

SPECIAL REPORT

10 Secrets Professional Writers Know about How to Write and How to Play the Publishing Game

by Jean-Noel Bassior

1. Forget the horror stories you've heard about the publishing world

Your friend Jason told you that his cousin's mother, Edith, sent her manuscript to a publishing house or literary agent two years ago – and she's still waiting for a response. What Jason left out is that Edith wrapped her 400-page manuscript in brown paper and addressed it to "Editor," Simon & Schuster. Are you getting the picture? You wouldn't respond either if you got a thousand packages in the mail each week for "Occupant." A lot of stories circulate about what happens when authors submit their material to agents and editors, but be slow to judge. The truth is, if you learn to play the publishing game like a pro, you won't have Edith's experience.

2. Be a letter, not a package when submitting to literary agents

Believe it or not, literary agents open their mail. Why? Because they're looking for gold – a lively, focused query letter. What's in it for them? Sheer joy. They know that if a writer can craft a dynamic query that actually tells them what the book is about, it's worth their time to ask for more material – and they do. That's when you send a package, on which you get to write "*Requested material.*"

3. Know how agents and editors think

Ever been to Manhattan? It's not just the center of the universe – it's the hub of the book publishing world. And even though not every agent lives there, most of them are in a New York state of mind. If they seem brusque, don't be fooled. That impatience is just a drive to get to the Next New Thing – which, hopefully, is *your* book project. They want you to hook them on your query in 10 seconds or less because they're really on your side. They're looking for fresh, focused ideas, and they're hoping your query letter, book proposal and sample chapters will be page-turners. In short, they *want* you to succeed.

4. Your query letter must do two things

Whether your book is fiction or non-fiction, your query has to (1) make agents and editors see the book in their mind, and (2) make them ask to see more material. There's an art to writing the irresistible query. It may take some time to get the hang of it, but don't give up. Learning how to write powerful queries and book proposals sharpens your writing skills.

5. To beat writer's block, write it badly

Most writers never show you their first draft. Why? Because it ranges from fair to awful, with flashes of brilliance in between. Writing is about bringing visions and concepts from your mind into physical reality and you don't always get it on take one. Fortunately, there's an activity called "rewriting" that gets you from "Geez, will this ever come together?" to "Wow, I like that!" So relax and start anywhere – at the end, in the middle, even with just one word – and write it badly. Get something –

anything – down, and trust the rewriting process to shape it. It's like chipping away at a block of marble to get the sculpture inside to emerge. Or, as artist Paul Klee once remarked, "take a line on a walk" and see where it leads you.

6. Where there's a will, there's a way to organize

Ever feel overwhelmed by stacks of research? Are you staring at piles of notes, e-mails, interview transcripts, clippings and reference books, wondering how all this material will ever flow magically into chapters? Relax. You *can* find a way to organize your material. Here's just one:

Print out a few pages of notes or an interview transcript, or photocopy some pages from that book with the info you need. Number the pages with a felt tip pen at the top right-hand corner of the page (1, 2, 3, etc.). What you're going to learn is how to divide the info on each page into bite-size chunks that can be indexed with, well, index cards. Let's begin.

Let's work with that transcript of your interview with Dr. Snark, a famous scientist you'll be writing about in your book. As the interview begins, he's talking about the discovery that won him the Nobel Prize. As soon as he changes the topic (or you ask him about something else), take your felt tip pen and draw a horizontal line across the page. Mark a big "A" in the right-hand margin. That's section A, where he talks about winning the Nobel Prize.

Read on. Now he's talking about his childhood, still on page one. When he finishes, draw another line across the page and label that section "B" in the right-hand margin. As soon as he changes topics, draw another line and label that section "C." Keep reading the transcript, drawing a line with your felt tip pen across the page whenever the topic changes and assigning that section a letter in the right-hand margin. Begin with "A" on each new page. On some pages, there will be three subjects, so you'll have "A," "B" and "C" in the right-hand margin. On other pages, Dr. Snark may talk about six different things, so you'll go from "A" to "F." Remember: Every time you begin a new page, start with "A."

After you've done a few pages, reach for some 3 x 5 index cards and create a card for each section. For example: Remember where Snark talked about winning the Nobel Prize? That's 1A. Mark 1A in the top right-hand corner of an index card, and write a key word in the middle of the card that will bring back that part of the interview. "Nobel Prize" may be enough. Take another card, label it 1B, and write some key words that will remind you of what he said about his childhood. And so on. Are you getting the hang of this? Eventually, you'll have a card for each section of the transcript, and you'll know precisely where everything is. And guess what: You can plan your chapters by shuffling the cards into different orders, experimenting with the organization of a chapter – or the entire book. Then, when it's time to write, lay the cards out in order on your desk and follow the plan – or change it. You're in control.

Yes, it's a challenge to do this grunt work, but it beats thumbing through hundreds or thousands of pages of research over and over, muttering, "I was sure I saw that quote in this pile." You can index anything – e-mails, old newspaper clippings, even those opening lines for Chapter 8 that you scribbled on a cocktail napkin one night in a stupor. (Just tape the napkin to an 8½ x 11 page and number it, too.) And this is just one way to take control of your research. You can create a system that works for you. The important thing is to know that you *can* take control of your raw material instead of feeling it's about to crush you. Even if you end up with hundreds of index cards, you'll know where everything is – and that's a great feeling. It's the way out of overwhelm.

7. Do these 3 things in bookstores when nobody's looking

· **Read Acknowledgments.** Look at books similar to the one you want to write. Does the author thank his or her agent or editor? Grab those names. You may want to send those folks your query letter.

· **Go on a title search.** Looking for a title for your book? Browse the titles of bestselling books on display. Notice the rhythm and play between title and subtitle. Make it a game – you may want to jot down titles you like, but the important thing is to let that rhythmic play seep into your subconscious mind. (Don't be surprised if you wake up one morning soon with a great working title for *your* book.)

· **Read at random.** Open a book that looks interesting and read a page. Like it? Keep reading. Bored? Put it down. Why do you like some books and not others? The ones you like keep you glued to the page, right? How does the author do that? Study his/her style and figure out why it keeps you reading. Your own style will improve as you notice what skillful writers are doing.

8. Hey, kids! Start your collection of rejection slips now!

Every writer has them. They mean you're serious, you're in the game. See them as badges of honor.

9. If you crave love or a response to your query, include a SASE

Be sure to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope so the agent or editor can reply on your dime. Or, use a pre-paid postcard with a box for them to check if they'd like to see more, that is, your book proposal or sample chapters.

10. Believe that you can and will get published.

In the end, that's what counts.

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