

The Mechanics and Mystique of Submitting Your Novel

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You're asking my advice? Just remember, this is only the opinion of one editor-- a really knowledgeable and hip editor. Better people than I have given you all sorts of advice and instruction about the actual writing of your novel. So, assuming you've got the easy... satisfying... *fulfilling* part-- writing the novel-- all taken care of, now comes the hard work and nasty business.

Okay, you've got a really fine piece of fiction here (or there), that you want to sell to a deserving publisher. You will be paid *big bucks*-- you hope. (You'll settle for bucks.)

There are two ways to do this: The Hard Way (Writer of the Past) and The Easy Way (Writer of the Future).

I know, dear reader, that this book applies to speculative fiction only, but much of what is said in this essay--and indeed, in this whole volume--will apply to all genre lit-- westerns, romances, mysteries as well.

WRITER OF THE PAST

The Hard Way. You live in Tahlequah, Prescott, Eureka, Yazoo City, or Newark. You go to the library and ask how to find the addresses of publishers. If you're lucky, this particular librarian will steer you to the LMP (*Literary Market Place*), which will give you addresses, phone numbers, editors' names and positions, and the kind of fiction a house generally does. A handy tool, this LMP.

Two asides: First, if you've written spec fic (or SF, fantasy, or horror), you probably know which publishers you're going to (you should excuse the expression) submit to. Spec fic is a small town and, like all small, incestuous towns, everybody knows everybody else and what they're up to. (That's the second sentence I've ended with a preposition, and it's something I'm sorry for.) If you don't read much SF, then it's easy to do some market research: march your *tohkes* to some bookstores and study the racks. Second aside. Agents: detestable, scrofulous bloodsuckers... oops! (Sorry, that's from my speech to the Association of Publishing Executives.) Seriously, if you really mean what you say about writing a novel and can convince an agent to represent you, *do it* as soon as possible. Agents specialize in the *business* of writing. If you let an agent do the business, you can spend more time writing.

How do you get an agent? There's a bit about that under "Writer of the Future." If you already have an agent, skip the rest of this except the part about conventions and conferences. If you already attend those, go to your typewriter and do magic.

Okay, you've got a list of editors and publishers, and a manuscript to show them. You don't have an agent. Say you've never been published before (sorry, not being published includes your stuff appearing in newspapers, scholarly journals, college yearbooks, and the like: if you haven't been paid for fiction by a publisher, you haven't been published.)

You can send your full manuscript in, blind (*Please* make copies of your work before you send it-- have you ever been in the back of a Post Office?). You can just take your months of sweat and toil, the creative result of your talent and imagination, and fling it onto a steaming heap of other slush-pile manuscripts next to some myopic, lonely, neurotic (read: underpaid and

overworked) genre editor's desk. It will be read, and you should count yourself lucky: outside the genre, nobody's flying the plane when it comes to "slush," or unsolicited manuscripts. Square business-- manuscripts will be returned unopened. Try it and see; maybe then you'll believe me.

If you must submit in this outmoded and inefficient fashion, then the rules are simple. Submit to a particular editor-- get his name. Call ahead, tell whoever answers the phone that you are sending a manuscript-- don't ask if you can send it, act like it's a constitutional right-- and inquire whether the house prefers the full manuscript or a partial. If the person hangs up or if you'd rather not be ignorant and pushy on the phone, you can check the listing in *Writer's Market* for the publisher's submission preferences. If the editor is like me, he'll want a partial and an outline. A partial means a readable chunk, usually the first fifty pages. Now, listen-- I mean this-- if they want fifty pages, it's the first fifty, not the first ten, then 200-220, and the nice chunk around 302. You'd be surprised at how many otherwise-intelligent people are guilty of this hooter. Submit a cleanly typed, double-spaced copy with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. If you possibly can avoid it, don't grovel, beg, threaten, cajole, or try to shame your potential editor in your cover letter. (Bribing? Well, I've never been successfully bribed. But no one's tried hard enough.)

Finally, be patient. Wait at least six weeks before sending a polite follow-up query. (Generally, in their *Writer's Market* listing, they'll tell you how long they wish it took for them to get to a submission, if the world were run properly. Add maybe four weeks to that, *then* write or phone.)

Oh yeah, simultaneous submissions. Some editors don't care, some do. I personally don't care so long as I'm told that other people are looking at it. *Writer's Market* listings will tell you policies on simultaneous submissions and such things as dot-matrix printouts, too.

All right, your manuscript *will* be read, but consider the conditions under which it will be read: The editor will be hoping to reduce the Olympian piles on the floor next to his desk; the time used to read slush is *snatched, stolen* from time supposedly spent on the important tasks-- phone calls, meetings, and writing memos to those insensitive bastards in every other division of the company. He, she, or it won't even have time to read *all* your manuscript before rejecting it. I probably do more publishing from the slush pile on a regular basis than any other science-fiction publisher (if you want to know why, get somebody to pay me to write about it) and I only take one or two a year, at best, from the slush. I won't ever tell you the number I get. There aren't enough zeros.

It's a sad fact that the odds are better in Las Vegas; America's a tough town. Why should publishing, even genre publishing, be different from the rest of life?

Discouraged? Don't be. Read on and find relief.

WRITER OF THE FUTURE

Okay, same manuscript. Same author. Same universe and dimension. But you're armed with the information in this essay. The writing is done, you send your manuscript to your agent in New York, he has lunch with the editor and hands it over to him, and (zip! zip!) the editor recognizes your name and puts it on the shelf (not on the floor). This means that it will be taken home and read or read in the office on a Saturday or read on the train to or from the office. (You can be sure it won't be read in the office during working hours-- if you want to know why, get somebody to pay me to write about it.) Even if you don't have an agent yet-- Putz! hurry up and get one-- you send your manuscript to the editor and (zip! zip!) he recognizes your name and

puts it on the shelf (not the floor), etc., etc. What happened? You did your homework and laid some groundwork, that's what.

What happened is that you got personal contact, you got off the slush pile before you sent your manuscript. When you've done that, you've gotten an editor to read, not skim, your work. (I'm assuming all along that you *can* write, of course.) Don't for a minute think that editors are arrogant-- they're overworked. They're generally people who love books, with too many clamoring for their attention. Getting them to know your work is getting them to *commit time* to your work. Remember how lucky you are-- yes, lucky: spec fic is the only field in which professionals-- established writers, agents, and editors-- are so accessible to beginning writers.

It's *true*! Did you know that there are SF conventions and writers' conferences going on all over the country just about every weekend? Did you know that varying numbers of agents and editors and writers and seriously involved fans attend them? Did you know that these SF conventions (cons) range in size from small cons of fewer than 100 to an annual World Con of 6,000 to 9,000 people? These cons are held at universities and hotels and motels and resorts. If you know where to look, I betcha you could find several a year within driving distance of your home.

Writer's conferences are different. They're usually not confined to just spec fic, they cost more money, and they are more formally run. Some are college courses, for Pete's sake, and are pretty intensive. They are valuable because there are several editors and agents who attend, speak, and meet with participants. But the expense can be prohibitive. Most colleges and universities have some kind of writers' program, and writers' magazines (I know you'll be able to think of at least one) will have listings. If you've got the time and the bread and the wherewithal, this is a great way to meet editors and discuss your projects with them. When you send your manuscript to them, believe me, you'll get a much better reception-- it doesn't hurt to remind somebody in your cover letter that you met at the writers' course at, for example, Oklahoma University (a very good writers' conference, by the way).

Back to science-fiction cons. They combine many of the best and worst elements of writers' conferences, parties, Shriners' conventions, minimum-security mental institutions, orgies, and roadside taverns. They are great, exhausting fun and are great ways to meet other people involved in spec fic-- especially those pros (authors, agents, and editors) you'll need to know. There is a problem, of course. Most people in the little pond that is SF prodom and fandom (oh, they *are* different: the pros get paid and have expense accounts and mucho prestige) are pretty cliquy. And SF conventions can be really lonely if you don't know anyone. Hey, I could be wrong and I'll hear from people who walked in off the street and were welcomed like brothers; but my observation is that unless you are a pro or know a lot of people, it could appear to be a very large party that you're only allowed to watch. Which is why I suggest that if you're going to write spec fic and are dumb enough to follow my advice and go to cons, you should probably bite the whole wienie and become a fan by joining your local SF club, society, or group. This way, you have somebody to go with to these cons.

Is this my third or fourth aside? Whatever. Romance, mystery, and western pros and fans have conventions, too. But they are neither as large, frequent, nor frantic as those in SF. They're still valuable, however, as a way to make personal contact with the people who will be judging your work for publication, who will be advising you on how to do better work in an increasingly competitive world.

But beware: Fandom and prodom can take you over. FIAWOL: Fandom Is a Way of Life. It's fun, it's instructive, you'll get adopted by a new family structure, and it will help increase your ability to sell your writing, which is the original point-- remember? If you don't

want a new lifestyle but still want to know about the cons, subscribe to *Locus* or *Science Fiction Chronicle*.

Well, there you are. The modern way to submit your manuscript and finesse the mystique is to get yourself off the slush pile. You'll still have to write a good novel, you know, and you or your agent will still have to make enough of a pitch to get your editor to get the rest of his publishing house behind the book so they can get booksellers to order it so they can get readers to *buy* it.

I know you have one more question. If I know so much about getting a manuscript published, why don't I do it myself? Good question: Get somebody to pay me to write about it and find out why.