

What to do if we are rejected? What are our next steps?

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

First of all, be proud of your achievement. Seriously; you have, as Brené Brown says in her excellent talks and books, put yourself 'in the arena'. In fact, in the face of any kind of rejection I would always recommend an afternoon watching Brené's talks or reading her books!

Remember that it is far safer and easier to keep your head below the parapet and not strive to be represented, published or 'on show' in any way'; searching for an agent will inevitably lead you into a place of vulnerability as you're putting yourself (and your writing) on the line to be considered by someone, and this in its own is a huge step. Being rejected by an agent is an active rather than a passive experience; after all, you have had a hand in this transaction by putting your work in the way of someone, by passing it over an agent's desk. That is no mean feat. It takes a lot of courage to submit your work to be assessed.

So, after we've given ourselves a pep talk with a side order of Brené, it's time to re-group.

Let's imagine that you began your search for an agent on 1 January and that it's now 1 July. You are six months into your search for an agent and you've done two rounds of submissions at eight agents apiece. You've got fourteen standard rejections, one agent who has yet to reply and one agent who was initially interested in the submission but, on reading the full manuscript, rejected it. Here, I'm going to quote CEO of Curtis Brown, Jonny Geller, who says in [an article](#) for BookMachine: "Rejection is wired into the creative process and longevity and success is mostly down to how you deal with this one issue".

Here's where the value of being in a peer group (even if it's only a peer group of two of you) can be immensely helpful. Writer groups are not only excellent for technical advice on your work in progress, but also moral support.

The COSTA Award-winning author Nathan Filer makes a point in the TedX talk I've linked to below that if you have received thirty standard rejections then it might be time to take pause and reconsider your pitch so while in this scenario we're not there yet, we can still tweak. Indeed, with every rejection I received, I took the opportunity to refine my pitch. Each time I took my submission package out, I tightened the screws in the synopsis, read over the covering email again, updated my pitch with any new achievements.

If take just one thing away from the article, let it be this: allow your submission package evolve just as you would any creative work-in-progress.

So, if we begin to think about the process of submitting work to an agent as a creative process in itself, the easier it can become to wrap our heads around it. When I take my fledgling poem to a Stanza group and have each line examined, the rhyming pattern dissected, the choice of words scrutinised, I welcome this feedback. The more that we can put ourselves in this mindset during the process of submitting to agents, the more resourceful and resilient we will become.

I don't want to shy away from the scenario above, however, when we've received twelve blanket 'it's not for our list' rejections. That can feel disheartening. At this stage, I would advise you to regroup by taking a week off of thinking about the submission. Put it in the bottom drawer and come to it fresh after a week away from it.

Then, do *even more* desk research: watch videos or listen to podcasts about rejection and learn from those who bare their souls. For this process, I would heartily recommend the How To Fail podcast with Elizabeth Day (there is also a book based on the podcast with a new book on the way *Failosophy: A Handbook for When Things Go Wrong* due out in autumn 2020). Remember, even the most prestigious writers experience rejection; the memoir by the veteran writer Michèle

Roberts *Negative Capability* (Sandstone Press, 2020) catalogues how her novel was rejected by her prestigious publishers and how she had to re-write it.

Another point of view to consider is that your creative work is trying to find its natural home, a little nook where it will feel at home and flourish. I would always encourage writers to think about agents as being one possible way forwards to get their work in the world, but at some point in the process – where that is will depend greatly on your levels of persistence with the project of securing an agent – you might want to reconsider whether you need an agent.

It could be that you look to submit to an independent press directly instead with this project and then, down the line, come back to submitting to agents?

This is what happened to me, in that the first book I published which was borne out of an informal conversation in a pub with a publisher and I had no representation (but had done a one-day course in negotiation skills at the Publishing Training Centre so tried my new-found skills out and managed to double the advance offered at a single stroke!).

As a friend put it to me at the time, this book became a 'calling card' which demonstrated that I was capable of writing a full-length work that a publisher would invest in. It acted as a first step; your first step might look like coming second in an essay collection prize or having your short fiction published in a reputable magazine. The gap between that first book coming out and my search for an agent was ten years; it wasn't until I was in my mid-30s that I felt my voice had matured enough to be looking for this kind of step up. Keep checking back with yourself as not only do our ambitions change, but so do tastes and zeitgeists.

In some cases, I believe it can be the case that the book is ready, however the paradigm in which we're living is not.

Artists' and writers' jobs are to work at the frontiers of the human soul. Agents and publishers sometimes just aren't ready for what we're trying to express. Perhaps this is most true in this current epoch? After all, this is one in which where we're having to

re-think, re-structure and re-evaluate so many of our belief systems, prejudices and values.

This might sound trite, but a rejection which is a 'step up' from a copy and paste job which has some feedback from the agent as to why it was a near-miss or some such is a huge step forwards. You are obviously doing very well if you're 'very close' to piquing the interest of the agent. No matter how difficult it is to pick yourself up and dust yourself down after a rejection like this, it's really important to try to do so. You're so nearly there!

I would recommend, if you get a 'near miss' rejection letter like this that you could take the opportunity to engage with the agent in question to ask them (if they haven't done so already) whether, given it was *nearly* a yes, if they had any suggestions of individual agents who they think your work might be of interest. They have obviously engaged with your work on some level, and, while they are also competing for clients, they do have informal relationships like this, just as any industry does, where word-of-mouth counts for a lot.

In your subsequent submission, should you get a lead like this, I would be tempted to even say that while the agent before really liked your work, they thought that this next agent would love it enough to take it on. Although it might sound counter-intuitive to make this upfront admission, I would think that the industry is that small that word often gets around in any case and it shows that you have done your homework – that you're persistent and that you're not submitting blind. Any agent worth their salt will value your quality of persistence.

Literary agent Euan Thorneycroft has shared with us his salutary perspective on rejection:

- Art is subjective. Books are no exception. If an agent turns you down, it doesn't mean that others will. You have to develop a thick skin and believe in yourself and your work.
- If you are getting multiple rejections and you are lucky enough to get some feedback and the feedback is all saying the same thing, you probably want to pay attention to

this. It might highlight a real problem with your novel or your writing. Use this as constructive criticism and remember it when writing your next work.

- Unfortunately, sometimes some books aren't just meant to be however persistent you are. This doesn't mean you aren't a good writer or that you won't be published. Most of the authors I have taken up have an unpublished novel or two under their beds. One author I know wrote about twenty before he was finally published!

Lastly, if you feel you've been unfairly treated or discriminated against in the submission process, then I would report this to the Association of Authors' Agents or speak to your union if you're a member of one such as The Society of Authors or the Writers' Guild.

Manifesto for the Writer from Wales who is Submitting to Agents

Write your version of this sample Manifesto. Pin it above your writing desk so that you see it every day.

I possess a unique point of view and a distinctive voice in my writing. I have decided to take the next step in my career as a writer by looking for a literary agent. I am doing this in a strategic way so that I make the most of the time I have available. I know that I will likely receive rejections. I will *feel* like I have failed but I know that I will not have failed. Instead, I will have taken one step closer to achieving my goal. Each time I am rejected, I will take it as an opportunity to grow, improve and refine my pitch. I will treat the submission process as a creative act. I am resilient.

Good luck and let me know how you get on on Twitter! [@WriterForster](https://twitter.com/WriterForster)

Must Reads:

- CEO of Curtis Brown [Jony Geller's article](#) on Book Machine 'Rejection Stinks' is worth a read
- To read about an established author's experience of 'failure', read *Negative Capability* by Michele Roberts (Sandstone Press, 2020)

Feed Your Ears:

- Brené Brown *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice* Audiobook is the top audiobook I would recommend to inspire writers going through the submission process

Feed Your Eyes:

- JK Rowling [talks to Harvard students here](#) about failure
- [Nathan Filer's TedX Talk](#): How to write an award-winning bestselling first novel is just brilliant.

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