

Are you sure you want to be a writer?

Truth is, there's no one way to achieve this goal—if you're sure it's your goal. Our suggestions are not written in stone, or passed on to us in some magical, transcendental moment—they have evolved over time. Others will disagree, but what we offer here is our experience and point of view. So read on and then you'll make up your own mind—because people usually do. But one thing is absolutely certain—in order to be a writer—you HAVE TO BE A READER. Don't even THINK about getting published if you don't like to read—or only picked up a book because you had to for a school assignment. You have to LOVE words on a page, a tale well told—and that includes all kinds of books—from classics to contemporary books, and writers the world over. The more well-read you are, the more well written your own book will be. So get thee to a bookstore or a library and get busy. Those guys and gals got published for a reason—and you can't break the rules unless you know what they are.

As you read you will discover what you like and *don't like* about certain writers and books and that's the key. What makes one book better or worse than another? Is it the characters, the plot, the structure, the voice? You must compare stories and answer these questions, and as you do, the elements that are key to your appreciation of a book become clear (Because of course you are supposed to write what you would enjoy reading). Sort out the pieces that work and apply them to the story you want to tell. This does not mean plagiarizing another writer's work.

You can take writing classes, but it's useful to come to them with at least some basic knowledge and understanding that you've arrived at on your own. Classes will not teach you how to write—they offer you techniques to sharpen your skills. If you want something you can get your hands on right now—head to your local book store and browse in the writing section—Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, Stephen King's *On Writing* and Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* are a good place to start.

The book is NOT in YOUR HEAD.

If we had a quarter, no maybe even a dime from every person who has come up to us at a book signing, after a speech, after hearing that we are writers, and said “I have a great idea for a book. It's all up here,” then tapped his or her head, we would be rich. No need for us to toil over a steaming computer, slaving away in WordPerfect. We could just collect our dimes and relax. You have to WRITE to be a WRITER. That means it must get out of your head and onto a page, computer screen, napkin, somewhere—but you have to write it down.

And no, there is not a publisher who's going to think your story is so fascinating that they'll hire a ghost writer who will plumb the depths of your psyche and experience and then turn your story into a best seller—not unless you are Paris Hilton, Beyonce or some other famous human being (or their dog). So you have to be prepared to spend your time at your craft. Further—your book has to have sentences, paragraphs, commas, question marks—all that stuff—no one does that for you. Copyeditors (provided by your publisher once they have bought your book) help to clean up your “little” mistakes and omissions, at the end of the process, but you don't get a pass on grammar and proper usage – the stuff your 7th grade English teacher tried to get you to learn, but you were too busy ogling the cute boy in the third seat fourth row, obsessing about the mystery meat in the cafeteria, trying to remember the difference between a real and a rational number or who won the battle of Little Big Horn (hint it wasn't General Custer), to pay

attention to boring stuff like subjects and predicates. And now here you are—wanting to be a writer (see *Elements of Style* referred to above).

And sorry, your personal life story is not necessarily interesting to anyone but you—unless you have the skill and ability to make it dynamic, universal, relevant to your readers. If you are not already famous, publishers are mostly not interested—which is why James Frey worked so hard to make his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, so dramatic—if not actually true and you know what a mess that caused. So remove your ego from the process and think about what makes your story one other people should/would want to buy and spend time with. You have to tell the story that lives in you—it's populated by characters that reside in your head and in your heart—they have permanent resident status, you can't keep them quiet.

Yes, most first fiction is autobiographical—it's not an approach we have taken—maybe because there are two of us and we don't have a shared history. But the thing to remember is that fiction, is that--fictional. You make it up. Writing fiction is about being creative and imaginative—not just retelling what happened to you when your boyfriend/husband left you, cheated on you, proposed to you, etc.. So while it isn't necessarily your story you are telling, your experience is crucial to your ability to tell any story. The more experience you have, the more you have to draw from.

Our advice is to live your life, enjoy the unexpected twists and turns and pay attention to the details. Stories happen all around us every day, but it is your take on them, your ability to pull the best, most interesting, most intriguing, most poignant, funniest parts of events—both real and imaginary—that will help make your idea a book. AND your story has to make sense. Why you ask, when life doesn't always make sense? Exactly. Things that are inexplicable, coincidental even miraculous in life don't usually work very well in a book. What characters do has to make sense to your readers—which means you need to have an ability, either innate or acquired to sort through stuff and apply some sort of logic. Because your book must have a beginning a middle and an ending. They don't even have to appear in that order, but however your tale evolves, it must "feel real". Even if you create your own universe—J.K. Rowling does this brilliantly in the Harry Potter books—readers have to buy into the logic of your realm.

Like dieting (something we've done a time or ten), writing requires discipline. You have to make yourself sit down at the computer or your notebook or your legal pad when it's sunny and the world is playing outside. You have to forego sleep to get in a couple of extra hours writing. A book will not start or finish itself. It will not sprout fully grown, like Jack's Beanstalk, and lead you to lofty heights of literary acclaim. You must toil. You must mine for the right words, the correct phrasing, the timing for your characters' dialog, the visual image you wish to convey—and like any other form of mining, you have to dig deep and get dirty and tired before you find the object of your excavation. So be prepared.

Getting in Print

(Like the Boy Scout motto says: Be Prepared.)

Once you have slaved –and we use that word quite deliberately, over your narrative, your ultimate goal, like mostly everyone else who has written a book (except those who are lying to themselves), is to be published, become an overnight sensation and climb right to the top of the New York Times Best Seller List. You must be warned that your entire goal will likely not be fully realized—so if you will be devastated if you don't achieve the whole shebang, be geared up for disappointment.

Relatively speaking, for new writers, the writing part is the easiest—getting published is at it's best and worst—trial by fire without a jury of your peers anywhere around. And let us say up front that this is not about poems or short stories because 1) there are relatively few books of poetry and/or short stories being published today by mainstream publishers, and 2) there are even fewer writers of these genres earning a living from them. This info is also not relevant to the children's book industry because at this point in time, we know relatively little if anything about how this branch of publishing operates, though you might find some helpful information on the subject at <http://www.underdown.org>

Now, back to the grizzly world of getting your book published. If you're trying to sell a novel you need an agent—and believe us, agents are always looking for GOOD material because they only make money by selling your novel to publishers. So they've all got their eyes peeled for the next hot writer.

An agent is your first line of offense and defense. Publishers don't have people who do nothing but read unsolicited manuscripts anymore, so the days of the lowly assistant finding a gem in the slush pile are history. The literary agent is now that person. Their recommendation and their reputation is on the line with every client they present to a publisher. So getting selected by an agent says to a publisher that your work must be worthy of at least a look. For all their hard work—helping you get your manuscript into shape, then breaking down the doors to PUBLISHING and getting your book read and hopefully purchased by an editor—an agent will generally get 15% of your earnings. However, they don't get paid until you do. So if you find an agent asking for money upfront—RUN in the opposite direction.

Nowadays, more often than not, you need to have your novel finished. Not that it's impossible to get an agent based on an outline and the first three chapters, but that is becoming more and more rare. So if you really want to improve your odds, finish your book before you look for an agent.

“How do I find this illusive, but important person?” you ask. First, you don't have to live in New York, or have a relative in the business—both of those might be helpful, but they are not necessary. Go to a bookstore or library and look for books that are similar in genre to the kind of novel you are writing. Check the acknowledgement pages. Writers almost always thank their agents.

For more names, spend some time online: <http://www.agentquery.com>, <http://www.aar-online.org>, <http://www.writers.net/agents.html> are all legit websites with tons of information. Your local library or bookstore will also have current copies of *The Literary Marketplace* and *The Writer's Market* which list hundreds of agents. Put together a list of twenty or thirty agencies, places that represent writers whose work is similar to yours and whose entry in one of the above guides says they are **willing to consider unsolicited manuscripts**.

Now, write a clever, witty, intriguing, GRAMATICALLY correct, SPELL-CHECKED query letter. It should include a bit about you and your novel but should not be more than ONE page. Do NOT tell them your whole life story, do NOT tell them how your book is going to make them rich, and do NOT send them the complete synopsis of your book---unless and until you are requested to do so. Be creative here. If your letter is boring who wants to read your book?

Send off these queries and wait.

You will wait weeks and weeks. You will get rejections. Hopefully, you will get requests to see your entire masterpiece. You will hold your breath as you carry your precious work to the post office and send it off and you will wait weeks and weeks all over again. Be Prepared. You will likely get rejected again. You will also get critiqued—some will be soft-- “I like the story, but not your characters.” Others will be more harsh. “You are not now, nor will you ever be a writer.” Take a deep breath, or several, evaluate the criticism and see if there are tips that will help your work, and start the process all over again. There are many good agents, and in order to find the right one—the one who gets your work and is excited to represent it—you need to persevere. And have plenty of self-addressed stamped envelopes.

Don't be foolish and fall prey to someone who promises you the moon. We know—after all your work what you want is to be published and you're willing to do whatever it takes—except sign on the wrong dotted line. The writer/agent relationship is like a marriage so there's lots to consider as you plan a future together. Keep a cool head, ask the right questions – a good agent should be willing to tell you the names of his/her other authors, to give you references, readily discuss who s/he's worked with and they should FEEL right to you. Do you like the personal touch of a small agency or the hustle and bustle of a big one? Do you want someone who represents many authors whose work is similar to yours or just a few? Does this agent feel passionate about their work and yours in particular or are they jaded?

Self-Publishing

This particular avenue for getting into print has become quite popular --- mostly because of the ease with which on-demand printing can be accomplished these days. Although some very well known authors started that way (John Grisham, E. Lynn Harris are two) it is even more difficult to achieve success this way. First, and we're going to be brutally honest here, most books that are self published are pretty bad. They have been rejected because they are not good stories, they are poorly written and they are not ready for the marketplace. But sometimes publishers don't “get” the appeal of a book until they see its success. And there are many writers who will not take no for an answer and resort to their own devices in order to see their work in print. So be it. It is a hard row to hoe and even those who have some degree of success self publishing initially, frequently end up with a mainstream publisher. Why? The costs and methods of distribution are the main factor. How do you get a bookseller to carry your book when they cannot order it through one of the major distribution houses? You can do this on local basis in independent bookstores, but growing your sales beyond your town is a major obstacle.

So self publish if you must. Google self-publishing—you get over two million listings and you will surely find the information you're seeking. We've heard that Dan Poynter's books and website are very useful.

Full Circle

We started telling you that to be a writer, you had to be a reader. That advice is repeated here. Read everything you can get your hands on—fiction, non-fiction, women, men, history, and how to books. Learn what makes a good story. And pay attention. The world is your work place and you must observe it and it's people endlessly.

May the words be with you!

V&D