

How to find a publisher for your first book?

By Valerie Harms

Here's the nitty-gritty on both genres in today's competitive publishing climate. First, you need to get your proposal ready, whether for an agent or publisher. The guidelines for fiction and nonfiction differ.

For novels, you need to prepare a cover letter with the entire manuscript. Agents and editors prefer to see the whole work because novels tend to change in development. The cover letter should include a 2-3-paragraph statement of the compelling aspects of the novel (used as a sales pitch), a table of contents, the word length, the niche (category—romance, mystery, contemporary), your biography, and marketing support. See below for more on this part.

For nonfiction, your proposal must be carefully thought out. At the top of the page put the book title and your name. Write a 1-2 page overview of the book, giving a brief description of it with a sense of your style and the approach you take. Estimate the number of words and note if illustrations are needed.

Follow this part with a large section on Marketing, including subheads on the

- Niche: kind of nonfiction, e.g. biography, history, memoir
- Audiences: think demographics
- Comparison to 2-3 books that are similar but show how yours is different. Pick best-selling books to show how your subject area is of interest but make sure to show what your book adds to the field.
- Ways you can sell the book beyond what a publisher typically does (1 page of ideas is good). Publishers want to see that you have a "platform," meaning that you give workshops or have connections to organizations with members who will buy the book. In this marketing section you have to show that your book will sell thousands of copies and that you will help make that happen.

Provide a short bio. Add special honors you have received and if possible recommendations by other well known names.

Provide a table of contents, followed by an expanded table of contents, which contains 2-3 sentence descriptions of what each chapter contains.

Attach 2-3 sample chapters. In any case follow the submission requests posted on the publisher's website.

It's much easier to get your work published if you have an agent; in fact, most major publishers will only look at agented manuscripts. The trouble is that it's just as hard to find an appreciative agent as it is an editor. If you have a writer friend who can recommend you to their agent, that's great. Otherwise, several reference books (often

found in libraries) can help: *Guide to Literary Agents*; *Jeff Herman's Guide*; listings in *Literary Market Place*. Note what genres the agents are interested in.

However, many publishers can be approached without an agent. Again use the above-mentioned guides, plus *Writer's Market* and *How to Be Your Own Literary Agent* by Richard Curtis, to find options. Don't be intimidated. These guides have done vital research for you by listing interests and contact information. Always check to see who the latest editor is on the website.

For finding both agents and publishers, good sources are the books or literary journals you read which are similar to your project. You can find names of possible agents or editors in the acknowledgements pages. Send your mss to those persons, citing the similarity. Perseverance and ingenuity are the key to success.

~ Valerie Harms is the author of nine books, a publishing consultant, writing coach, and workshop leader. See www.valerieharms.com for more information.