

What are the common pitfalls in securing an agent? How can we overcome them?

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

Even if you follow all the advice in the world - including the advice in these articles! - it doesn't necessarily mean that you will be offered representation. This situation can arise due to lots of different reasons. Euan Thorneycroft, a literary agent who represents several writers from Wales and works at AM Heath, shares the top three most common mistakes with us below that he witnesses on the submission pile:

- So often I read a really polished first three chapters, get all excited, but then the rest of the novel doesn't match up. While the beginning is important, so is the other 80% of your book. Take the time to revise and polish the whole thing before you submit.
- But don't keep revising and polishing. At some point, you need to let your manuscript go.
- Always check the spelling of the agent's name so you don't get it wrong.

Meanwhile, Cathryn Summerhayes, agent at Curtis Brown - who is Cardiff born and bred - shares on the [Penguin website](#) some of the reasons which cause her to bin a submission:

- Typos. Accidentally cc-ing every other agent you've sent to, submitting to the wrong agent - I often see material I wouldn't consider on my list, even though my online profile and the agency's website make it very clear what I do and don't like.
- You'd be amazed how many times I see things like 'I would LOVE to be represented by United Agents' (I work for Curtis Brown). Sloppiness suggests your work will be lazy and that you might not be a good self-editor, and ultimately that you might not be the best author for me to represent.

- This is your audition, your biggest job interview ever, so do put the work in! If you have written something brilliant, you don't want to fall at the final hurdle by messing up the covering letter.

Meanwhile, here are some other reasons that submissions can fall flat that I've witnessed over the years.

Submitting too soon

If you're looking to submit a work of fiction, including children's, to an agent then you'll need to have written a first full draft – and revised it many times to polish it to as high a standard as you can on your own before you put together your submission package. It's not worth the anguish of submitting before you've done this because, if the agent likes the initial three chapters, they'll be chomping at the bit to read the balance of it. If you have to reply to say that you've not yet written it, you risk falling off their radar (or disappointing them as in Euan's example above).

Mismatch

It's a basic mistake, but one that many authors can fall foul of: not doing the desk research and submitting to an agent whose list isn't open or to an agent whose list is not right for your project. It's always worth that extra ten minutes checking the agent's individual list before you submit – checking that they are looking for work in the genre you're writing in, googling them or looking them up on Twitter to see if they've been writing about their current tastes recently. Just in the process of writing this article, I've spotted an agent on Twitter who's keen to hear from working class writers – [Nicola Barr](#) at the Bent Agency.

You might find that agents who are more senior have lists which are closed and which reject you outright because, for example, they only work with six authors who are all world famous and that is enough business to keep them busy. Again, do your desk research.

Presentation

Because of the volume of submissions that agents receive – this will be in double figures daily for most agents – a concise and well-presented submission package is going to be important so that you don't get dismissed within the first couple of seconds that the agent or initial reader opens the post or email. What does 'well presented' mean, though?

I would suggest that you consider using the same font and font size in all of your attachments and that you follow the advice in earlier articles around checking your submission package assiduously for typos. Keeping your manner professional in the cover note will help because, as we've discovered, this is about letting the writing speak for itself. I say this with experience; the submission packages which told me to 'brew myself a cup of tea' with a teabag affixed to the cover letter immediately went into the recycle pile (it happened more than once!). The packages I was more likely to pass on to the agent when I was in charge of sifting through the submission pile were those in which the author got the necessary information across while giving a flavour of their stellar writing – without gimmicks.

Expectation Management

The standard length of time I would wait before nudging agents is three months. Agents have phenomenal and relentless amounts to read and especially in the wake of Coronavirus, additional strains will be present in the months and years to come as the industry has to re-invent itself. A polite email after this period has elapsed to

enquire about the book (and perhaps mentioning any new developments in your own writing career to increase your relevancy) is absolutely fine.

Not realising that seeking representation can be a marathon rather than a sprint

We have all heard the story of the multitude of times JK Rowling touted the manuscript for Harry Potter around British publishers, but it bears repeating in this context: think about the amount of sheer determination and resilience that author had summoned up in order to keep going. If you're serious about seeking representation, I would set aside a full calendar year, if not longer, for this journey – you could initially sketch out your year into four quarters with each submission round needing around three months apiece. This will help you to set your expectations and not lose heart. A recent system I've become a devotee of is the method of Bullet Journaling and perhaps you could consider researching this as a methodology to apply to your search for representation?

For this reason, it can be a good idea to have another book project simmering which you can turn to in between submission rounds; having this to hand will give you a focus beyond the book on submission and a reason to keep going as well as distracting you from obsessing over your inbox waiting for responses from agents. Having another manuscript in development can also be a good idea because ideally agents are looking to represent you beyond the book project you've submitted. It will be music to the agent's ears, if they are interested in taking you on, that you have more work up your sleeve and in the latter stages of development.

Under-selling yourself

A good friend of mine who worked in writer development and who was pitching their book once turned to me for advice and asked me to look over their submission package. They were a talented and experienced writer who had performed their

work on one of the biggest stages in London as well as been involved in many other creative interventions. Their draft cover email simply stated that they looked forward to hearing back about the submission. That was it: one sentence. No mention of their track record or the acclaim their work had been met with. I gently pointed out that *all* of this was relevant.

The more you can give your potential agent an overview of where you see yourself on the landscape of your genre, and perhaps also where you're at in your development as an artist, the easier it will be for them to grasp whether the time is right for them to engage with you to work in developing your career.

Over-selling yourself

I'm sure that you wouldn't do this – in my experience under-selling is the far more common pitfall that writers fall into! – but it is important that you give an accurate impression of who you are and what your relevant achievements are to date.

In summary

Be authentic from the start. This is about a relationship between two people and the more 'yourself' you can be as a creative person with your agent, the more fruitful and potentially collaborative the business relationship can be between you. Have confidence in who you are rather than who you think you should be. Every single author has a completely different 'journey' or career trajectory.

Further links to agents mentioned in this piece:

Check out [Cathryn Summherhayes](#) at Curtis Brown

Check out [Euan Thorneycroft](#) at AM Heath

Check out [Nicola Barr](#) at the Bent Agency

Julia Forster