



Week 2 Audio Transcript

Sally Collins Pitching To Publishers

What Publishers Really Want

Believe me, as a publisher I WANT to love every submission I read. But I see writers with wonderful creative skills who get rejected because they were impatient, sending out proposals that were just too raw. At the worst extreme, I read submissions that are truly awful: poorly conceived and executed. I read a lot that are just tepid.

So what do publishers really want?

- They want more: More humour, more tears, more emotion, more sensuality, MORE OF EVERYTHING! What I mean by this is that many submissions are technically competent, but they don't stand out in any particular way. Agents and publishers are looking for the submission that makes them jump out of their chairs in excitement because it is the funniest, sexiest, cleverest or most moving piece of writing they have seen this month (or year, or decade!).
- They want a professional submission: Don't send it in until it's ready to be sent. Check the spelling. No, the editor will not fix it for you. You won't get that far.
- They want something that's great to read: Is your manuscript gripping and compelling? Are the characters believable, the pacing tight, the voice engaging? Specifically ask your beta readers to comment on this, and consider paying a manuscript assessor for feedback at this level.

- They want no follow-up calls a week after posting: Sometimes post or email doesn't get opened right away. Most publishers and literary agents get 2 metres of mail a week. It might take 3-6 months for them to get round to you. After that, you might politely ask if they've received it and how far your manuscript is from the top of the pile.
- They want courtesy: It is really attractive when writers are polite in their communication with my company and respectful of the amount of time it may take us to make a decision about their manuscript. This point is especially important for agents, because they are in a sense "auditioning" writers for publishers. Writers who are unreasonably difficult with their publishers often never get published again, because the Australian publishing culture is quite genteel and really doesn't take well to foot-stompers. So if someone is routinely shirty with me, I know exactly how they'll behave all the way along the line and what that will mean for their book – it will be a rocky road and I have to decide whether it's worth it. Remember that agents and publishers aren't the enemy.

Publishers love books - that's why we work in publishing. We just don't have 24 hours a day to read submissions, so it will take us some time to get back to you. If you respect our request to give us three months to read your submission, we'll respect your writing. If you, instead, call after two weeks to complain that we're taking too much time, that doesn't really bode well.

Some of this will sound profoundly trivial to you, but if you get a dozen manuscripts landing on your in-tray every week, you're going to want the basics to be straightforward. You've got plenty to do looking after the books you've already commissioned without authors making your life difficult. You've also got plenty to choose from; what you need is something good, exciting, unique.

There are no hard and fast rules ...

1. If I like the sound of the story, I'm prepared to overlook missing information in the query letter - so the story needs to be described well.

2. If I like the sound of the author, I'm prepared to overlook a query letter that is otherwise lacking. Liking the author doesn't mean liking their biographical information - it means liking their tone. A lot of query letters read the same - with a flat tone - and that's probably because writers are taking them seriously, which is fair and reasonable. But an author who shows me a bit of personality - an "I love" or "I'm passionate about" or "I came up with the idea for this novel while standing on my head in a bar in Tijuana" - is going to make me want to read what they've written.

3. I often work on instinct and there's some stuff I just can't empirically break down about why I like some letters and not others. The authors I've found in the slush pile have all - without exception - had fantastic letters. I got a feeling when I read the letter and then it was borne out when I read the manuscript. Wonderful writers always write wonderfully, regardless of whether it's a query letter or a novel or an email.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is: don't be too rigid in your letters. The basic structure is: describe the story, tell me why I should read it and tell me a bit about you, and write the letter as if you're writing to someone you want to start a relationship with. The publisher-author (or agent-author) relationship ideally endures for years, and we're all human - we all respond to emotional cues, even in business (perhaps especially in business) - so when someone sends a query letter that makes me laugh or makes me feel like they have a wildly beating heart, it makes me want to work with them. It doesn't matter so much if their book isn't "perfect".

Remember, the query letter is your first way in to an agent or publisher and first impressions definitely count. A badly punctuated letter is equivalent to turning up to a job interview with messy hair and buttons missing. A letter that doesn't tell me why I should read the manuscript is the same as sitting in that interview and not talking about your experience or why you should be hired. How can you then be surprised if you don't get the job?

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