

Tips on how to approach literary agents and refine our pitch

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This is the second article in a four-part series written for Literature Wales on how to secure the interest of a literary agent...

Before we dive into how to approach literary agents and refine our pitch, I wanted to zoom out and address the bigger publishing landscape, specifically, diversity in publishing. It's important to discuss the wider context writers today find themselves in before we address submitting to agents.

A quick scan of the shelves in your local bookshop will demonstrate the lack of plurality of voices which find a platform in publishing – specifically authors who are Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME). In a recent report which came out in June 2020, 'Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing', the first academic in-depth study in the UK which examined diversity in trade fiction, the authors wrote in their key findings that:

Publishers, agents, and booksellers are urged to:

- **Value and engage directly with 'BAME' audiences:** *To make publishing more diverse, publishers need to learn to value non-white, non-middle-class audiences.*
- **Hire more diversely:** *Hiring more people who belong to marginalised communities will help publishers to tap into new audiences – but only if staff are given the resources and freedom to do this work without being burdened to speak for these communities.*
- **Develop strategic alliances:** *There is already a network of writing agencies and audience engagement practitioners that publishers can use to reach new audiences. Publishers need to invest in establishing long-term partnerships with*

these organisations to find and develop talented writers of colour, bringing them to publication and to audiences.

Clearly, a lot of the work around systemic racism here needs to be tackled 'up-stream' within the publishing houses and literary agencies. There is a very long way to go for both agents and publishers to tackle under-representation of marginalised voices as well as 'downstream', once the books are in the public domain. One practical thing you can do if you are a BAME writer from Wales, which picks up on the final recommendation in the report cited above, is to contact your local writer development agency – in Wales's case this would be Literature Wales – to find out about opportunities for both career development and outreach initiatives by publishers about which they've been made aware. Your local Society of Authors or Writers' Union group might also be able to give some pointers.

In another recent report called 'Common People: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in UK Publishing', the authors addressed systemic issues which are perhaps at the root of the lack of diversity as far as class and geography is concerned on our bookshelves (both of these reports are linked to at the end of this article). One key finding from the report was that:

More literary agents need to move outside of the capital. Opportunities must be found for new collaborations and bridge-building between this part of the publishing industry and regional writing. Agents need to be mindful of how they are perceived and to develop their own workforces to better reflect society so that their taste-makers remain relevant and that their businesses are viewed as accessible and open to people with different lived experiences.

There are now some recently established literary agencies which actively seek to work with writers from under-represented backgrounds. I would particularly recommend checking out [The Good Literary Agency](#) which is based in Bristol and was founded by Nikesh Shukla and Julia Kingsford and [OWNIT!](#) founded by the publishing pioneer Crystal Mahey-Morgan. One of the writers represented by OWNIT!, Derek Owusu has won the 2020 Desmond Elliott Prize for *That Reminds Me*, the first novel to be published by #Merky Books, an imprint at PRH, curated by

Stormzy. Meanwhile, Jacaranda Books campaign Twenty in 2020 represents the first time a publishing house will publish twenty books by 20 black British authors in one year, aiming to normalise the presence of diverse literature on our reading lists.

Meanwhile, other agencies which have been established for longer, such as David Higham Associates, are running outreach programmes such as 'Open Days' which provide an opportunity for authors who are under-represented to submit while Spread the Word, the writer development agency which is based in London, post news about UK-wide opportunities and are worth following closely alongside Literature Wales' rolling noticeboard. Meanwhile, do check out The Literary Consultancy's director Aki Schilz's thread from June 2020 about agents who are open to writers from all backgrounds here.

The multinational conglomerate publisher Hachette group announced in June 2020 that they are going to open offices in Newcastle, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Bristol and Manchester but they are currently in the minority as far as the 'Big Five' publishers are concerned in having this kind of regional outlook, and this obviously also excludes offices opening in Wales. And while Orion ran a 'Hometown Tales' initiative a few years ago to find 'regional' voices, this was a one-off opportunity, at least as far as Wales was concerned.

In the aftermath of both 'Common People' and the 'Re-thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing' reports, literary agencies and publishers will be and should be increasingly aware of their need to work proactively in finding under-represented voices and writers submitting in 2020 and beyond will be submitting in this climate of increased awareness.

So, if you have decided that you'd like to pitch your manuscript or book proposal to a literary agent then the question is what happens next?

The first question I would ask any writer is: are you *sure* you've taken your work-in-progress as far as you possibly can?

For example, have you read it aloud from start to finish and incorporated edits that sounded clumsy on the ear? The ear will pick up things which the eye will never notice. Have you given your manuscript to a 'beta reader' – a reader you trust who will give you constructive feedback – on how it could be improved? Some writers swear by workshopping in writers' groups, others prefer to take it to just one trusted ally.

If you're writing non-fiction then what you need to have produced in order to submit can vary depending on the preferences of the agent, however this blog post by Federica Leonardis from the [Writers' & Artists' Blog](#) spells out succinctly what she is looking for and I think it's a good rule of thumb. Essentially, if you're pitching a debut narrative non-fiction work then the probability is that you'll need to have written the first draft. If it's a factual non-fiction book then a proposal and sample can suffice, but the proposal will need to be substantial. However, do always check the agency websites, as this advice on non-fiction submissions can differ.

If you feel you've really taken your work-in-progress, regardless of genre, as far as you possibly can within your gift, then it is time to do some desk research and refine your pitch...

I was given excellent advice on the mechanics of submitting many years ago by Philip Gwyn Jones, now publisher at Picador. I would like to share it with you now. His advice was as follows:

1. Decide on a hand-picked list of 8 – 10 agents with whom you would most like to work.
2. Submit your pitch to them, stating in your personalised covering email/letter that it is a simultaneous submission and that if you haven't heard back within 8 – 12 weeks (you can decide how long) then you'll assume the manuscript is not for them.
3. Rinse and repeat with your next list of 8 – 10 agents until you get a request for the balance of the manuscript or an offer of representation.

This is a strategic approach which means that you won't be left sitting on your hands, which you would be doing if you approached agents one at a time and waited for twelve weeks before moving on to the next submission. However, there's a lot of nuance in this advice, so in this article, we're going to unpack some detail in each of those three steps.

How do you decide on your A list of 8 – 10 agents?

As we've touched on already, each agent has taste which is unique to them. How do you decide which agents are most suited to the book you've written?

Initially, I would advise you to turn to your bookshelves and to take down the books you love and which might be in the same spirit of your manuscript. These books should ideally be by writers who are based in the UK and ones which have been published in the past 10 years. Turn to the acknowledgements page to see if the author has thanked their agent – and if so, see who it is. Writers often thank their agents; however, if you find that they haven't, then you can persist by researching the author's website and checking their contact page to find out who represents them. Add the agent to your A list.

Another good way to find out what style of book an agent represents and whether there is some kind of overlap with yours is by looking at the agent's individual profile on the agency website; nearly all agencies now have this information online. While this can take time, it can be worth the effort if you break it down into small steps and if you're only looking for 8 - 10 agents initially.

I would advise here, on balance, that authors should only contact one individual agent within any one given agency at a time. To explain further, there are some very large agencies now, such as Curtis Brown or ICM Partners. If a good agent within a large agency such as this thinks a project shows promise but if it isn't quite for them but might be for a colleague, then will reply to say as such to the author and then suggest they contact that named individual within the same agency. They might even offer to pass it on, with your permission. However, if you submit the same project to three agents within the same organisation there is a chance that this will

be discovered and that it will dilute the strength of your pitch, because in your covering email or letter, you are going to spell out exactly why you're keen to be represented by each individual agent. Some agents share small offices, so they may well open your submission on the same day if you were to submit to more than one agent in any one agency.

If, of course, your manuscript doesn't get passed on, there is nothing to stop you then submitting to another agent within the same agency when you turn to your 'B' or 'C' list, but it is just worth thinking about who, within the agency, is your top choice and starting with them. Aim high!

You can delve deeper into what the agent in question is looking for by a simple Google search on their name and the agency's name. Very often, agents will be interviewed for pieces online and will state the kind of book they're hungry to represent at the moment – obviously tastes change quickly, but the good news is for authors is that if the manuscript shows promise, then agents will sit up and take note.

Another way of getting to know individual agent's taste is by following them on Twitter or Instagram, if you have an account. Many agents have a Twitter profile nowadays, some agents even blog, such as David Higham Associate's Lizzy Kremer whose blog [Publishing for Humans](#) comes recommended.

One word of caution: I would advise *not to* include any agency which asks for a 'reading fee' in order to be considered by them.

Lastly, If you can't see the agent's email address online or if you get a bounce back, please do pick up the phone to check the contact information with the agency; they should help you.

The On-going Strategy

Inspired by Jo Bell's brilliant essay 'On Submitting to Magazines and Journals: The Patented Jo Bell Method' from *How to Be a Poet* co-edited by Jo Bell and Jane Commane – in fact the entire book is worthy of reading if you're a poet and wanting to get your work into the world! – I strongly recommend creating a simple spreadsheet with the following columns and keeping it updated throughout your submission period.

A-List Literary Agents

- Agent's Name
- Agency Name
- Email address
- Submission criteria (e.g. first 3 chapters and synopsis, plus covering email/letter)
- Date submitted
- Date to hear back by
- Response

How do we refine our pitch?

The covering email/letter is your first impression and as such, it is important to think about how you want to present yourself. I always advise writers to think about the small details as well as the bigger picture when it comes to refining their pitch...

You might have come across the term 'elevator pitch' and by this, what we mean is how we'd summarise our manuscript in one sentence if we were in an imaginary elevator and in between floors looking to convince someone to read or buy our book before they exit at the next level. This 'elevator pitch' that you will refine in your submission package will be used, if you are taken on, up the chain of submission – it will be used by the agent to sell the book to potential editors. Then, should the book be taken on, it will be used by the editor at the acquisition meeting, and then the publishers' marketing and publicity team will use it in their communications with retailers, the press, and so on.

It can be useful, if it is indeed genuine, to compare your book in your pitch in terms of theme, voice or structure to another book. This is not about 'pigeon holing' so much as what the industry likes to call 'positioning' or 'comping'. While it can feel like you are reducing your work to the lowest common denominator, it is helpful if you can at least begin to broadly speak to your genre or speak to how your work is similar to another writer's, even if there are also significant departures.

What goes into the covering email?

There are dozens - if not hundreds - of blogs and articles written about the covering letter/email and so rather than reinvent the wheel and show you one below, I have curated a list of the blogs I would recommend you read to get a comprehensive steer on this. Choose a resource by a writer or a website whose tone you like and opinion you trust and follow their advice while remembering that there is no one perfect way to do this.

The covering email and letter should ideally reflect who you are as a writer and your personality to some degree. Be bold in this regard; as writers we are unique in what we have to say to the world, especially from the unique standpoint of writing out of Wales, and you can be proud about the manuscript you have written and your heritage.

Here are ten top tips that I have found to help when writing a covering email or letter:

1. Make the most of your subject heading (checking out first that if there is a criteria for this spelt out on this on the agency website). One template you might like to adopt is:

Joe Bloggs | NOVEL TITLE | Literary Agent Name | Submission

2. Use the footer information to not only state your contact phone number but also to link to your online platforms if you have any (this is not essential). For example, you might hyperlink to your author website/blog and your social media handles.

3. If you do have social media handles or an author website/blog, it is very much worth your posting to these a little in the run-up to the time of submission such that, should an agent be potentially interested and click on a link, they will find something which is recently posted by you.

4. In your opening paragraph, do personalise the letter to make it relevant to the agent in question, explaining why you are particularly interested in working with that individual agent. This might be because of a particular book or author on the agent's list, their background, or something you heard them say at an event that you saw them at – even if that event was a while ago, it is still relevant.

5. Do include relevant information about your writing background; this might be a prize you've won, a writers' bursary you've been awarded or an article you've had published which is relevant to the manuscript you're submitting.

6. Read the covering email/letter out loud to make sure it reads fluently.

7. If you're submitting by email, once you've got the submission perfectly formed, do a test submission by sending it to yourself first to see how it looks on the screen.

Give yourself this free opportunity to submit without 'wasting' that opportunity and see how it looks – does the formatting go askew? Is the font all consistent? Are there any typos? Critically, I've found over the years that this last chance saloon technique of sending the email to yourself *before* sending it to the person in question gives you a fresh pair of eyes to cast over the email one last time.

8. Remember that these tips are about the 'container' into which you are pouring your creative work. The more 'easy on the eye' that the covering email, synopsis, and sample chapters are, the less of a barrier it will be for the agent to click on the attachments and dive into what you've written; as such I would use a standard font throughout.

9. I would put into the covering email/letter somewhere that you are a writer based in Wales. This might be in your closing paragraph – for example 'When I'm not writing, I work in Cardiff part-time while also looking after my two pre-school children'. Or, if it's relevant to the book (for example, if it is set in Wales) then I would suggest that you include this higher up the email. This helps the agent to begin to ground their understanding of the experience out of which you are writing.

10. Let the writing speak for itself – you don't need bells and whistles to promote yourself. You've written a brilliant piece of work and you should ultimately have the confidence in your convictions that this deserves to reach a readership. Go for it!

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While it isn't directly relevant to submitting a manuscript to an agency, I think the following anecdote is relevant and it speaks to tip number seven above.

I once spent an afternoon calling around every literary agency in London which specialised in literary fiction and which was within a commutable distance from where I was living in 2003 in order to look for a job as an agent's assistant. I identified over thirty to call using that year's *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*. Not only did calling the office give me an idea about the workplace in that I got my own first impression about the office culture from talking to the staff who were answering the phones, it

also gave me, by the 30th call, a very well-seasoned pitch as to why I wanted to work in a literary agency. By the time I got towards the end of the alphabet, I had several openings and went on to be interviewed by four agents.

The Synopsis and the Sample Chapters

Now that you've discussed your covering correspondence, the next thing to consider is what else in the 'submission package' that the individual agent requires. Most now request an email submission, but some still do prefer submissions via post. If this is a work of fiction then the norm is that agents like to see the opening three chapters or, sometimes they specify the first fifty pages of the manuscript along with a one-page synopsis and a covering email or letter. Again, advice abounds on how to write a synopsis, which could take up an entire article in itself so I refer you to the links at the bottom of the piece which I'd recommend you read on this.

If you're submitting a work of non-fiction then, as we cover elsewhere in these articles, it can be the case that you need a strong sample along with a full proposal of the project. Again, do check the individual agency websites to see what their unique requirements are.

What if I don't hear anything or if I am rejected by all the A list agents?

If you don't hear within your specified deadline in the covering letter, you can, if it gives you a sense of closure, call up the agency and ask if the submission is still being considered. In both my experience and that of those writers I've spoken to, it is highly likely that if an agent is interested in your work you will know very quickly indeed. For example, within ten hours of submitting my manuscript to the agent who I went on to be represented by, I found that the agent was following me on Twitter and that they'd written by email to request the balance of the novel.

Therefore, if you have a couple of agents who haven't replied and twelve weeks have elapsed, then the likelihood is that it isn't for them. However, bearing in mind the work that you've put into the submission package, it might be worth calling up to check. I once did this and found myself saying to the receptionist, "I'm just calling to get my novel rejected." I wouldn't advise this – it rather puts you on the back foot! – but you never know, that phone call or email might prompt them to take another look. Perhaps you submitted it on the same day that the agent in question was running a twelve-way book auction or their child was rushed into hospital. It's always worth a little follow up.

If, at the end of this process A-list you only have rejections, take this as an opportunity to improve your pitch. Go back to *all* of your collateral – not just your opening chapters, covering email/letter, synopsis, but also your blog, website and social media posts – and review how you could improve each one. Could you refine your bio in your Instagram or Twitter profile? Is there something in the zeitgeist you have an opinion on that's relevant to your manuscript that you want to blog about?

Next, it is time also to put together your second B list of agents and start anew. To find these, follow the same tips as above, and do more desk research if need be. Why not try submitting at a different time of day this time? As Friday afternoon is one which, purely on instinct, I feel is worth a punt as some agents will be putting together their stash of weekend reading together at that time of the week. Remember to check the agents' websites to review their submission criteria and perhaps also their Twitter feed to see if there is anything they've recently said which you could 'hook' your submission onto. Then, take a big breath and submit again. If you need a pep talk, hit up #QueryTips or #QueryFail on Twitter to read of other authors' experiences.

We'll cover what to do if you are repeatedly rejected by literary agents in the following article as well as what the common pitfalls are in approaching agents, and how we can overcome them. But the key thing to remember in this endeavour is that you only need to find one agent who is the perfect fit.

What if an agent wants to represent me?

Here's David Higham Agency's Lizzy Kremer on how to choose an agent [from her blog post](#), 'Let Me Represent You – The Agent's Verb'.

That's why it's so important to choose the right agent in the first place – to make it someone you like talking to, in whose opinion you have faith. If I compete to represent an author and lose to a peer, I don't mind much. If I'm not the right person for that author, then it's probably for the best... in fact, if I meet an author and find out I'm the only agent they are meeting, I usually urge them to meet some other agents. We've all got strengths and flaws; we all represent authors in our own unique ways.

Let's look at this last sentence by Lizzy, what to do if you get an expression of interest from an agent. What do we do in this instance?

First of all, take a moment to congratulate yourself.

Then, as Lizzy Kremer says above, you might want to reach out to the other agents whose desk the submission is still sitting on (if there are any who have yet to respond in that submission round) and let them know you have an agent interested in representing you. This will make the agents sit up and take note; no agent or publisher wants to be the one to pass up a great author!

Give them a deadline by which you'd like to hear back – perhaps a week or so – and then sit tight. If you find that you have more than one agent interested, meet them (either online, by phone or, if circumstances allow, in real life) and get to know them a little. This will be, all being well, a lasting relationship and it's good to have had that opportunity to connect beforehand. If you have any questions for the agents, now is the time to ask them. Then, based on this, your feelings, and gut instinct for what they suggest as a plan for your work-in-progress and your career plan, make your decision as to which agency to go for.

Must Reads – Online Resources

- Writers' & Artists Blog has a wealth of articles on the submission process, but [here's one by Simon Trewin](#) I recommend on the covering letter.
- Lizzy Kremer's Blog [Publishing for Humans](#) comes highly recommended.
- [Association of Authors' Agents](#) is one resource to turn to if you have concerns about your process of seeking representation
- Aki Schilz of The Literary Consultancy writes [an excellent article](#) on How to Write a Synopsis.
- [Austin Kleon's](#) blog, books and weekly e-newsletter are all rich resources for writers who are looking for inspiration to start writing and keep keep going
- Joanna Pen's [Creative Penn](#) is a brilliant archive of tips, articles and resources.

The Bigger Picture – Must Reads

To get a bigger picture of the current publishing landscape and how it has been challenged to face up to the lack of diversity in publishing, I would recommend reading these reports:

- [Common People](#): Breaking the Glass Ceiling in UK Publishing by Professor Katy Shaw, 2020
- [A Room of My Own](#): A Survey of What Writers Need to Work published by the Royal Society of Literature, 2019

- Re-thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente, Spread the Word, 2020:
- Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace, Spread the Word, 2015

Julia Forster