



Learn how to break into the  
market, pitch your idea, and find  
success

# HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

10 TOP TIPS

Claire McGowan





## About Me

Hi! Welcome to my top tips on getting a traditional publishing deal. I'm a UK-based author with multiple publishing deals across the world. I also run an MA in creative writing and have taught for many organisations including Guardian Masterclasses, the Arvon Foundation, and the Cheltenham Festival. To clarify: this book is just about getting a traditional deal. There are many excellent ebooks and blogs that will tell you how to self-publish, but as I don't know much about that, I'll stick to the other kind.

You can find me on Twitter at [@inkstainsclaire](#), and visit my website for more writing tips at [www.ink-stains.co.uk](http://www.ink-stains.co.uk)

I hope you enjoy it!

*Claire McGowan*

# Introduction

First, let me tell you the good news: it is entirely possible for you to get published. Agents and editors are always on the look-out for new talent with exciting ideas. But maybe at this point you're feeling a bit worried. You may think you don't know anyone in the publishing industry. You might not live in London, or be under thirty, or even have gone to university. I firmly believe that none of this matters and could cite you dozens of examples of people who don't fit any of these categories, but who went on to get exciting and substantial book deals. And you can too.

This book is going to focus on traditional publishing, simply because that's what I know. Of course, if you would like to explore self-publishing, that's an increasingly valid path which has been very successful for many people.

Just a caveat: as with all creative industries, there's a large amount of luck involved. Hitting a trend. Landing on an agent or editor's desk just when they're looking for someone like you (as Adele said), or they have money burning a hole in their pocket. None of us can plan for that – but what we can do is maximise our chances in the meantime.

To get published you need three things.

1. a great story
2. good writing
3. a way to get your work in front of deal-makers

This ebook will show you how to make sure you have the first two, then how to get your work into the hands of agents and editors, and it will also explain what type of books will get them all fired up and clamouring to sign and publish you. Ready? Then let's start!

## **1. Writing a book that sells**

Obviously this is a huge topic – in fact I teach a two-year MA in it! – but probably the main factor in deciding whether you get published or not is choosing the right idea. Start keeping an eye on the market, if you aren't already. Browse the displays in the supermarket and airport. Listen to what books people are talking about. See what's topping the charts. Decide what format and genre you're going to write in – if it's a novella or another format that isn't traditionally publishable then this will automatically hurt your chances. Most novels now are around 90,000 words. This varies quite a bit, but if you're significantly under or over this may raise some eyebrows.

Look at the bestseller lists (you are allowed to feel raging envy at this point. Raging envy is quite a good motivator). Scan the books in WH Smith as you're waiting for a train. You might even like to check out the *Bookseller* magazine, the trade publication of the industry. If you don't want to splash out on a subscription the website has a lot of free content, including announcements of new books that have attracted big advances (or perhaps your local library might have a subscription).

Notice the kinds of stories (or genres) that get published. Crime fiction is always popular, and in recent years psychological thrillers and dark suspenseful tales have topped the charts. Women's fiction featuring emotional storylines also does well, as does historical fiction. The main thing you'll notice is that most of these books have strong stories – big things are happening to the characters. Interesting people. Engaging settings. A strong 'hook': in other words, an idea that makes you want to read the book.

Notice which blurbs appeal to you and make you want to pick up the book and read the first line (or use the Kindle Look Inside feature). Does your book fit alongside these successful ones? Of course, there will always be the odd 'quieter' or literary novel that does well – usually after it's won a major prize – but these are the exceptions. You have a much better chance of selling your book if you have a strong and compelling story.

Then there's the second point I mentioned that you need— good writing. Note that I didn't say 'sublime writing' or even 'beautiful writing'. Some people prefer books where every sentence is crafted and honed. Some prefer to read a really gripping story. If you can do both, you're in luck!

If your writing is not strong enough, unfortunately you have to learn this the hard way by constant reading and constant writing. Consider a writing MA or a shorter course, or joining a writing group to get some feedback. Or you might want to work with a writing mentor or get a professional MS critique or even a full edit. They say you have to write a million words before you become a good writer - better get started now. This includes skills like writing believable dialogue, using description, producing clear and correct sentences, creating a voice for your characters, writing with pace, and injecting your work with suspense and drama. I could (and do) talk about all this for hours, but the main things to take away here are:

**Start studying the market** via bookshops, bestseller lists (such as the *Sunday Times* one), review pages, and trade publications like the *Bookseller*.

Ensure you have a **strong story** and a good grasp of **basic writing skills**. If not, it might be time to take a class.

## 2. Pitch yourself

So, you've got yourself a good book with a strong story. Next you have to be able to sell your idea. If you're thinking 'this sounds like absolute hell', then don't worry. Novelists are an introverted bunch, and unlike with screenwriting, you won't often, if ever, have to do this in person, or deliver a pithy 'elevator pitch' of your idea. But you do have to be able to sum up what your book is about. In other words, have an answer to the question everyone has probably been asking you for years, to your annoyance: what is your book about?

Again there are lots of books that can help with pitching - *Plot and Structure* by James Scott Bell is a useful one - so I won't go into too much detail here. Your answer to this question doesn't have to follow a set formula or be perfectly polished. But it's useful if it goes something like this: *It's about (character, e.g. a young woman) who (problem) and then (what they do in response)*. Try to think how you would explain a film or book you've enjoyed to a friend. You'd pick out the main 'hook' and you'd try to keep it simple and enticing. That's what you need to do here too.

For example, here's a summary of my book *The Ex Factor*: *It's about four friends who date each other's exes, with chaotic results.*

Now you need to produce a few documents – namely a synopsis and a covering letter. A synopsis is a summary of what happens in your plot. It's a working document that lets the agent see how it progresses and what the ending is (you should usually include the ending). It also doesn't need to be incredibly slick, but it does need to show the agent you can write interesting and fluid sentences, and that the plot is going to be gripping enough to make it worthwhile for them to read your pages.

Every agent is different, but usually they will dip into the three chapters you send with your synopsis and if they like what they see, read on. The synopsis tells them if it's worth calling in the rest of the book. So, you don't need to include every detail of the plot, just the rough shape of it. I find it's helpful to imagine the synopsis is an extended blurb (the text you find on the back of the book), and one which includes the ending.

Here's a useful model you might like to use.

**Paragraph 1** – a few lines summing up what the book is about.

**Paragraph 2** – the start of the book, what kicks the plot off, the inciting incident and so on

**Paragraph 3** - how the story continues, avoiding too much detail

**Paragraph 4** – how things end, capturing the emotion the reader should feel

**Paragraph 5** – briefly say what kind of book it is (e.g. the genre) and how long it is (alternatively, this can go in the covering letter)

Next, you need to write a covering letter. As more and more agents ask for email submissions, this may actually be the body of an email. Do check what each agency is looking for on their website and stick to it exactly – usually this will be the first three chapters or fifty pages (don't obsess over this – end it at a natural break. If your chapters are very short or you aren't using them, then use your common sense).

Personalise it: agents hate getting 'Dear Sirs' messages, especially when they are women, and they don't like getting ones which have clearly been blanket-submitted. A good approach is to select a certain number of agents (six maybe) and submit to them all at once, using the correct names and referring to their personal tastes. Agents move around a lot, so it's also worth checking if they are still at the same place.

How to find these agents? There are resources like the *Writers and Artists Yearbook*, but it's impossible to keep them fully up to date as people move so much. They also can't tell you if an agent is just starting out and 'building a list' (i.e. looking for new authors) or very established and hasn't taken on anyone for five years. Back your research up by seeing who's at events, who's writing blogs about their wishlists, and look on Twitter. Here's a model you might find useful.

Dear X, (*name correctly spelled and having checked they are based there still*)

Please find enclosed the synopsis and first three chapters (*or whatever they asked for*) of my (*genre*) novel, TITLE, which is (*word count – rounded up the nearest thousand*). I'm writing to you because I saw you speak at the X literary festival/I read your blog on what you were looking for/you represent Y, whose work I love.

I feel my work is similar in style to/might appeal to readers of (*author or book*). TITLE is the story of (bit more about the book here).

(Tiny bit about you here, only if interesting or relevant though, e.g. you've just done an MA in creative writing, or you're a journalist on a women's magazine or you've won a literary prize, or you are a doctor and sending in a medical thriller.)

Many thanks for your time and consideration.

Best wishes,

Name (*probably not a good idea to include any qualifications here, if you're pitching fiction, unless it is relevant in some way*)

People often get tied in knots about the synopsis and covering letter, but the main things to remember are:

This is a business communication. You don't need to be stiff and over-formal, but you should be straightforward, clear, and try not to sound desperate, difficult, or defensive.

Agents want to hear from you! Writing to them is not an imposition so don't apologise.

Make sure everything is formatted nicely (12 point, a readable font like Arial), proper paragraphs and spelling. The synopsis can be single-spaced although the novel extract should be double-spaced.

In the US these are called query letters and usually you send this on its own first, and see if it gets the book requested. See the blog [Query Shark](#) for lots of great and funny advice on pitching and querying.

To summarise:

Find a group of named agents you want to approach to begin with. Check they are at the same agency and whether they represent your kind of book (e.g. some will not do children's or non-fiction).

Approach in a clear business-like way, showing you can write and have a great idea, but without any gimmicks (don't send gifts, photos, glitter, or anything like that).

Hone and polish your first three chapters, synopsis and covering letter (or email) but do not obsess about the exact words or their order.

Submit in the way they request (e.g. email/three chapters plus synopsis).

The above example letter is only that: an example. If you don't feel comfortable saying 'my work is like Stephen King's', a nice way round it is to compare the theme or setting or tone to something already published. It helps the agent to situate it and shows you know the market.

A word about genre: it's important to be able to say whereabouts in the market your work will sit. However, it's not always easy to know what genre you are, unless it's something obvious like crime, sci-fi, or fantasy. Again, identifying other similar books will help with this. If it has a teenage protagonist it may be Young Adult (but not definitely) or Middle Grade (for ages 8-12). It might be romance, rom-com, or 'women's fiction' – a broad term covering what might also be called 'book club fiction'. Or even literary fiction. Don't feel you are boasting by using that term, by the way, it's a genre too.

### 3. After you submit

It's quite common for writers to get some degree of interest when they submit, then become very excited and convinced they've made it, only to fall into a sort of limbo. I've been there! Some agents are not all that good at communicating what they mean – if they want to sign you, if they're rejecting you, or what. Some may not even reply (though this is hopefully rare). It's a bit like dating –you may have to navigate subtle clues.

Once you have submitted, wait about six weeks before chasing. If it's a busy time (e.g. December, August, October (Frankfurt Book Fair), April (London Book Fair), they may not have got to it yet. I would email not phone and definitely do not turn up at the office! It's entirely possible they could read the whole submission as soon as it lands in their inbox and get in contact right away. I've seen that happen. Or you might wait for months with no response. That's why we do multiple submissions. Most agents expect this and are fine with it, but if you do hear back from them you might like to let them know a few other people are still reading.

Next, they will probably ask to meet you. Or they might just offer to represent you upfront. Or they might offer to work with you for a while and see what happens. Or that they will represent you if you agree to make some changes (sounds like dating again, huh). It seems more common now for agents not to clarify the situation. You can always ask, of course.

If you don't have a signed contract then both of you are free to walk away at any point. Even if you do have one, there's usually a 30-day break period, so it's not difficult to dissolve it. Never be afraid to move on if you feel an agent-client partnership has for some reason gone stale, or they no longer believe in your work. Generally speaking, if they are excited about you they will try to sign you up right away. If they are slower or more mealy-mouthed, then perhaps they're 'just not that into you' and you should seek another agent.

What if more than one agent is interested? This might seem like the dream, but when it happens it can be rather stressful. Who to choose? Will the others be offended? I would say try to meet with or speak to them all and just see who you click with (back to dating). You might also like to consider the trade-off between experience and time. A very established agent may get good deals but not have a lot of time for you. A newer agent might have the time to build your career, but be less experienced. I think the most important thing is that they genuinely believe in you and love your work.

## Getting noticed

So, you have honed your book and pitch, and are starting to send it out to agents. What are some other ways you can come to people's attention, and leap to the top of the slush pile? (NB this slightly derogatory term doesn't mean that it won't get read, it will. But it might take time.) Here are some suggestions.

## 4. Going to events

Book industry people are a pretty friendly bunch, and you can easily get chatting to them if you go to a writing festival or literary event. Many bookshops hold author panels – why not go along and chat to the author? They'll be glad to see you and you'll have made a contact. There are also conventions like Crimefest where the authors, agents, and editors mingle in the bar with everyone else. The ideal chance to get chatting.

If you're not good at networking, why not bring some friends or arrange in advance to meet up with fellow delegates? Twitter is a good place to do this. There are also writing-specific festivals such as the York Festival of Writing. Agents who go to these are explicitly looking for new clients, so it's worth finding out who's there. You can even sign up for a one to one session and get some direct feedback on your work. Invaluable! There are other one-off workshops that will teach you a bit about both writing and getting published – I run ones like this.

Examples of events:

Crimefest, Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Festival in Harrogate, Bloody Scotland (as you can see, the crime writing bunch are very sociable)

Panels in bookshops and libraries

York Festival of Writing

Writers' and Artists' Yearbook events

Even if you can't make it along, familiarise yourself with which agents are out and about looking for new writers.

## 5. Get online

Do you hate the thought of Twitter and Facebook? Or do you love them, and you worry all your writing time will be sucked into a huge vortex of procrastination? Or what we writers call, the average working day. Social media only really works if you like it and are familiar with it, so never do anything you don't feel comfortable with. However, Twitter is a good way of connecting with industry people. Don't pitch directly to them (unless they ask – check out the hashtag #pitmad for example) but it's fine to chat and interact as you would normally, and it will help you learn about the industry.

## 6. Be findable

You absolutely need to have some online presence nowadays. This is because if an agent comes across your name, say because of a competition (see below), they will quickly Google and may drop you a line to say they'd like to read your book (this has actually happened to me so I know it's true). A very simple website with your details, a brief bio, and a bit about your work will suffice. There's nothing more annoying than not being able to find an email address for someone when you want to help them out. Please do not lock your tweets either – what's the point of this? However, if you enjoy blogging and book reviews, you might want to think about starting a review blog. If it takes off you'll get send free books, and invited to author events. If you want to write a non-fiction book, it's also a good idea to start blogging on that topic.

## 7. Competitions

If you pick up a copy of *Writing Magazine* or another publication, you'll quickly realise that there are hundreds of competitions out there, and you could easily bankrupt yourself entering them all. If you choose carefully and get shortlisted or even win, it could propel your career onwards. Even small competitions can have this effect. However, very few of these are for novels, and most are for short stories. Here are some factors to think about when deciding to enter or not: What do you win? Who's judging it? Some of these are little more than money-making exercises for the organisers, but if it's likely to be read by agents then it could be worthwhile. What's the entry fee? I think it's very easy to spend a lot of money on competitions, and still get nowhere, and end up demoralised. There's no need to have ever entered anything to get a publishing deal. One small caveat: if you enter a competition that's, say, for a short extract of writing, and you haven't finished your book, and you win, it can put a huge amount of pressure on you. There's nothing wrong with waiting till you have a draft.

## 8. Should I write short stories?

This was the kind of thing I used to worry about a lot before I was published. I never came up with any ideas for them, but should I master that form before I moved on? The truth is they are totally different. I struggle with short stories but can, I like to think, turn out a novel. Only do it if you enjoy it and think you are good at it.

## 9. What not to do

Here's a list of common submission errors that you should definitely avoid.

Sending in mis-spelled, badly formatted (or handwritten) work

Sending the extract chapters all in separate files

Sending in something crumpled or with stains on (most agents just use email now, which takes away this risk)

Not personalising your cover letter

Not having finished the book you send in

Not following the submission guidelines

Not 'selling' your story properly, or being too explain it succinctly

Over-selling the book or yourself; over-confidence

Including too much personal detail or expounding on why you wrote this book

Harassing the agent for an answer

Not being able to make your mind up –you don't have to decide between agents right away, but again, as in dating, don't keep people dangling for too long....

Suddenly forgetting that you actually wanted to get published\*

\*Yes, this does happen. The thing you've dreamed of for years – an agent, a publishing deal within sight – is in your lap and you freeze. Is the book actually good enough? Do you really want it after all? This is a pretty standard mental block and usually comes from having issues with success, failure, and inadequacy. Don't let it rob you of the chance you earned!

## 10. Keep going

If you've done everything above and contacted your six agents, only to receive nos or silence, then try another six. If it's still a no from everyone, then it may be time to try something else. Did you get any feedback, and if so were there common themes? It's quite likely the story was too 'quiet' or didn't grab them as marketable, or they didn't know where in the market it would fit.

Writing another book may be key – you'll have learned so much from the last one. Most authors, including me, do not sell their first books. Writing another book is also important because if you get a deal, they will very soon want to know what the next one will be. If you have a two-book deal you might only get a few months to write it! It also helps to distract you from the waiting. Keep going, keep learning, and use all the sources of support and education I've mentioned. Allow yourself a bit of time to feel sad or cross, and then try to put it behind you and tell yourself that becoming a published author isn't something you can do overnight.

If you'd like to find out some more about the emotional side of writing - overcoming blocks, dealing with rejection and fear, staying productive - check out my other free ebook, **HOW TO BE CREATIVE**.

# Useful info

## What to read

*Plot and Structure*, by James Scott Bell

*Save the Cat*, by Blake Snyder (screenwriting-based but very useful)

*Writing the Breakout Novel*, by Donald Maass (the single best book I've found on premise)

*The Bookseller*

*Writing Magazine*

## Classes and events

Writers' and Artists' Yearbook (they run events as well as producing the iconic book)

The Festival of Writing

Faber Academy

City University, London (this is where I teach but most universities offer writing MAs or even BAs)

The London Writers' Cafe

Chalk the Sun (London)

Guardian Masterclasses

## Useful websites

<http://queryshark.blogspot.co.uk>

<http://nanowrimo.org> - I haven't talked about

NaNoWriMo yet, but it can be an amazing way to forge ahead with your book and make contacts. National Novel-Writing Month is in November.

[www.agenthunter.co.uk](http://www.agenthunter.co.uk)

# Other things I do

If you've enjoyed this book, do make sure to check out my other free one, HOW TO BE CREATIVE.

You might also like to see what events I have coming up, as I often run writing workshops. Usually in London, but also in other places too. And I'm also available to visit bookshops, book or writing groups, book festivals, and so on. Visit the events page on my website, [www.ink-stains.co.uk](http://www.ink-stains.co.uk)

I also offer one-to-one support, and can read your MS and give you detailed and constructive feedback on how marketable the idea is, the quality of the writing, and everything from typos to concept. To find out more visit [www.ink-stains.co.uk/teaching](http://www.ink-stains.co.uk/teaching)

Here's what some of my clients have to say:

'Claire's feedback has proved invaluable and her report was packed with tips to improve my manuscript. For all writers seeking an agent or publication, Claire's advice is second to none' – Charlie P

'Your report was incredibly helpful and I amended my MS accordingly' - Belinda S

'Thank you so much, Claire. I am already sparking with new ideas!' - Ann G