

The Brown Bag Guide to Book Publishing

AN AUTHOR'S GUIDE TO THE INS AND
OUTS OF TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING

Sea Never Dry Books
Washington, DC

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About Brown Bag Guides

Brown Bag Guides are the perfect resource when you need clear, accurate, and complete information—but are too busy to wade through thick textbooks and endless web searches.

Brown Bag Guides respect your time: we pack our books with quality content and insights but don't bulk them out with filler.

Pick a week, take a little break each day to read through your Brown Bag Guide (say, over your salad and sandwich), and get up to speed in the time it takes to eat lunch! You'll be in and out with the information you need and clear answers to your most important questions.

Clear, quick, straightforward—but not too serious—Brown Bag Guides are the ideal solution when you've got a lot on your plate.

Introduction

Books are all over the place in the United States and fairly easy to access for the majority of us, but most people don't have a clue about how books are actually made. When I tell people that I edit books or that I work in publishing, they will often nod appreciatively, pause, and then inquire, "Um . . . so what does that mean?"

What happens between the author working at her computer and the reader pulling a paperback off a bookstore shelf? For most people, the path that connects an author and a bookstore or online retailer is not a huge concern—they know where to get the books they want to read, and that's good enough. But what happens if you want to *write* a book? What if you've been sitting at your computer typing away at the Great American Novel—and then you end up with a book deal? (What is a book deal, and how do you get one in the first place?) And what happens once you're book launches and you

join the ranks of the published? If those are your questions, this book is for you.

The Brown Bag Guide to Book Publishing is your insider's guide to what happens between writing your manuscript and selling your book. The best way to prepare yourself for the process of working with a traditional publisher—or to decide if that's even the right path for you—is to learn all that you can about it. This Brown Bag Guide will help you do just that—and it'll only take as long as a couple of lunch breaks!

A Few Notes Before You Begin

The “Chapter Takeout” section at the end of each chapter will help you track the major points. If you're not sure where to spend your time, try reading the Takeout sections first to help you decide whether to dive into a chapter right away or come back to it later.

If you frequent sandwich shops, you've likely been asked this question: “Chips or carrots?” In other words: *Do you want something that's good for you, or do you want some junk food to go along with that?* The “Chips or Carrots?” sections sprinkled throughout this Brown Bag Guide will help you separate the facts from the myths,

junk food, and fiction, by pointing out key misconceptions floating around about the book industry.

And as you come across unfamiliar terms, be sure to consult the glossary at the end of the book; terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary.

PREVIEW

Finding a Publisher: Not as Easy as It Looks

How do you reach out to traditional publishers to say, “Hey, publish my book!”? How do you know which publisher is the right one for you? How much will you get paid? How do you make sure you don’t end up with a raw deal?

I have some good news and some bad news.

The bad news is that most major publishing houses won’t even talk to you. The good news? Most major publishing houses won’t even talk to you. But how is this both good *and* bad news?

And You Thought Bouncers Only Worked at Nightclubs

Most traditional publishing houses (also called “legacy publishers”) do not deal directly with authors who want to get their books published—at least not initially. Instead publishing houses talk to intermediaries called **literary agents**. Agents—like real estate agents or sports agents—are the people who help strike a deal between two parties.

So, on the downside, you can’t go straight to most publishers and get a contract signed right away, and finding an agent can be time consuming and an obstacle all on its own. And, of course, agents don’t work for free. But the agent’s role is also a good thing because if you’re a writer with an agent, you have an advocate in the process: someone who knows which publishers and **editors** are looking for projects like yours, knows how to negotiate a good deal for you, and can help you manage your next book—and your whole career as a writer.

Now, all of that assumes that you have a *good* agent. As with any profession, the agent community has its incompetents, bad seeds, and nincompoops. (The [Writer Beware website](#) can help you do a little background re-

search to see what category a prospective agent falls into.)

Theoretically, publishers could seek out authors completely on their own—receive book manuscripts and book ideas that are sent to them directly by authors—and some do. But most don't go that route because of the hassle involved.

Publishers go through agents because it adds a layer of vetting into the process. Rather than having to wade through **proposals** from every Tom, Dick, and Hadrian who wants to write a book, the publishers deal with intermediaries—agents—who select the more promising projects and forward those on. (Proposals are covered in chapter 3, but I'll say briefly here that they are documents that describe a potential book project and author.)

Not only do agents pull out the better proposals from the vast number that are flying around (or that's the idea, anyway), they also develop relationships with editors. Agents learn what kinds of book projects individual editors want to publish and can use that information to target proposals to the right people. Thus, for example, an agent would know to send the raw vegan cookbook proposal to the editor who works on healthy living titles

and pass along the comforting-a-colicky-baby proposal to the editor who is building a parenting **line** at his or her **house**.

These relationships make the editor's hard job a little less difficult; with the help of agents, they can spend more time reviewing projects that are in their desired focus areas. As an author, and as someone outside this process, you probably won't know these specific, important details about individual houses and editors; and it is even more unlikely that you will have built up any goodwill or capital with the houses or editors. Even if you did manage to venture a good guess about an editor's interests based on what she has already published, you wouldn't be privy to the sorts of details she might share with agents, like her desire to stop or start publishing books in a particular **category**, or new publishing initiatives that are underway at her house.

Most major houses have a stated policy that they do not review **unsolicited** book proposals. Generally, *unsolicited* means proposals that come in without an agent, sent by some ambitious author via e-mail, the US Postal Service, or singing telegram. Collectively, these proposals are referred to as *slush* (which gives you an idea of how some editors feel about them), and the **slush pile** is

typically managed by a junior employee in the editorial department. By “managed,” I mean that all pieces are either disposed of or marked “return to sender”—*without ever being opened.*

And that’s not a dirty little secret, either. Houses are up front about it—take a look at their websites. They just do not have the time or the will to wade through it all; and for the most part they feel that going through agents works for them. Or, at least, it works better than combing through thousands of proposals themselves.

Tales from the Slush Pile

Some houses (usually smaller, independent houses) do consider submissions from the slush pile; but those houses are relatively rare, and rarer still are slush projects that actually end up as books on the bookstore shelf. Editorial resources are limited, and most publishers don’t want to devote time and energy to sifting through a mountain of unsolicited manuscripts when they get a constant stream of vetted material from agents. Still, if you’re open to working with smaller or specialized publishers, it can’t hurt to check their websites to see whether they review unsolicited proposals.

[End of Chapter 2 Preview]

Your New Best Friend: Your Agent

By now you must be curious about how agents work. Know this first: You do not pay agents up front to work with you. I'm saying that right here at the beginning because it's a common misconception—and unscrupulous folks can take advantage of people's lack of knowledge about this.

These days, it is considered highly suspect for an agent to charge you a fee to read your work or to represent you—but *that doesn't mean agents work for free*. On the contrary, they work on commission. That means they get a portion of what you earn from the deal they help you secure. Typically this ranges from 10 to 15 per-

cent of the **advance** and **royalties** (more on those two things later!).

Chips or Carrots?: Pay to Play?

Trying to get published is an uphill battle—like trying to lose weight or win that carnival game where you grab at stuffed animals with a metal claw. And just like in those situations, there are people who will attempt to take advantage of people’s desperation, their confusion, or their desire to get a leg up. As you seek out agents, you may find people advertising that they will consider representing you—but only if you pay them a reader’s fee. This is not how established agents work. This doesn’t mean that it’s not okay to pay someone to read your work and give you feedback, but recognize whether that is the service you are paying for (no strings or promises attached) or whether someone is using it as a tease by claiming it’ll help you get your foot in the door with their company or agency.

So the agent helps you get a “book deal”—but what does *that* mean? It’s more than just you and the publisher agreeing that it will print copies of what you typed up on your computer. Publishing contracts are as convoluted and confusing and full of legalese as any other contract you might see. The contract sets out the **terms** of a book deal, specifying things like what percentage of the

revenues you'll receive as the author, who owns the **rights** to publish your work, what rights they own, what happens in the event of a dispute, what your obligations are as an author, what the publisher's obligations are to you, and so on.

We'll get into the details of the publishing contract a bit later, but for now, just know that it is your agent's job to help you get to a point of agreement on the details and hammer out a contract that is as good as you can get. Those details might include getting the publisher to give you a higher royalty rate (more money for you), more time to polish the manuscript before you have to send it to your editor, or even something as simple as more free copies of your book once it's printed.

Finding an Agent: Like Online Dating (But More Fun?)

Finding an agent can be a tedious, time-consuming, and discouraging process. It's similar to the process of finding a publisher. But at least when you're seeking a publisher you have an agent to help you; when you're looking for an agent, you'll most likely be going it alone.

Agents tend to specialize in certain types of books, so the first step in narrowing down your options will be finding agents who work on books in your category. Agents list these details on their websites, and that information is also available (along with agents' contact information) in the **Literary Market Place** (LMP). This resource is available as a book in the reference section of the library or as an [online database](#) (that you pay for full access to). Other resources for researching agents include:

- Poets and Writers' literary agent database: http://www.pw.org/literary_agents
- The Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR) agent database: <http://aaronline.org/Find>
- *Writers Digest's 2013 Guide to Literary Agents*

Color Inside the Lines

Also listed on agent websites are their submission requirements: how many sample chapters they would like to see, what details should be addressed in your proposal, and so on. The nuts and bolts of this don't vary too much from agent to agent, but some of the nitty-gritty details do; be sure to follow their guidelines so you don't give them a reason to toss your proposal and move on to the next without properly considering yours.

Another method, which might help you identify a particularly well-loved agent, is looking through the acknowledgments sections of published books that are similar to yours. An author who has had a good experience with his agent will probably write nice things about the agent in the acknowledgments section; a poor agent is unlikely to inspire that response. If you have a particular agent in mind, you might take a look at some of the books that he or she represents (agents will list titles and authors they represent on their websites). Browse through the acknowledgments sections of those books to see what the authors had to say about each agent (if anything). The [Writer Beware site](#) offers cautionary information to consider about allegedly unsavory or mediocre agents.

And some writers have luck meeting agents (or even editors) at writers' conferences too. If you meet an interested editor before you have an agent, you can go back a step and seek out an agent to help you manage the contract negotiation and signing process with the editor.

In addition to making sure your agent has experience with books like yours and isn't a notorious cheat or screw-up, get an idea of how well you'll work together by

[End of Chapter 4 Preview]

Glossary

academic publishing: Academic publishers, generally associated with universities, primarily publish highly specialized, scholarly work by professors and academics. They differ in quite a few ways from trade publishers, especially in that they mostly do not work with agents and also tend to sell fewer titles at higher prices. These books are not primarily published for the general public but are used by researchers and in graduate and undergraduate courses.

acquire: Action taken by a publishing house or an editor at a publishing house to securing a contract to publish a particular book project. (The editor who handles this function and is responsible for overseeing the process is called the *acquiring editor*.)

advance: The portion of an author's royalties that is paid before a book's publication and sale; often half is paid when the contract is signed, and half is paid when the author sends the complete manuscript draft to the publisher (or the payment can be divvied up in other ways).

agent: *See* literary agent.

ARC; ARE (advance reading copy or advance reader's edition): An early edition of a book printed before the official book is published. These are similar to galleys but generally look much nicer—almost like a paperback edition of the book. The text printed in an ARC is not yet proofread, and ARCs are not for sale. They are sent to media contacts, booksellers, reviewers, and others to drum up interest in books before publication.

backlist: The older books on a publisher's list; those books published prior to the current season.

big-mouth list: A list of contacts, primarily in media, publishing, and bookselling, who can be counted on to spread the word about books they have read and are excited about.

blurb: A positive quote about a book or author that comes from a book review, a writer, or a person of note; blurbs are often used for marketing purposes and printed on book jackets to entice readers (e.g., "One of the best books of the year . . . will stay with you long after you've read the last page." —*New York Star Tribune*)

book proposal: A document that describes a potential book project, its author, and the anticipated market for the book. An author will send her book proposal to agents when she is seeking an agent to help her find a

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ewurama Ewusi-Mensah is a book editor, book lover, and devotee of the written word. Prior to founding Sea Never Dry Books, she soaked up a world of publishing knowledge through her work with Little, Brown & Company, Sourcebooks, and other noted publishers. She is excited about helping authors make sense of it all, and she loves reading (naturally), sunshine, and long walks on concrete.