How to Find an Agent

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First, I have to say that if you are starting from zero, and you don't know anything about the publishing industry, please educate yourself. I have personally written many articles and blog entries about the publishing industry, many of which you can find by reading through the back entries of my blog, or posted on my website (`http://www.annagenoese.com/`). Back when I first started, not too many people in the industry were writing blog entries where you could ask questions—but there are tons now. Everyone's got a blog or a Twitter or both.

I am of the opinion that it is very important that you not try to find an agent when you are still at Publishing 101. At the very least, you need to know what to look for to know if someone is taking you for a ride. There are a lot of unscrupulous scam artists out there, and if you get caught up by one of them, that can have a worse effect on your writing career than diving in without an agent.

Rule number one is that money flows toward the author. If an agent tells you that zie will take you on if you pay them $X up front, it's a scam. If the agent tells you that zie will take you on, but your manuscript needs to be professionally edited and only that agent's editing service will do, it's a scam. If the agent works in any capacity for the publisher to whom zie wishes to sell your book, be on high alert—no one can serve two masters.

The exception to rule number one: An agent, when offering to take you on, may have it written into the contract that if your relationship lasts X number of months, submissions, or rejections without a contract, that agent will begin to charge you what amounts to a handling fee of $X per manuscript. This used to be very common in the days of copious paper submissions; postage and photocopying costs do add up. However, in these days of e-submissions, keep a keen eye on where your agent is submitting. You are well within your rights to ask for an accounting of to whom your agent is submitting, where that editor works, and which format the manuscript was submitted in—and a copy of the rejection letter.

When in doubt, do more research on the agent. There are many places to research the quality and reputation of an agent. The best place to go is Preditors & Editors (`http://pred-`

ed.com/). Another good place is the advocacy group for whichever genre you write in. Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, Science Fiction Writers of America, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Western Writers of America . . . I mean, the list goes on, and as far as I know, they will help you out even if you don't live in the USA.

If you seriously can't find any information about your agent out there already (and that should be a clue to you), then try making a post on the Absolute Write forums (http://absolutewrite.com/forums/). I recommend this only for people who are past Being On The Internet 101. I also recommend you do it under a pseudonym instead of your real name—there are a lot of agents and editors and authors who read those boards, and you can get a reputation. (Also, people search their own names to see what's being said about them, so if you make it a habit of calling people names, thinking there are no repercussions for what you say on the internet, think again.)

There are many ways to find agents. First, what are you writing? Not all agents handle the same work. There are some agents who are focused on science fiction and fantasy, with very rare exceptions. There are some agents who are very well known for doing mystery, or romance, or nonfiction, or YA.

Once you have a genre, there are several ways you can go.

You can go into a bookstore and look at the dedication and acknowledgements pages of the books that are the most similar to yours. For example, if you are writing a paranormal romance novel that is very similar to *Salt and Silver* by Anna Katherine (heh), then you would see that the author thanks "her agent, Diana Fox"; a quick Google search would turn up http://foxliterary.blogspot.com/, and you are on your way to following those submission guidelines (and mentioning, "I am querying you because you represent my favorite paranormal romance, *Salt and Silver* by Anna Katherine, and my book is very much in that style."). If a particular book does not have the agent's name in the front matter, check the other books by that author, or the author's website.

Another way to do this is to look at the websites of the advocacy group for your genre, and see what information about agents is there. Many groups have a list of agents available. Often these lists are only available to their members; if membership doesn't require publication and you have the cash to write off at tax time, give it a shot. It's good for networking and information, if nothing else.

Of course, there are always books/websites like Writers Market. It's fee-based, though, and it doesn't give you any kind of leg up. Seeing "I found you through Writers Market" in your query doesn't make an agent more likely to want to buy your book, so start with the places that are free.

Again, I am going to recommend Preditors & Editors (`http://pred-ed.com`) as a great free resource available to anyone who has the internet.

Go through the list. Get yourself a list of agents who are recommended or whose name(s) you like. Next you have to do research. Find that agent's website or blog. Read about what they represent, what they are looking for, what they like to read, what they hate. Go back through their blog or Twitter—very likely there will be clues about what they loathe or love in cover letters and submissions.

Yeah, it's work. You thought getting an agent would somehow be easier than writing a book? Wrong! Suck it up. If you aren't willing to do the work to find the right agent, what do you expect is going to happen? That's right—you're very likely going to get shafted.

There is a similar website—which is to say, a website with agent lists—called QueryTracker (`http://www.querytracker.com/`), and although it is free, it requires you to sign up for the website and log in if you want to use it. I don’t know how helpful it is, but you can look into it if you feel inclined.

Another place to do research on agents is Publishers Marketplace (`http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/`). Do a search for the name of the agent, and see that agent's page. Not all agents have one, but many do. They list projects the agent has recently sold, or ones that are forthcoming from publishers.

(Publishers Marketplace also has a pay feature, which includes options such as “deal search” which will tell you what people are selling and buying—agents *and* editors. If you have twenty bucks to spare, you can try the pay features for a month, and see if you think it’s worth it.)

Note: If you can't find any information on an agent that is recent, or if the agent hasn't updated a blog/website/Twitter in several years, that is a clue that perhaps it's not the right agent for you. Go ahead and query, but you might not hear back!

So now you've picked four or five agents to query. This is the time to follow the submission guidelines. If you do not follow the submission guidelines, chances are very good that your submission will just get trashed.

Write a decent query letter. Get someone to proofread it for you, or use your computer's text-to-speech function to read it out loud to make sure the words all make sense together. Spell the agent's name correctly. Spell your name correctly. Spell your book's title correctly. Make sure you include the genre and word count and whether you've finished the project or not. (If your book is not finished, stop trying to find an agent and go finish it. Seriously.)

Do not ever lie in your query letter. It is not worth it. You will eventually be asked to show proof that the things you claim about yourself and your book are true. If they are not true, you will be rejected. If you've already been published, there will be a scandal. Sometimes scandals sell more books—other times, scandals mean you will never sell a book again. Don't risk it. Just be honest.

Here is what it comes down to, though. The secret handshake that is sure to get you an agent: **Write a good book.**

Yeah, that's it.

Except sometimes for value of "good" you can insert other words—which sucks, because genuinely good books should get published and sometimes they don't.

Words that will sometimes substitute for "good": timely, marketable, scandalous, rare, edgy, personally appealing to the particular editor/agent

Sorry. It's true. It's also much easier to get an agent if you know someone (or know someone who knows someone) who can call in a favor, or if you are famous (even if you are mostly or completely untalented as a writer), or if you have some kind of marketing connections (like, your mom is Oprah or your dad is Regis, and you can get yourself on all the talk shows), or if you already have a book deal and are in need of someone to negotiate the contract.

That last one is how quite a few people get agents—and you can look at it as distressing, or as proof that agents are not the end-all, be-all, blah blah gatekeepers of the publishing industry. Sometimes a book is rejected a million times by agents, but picked up by an editor anyway. (Sometimes a book is fiercely coveted by agents, and nevertheless rejected by every editor.)

It's also pretty easy to get an agent if you are already a super famous bestselling author, but you're looking to switch to a different agent for whatever reason.

For more advice: I know it's been a few years, but I still recommend Miss Snark's archives (`http://misssnark.blogspot.com/`); if you are of a certain sensibility, you will probably enjoy her writing style, and as she was (and is) an agent, her advice is certainly mostly spot on.

Many agents keep blogs non-pseudonymously, and they are pretty easy to find if you know how to navigate the internet. If you are new to the internet, I suggest Googling literary agent blog (`http://www.google.com/search?q=literary+agent+blog`), and reading through what pops up. Do not just read one or two. Every single agent is different. If you want a real overview, read a bunch of them!