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10 tips on how to approach a literary agent: A veteran of the trade dishes specific advice that can boost your odds of success

Terence Cantarella

Once the time has come with your book project, how should you approach an agent? What preparations do you need to make before taking the plunge? What kinds of selling points are apt to boost your chances of success with an agent?



Taryn Fagerness

Literary agent Taryn Fagerness of the [Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency](#) graciously dished out advice to aspiring writers during a four-day literary event hosted in May 2008 by the Florida Center for the Literary Arts at Miami Dade College in downtown Miami. As an agent and subrights manager at one of the nation's top literary agencies, Fagerness and her colleagues have worked with such authors as Amy Tan, Lisa See, Kate White and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Here's what she had to say about approaching an agent:

1. Make up your mind about self-publishing before you approach an agent. If you self-publish, it's incredibly difficult for an agent to then sell your book to a publisher. Unless you were able to sell 30,000 copies of your self-published book out of the trunk of your car, most agents and publishers are going to assume that you simply were unable to find an agent for the book. There are some instances when self-publishing is a good idea, but give it serious thought before you approach an agent.

2. Set realistic goals for your book. Why are you writing this book? Is it for the fame, the fortune, or simply because you want to get your message out there? What are your goals? The answer to these questions could change the way an agent goes about working with you on a book. For instance, sometimes an agent will get slightly less money for authors in order to get them a better editor and a better publishing

“Above and beyond my expectations.”

UCLA

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Professional
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Screenwriting

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house that will publish their book in a better way.

3. Read books within your own genre. If you're writing a mystery or thriller, you had better be reading a LOT of mysteries and thrillers. You have to know what you're up against. You have to know what's out there. And if some of those bestselling authors rub off on your work, that's OK, too.

4. Research publishing houses. You have to start by getting a sense of where your book is going to fit in the bookstore. Where are you going to see it when you walk in? You can look inside different books to find out which publishers are printing which kinds of books. You don't have to become an expert on the publishing industryâ€”that's an agent's jobâ€”but it's immensely helpful to know ahead of time where your book will fit.

5. Get noticed. This is a big one. Before you even go chasing after an agent, it's possible to get an agent to go chasing after you. Write a column for your local newspaper. Under your name, mention that you are writing a book. Start a blog too, and create an "About Me" page where you mention your book. An agent might read your piece and contact you. The most common way the Dijkstra agency finds clients is by reading magazines and newspapers and writing to the authors. Articles are often catalysts for great book ideas.

6. Make friends with local booksellers. Booksellers know the market. More importantly, they know where your book fits in the marketplace. If you can get them to read your manuscript, that's fantastic. Having a blurb or endorsement from a bookseller or librarian is invaluable. Agents respect booksellers, so if one took the time to read your book, let an agent know about it.

7. Think about hiring a freelance editor. It's not a shameful thing to hire an editor. Some of the most popular authors still use freelance editors before they turn in manuscripts to their publishers. Writing is a collaborative process and a trusted freelance editor can whip your manuscript into shape.

8. Understand your book. What's the pitch? This is often the hardest thing for authors. What's the essence, the most interesting thing about your book? Figure that out and express it in two to three sentences max. This is your "elevator speech." It can be difficult to distance yourself from your work and view it in a business fashion. So, get feedback from other people who've read the whole thing and see how they would pitch it.

9. It's helpful to have a good story about how you connect to the work. You've got the elevator speech; now you need a "cocktail-party speech." Everyone comes to write the story that they're writing SOMEHOW. Did you simply write about Egypt or did you actually live in Egypt? If the story of your personal connection to the story is a good one, agents will often retell that story when shopping the manuscript around.

10. Finish your manuscript. For first fiction, an agent needs to have the whole thing to be able to sell it to a publisher. Get it finished. Get it polished. Have your mom read it, have your neighbor read it, have your librarian read it. Make sure it's totally done and ready. A partial or a first draft is not marketable. For nonfiction, you need a fantastic platform. If you're writing a diet book, you'd better be a diet guru of some kind. In your book proposal, don't forget the marketing section. This is where you mention all those great connections that you have, your enormous mailing list, your book's target audience, and anything else that the publisher can use to help generate sales.



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And there you have it: 10 simple rules to ensure that you start off on the right foot when approaching a literary agent.

As far as actually finding an agent, Taryn recommends reading [Literary Market Place](#), attending literary events, checking the acknowledgement sections of books similar to your own, and subscribing to Web sites like [Publishersmarketplace.com](#) and [www.Publisherslunch.com](#).

Good luck!

Terence Cantarella

Terence Cantarella is a freelance writer and regular contributor to the *Biscayne Times* newspaper in Miami, where he lives.

For more advice from literary agents, see Sarah Anne Johnson's interview article headlined "Inside advice from top agents" in the February 2009 issue of The Writer.

To learn more about the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency, visit its Web site at [www.dijkstraagency.com](#).

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