

# FAQS About Literary Agents (For Legacy-Publishing Writers)

written by Holly  
December 20, 2009  
By Holly Lisle

- When do I need an agent?
- How much should I pay an agent to read my book?
- How do I find a reputable agent?
- Do I have to have an agent to be a writer?
- How do I know the publisher or agent won't steal my idea?
- Who is your agent?
- Can you hook me up with your agent?
- How do I tell a good agent from a bad one?
- Should I take my manuscript to conventions with me so that agents there can read it?
- How creative should I be when querying agents?
- Why should I pay an agent if I have to sell my first book on my own anyway?

---

## When do I need an agent?

When you have at least one novel manuscript or screenplay completed and an idea of what your next couple of books (or screenplays) will be. You don't need an agent to represent you on short stories or poetry. If you only want to sell the one book that you've completed and you never want to write another, you might need an agent to get the best terms for the book you've done, but you probably won't be able to get one.

Agents want clients who work in profitable fields (novels, screenplays) and who will produce salable work on a regular basis.

---

## **How much should I pay an agent to read my book?**

The instant an agent tells you that he charges a fee to evaluate your manuscript, RUN—do not walk—in the opposite direction. NO REPUTABLE AGENT charges a reading or evaluation fee. The AAR (Association of Author Representatives) forbids its signatories from doing so, just as it works in other ways to uphold the ethics of the field. Good agents are signatories of the AAR. Real agents make their money by taking a commission when they sell your books. They, like real publishers, take you on because they believe in you and in your work. They read your material, they say to themselves, “I can sell this writer’s work and make enough money from my fifteen percent to make it worth my while. I can see this writer becoming something special in the field, and I can help him get there.”

Ripoff agents feed you the following lines—“I charge a \$50 processing fee. If the manuscript is sold, the fee is refunded. If the manuscript is not ready to be submitted, the writer gets a professional critique as to what must be done to the manuscript.” Oh lucky you. Or, “\$60 reading fee for first three chapters and outline or synopsis—but only when I request this material once I’ve read the query letter. Fees for reading complete manuscript are on a sliding scale.” Gee. How generous. (These come from actual agent entries in a popular writers’ guide to agents, publishers, etc..)

Here is the unspoken translation to the agent’s reason for requiring a reading fee. “I absolutely suck as an agent. I

cannot make as much money off of my sales of books for my clients as I can by ripping off naive writers who don't know that my job as an agent should be to sell books and make money for my clients, and that my search for new clients should be part of my cost for doing business, just as the writer's investment of time, talent, office supplies and postage is part of his. Furthermore, I have the ethics of the scum you scrape off the underside of a dead tree, and I've found that P.T. Barnum was right: There is a sucker born every minute. I'm out to milk my share of them."

Never pay an agent a reading fee. Never work with an agent who charges reading fees. There are no exceptions to this rule.

(For more information on this, also see [WriterBeware](#) [offsite, opens new window])

---

## How do I find an agent?

The best way to find an agent is through the recommendation of a happy client. Your time will be well spent if you meet writers whose books you read at conferences or conventions or online and ask them who their agents are, what their agents have done for them, and whether they would recommend their agent to anyone else. **Don't** ask if they'll recommend you to their agent (unless the two of you are friends and the writer is familiar with and likes your work). That is an imposition. But just asking about their agents is not an imposition. It ain't top-secret information. And most writers are more than willing to brag or bitch about the person representing them. This is what I have to say about my agent. You can learn a lot from these conversations.

There are two reasons why you only ask writers you've heard of these questions. The first is because you have heard of them,

so you know their agent must be doing something right. The second is that most writers write the sort of stuff they read – so if you read SF and want to write SF, you'll be eliminating a lot of agents who loathe SF from your query list if you get the names of agents who already represent SF writers.

The next best way is to go through the most current edition ***Insiders Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents*** or a similar guide and look for agents who express an interest in the kind of work you do.

You should also check the **Association of Authors' Representatives**, which lists Association of Authors' Representatives-members. The AAR requires members to follow a code of ethics, so while it won't guarantee that the members listed there are **good** agents, it does at least make a valiant attempt to weed out the scammers.

When you've found an agent that interests you, query. Don't send the completed manuscript without his having requested it first.

For detailed instructions on how to query an agent, click [here](#).

---

## **Do I have to have an agent to be a writer?**

No. Of course not. You don't even have to have an agent to be a professional writer, or a successful professional writer. Writers have successfully represented themselves before, and if you're a lawyer with previous experience in the publishing field, you are probably safe representing yourself.

The old saw about the doctor who treats himself having a fool

for a patient, however, is not without its applications here. I would be much worse off professionally without my agent. Good agents do much more than find homes for manuscripts. If he (or she) did nothing more for you than remove bad clauses from contracts, the agent would be worth his ten or fifteen percent.

---

## **How do I know the publisher or agent won't steal my idea?**

You know this because you are going to take my advice and find both a reputable agent and a reputable publisher, and because real agents and real publishers are in the business of getting good books into print. They wouldn't fool around with plagiarism any more than they would voluntarily contract bubonic plague. Also, you might want to [click here](#) to read about the other reason that professionals don't steal ideas.

---

## **Who is your agent?**

Robin Rue of Writers House. Follow [this link](#) for more information on my agent and how you can contact her regarding representation.

---

## **Can you hook me up with your agent?**

Not unless I know you and I know your work. I can and do recommend my agent, and have made the information freely available if you choose to use it (follow the link to get information about my agent), but getting her to represent you

will be your job. For questions about whether I'll read your manuscript, etc, [click here](#).

---

## How do I tell a good agent from a bad one?

A good agent will represent people you've heard of, and will be willing to give you references. He will be able to tell you the titles of a couple of books he's agented recently, and these will be books you'll be able to find in the bookstore. A bad agent will tell you that his client list is confidential, and will not be able to point to any books currently on the market that he's agented. Evasiveness surrounding this issue should set off warning bells in your head.

Good agents will be members of the **Association of Authors' Representatives**.

Good agents will never, never, never charge a reading fee, upfront expenses, a charge to take you on, or any other charges or fees in advance of selling your book. This is really important. There are a multitude of agents out there who do not make their money from selling books. They make their money by gulling naive hopefuls, either by charging reading fees to "evaluate your manuscript" or by taking on clients who pay in advance to have the agent place the book. **This is not the way good agents make their money.** Good agents receive a percentage of the advance and royalties for every book they sell, usually fifteen percent. They get no money from you until they have produced results. If an agent asks for money from you before producing results, fire him.

Good agents, those who believe in your talent as a writer, will not receive your manuscript and immediately recommend that you send it to Book Doctor X to punch it up. Good agents

will frequently recommend ways that you can make the book better yourself. If you prove incapable of following these suggestions, good agents might suggest a collaborator or someone to help out, I suppose. Still, if an agent recommended to me that I spend money on a manuscript before it was sold, I would be suspicious.

---

## **Should I take my manuscript to conventions with me so that agents there can read it?**

No. Agents go to conventions to shmooze with their clients and publishers and meet potential new clients. But they don't go to read manuscripts, and they don't go prepared to carry dozens of manuscripts or disks home with them to evaluate later. If you meet an agent you like, and he likes you, enjoy the conversation you have and see if he'd be receptive to having you send your manuscript or a partial. When both of you get home from the convention or conference, write him a letter reminding him of who you were, what you talked about, and that he said he'd be willing to look at what you've done. Send only what he said he'd be willing to look at. If he said, "I'd love to see the first three chapters," don't send the whole book and hope he forgets what he said – he probably never requests more than the first three chapters, and you won't look too good for being pushy.

---

## **How creative should I be when**

## querying agents?

People who ask this question almost never want to know how creative their book should be. They want to know how to get the agent's attention. They want to stand out, be different, be colorful. They ask if they should paint their envelope in rainbow hues so that it will stand out, or write a funny query letter, or send photos of themselves dressed in a barrel and nothing else, or enclose a couple of hundred dollar bills with the manuscript.

Agents want to represent professionals. You'll stand out by being one. White paper and black ink, a simple typeface, professional courtesy, brevity and concision in your letter, and the inclusion of a self-addressed stamped envelope with your manuscript will move you ahead of the majority of queries the agent receives.

Save your creativity for your book.

---

## Why should I pay an agent if I have to sell my first book on my own anyway?

Because a good agent doesn't just sell your manuscript to your publisher. He also negotiates your contract to remove harmless-sounding but deadly clauses; gets you more money for your work than you could ever hope to get for yourself; tells you when it's time to move on to greener pastures; sells subrights to foreign publishers; hounds slow-paying publishers for the money they owe you; tells you when you've ridden on your laurels for long enough and when it's time to write bigger, more challenging books; helps you figure out what your next project needs to be; keeps an ear open for editors who

are looking for projects you'd be perfect to write; and listens to you bitch and cavail about things that are going wrong in your life (but do keep the bitching and cavailing to a minimum).

For all of this, your agent gets fifteen percent of what you make—and if you realize how lucky you are to have such a gem of an agent, a dedication in your best book.

---

**NOTE:** If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community. Learn how writing fiction for a living really works.

---

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved