

# **Hoots and Hollers**

**Tips and Guidance For the Unpublished Writer**



**Laughing Owl Publishing**

***Hoots and Hollers*** is a compilation of articles, lectures and workshops presented by Muireall Donald, and Aleta Boudreaux.

A full printed copy of Hoots and Hollers is available including example query letters, additional articles and materials not included in the free download. The full version is \$25 US and includes postage. Call 888-865-4884 to order the printed version.

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## **What Writers Need To Know About Manuscript Submission**

### **1. What Should The Manuscript Format Be?**

**Unless you have a completed novel, the format does not matter.**

Formatting can be done after you have written, rewritten, revised, polished, edited and cut. Have you done that yet? No? Then here is a check list for you to go over before worrying about manuscript format.

### **2. Get out your polishing cloth.**

Show, don't tell. Don't narrate. Use active prose. Be aware of the rhythm of your words, the length of your sentences, the musical flow and ebb of phrases. Keep your point of view consistent and as limited as possible. Novels are about characters as well as about plot. Don't switch points of view from one paragraph to another or from one character to another just to explain the story. The reader needs to be able to empathize with one character. Bouncing around from character to character dissipates the power of your story.

Avoid exposition, particularly in dialogue. Also avoid long internal monologues. Don't dazzle the reader with your vocabulary. Don't repeat yourself. Keep things simple and direct. Kill all the adverbs you can find. Then find your longest most beautiful flowing sentence. Think of it as a poisonous snake. Use your computer machete to chop it into pieces.

### **3. Get A Fourth Grade English Grammar and Punctuation Book.**

Really. Use it, a thesaurus and the best dictionary you can find, for spell checking and grammar checking and punctuation checking. PLEASE DO NOT RELY ON YOUR COMPUTER FOR THESE THINGS.

Grammar and punctuation serve a purpose. They help readers know when to pause, what is significant, and which items belong together. The words on your paper say more about you than you probably want to know. Do you fix your hair and put on makeup for a photograph? Your manuscript should get the same care.

Lay and lie. Which and that. Who and whom. I am not going to go into the proper usage for these words. It makes my skin prickle to have to explain them to people who are more than ten years old. If I get a submission that misuses these words, I read no farther than the first instance. Back the manuscript goes.

By all means, use the language tools of your computer for an initial spell check. Then get four separate humans who are good at grammar, spelling and punctuation to read your manuscript. When they are through with it, say thank you and re-read it yourself.

Finally, go back and reread every sentence in its final incarnation. How does each sentence sit in relationship to the next? Cut. Cut everything you can cut then put the novel aside for a week. Reread it and then cut some more.

Bandages and tissue may be necessary aids, but I promise the results will be worth the initial pain.

### **4. The Synopsis.**

The writing is not finished yet. Now you get to write your synopsis. This is where lots of writers moan and their eyes roll around in their heads. Some even clutch their hearts. But it has to be done. Just like going to the dentist.

Definition of a synopsis: It sketches out in simple terms the crucial relationships of the story from beginning to end. If you have done your plotting well, the synopsis should be as easy as writing your bio.

After you have finished the first draft of your book, write the synopsis as though you are a student doing a book report. Leave out the commentary

that most Lit teachers require. You don't use the synopsis to dissect your writing style or your book. You use the synopsis to *describe* it.

## **5. Finding An Editor and Working Successfully With Her**

When everything is done, and your critique partners and proofreaders deem the book ready to be sent out, you start making contact with publishing houses and editors. There are three ways to make contact: 1) a personal connection; 2) writers conferences; 3) by mail.

If you are friendly with any published writer, don't be shy about asking if they know an editor who might be interested in your book. Chances are, they will know a couple of editors and won't mind giving you the names. Thank the writer(s) and remember that what goes around comes around. Someday, you may be able to help her.

Editors who are looking for new writers go to conferences. We know that writers who attend conferences are serious about their craft and are professional. Try to make appointments with editors who are looking for your type of book. Pitch your book in three sentences or less. This can really be done. Think of the TV Guide listings for movies. Smile at the editor you are meeting. Thank her for her time before you leave.

If you aren't able to attend conferences, purchase a copy of the current year's Writers Market. You will find listings of editors, agents and publishing houses along with descriptions of what they acquire. In this instance, your query letter will have to be your smile and your presentation. Make it as magnetic as possible.

## **6. Writing Your Query Letter.**

Let's cover the don'ts first. While these may make you laugh, unfortunately they are real examples of some queries I have received.

While I cannot speak for other publishers and editors, I can tell you this: You will be wasting your time and doing your work an injustice if you send me any of the following things:

A handwritten note (poorly handwritten) on lined paper, signed only with the author's first name. No return envelope or stamps were provided.

Don't say that you have included the first chapter of your manuscript because you think sending a synopsis would be boring. Also, don't say that you are a gifted seventeen year old writer with a brilliant future in fiction ahead of you. That may prove to be true, but right now, you are just another writer with a query. Follow the house requirements, send a synopsis, and let your work speak for itself.

Don't make a declaration that you are a member of a fascist organization with a non-fiction book which seeks to expose government conspiracy theories, secret black projects and evil aliens. Editors watch the XFiles too, and Chris Carter does this sort of stuff much better than anyone else can.

Don't send a copy of an automatic writing communication from your guardian angels or spirit guides. Editors are highly skeptical people and they dislike intermediaries. Once again, your work should be able to speak for itself.

Now that we have the "don'ts" out of the way, what sort of query letter *should* you submit?

Ideally a query letter should be one page long. The opening paragraph should tell something about you and define your manuscript. The rest of the letter should give a brief, intriguing description of your novel. Tell what the word count is. Give the editor a reason to read your book. You have to put yourself in a salesperson's mind at this point. Make it read almost like advertising copy, but not so slick that you come off sounding like an overindulged only child. Most of all, don't tell the editor that your mother, father, spouse, children or friends love your book.

### **Now, what about Manuscript Format?**

This is really the simplest part of the whole process. The cardinal rule is this: *Find out exactly what the requirements of a publisher are before you submit to them.* Write a letter asking for a copy of the requirements. Include an SASE. Or pick up the phone and call them. Don't pitch your book at the same time. Just ask what the requirements are.

If you write horror, don't send it to a romance house. If you write literary fiction, don't send it to a science fiction publisher. If you write poetry or

children's books, don't send your work to a publisher who deals only in novels. You don't want to send erotica to a house that publishes Christian stories. These are common sense issues, but many writers are so pumped about their work that they will send it to every house they can find without taking the time to do the proper research.

There are basic rules for formatting: double space; use regular typewriter fonts like Courier or Times New Roman in 12 point; one inch margins without justification; no white spaces between paragraphs; use underlining to represent italics; use headers with your name, book title and continuous page numbers; put your name, address and phone number on the title page. All of this is easily set up on word processors -- another reason to pack away your typewriter. Your manuscript should be easy to read with lots of margin space for the editor to make notes in.

Always send your manuscript loose leaved, with a large rubber band around it and preferably in a box. Include return postage. And don't send your only copy! You don't want to hear it and we don't like to admit it, but manuscripts *can* get lost.

By Muireall Donald

## **GETTING PAST THE FIRST CUT**

### **How to professionally present your work to publishers**

#### **FINISH YOUR BOOK**

The first thing that you must have before you even begin to approach a publisher with your book is A FINISHED MANUSCRIPT. By finished I mean, completed and polished to the best of your ability. Don't make the mistake of sending out a manuscript that is not spell checked and read over by someone else. Prepare it in proper formatting. There are reasons why publishers want the manuscript double spaced (to write in between the lines) and numbered with your title and name, (in case they drop the loose sheets.)

#### **RESEARCH THE PUBLISHERS**

Take time to thoroughly research the publishers that publish your specific type of book. Find out who is looking for what, who buys from authors directly, who will consider first time authors, who will look at your work without an agent. There are several books published annually that list publishers and their basic guidelines. It is always good to write for new guidelines because publishing houses needs change often. Always include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope or SASE with your requests

#### **WRITE A QUERY LETTER.**

A query letter is ONE PAGE letter written to a specific editor of a publishing house. If you have to call the publishing house to find out the editor's name it will be worth the few cents to get it to the proper person instead of the general slush pile.

The query letter briefly tells about your book, about your qualifications for writing the book and why your book is suited for their publishing house. (ie: because it fits their guidelines, similar to other books they publish, etc. ) Do not tell the editor that your mother, spouse or critique partner loved the book. Do not tell the editor that you think their readers need your book or that it is the best book ever written on that subject. Send an SASE for their reply.

## THE WAITING GAME

Don't be surprised if it takes up to two or three months for a reply to your query letter. Editors get swamped with un-requested mail. They will look at this last and often several days or weeks after it is logged in. Remember this is a tough business, there are many writers with great ideas and without an agent or a track records of book sales, you have no clout with the publishing house. If you are sending a submission to another publishing house at the same time, let them know. This is called a multiple submission. It is always best to find out if their guidelines say they will accept multiple submissions.

While you are waiting, polish your manuscript a little further. Learn to write a synopsis.

## WRITING A SYNOPSIS

A synopsis is between 5-10 pages that tells what happens in your book. It is written in the present tense. (ie: The hero drives to a car lot where he buys an old truck)

It is not a detailed description of every event in your book. It quickly points out the background information on the characters and then action in the story and the motivation of your characters. Don't forget to include how the book ends.

## GET READY...GO!

You've finished your book, you've sent off the query letters.... an editor writes back and asks for 3 chapters and a synopsis. Call your friends to tell them the good news then send EXACTLY what the editor requests. Send the first three chapters, not a random sample. They want to see how you develop your story, plot and characters. You should already have your synopsis ready to go.

Include with this mailing a self addressed stamped postcard with the title of your book written on the back. The person who opens up the mail for the editor will write on the back the date it was received and mail it back to you.

## WAIT TILL VICTORY

Here you wait again. Don't be surprised to wait up to 3-6 months for a reply. During this time, polish the rest of your manuscript or start another book. If you don't hear from the publisher after 6 months, it is perfectly acceptable to write a letter asking the editor about the material you sent at their request. Don't ask if they have decided anything, just ask where it is at the present time. If they don't reply in another month, then call and ask for the editor's assistant. Tell them how long it has been, that you sent them a letter but have not heard where your material is at the present time. **BE WARNED!** If you call them, there is a chance that you might get your rejection letter in the mail within a few days.

## SECOND ASSAULT

You open your mail and there is a request for the entire manuscript. Call your writing friends and yell into the phone, "They want to see the whole book!"

The publishing house will probably send you a release form that will allow them to read the look at the entire work without obligation and you release them from any liability if they happen to publish something similar to your work in the future.

Don't worry about your copyright at this point. If they like your book, they will buy it. It is too costly for them to be sued for plagiarism.

Sign the paper, send the manuscript along with enough return postage to send it back to you or a statement for them to recycle or destroy the manuscript if they don't want it.

Take a day off.

Start writing on that other book tomorrow.

## VICTORY

One evening, the phone rings. It is the editor from the publishing house.

**THEY WANT TO BUY YOUR BOOK!**

When you get the "CALL", relax. **DO NOT** accept any terms over the phone.

Say things like: "I'm so glad you like it," or "What do you have in mind?", "That sounds interesting." "Send me what we you are proposing in writing and I'll look it over and get right back to you."

At this point, don't be afraid to call an agent or entertainment lawyer to talk to them about any contracts that you receive. Even if you are not

represented by an agent, most will be able to look over your contract (for a fee) for any potential problems that they might see.

## DO NOT QUIT YOUR DAY JOB

As glamorous as it is, writing is a job, a profession and one that you will need to take seriously. However, unless you strike the big time, with something like Book of the Month club or Oprah's Book Club selection, you will need to write in your spare time.

If your book does not sell well, or your book advance exceeds the publishing house's expectations, you may be required to roll over your royalties into the next book. These are things that would be spelled out in your contract.

There are only a handful of authors that make large sums of money on a continual basis. There are many authors who make a good living at writing. And with skill and a good amount of luck you can be one of them.

## HAVE FUN

by Aleta Boudreaux

## REFERENCE BOOKS FOR EVERY WRITERS BOOKSHELF

The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing, Writer's Digest Books

Elements of Style, Strunk and White

Elements of Grammar, Strunk and White

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary  
(has dates words were first used)

A good Thesaurus

A good English Grammar Book – 9<sup>th</sup> grade level

Writer's Marketplace

Insiders Guide to Book Editors, Publishers and Literary Agents by Jeff Herman

Book Promotion for the Shameless by Lorna Tedder ([www.spilledcandy.com](http://www.spilledcandy.com))