

# Traditional Book Publishing Basics for Freelance Editors

by  
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Suppose you're working with an author who is interested in publishing the traditional way—getting an agent, landing a book deal, seeing their book on the shelf in the local Barnes and Noble, the whole dream. And maybe that author has asked you to help make sure the ms is ready for the big show.

## **Here's a (relatively) quick overview of the process.**

For *fiction*, your author needs to have written the full manuscript (unless s/he is multipublished by traditional publishers). The author will need to write a synopsis of the work. And the author will need to write a query letter describing the work (also called a pitch letter).

The author sends the query letter and perhaps the synopsis and a few pages of the ms itself to potential agents (depending on each agent's specific guidelines). If the agent is interested, s/he will ask for the full ms (or some part of it).

If your author is writing *nonfiction*, the author must write a book proposal (even if s/he has already written the whole book). That's unless the nonfiction is memoir or a similar type of creative nonfiction, which is treated like fiction.

Then the author will pitch the book idea to agents either including the proposal or waiting to be asked for the proposal, depending on the agent's guidelines. (This information can easily be found on agency websites.)

If all goes well (in either fiction or nonfiction), an agent will agree to represent the author and will sell the book to an acquisitions editor at a publishing company and sometime thereafter, the publisher will publish the book, and then, one hopes, readers will buy it and love it.

Some publishers (very few, mostly small) allow authors to query them directly. In this case, the process is still the same: the author pitches the project as directed in the guidelines. If interested, the acquisitions editor will ask to see the proposal (for nonfiction) or the synopsis and complete ms (for fiction).

Relatively few people are actually offered publishing contracts, so it's best if your author has a realistic idea of the chances. They are very low. Perhaps one or two percent of all submissions are eventually published the traditional way. Authors can improve their chances by writing an excellent book and developing a platform (a way to reach their audience) but this is no guarantee of success.

Editorial takes place in several rounds, for both fiction and non: a developmental round (DE), in which any outstanding big-picture problems are addressed; a copyediting round (CE), in which sentence-level problems are dealt with and the ms is edited to adhere to the publisher's style guide; and a galley round, where the author reviews the page proofs (the actual laid-out book) for any egregious errors.

Authors are discouraged from making extensive changes during the galley round as it quickly becomes expensive to reformat an already laid-out book, so the author should be sure the book is what they want it to be before it ever reaches this stage. At the galley stage, some publishers charge authors for changes that are not egregious errors.

Most publishers have a final proofreading round before the book is published, but the author is not generally involved in that round.

Most revision deadlines are tight and authors generally have only a few weeks to respond to edits without jeopardizing the publication date. A lot rides on the pub date (marketing, catalog placement, etc.) so ideally the author will not force the publisher to move this date.

Authors generally have little say over the cover design although if they really dislike it, they can push for change. This is generally best done through the agent. It also helps if the author can provide feedback from readers/colleagues/acquaintances who have responded negatively to the cover. Specifics about why it isn't working can help make the argument. What may make an acquisitions editor willing to push back against the art director are factual concerns that the cover will confuse readers, such as the cover is much too similar to a directly competing title or the cover promises the wrong genre (a thriller cover that looks like a romance).

What won't work are arguments like, "But it's not the cover I always dreamed of!" or "Here's the cover my brother drew for me" or "I don't really like lime green." The acquisitions editor, art director, and publisher don't care.

### What's an Author?

Seems obvious, right? It's a person, generally speaking, who has written a book. But sometimes, as in the case of a celebrity or expert author, the person whose name is on the book didn't actually write it. Someone gave him or her a hand. This coauthor (if the writer's name appears on the book) or ghost author/ghost writer (if the writer's name doesn't appear on the book) interviews the expert or celebrity, writes the book, and gets compensated for his or her work, either with an upfront payment or a share of the royalties (money the book earns) or both. See below for more information about advances and royalties.

People interested in writing books have several opportunities:

- They can be a book author, writing their own books under their own name (or, if writing fiction, a pen name if they want). For fiction, the author must have a solid mastery of craft. For nonfiction, it is helpful for the author to be a recognized expert in their subject area, or at least to have covered the subject extensively as a journalist. Some nonfiction writers, like Malcolm Gladwell, are successful writers even though they're not experts in their own right. These writers do in-depth research on topics of interest to readers and present the information in a compelling and accessible way.
- Authors can be experts, using coauthors and ghosts to help them write nonfiction books in their area of expertise.
- Authors can be a coauthor or ghost, doing the actual writing based on information obtained from the expert who will be credited with the book.
- Authors can be celebrity authors. First they have to become famous in another field of endeavor. Then they decide to write books. Most choose one of the other three options.

Many freelance dev editors will be approached about opportunities for ghosting and coauthoring. This is definitely worth exploring, but it's also very demanding and you'll want to be sure you're compensated fairly for your time.

## Words to Know

*Acquisitions editors* represent their publishing company and are the ones who actually offer the contract for a book. The acquisitions editor may or may not actually edit the book. Many acquisitions editors will hand off mss to developmental editors, who help shape the manuscript and makes sure it does what it's supposed to do. As a freelance dev editor, you may be hired by an acquisitions editor or editor-in-chief to develop mss for a traditional publishing company.

*Advance*: money a publisher pays an author before their book is published. In general, an editor plans to pay an advance equal to the amount of royalties—the author's share of profits—that s/he believes the book will earn in six months (in some cases, one year). Since figuring out how many copies a certain title will sell requires a bit of guesswork, and agents push editors for larger advances, often a book doesn't sell enough copies to *earn out* the advance. That is, an author may receive an advance but then never see additional royalties.

Traditionally, half the advance is paid on signing the contract and half on acceptance of the final manuscript, but these days many publishers break the advance into thirds: one-third on signing the contract, one-third on acceptance of the manuscript, and one-third on publication.

Advances vary widely, depending on the publisher, the book, and the author. They can range from zero to well into the six figures. Recently, advances have been declining because of the poor economy and slow book sales.

*Note*: Some self-publishing sites claim that the author has to pay back the advance if their book doesn't sell well enough to earn out. This is untrue. The only time an author has to pay back the royalty is if s/he fails to meet contractual obligations, such as not delivering the book by deadline. Even then, most editors will work with the author to establish a new deadline.

*Agent*. Agents work as salespeople on behalf of writers. They sell the author's book to a publishing company and earn a commission from the advance and royalties (the standard commission is 15%). They protect an author's rights and try to ensure that the author gets favorable contract terms. Generally, they don't edit an author's work, although some will help an author polish their work before *shopping* it (sending it out to editors). As a freelance development editor, you can benefit from getting to know agents, as they may refer potential clients to you if they feel you can help an author get their work ready for publication.

*Assistant editors* work with acquisitions editors and may or may not have decision-making clout.

*Copy editors* and *proofreaders* are usually freelancers. When on staff, they are not decision-makers and cannot offer to publish a book. But this is another route freelancers can take to get work from publishing companies.

*Editorial assistants* read the slush (mss no one is very excited about) and make the coffee, but someday hope to run the company (and for all you know, will, so be nice).

*Production editors* route the book through the editing and design stage and resolve problems in the production process (whether print or digital or both). The author is unlikely to have much contact with production editors; if you're working as a freelancer for a publishing company, you may work with a production editor to schedule deadlines and work flow. Or you may work with a *copy chief*, who oversees the movement of the ms through the editorial process. Or these roles or some part of them may be played by a *managing editor*.

*Editors-in-chief* and *executive editors* oversee the entire editing function of the publishing company. They may acquire books but their main role is management.

*Publisher.* This term is used loosely to refer to both the person who has the title of publisher and to the publishing company as a whole. The person who is the publisher is basically the boss. He or she is mostly involved in the financial end of the operation—making sure sales are good and revenue is flowing. They usually have the final say on editorial decisions, but they don't generally acquire books.

*Royalty:* the amount the author receives per book sold, traditionally a percentage of the cover price of the book but now commonly a percentage of the net price of the book (what the publisher sells the book to a retailer for). Royalties tend to be graduated, with higher percentages for hard cover (perhaps ten percent) and the lowest percentages for mass market books (five percent). Mass market books are the 5x7 paperback books you find at Walmart, the grocery store, and the book store. Trade paperbacks are of varying sizes; the royalty rate for these is usually somewhere between hard cover and mass market.

Ebook royalties run higher, usually somewhere in the range of twenty-five to fifty percent of the cover price.

As mentioned, royalties can also be paid on net earnings rather than cover price, and it makes a big difference in how much money a royalty rate will actually generate for the author.

### Four Ways Authors Find Agents

Where does an author find an agent? Especially a good one? Herewith, the four basic strategies, in no particular order:

- Through writers' conferences. These often have pitch sessions where authors can meet with various agents and pitch their mss.
- Referrals from other writers. In other words, networking and schmoozing.
- The agent finds the author. Dream on, right? But this happens much more frequently than you might realize. If an author has an online presence, it's possible to attract the attention of an agent looking for a writer for a specific kind of book she knows editors need.
- Querying. The author sends pitch letters to agents cold. It works!

If you're working with an author who is trying to find an agent, encourage perseverance. It's not unheard of for an author to send a hundred queries before getting a bite (if they get a bite at all).

Things to remember: if the author sends out fifty or one hundred queries at once, this doesn't allow for making changes to the pitch (or the project). Once an author has pitched an agent, and the agent has said no or hasn't responded within a reasonable amount of time (not responding is how some agents say no), the author can't query them on that same project again.

By sending out few letters at a time (say five or ten), the author will have the opportunity to tweak their pitch if they're not getting any bites. By the same token, if they're getting bites but no offers of representation, that means the proposal (for nonfiction) or the manuscript (for fiction) needs more work.

Authors can check out [Absolutewrite.com](http://Absolutewrite.com) for the scoop on agents in their [Beware](#)s, [Recommendation and Background Check](#) forum. They can learn which agents are interested in which genres on [AgentQuery.com](http://AgentQuery.com).

Many agents blog or participate on Twitter. Spending some time reading their blog or following them on Twitter can give an author a sense of whether they'd be a good match. As a

freelance dev editor, connecting with agents (and/or acquisitions editors) on Twitter can help create a connection so they'll think of you if they have an author who needs a dev editor.

The traditional book publishing process can be quite complex but having a basic understanding of how it work allows you to advise your authors more effectively. If you have authors interested in traditional publishing, I would encourage you to read trade newsletters and magazines, such as *Publishers Weekly*, to keep abreast of current trends and practices in the industry.