

Choose your own adventure:

Publishing paths, and red flags to watch for

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Let's say you've finished writing a book. Amazing! For many people, "Write a book someday" is an outlandish moonshot bucket list item they'll never actually get around to. This is an achievement to be proud of. Whatever happens next is the gravy on top.

Now, let's say you want to pursue traditional publication. You've gotten feedback on your book from critique partners and beta readers. You've scrubbed and polished and edited the manuscript within an inch of its life. You've written a synopsis and a query letter. Sooner or later, you're going to run out of ways to procrastinate and have to actually send that query somewhere. Fortunately, you have a lot of options.

Choose your own adventure: the publishing train

The path to traditional publication is like riding a train. You can get on the train at any stop you want. You can pass stops you're not interested in and keep riding on to the next. You can get off the train any time you reach a destination you're happy with. But *the train only moves in one direction*. You can't ask the conductor to take you back to a stop you've already passed. There are three major starting points to choose from on your publishing journey:

1. Apply to mentorship programs
2. Query agents
3. Query publishers

Mentorship programs like Author Mentor Match or PitchWars pair new writers with established professionals to help strengthen their manuscript before continuing along the publishing train.

The process of applying for a mentorship is exactly like querying agents or publishers—you'll send a query letter, synopsis, and opening sample of your manuscript, and anyone who's interested will contact you to request more. Think of it as a querying trial run. If you are chosen by a mentor, they will likely expect that Querying Agents will be your next step, so that's what they'll be helping you work toward.

Of course there are always more applicants than mentors, so only a few will be chosen. If your manuscript is not chosen, you can always move on to querying on your own. Or, you might decide to skip the Mentorship stop altogether and get on the train at Querying to begin with. What you can't do is query a bunch of agents, and *then* go back and try to get a mentor...to help you query agents. You already did that, so there's nothing for a mentor to help you with. So to reiterate: get on the train at any stop you like, but it only moves forward.

Agents

A literary agent's job is to find a publisher for your manuscript. If they succeed, they will try to negotiate the best possible contract terms on your behalf. In return, they get 15% of anything the publisher pays you for that book, whether that be an advance before publication or sales royalties afterward.

Agents are an even pickier bunch than mentors. They don't get paid until their clients get paid, so they'll only agree to represent manuscripts they think they have an excellent chance of placing with a publisher. Agents pass on 99% of queries sent to them. If they're so selective, why bother trying to catch their attention? Well, you don't *have* to. You could skip the Agenting stop and begin with publishers in the first place. But many of the largest publishers only accept submissions from literary agents—meaning you, as an author, can't contact that publisher on your own, even if you think your book would be a perfect fit for them. If you want your book to end up with Scholastic or Penguin or Macmillan, you'll need a literary agent first.

How should you decide which agents to query? Search websites like manuscriptwishlist.com and querytracker.com for agents that represent the kind of book you wrote. Many agents specialize in only a few genres. They might only represent children's literature, or only nonfiction, or only adult mysteries and romance. Query lots of agents, but only

the ones that actually seem like they'd be a good fit for your work. Sending your Epic Space Opera to an agent that specializes in picture books is a waste of everyone's time.

Agent Red Flags

Occasionally, there are predatory businesses that present themselves as a legitimate literary agency, but then turn around and try to sell you some other service. They might insist that to be signed as their client, you need to pay for a certain editor's services. Or they might claim to have a publishing imprint as well, and offer to publish your manuscript themselves (again, for a fee). A legitimate agent will never ask you to pay for anything up front, ever. They only get paid after you get paid.

Another red flag to watch for is literary agents that aren't *scams*, exactly...they're just not very good at their job. A good literary agency will list all their agents on their website. Each of those agents will have a resume of experience in the publishing industry, such as internships with other literary agencies or publishers, or serving as an assistant to a senior agent. They will list their clients and recent sales. Any agency that is not transparent with their track record should be approached with extreme skepticism.

There is no bar exam or licensure necessary to set up shop as a literary agent, so it's up to prospective clients to vet their credentials. Make sure any agent you query knows what they're doing and has a resume of experience in the publishing industry. A writer who successfully sold their own work, but has never assisted a real agent, or an Instagram book promoter with hopes and dreams, do not have the proper experience to do your work justice. Agencies with dozens of clients, but very few publishing deals are probably not very effective. Agencies whose only deals appear to be with small publishers (that would have accepted unagented queries to begin with) are probably struggling to get their clients the results they'd hoped for.

If a literary agent agrees to represent you, congratulations! Just be sure to check for a few more red flags before you make things official. A legitimate agency will always offer you a written contract of representation. Do not agree to do business with anyone based on a verbal agreement only. Contracts protect everyone's rights, and an honest professional will insist on

one. On the other hand, this will be a working relationship, so don't enter into it based on a written document alone. Arrange a phone call with the prospective agent to ask about their communication style and their plans for your book. Contact some of the other writers they represent and ask if they are satisfied with their experience. Do not do business with any agent that resists the idea of a phone call, a written contract, or sharing the names of their other clients.

Independent Publishers

Maybe you tried querying agents, but didn't find yourself in that coveted 1%. Or maybe you weren't interested in placing your book with one of the big publishing titans to begin with. Either way, you might decide to query publishers directly, without the assistance of a literary agent. As mentioned before, the largest publishers only communicate with agents, but there are countless smaller publishers that will accept queries directly from authors. Smaller does not mean inferior, only that they publish fewer books every year. Independent publishers often specialize in certain genres and cater to very specific readers. They might publish only romance, or horror, or picture books, or poetry collections. This specialization means they will have fewer authors vying for their attention, and are able to focus their marketing efforts on niche reading audiences. If your manuscript sounds like a good fit for their publishing catalog, an independent publisher can be a great option.

Publishing red flags

As with scam literary agencies, there are a few bad apples out there trying to make money *off* of authors instead of *for* them. A legitimate publisher will accept some manuscripts and reject others. They will never ask an author to pay for *anything, ever*. Authors should not be expected to pay for editing, cover art, marketing, or anything else. If a publisher says they want your book, but then starts asking for money, *run*.

Make sure any publisher you consider is doing an effective job selling the books they publish. They should proudly list the titles they've published on their website. When considering submitting your work to a publisher, check out these other titles first. Are these books widely

available for purchase? Are they getting reviewed on retailer websites? If you can only buy the book directly from the publisher's website, chances are friends of the author are going to be their only customers. Publishing a large number of new titles every year is another red flag—this may be a sign they are not investing a lot of care into the books they produce, and expect the authors to be responsible for marketing them.

If you submit your manuscript to a publisher and get an offer of publication, congratulations! You have every right to be excited. But be sure to do one last layer of research before you agree to anything. If possible, contact some of the authors of their previous publications to ask if they are satisfied with their experience. Then, read the proposed contract carefully. The publisher should offer a written contract that spells out when the book will be published, how much you will be paid, and how often they will communicate with you about sales data. The contract must specify which rights you are selling to them, and which you are retaining. It should include clauses explaining what happens if they go out of business in the future, or fail to comply with any portion of the contract. Before you sign the contract, it would be wise to have a lawyer or other contracts professional look it over first. If the publisher resists putting their terms in writing, or the contract attempts to claim more rights than you agreed to sell, *run*. Legitimate publishers do not behave this way.

Non-traditional publishing

All of the options we have discussed so far focus on traditional publishing, where authors sell some of the rights to their work in exchange for a published book at no cost to them. There are other publishing paths, but they will require the author to finance the publication themselves. This is not traditional publishing.

Self publishing is one non-traditional route. In this case, the author wears all the hats. They are responsible for every aspect of getting a book on the market: editing, formatting, distribution, cover art, marketing, and much more. The author keeps all the rights to their work and doesn't have to split the profits with anyone, but it also means they must pay for all publication costs themselves. This can be an effective and personally satisfying route to getting your book published, but it is *not for beginners*. Self publishing is essentially starting a

publishing business, even if you'll be the only client. And, just as with the other stops on the publishing train, once you choose to self publish a manuscript you really can't move backward to any of the other options.

There are also services that will assist you in self publishing, for a fee. The author pays them, and the business takes care of sourcing professionals to handle editing, formatting, cover art, and distribution. They will probably not offer any help with marketing. This is a perfectly viable option as long as the company is honest up front about what they offer and how much it will cost. As with any of the other options, a written contract that approaches both parties' rights and responsibilities with transparency is essential. Anyone that pretends to be a traditional publisher, then turns out to be a "vanity" press or publishing assistance company, is not to be trusted.

Enjoy your journey!

The beauty of the publishing train is that you really can choose your own adventure. You may not be able to move backward to a previous option for this manuscript, but you can always keep writing and choose different paths for different projects. You might query independent publishers with one manuscript, but start with agenting or mentorship for your next one. Once you have some experience with the publishing industry under your belt, you might decide you're ready to tackle self publishing. As long as you choose your entry point carefully and keep an eye out for red flags, you can take your writing on whatever kind of journey you'd like.

AGENT RED FLAGS:

- No training with a publisher or literary agency
- No recent sales, or doesn't list their clients and sales
- No sales to major publishers
- No written contract
- Charges fees instead of earning a percentage of sales

INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER RED FLAGS:

- Publishes a lot of new titles every year
- Accepts all manuscripts submitted to them
- No written contract
- Hidden clauses in contract
- Charges fees instead of earning a percentage of sales
- Sells services to its authors
- Books are not widely available for purchase