



The Writer's Compass

Briefing 8: How to make an effective submission Alison Baverstock

This is a briefing for authors, based on a seminar delivered for the literature development organization Spread the Word <http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk> in April 2010. Its main purpose is to promote the idea that all authors, whether previously published or not, should think carefully before making a submission to an agent or publisher, and prepare what they send with meticulous attention.

About the author

Alison Baverstock worked in publishing for many years and has written extensively about the industry from both publisher and author's point of view. She is the author of *How to market books*, which is commonly referred to as the 'bible' of book marketing, as well as the bestselling *Is there a book in you?* which examines the resources writers need to get published. She is Course Leader for the MA in Publishing at Kingston University and in 2008 won the Pandora Prize, awarded annually to a woman who has made a significant contribution to the publishing industry.

Introduction

For many writers the urge to get work off their desk and onto someone else's is an ongoing pressure. And preferably they would like a grateful recipient who provides instant confirmation of its value to the world of literature and stresses the necessity of sharing with the reading public immediately.

Dear reader, resist. It is rather vital to ensure that what you submit is sent to the right person, at the right time in your writing development, and at a time when they are ready to receive it. The world of publishing is contracting – organizations are taking on less, even turning down some of the stuff they have already commissioned, and saving overheads by joining forces – and so it is vital to make the best possible approach. For some types of book (notably SF and Fantasy) the number of agents and publishers may be particularly small, so making one infelicitous approach to a key prospect may make further attempts much more difficult in future. You really do never get a second chance to make a first impression.

I hope the following advice will be useful, but before we start, here are three key principles to keep in mind at all times:

- 1) **A submission is only as good as the work it accompanies** – and (unless you are well known in another context) will probably only be successful if the work it introduces is worth the recipient's full consideration. Managing the process of submission effectively is not a substitute for making the work really good.
- 2) **You need to detach yourself from your work** and think objectively about why someone else might be interested. Swapping a position from inside the work you know so well, to that of appreciating the role of someone who is coming across it for the very first time is tricky, but essential if you are to explain effectively its value to a third party.
- 3) **The process of submitting work is agonising** – it involves finalising a pitch, sending it off and then waiting – all the while wondering if it got there, and whether they like it. It helps if, as well as sending the best possible version of your material, you have also paid attention to the minutiae of despatch: finalised an accompanying letter that you are happy to be represented by; paid enough for the postage so you can be sure it will arrive; sent accompanying information that you have read through over several days rather than dashed off in a hurry. Acknowledging that the process will be stressful is a good way of seeking to manage the situation, but above all, don't do this in a hurry – or, as the proverb says, be prepared to 'Act in haste, repent at leisure'.

The various players involved in the submission process

Literary agents are intermediaries who represent work to publishing houses, seeking to find the authors they look after the best possible deal in terms of money, marketing and long term prospects. Finding an agent saves you the trouble of contacting publishers yourself, but given that their business model is based on them receiving a percentage of the monies offered to the writer, agents will probably only want to be involved with work that will sell for a significant sum – or from a writer they recognise may achieve this in future (hence it is very hard for a poet to find an agent).

Lists of agents, their various specialisations (if they do not currently represent Science Fiction it does not generally mean they are looking for submissions that help them get into this area) and existing relationships can be found in *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* and *The Writer's Handbook* and these need to be read with care before any approach is made (pay particular attention to the format in which they have said they like to receive material).

The general view is it is harder to find an agent than a publisher.

Publishers take content and turn it into a format that can be shared with others; the sales achieved in the process fund investment in new authors and new products. Publishers come in all shapes and sizes from large multinationals to small independents. They may publish in printed format but may also offer to disseminate work online, through ebooks and through other media via the sale of serial, merchandise or game rights.

Literary consultancies offer feedback on material produced by writers. They do this for a fee and may pass on writing they consider worthy of investment to literary agents and publishers. They offer writers an objective assessment of their work and as there is no personal relationship (or more significantly, eye contact) between the reviewer and the author, it is often easier for the writer to absorb their comments. Most such agencies offer a range of manuscript appraisal services from having a few chapters read to the whole thing and will also give feedback on the submission package. Details of such agencies can be found in the various writing reference books, on relevant websites and through the advertisements in writing magazines.

Mentors and encouragers Many writers build up a network of others from whom they can seek help, support and feedback. This is not as straightforward as it sounds. Bland feedback ('it's very nice') is useless to most writers and comments that are too brutal ('why you think this might be publishable is beyond me') may be completely off-putting. Bear in mind however that feedback is only ever that – it is not a requirement to change your manuscript. That decision rests with the author as creator and the agent/publisher as investor and even then you may decide you would rather maintain your original thesis or style and find a different investor.

When dealing with these various stakeholders, the amount of information you send on yourself will depend on what you are asking them to do: invest in you or help you decide whether or not your material is ready for sharing with the general public.

Before considering contacting any of the above agencies, equip yourself with a good manual of information on the book trade such as *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* or *The Writer's Handbook*. Read the information that potential recipients have taken the trouble to say they want to receive: the format they prefer (print or email); how many chapters constitute a submission; what else they want to know about you. It is also worth reading the information that many publishers have added to their websites on how to get published – some of which is really well thought out. For example, see www.snowbooks.com/submissions

Questions to ask yourself before submitting work

1) Is this the right organization?

Should you try to seek an agent or go straight to a publisher? Some publishers accept direct submissions; others prefer to allow agents to do the sifting. Or would you be better paying for feedback on your manuscript before progressing further? For non-fiction, finding the right publisher with experience of marketing to the particular sector your work appeals to will be particularly important.

2) Publisher – size, scope, political affiliation

A large publisher will not necessarily guarantee you the best working relationship. Larger or more traditional organizations can seem bureaucratic and slow to make decisions; smaller ones more dynamic and personal. Publishers like to get a reputation for handling a particular type of

title, so what else does the house you plan to approach publish (look on their website or ask for a copy of their catalogue) and would a title from you enhance the offering they are able to make to the book trade and the reading public? Never assume that if you approach a publishing house with no history of similar titles to the one you propose you are helpfully extending their range; firms like to concentrate their strengths so that the reader who enjoys one book will return for something with similar (but not identical) appeal.

3) Agent – do they handle anything similar, is it the sort of thing they like?

Many agents used to be publishers and tend to specialise in the sort of books they used to produce. Does what you want to offer them fit their profile? Agents, like publishers, build up a reputation for being a particular kind of organization with a specific expertise. Why are you approaching them? Do you know good things about them (look in the forewords of books written by those they represent and you may get a hint of their style of involvement) or have you heard them speak and liked what they had to say? Have you had them recommended to you, perhaps by someone in your writing group or by your tutor? The more well researched your approach is, and hence memorable your letter, the more the potential agent is likely to take notice.

Remember, if they take you on, you will be sharing the income from your writing and so it helps if the relationship works. Some writers like straight encouragement, some a soothing form of ego-massaging, others to be a little frightened of their agent as this helps them progress their work. Once you have opted for a particular agent, it is hard to change (much harder than changing publisher) so think carefully before you make a final decision.

4) Is this the right format?

Is your work a novel or a novella? Would your selection of short stories around a group of friends be better described as an episodic novel? Publishers are notoriously wary of offering collections of short stories, unless you are already a well-known writer (the belief in the industry is that they don't sell).

5) Is this the right time?

- Within the publishing cycle (are they all frantically preparing for the Frankfurt Book Fair?)
- For you (is your writing still developing and so would you be better waiting a bit?)
- For your work (if you are writing fiction, then it's best to have finished the manuscript before you start submitting; for non-fiction generally a sample chapter is fine, along with a full indication of contents)
- Within wider society (what is current – does this feel topical?)

6) Whom should I approach?

Don't assume you have to go for one of the surnames in the firm's title (they may not even be living). Those running the organization will probably already have full lists, so you may be better off seeking attention from someone more junior who may be less busy, but because they also work there, still has the ear of management. If you can't work out from the information they publish (in reference books, on their website) whom to send your material to, it's worth ringing up to find out the name of the most appropriate recipient – and do double check the spelling of their name (there is nothing more obvious to the recipient than a misspelling of their name; and at the same time less obvious to the sender).

7) What should I send?

- A well-written letter (see Appendices)
- A synopsis – I define this as a back cover book blurb with an ending (most book blurbs don't say how the story turns out for fear of ruining the experience of what is between the covers). It's there to show the potential reader that the work has a shape or structure and to give a sense of how the story turns out. Keep it succinct and a page is plenty – the recipient does not need to know how chapter 23 differs from chapter 24. It may be useful for you to have a complete list of what happens in each chapter, but you do not need to share this right now.
- Proof of the market (name a couple of previous titles that have done well in this genre, a particular programme on television or radio if it relates to that, along with a note of the estimated audience; a press cutting highlighting a subject relevant to your writing etc.). You could add to this any feedback received from the market, for example, if you are writing for children some information from them on why they liked your work/feedback from a teacher or parent would be useful).
- Information on you: perhaps a single sheet listing your path to writing, how you support yourself and any key attainments or experiences that qualify you to write about this area. A full CV is not needed. Keep it brief and interesting – they are interested in the background to your writing and affiliations, not your GCSEs.
- Postage paid postcard to confirm receipt (to avoid anguish later)

While this checklist is hopefully useful, it is not meant to be completely prescriptive. The submission package that stands out is one that is truly targeted to the recipient and their interests, has evidently been compiled with care, and is perhaps slightly quirky.

8) Why do I need to send so much?

If your recipient likes what you send, they will probably take it to a meeting to discuss with their colleagues. There will be limited time in which to sum up its merits and to confirm that there is indeed a market (publishing is a business and needs to make a profit). It helps if you have provided the information they need in order to make an effective case for your work.

9) How long should you wait before chasing?

Time is relative. From the moment you send off a submission you will be imagining its path towards the intended recipient. You will probably be anxious about whether or not it did arrive (hence it's a good idea to ask them to return a prepaid postcard confirming receipt). In general, most firms would not object to being chased after a couple of months.

10) Is it editorially perfect?

You are approaching wordsmiths who care about language, so be very careful over presentation. If you can, get a friend or relation with an eagle-eye to read it for you. Use the spellchecker on your computer – but don't rely on it exclusively as it will only pick up words that are misspelt, not words that are correctly spelt but used in the wrong context (meet/meat etc).

How not to do it

When you send in a submission your words have to work on their own; there is no mediating smile or body language to augment or soften what you send. So an author who not only offers excellent and marketable writing but also conveys a professional attitude to publication is attractive. Ideally you need to convey enthusiasm without obsession; pride without arrogance; talent without difficult personality, always remembering they have lots of choice (the mail in which your submission arrived probably included 19 others).

Never quote from one rejection letter in another. There are standard phrases that get used ('I felt insufficiently passionate'; 'I did not fall in love with it'; 'This is a personal opinion and another house may feel differently'; 'Does not suit our list as it is currently developing') and so quoting them will reveal previous rejections. The fact that they 'wish you luck with someone else' does not mean they mean it and you should not quote this when trying to place your work elsewhere.

Ensure you are able to remember what you sent where. Most agents understand that due to the time taken to receive feedback, an author may want to send their work to more than one agent at a time, but they appreciate knowing whether what you have sent them is a sole submission (and if it is, ensure you extract maximum benefit from this, saying why you want to be represented by them). Sending a blanket submission to many agents at the same time tends to mean that your package feels impersonal, and you are unable to absorb the feedback gained from each agency in the process (unless you are spectacularly well organised, and I have seen writers who manage spreadsheets with information gained in this way).

If you subsequently get a rejection, unless you have very strong grounds for assuming they misunderstood your proposed product or market, never write back and tell them they are fools to have rejected your masterpiece. An angry letter is unlikely to have much effect. Instead, put the rejection aside for a week or so and then return to it to see what you learned in the process. Most authors talk about learning from the involvement and style of the rejection letters they receive, and there is such a thing as a 'good rejection'.

Further reading

Baverstock, A. *Marketing your book, an author's guide* (2007, second edition) A&C Black

Blake, C. *From pitch to publication* (1999), Macmillan

Morgan, Nicola, Help! I need a publisher <http://helpineedapublisher.blogspot.com/>

Taylor, Debbie, Mslexia *From Laptop to Bookshop Workshops* (2010) Pdfs covering choosing a title, composing a pitch letter, writing a synopsis and the first paragraph) Currently available to download free from <http://www.mslexia.co.uk/shop/goodies.php>

The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook (latest edition), A&C Black

The Writer's Handbook (latest edition) Macmillan

Good luck!

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Appendix One: Template for an effective submission letter

1) Send it to the right person in the right place

Spell their name and the name of the firm correctly (they will notice and it gets your approach off to a very bad start). Double check that the address you have noted is where they still are (my own publisher moved two doors along within the same London square last year).

2) Introductory remarks

Say what you are sending, why you are approaching them and what your book offers in terms of a match with their current list. Keep it light and precise.

3) What you are offering

Explain what kind of work you are enclosing, in which genre (e.g. thriller, romance, literary novel), what it compares with and why it is different. Bear in mind that publishers and agents are always more comfortable knowing that your book fits within a genre and that booksellers would know where to put it within their shop (and this constitutes a strong reason for turning books down).

4) What qualifies you to write it

How you know about the subject area you are writing about; why you are an interesting person and what commitment you have to writing. If you have ideas for the further development of your ideas (e.g. more titles along the same lines; sequels; a series) say so. Establishing an author's name for a particular kind of writing requires investment and persistence, so all potential investors will be interested in long-term commitment.

5) Include your contact details

And do check that these are completely correct.

Appendix Two: Sample letter to an agent/publisher

Dear

I am pleased to send you the first three chapters of my personal memoir, *My father and me*. I am approaching you because you have had particular success in the genre of life narrative, and I particularly admire the work of Blake Morrison, whom you also publish.

The book is a memoir of my adolescence and tells the story of my relationship with my father. The person who bought me a book every month as part of my pocket money, and went with me to choose it, who read to me extensively and encouraged me to talk about books, eventually became a stranger. Having seen me as recipient for all the information he had acquired about the world, he became frustrated as I wanted to develop my own ideas. No longer possessed of an automatic audience, my father became first distant and later hostile – a situation from which we were unable to extricate ourselves.

I support my writing through teaching at a university and freelance journalism in the writing and publishing press. I have another volume planned on my life after he died. As I share his fondness for rituals such as afternoon tea and choral evensong, gain similar happiness from packing a day with events, and love recommending books to other people, am I now turning into him?

I am enclosing the first three chapters, a synopsis and information on me. I would be honoured to be represented by you, and this is a sole submission.

Yours sincerely

(Please note that this letter is personal and specifically targeted to a particular agency; in any submission letter the writer's voice needs to come through.)