

The Art of the Pitch

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What is a literary agent? The simple definition is he/she is a professional who acts on behalf of an author in dealing with publishers and others involved in promoting the author's work. **So, what does a literary agent do?** In short, she/he circulates your manuscript to publishers. Of course, there are other steps involved. The first is to review your manuscript prior to accepting/rejecting it. If they accept it, they'll negotiate the business deal between you and the publisher. They'll also discuss goals and future plans with you, know what's marketable and what's not, suggest ways to edit your work to make it more sellable, monitor your rights and royalties, advise on contracts, and make sure you're getting what you're entitled to. Literary agents also spend time cultivating relationships with various publishing houses.

But an agent is not the solution to getting a work published that's not publishable. Many writers have the impression that all you must do is get your work into the hands of an agent and everything else will take care of itself. NOT TRUE. Agents are picky just like editors are, and because the publishing industry is getting tighter with all the different publishing options open now, a good agent can't afford to take a risk. Meaning, finding a good agent isn't easy. But, with this Agent Fest, you're on your way. You're meeting one or more agents in what the industry calls a "pitch" session, and this is where it could all start for you if, and only if, you present what an agent wants to see.

So, the first thing you must do is select an agent who will represent what you write. Most agents don't represent everything – at least the good ones don't. They have strengths and weaknesses in their ability to sell certain projects, and they're not going to rep a client who doesn't write what they can sell and, in many cases, doesn't write what they like. **Find an agent who represents what you write.**

Next, look at their track record. Are you comfortable with what they do, who they represent, what they require from an author? Most reputable agents have bios and blurbs all over the place, so go online and do the research so you'll have a basic understanding about the person you're asking to handle your career. While you're at it, look at their submission guidelines. Knowing what they want is a huge step ahead at a pitch session. **Do your homework.**

Now, some pitch session basics.

- Don't take a full or even a partial manuscript to a pitch session. Why? Besides the fact that most submissions are done electronically, agents (and editors) don't come to pitch sessions expecting to carry dozens of manuscripts home with them. If you impress them

in your pitch, they'll tell you how to submit. Do, however, have a synopsis and three chapters handy, back in your room, or in your messenger bag, just in case.

- No manuscripts slid under the bathroom door, given out in the elevator, in the hall, or on the floor outside their hotel door. It's certainly appropriate to approach agents when they're not busy, but approach with questions, not a ream of paper, for the same reason as stated above.
- General chat is fine, but not during your pitch time. Also, don't interrupt an agent who is busy talking to someone else, and don't butt in on that conversation hoping to get noticed. Wait your turn and keep in mind others are waiting for the same opportunity to chat with an agent during non-pitch time, so don't monopolize an agent when you manage a little off-the-clock time.
- Business casual dress. You don't have to be the late Barbara Cartland who wore an evening gown and tiara when she worked, but that just-out-of-bed look isn't good either. An agent must take into consideration how to promote an author along with his/her book. If the only look you put forward is sloppy, that could be held against you.
- Yes or no on multiple queries or submissions? Many agents will tell you no, but this is your career and if you're not actively advocating it, no one else will be. Multiple queries/submissions are among the greatest worries of newer authors. Should I? Shouldn't I? Before you make your decision, take a good, hard look at the waiting time between the query/submission and the agent's decision. It might be weeks, it could be months. Occasionally it will run into more than a year. Ask about wait times in your pitch session then consider if you can afford the wait, or should you be actively engaged in more than one agent pursuit? The answer is—whatever you think works best for you.
- Remember that agents come to the pitch to be pitched. With few exceptions they need new authors as much as new authors need/want to be published. But, it's up to you to get it right during your allotted time. So, here are the generally accepted dos and don'ts of the pitch session.

Step 1: Write a Two-paragraph Summary

It would be nice if, during your allotted few minutes, you could cover every plot twist and character. But you can't. Which means you must take your entire manuscript and boil it down to the essentials. The late, great Karl Largent once said: "If you don't know your book well enough to sell it in a paragraph, you don't know it well enough to sell it at all." (As a matter of interest, Karl was associated with MWW for years, until his death. Look him up.)

"Two paragraphs to sell my book?" you ask. "Are you crazy?"

Nope, not at all. The most important aspect of getting an agent interested in soliciting your manuscript is knowing your story well enough that it can be pitched in a paragraph or two.

It's hard work reducing it that much but stripping your story of all its bells and whistles and addressing only its basic elements is essential. What are those essentials? Genre. Setting. Character. Conflict. What's at stake? (Applies to novels, not works of non-fiction.)

So now you have the elements of the perfect pitch for your novel (non-fiction books coming up later). You're a writer and it would be easy to devote pages to each topic. But you've only got two paragraphs—maybe the most important two paragraphs of your writing life. Meaning...do the work!

1. What is your genre? Do you even know what a genre or sub-genre is? If you don't, study up because if you can't sit down at your pitch session and say my book is a romance, or a mystery, or a western, you're sunk. Know your genre. And, if you write in a sub-genre, know what that is as well. My genre is romance, my sub-genre is medical. Meaning, I write medical romance.

2. Setting. This isn't as important as knowing your genre, but if your book takes place in 1512 in Scotland, or 1923 Chicago, that's basic info the agent needs to know in order to determine how or if he/she can even sell a book with this setting. If 1512 Scotland is hot, you and your agent stand a good shot at being in. But if nobody's looking at, or buying 1923 Chicago, you've got a problem. So does your agent if she/he has agreed to represent you and your book.

3. Character. Definitely a pivotal selling point. Do you know your main characters well enough to describe them in a few sentences? In this, think Charles Dickens, the master of all who've ever described a character. For example: *'He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him... A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the bully of humility.'* (Describing Mr. Bounderby in *HARD TIMES*.) Granted, this isn't a description one might put out there today, but in precise terms Dickens has introduced you to the heart and soul of his character. And, he doesn't put it in list form, the way so many writers do. Even if you've never read anything more about Mr. Bounderby than what you've read here, don't you get the sense you know this man? Can't you visualize him? That's exactly what you want to do to impress an agent. Go Dickensian, but in your own words.

4. Conflict. I write conflict for both my main characters (hero and heroine) – internal as well as external. Understanding conflict is an all-day workshop in itself, but to sum it up, conflict is the plot, and also the texture. It's what makes your story interesting, turns it into that bumpy ride, removes it from that long, smooth linear line from beginning to ending and tosses it in another, more interesting direction. And while the purpose of this workshop is pitching the agent, you must know conflict. In summary, the **external conflict** is the motivator that creates the inner conflict. The **inner conflict** is what holds the character back. It's the thing in his/her life that stops him/her from working toward a solution and since working toward the resolution of conflict is what most novels are about, it's important. For example, the hero has had cancer, but he hasn't hit the five-year mark where he's declared cancer-free. Cancer is the **external conflict**, because it's what

stops him from entering a committed relationship, and that fear of commitment until he rings his five-year bell is his **internal conflict**.

Overall, there are 6 basic conflicts (or 7, depending on who you're listening to). Almost every novel will fit into one of these.

Person vs. person: one person against another for some reason. One of my favorites is *And Then There Were None*, by Agatha Christie.

Person vs. nature: One title always comes to mind first: *Moby Dick* by Melville. That's man against nature at its very best.

Person vs. self: That's you fighting you. Any of my novels fit into that category because my characters always, without exception, must come to terms with themselves before they can move on in life.

Person vs. machine: This is the new kid on the block, an emerging conflict that's fighting for its legitimate place. For me, I think in terms of H.A.L. in Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*. Even Frankenstein's monster, to some extent, was a machine that fought mankind. Think Asimov, Bradbury and, especially, Roddenberry. This is a popular, and even frightening conflict because the nature of it changes and we don't always see those changes coming or recognize them as they're happening.

Person vs. society: This is where the conflict is about challenging societal norms. One of my all-time favorite books, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Harper Lee) certainly does that. Another one of the greats is Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a story about Huck's struggle with his opposition to conforming to society's expectations.

Person vs. Fate (God, Destiny, etc.): Everybody faces that challenge or conflict in their lives at some point. *Why me, Lord?* This type of conflict occurs when a character is trapped by an inevitable destiny. Oedipus, for example, is fated to marry his own mother. Odysseus comes up against the anger of Poseidon and is destined to sail the seas for 10 years before he can return home. What can humans do in the face of the gods and fate? It's the conflict of many good stories.

The bonus conflict: Most authors recognize the basic 6, but number 7 is squeezing its way in. Person vs. the unknown/extraterrestrial/supernatural: The conflict can arise in many different forms, but some of the best examples include pretty much everything Stephen King writes (*The Shining* is a great example), Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Daphne du Maurier's short story *The Birds*, which was popularized by Hitchcock in his movie.

5. What's at stake? Something is at stake in every good novel. Whether it's the character's heart, the future of the planet, or the life of one child with a serious illness, there's got to be a way to fight the fight and overcome (or fail, if that's your choice). If there isn't, the story has no real point to make. And, in a broader sense, isn't that what life's about anyway? Successes and failures?

Step 2: Identify How Your Book Is Different (for fiction and non-fiction)

This is extremely important because you could have an amazing story to tell, or important knowledge to impart, but if it doesn't sound interesting it will be a hard sell. No matter what you're writing, you must be able to show why your book is different from anything else out there, and why that difference needs to be read. Then, in your pitch, highlight what makes your story unique. I wrote a book about dangers inside your house, and showed potential bad consequences arising from common, everyday items. That book was one of my fastest sellers ever because I did my homework and discovered the topic hadn't been written to the extent I intended to write it. That made my topic more appealing, and that's also what sold the book.

Step 3: Practice Your Pitch & Be Prepared to Answer Questions

By now, you've faced the fact that the best pitch is based on that two-paragraph summary. Fiction has been covered above. **In non-fiction, the important elements to pitch are topic, relevance, demographics, and uniqueness. Also, if you have special qualifications or credentials that make you an authority (not always necessary, but usually helpful.)** And, you've written that pitch, made it ready to study. Or at least, you're trying to write it. It does take effort. But after you've tweaked it enough and covered what you consider to be the most important elements in your book, then it's time to practice it. What? I can't pitch my book off the cuff? You can, if your off-the-cuff is very good and you don't get nervous. But most writers overestimate themselves in this, and that's when it can all go bad. Just sayin'.

-Record it and listen to it. Does it make sense? Is this what you meant to say? Are you speaking in a manner the agent will understand you? Go back and edit until you think it's perfect. Then...

-Read it to a trusted and literate friend. Does it make sense to her? Does he have suggestion for improvement? Does it sound conversational and natural to your friend? Or, did it sound frantic and unrehearsed. Bear in mind, someone who's read your book will be able to tell you how successful your pitch was. They might be able to add important details you've left out, or suggest you lose something that bogs down the pitch. If they haven't read your book, the most important feedback you can get is, based on your pitch, would they be interested in reading your entire book? If yes, that's great. If no, go back and do more editing. Then repeat the steps. And, in every case...

- Ask your friend to ask you random questions about your book. Why? Agents are likely to do that, and the best way to prepare yourself is to practice answering random questions.

Some of those questions:

Tell me about yourself.

Where did you come up with your idea for this book?

Are you working on anything else? (Hint. They like to hear that you are.)

Where do you see your book fitting into the market?

Do you know the demographic you're targeting?

Who are your favorite authors?

And since we're on the subject of questions, be prepared to ask one or two of your own, just in case. One of the best ones is to ask how you can improve your pitch (in the event the agent doesn't make a request.) Also, if you don't get a request to submit, ask why. Both these questions will help prepare you for the next time

Step 4: Especially for the non-fiction writers

In your pitch, address the following three questions:

1. What is the relevance of your topic and why is it important?
2. Who is this book going to help? Whose problems will it solve?
3. Why do you have the authority, credibility, and/or platform to be the author of this book? (Hint: Without authority or credentials, the willingness to do the hard work and research goes a long way. Tell them you excel at research, love doing it...something like that. Always give the agent a take-away that lets them know you're the one to write that book.)

One suggestion for anyone pitching: Brevity is your friend! The longer you talk, the less time the agent or editor is talking. You want to hear their feedback and reaction. If possible, somewhere around the half-way point, try letting the agent guide the discussion; find out what's caught their attention or what piece is missing. Then, be open to feedback.

Also, in today's publishing environment, agents want writers who are focused on long-term career growth and success. If you seem too invested in a single project – the one it's taken you ten years to write – that sends up a signal to the agent that you've been stuck for a long time. You're not growing as a writer. Since they want growth, and because multi-book contracts are not uncommon, your pitch session may not turn out as you'd hoped it would. So, show the agent a writer who's focused on future projects and, at the very minimum, has several ideas bouncing around.

Take the pressure off: an agent pitch isn't the deciding or defining moment of your career. So, if you don't receive an invitation to submit, while it may be discouraging, learn any lesson you can from that pitch session then move on to another agent and another pitch. The industry is full of rejection-turned-success stories. You know, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Bach) rejected 18 times; *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Canfield) rejected 140 times; *Carrie* (King) rejected 30 times; *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell) rejected 38 times; *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle) rejected 26 times. The fact is, agents and publishers get it wrong every day. So, if you believe in your work, don't give up on it when you don't receive a request at an agent pitch. Some of the world's best writers with some of the world's best books will testify to the power of persistence.

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8 DON'Ts in Pitching an Agent

1. **Don't say your book is the next best seller.** Chances are, it won't be, and they know that. So, if you lead with that, you sound either inexperienced or arrogant. And, you're not impressing anyone, not even if you mean it as a joke. (Can you even begin to imagine how many times an agent has heard that line?)

2. **Don't be informal.** Addressing the agent by his/her first name in an agent pitch is usually okay, but don't go all chummy-chummy. This is a business meeting. Keep it as such.

3. **Don't pitch a book in a genre or topic the agent doesn't accept.** I'm repeating it from earlier because it's important. Too many writers pitch/query the wrong agent. It wastes times – yours and theirs. And, looks unprofessional. Know what the agent represents before you do the pitch or be prepared for a rejection in your first sentence or two if you've missed your mark.

4. **Don't say, "My book is for everyone."** Nope, it's not. And if you can't define the demographics you want to reach, it's like Karl Largent said – you don't know your book well enough to sell it. Further, an agent will know that, too. This is the time to be very specific. Something like: *My book is for the parents of grade school-aged kids on the autism spectrum.*

5. **Don't start your pitch with a question.** "Interested in how to get over your cheating hubby?" It's commonplace and boring. And it sounds more like a sales gimmick than a book pitch. Agents just want to get right into the meat of your work, so that's where you start.

6. **Don't say how many books you've self-published.** Unless you've SOLD for \$\$\$ (not given away as freebies) over 5,000 copies of a single book, the agent doesn't care. Especially since selling a self-pubbed book has nothing to do with them. How many **traditionally** pubbed books you've sold talks. So does selling over 5000 copies of a self-pubbed book, considering that 97 percent of all self-pubbed books sell less than 100 copies. Meaning you're doing something right to reach that magical number of 5000. That definitely talks.

7. **Don't say your book is totally original or unlike anything else.** No one's book is 100% unlike anything else, and even Shakespeare's work is crafted (or as has been asserted, plagiarized) from other time-tested stories.

8. **Don't say you are the next 'so and so'.** If you're the next Stephen King, what are we going to do with the original one? Original is the key word, here. Be original. Don't be somebody else. Some might disagree and say the comparison works. But in truth, the publishing industry wants something fresh or original. Stephen King is that unto himself but here's the shocker, you're not the next Stephen King. Or James Patterson. Or Nora Roberts. You're the next you.

So, now that you know a little more about what you're getting yourself into, sign up for the next agent pitch that comes your way, and with some study, you'll be able to approach it in a way you might not have approached it a month, or a year ago. Be confident. Be knowledgeable. Relax. Enjoy. It's not really such a scary proposition when you consider that the reason agents attend writers' conference is to seek out new clients. That could be you. Just make sure you prepare yourself beforehand, because solid preparation is the key that opens the door. Good luck!