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Avoid Scams

By Georganna Hancock

Writers seem to be exceptionally vulnerable to fraud. This probably has more to do with the intense competition, which generates desperation, than with any particular weakness. Also, scams about writing abound, especially on the Internet.

In this article, we'll examine fraud surrounding writing contests, literary agents, publishers, and miscellaneous services that con artists dream up to sucker us into parting with our ever insufficient funds.

First, what do I consider a scam? Fraud happens when you receive less than you pay for, or when you pay a fee for a service usually rendered on commission. A few examples that come immediately to mind are software that purports to automate writing, queries, or submission; agents who charge (anything); and companies that promise to publish your work just like traditional publishers, if you foot the bill and agree to receive little, if any, payment as the author.

If there ever was an area in which the adage "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is" applies, publishing is it. The problem is that in the beginning, when a new writer is just getting started, he or she doesn't always know what is "standard" and what is outrageous. Many people begin writing completely unprepared for the reality that it is a business. To succeed, a writer needs to have knowledge of the field and its practices.

Even forearmed with some information, it is not unusual for most writers to fall into at least one swindle early in their careers. When our only contact was mail and ads in magazines, I replied to the "How to Make Big Money Writing Short Sentences" scam. I sent my check for \$8 to learn that I should place similar ads. I was too embarrassed to complain! The Internet exacerbates the problem as the cons pop up with new names and new websites as quick as the writing community becomes aware of them.

However, the Internet also provides a faster, more reliable network to discover frauds than ever existed in "the good old days." Before you contact any service provider, at least run a search (Google, Yahoo, MSN) on the person and the business names. Be sure to use the right name and put it in quotation marks. If

any complaints have registered on message boards or forums, they usually pop up toward the top of search engine returns, right after the one for the company's website. Scrutinize the company's listing or website for evidence of professional membership, and then check out that lead to see if it is in good standing. You can also try the Better Business Bureau and Chamber of Commerce for the area where the business is located.

By the way, the lack of a physical address and phone number is an early warning sign of potential problems. Without those pieces of information, it is very difficult to pursue refunds or demand service. Knowing where the company or person is physically located also facilitates performing further research on them, if needed.

Another major tool in avoiding frauds is developing in a strong writers' network. Connect and participate in groups (professional and amateur), forums, websites with social activities, and mailing lists. All three major search services sponsor online groups, a boon to writers who live in isolated areas. The more resources you have available to tap when researching a person or company, the better chances you have of discovering the scamsters without getting hurt yourself. Ask members of your group if they know anything about the business you're considering contacting. Do this FIRST, before you get involved.

Top Online Resources

Preditors and Editors	http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors/
or	http://www.invirtuo.cc/prededitors/
Writer Beware	http://www.sfwa.org/beware/index.html
Writer Beware Blog	http://www.accrispin.blogspot.com/
20 Worst Agents	http://www.sfwa.org/beware/twentyworst.html
Absolute Write	http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=22
Association of Authors' Reps.	http://www.aar-online.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=9693&orgId=aar
A.R.&E.	http://www.agentresearch.com/agent_ver.html
Whispers & Warnings	http://www.writersweekly.com/whispers_and_warnings.php

Some of these resources carry notices about problem people, and some are lists of ethical businesses you're more likely to have better experiences with. The "Preditors and Editors" and "Writer Beware" sites are comprehensive, covering all types of frauds targeting writers. I recommend reading every page on both of them. On the positive side, if you're searching for more worthwhile contests to

enter, consider subscribing to Erika Dreifus' free newsletter at <http://www.practicing-writer.com/content.php?page=newsletter> or through the Yahoo group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/practicing-writer/>.

Still, in the final analysis, a calm and patient attitude on your part will protect you. Don't look for short-cuts or ways to avoid the hard work involved in writing and getting published. Curb greed and desperation and take the time to research every business relationship you consider.

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