



sarahjrexford.com



BECOME AN AUTHOR

Your Streamlined Process To
Pursue Your Dreams

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NICE TO MEET YOU!

Hi! I'm Your Coach, Sarah Rexford

Can you relate to the following? You want to become an author but you're unsure how to take your next step.

You need to write your query letter but drafting it feels much more overwhelming than writing your book. You want to live your dreams but querying agents feels overwhelming. You need to keep your day job and wish the publishing process could be simplified so life wouldn't be so complicated.

After nearly a decade in the publishing world, I've found that many writers know what they need to do, but are unsure of how to do it.

The good news is, I've been there too. In this guide, I share five tips that drastically helped me streamline the process, in hopes they help you too.



Do any of these points resonate? You know you need to:

- Draft your manuscript
- Create your book proposal
- Write a standout elevator pitch
- Craft a query letter
- Find agents to pitch
- Query agents
- Build your online presence
- Keep track of it all

If you're unsure how to execute the above, this guide is for you. I specifically crafted this material to help you take the steps necessary to pursue your dream, all while keeping your day job. Of course, ideally your dream job will become your day job, but we have to get there first!

Use these tips to save time executing the steps to publication. The more streamlined you make your process, the less time you have to spend doing the work.

This will help you establish a healthy lifestyle, which in turn, gives you the tools to create a dream you can pursue with longevity.

Anyone can buy into hustle culture, but it takes grit to pursue your dream to completion. Use this guide to help you stay on track and keep your job until you're making a living as a writer. Ready?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large 'S' and 'h'.



TIP 1

PREPARING FOR YOUR JOURNEY



SET YOUR GOAL



To reach your
dream you
must start your
journey.

Starting:

Before you start drafting your manuscript, finding agents, writing your query letter, and querying, it's important to articulate exactly what your goal is.

Getting clear on the specifics of your goal is important for two reasons: So you avoid taking unnecessary steps and ensure you take the right ones.

To help you get clear on your dream, answer the following questions.

- ✓ What genre is my manuscript (or will it be)?
- ✓ What publishing route do I want to take (self-publish or traditionally publish)?
- ✓ Why do I want to become an author?

If you need help answering any of these questions, feel free to reach out!

*For the purposes of this resource, I focus on traditional publishing. However, you can apply many of these tips even if you choose to self-publish.

Before you start your publishing journey, set a goal to reach for. I've found that the S.M.A.R.T. goals, originally created in 1981, are extremely helpful.

SMART GOALS

FOLLOW GEORGE DORAN, ARTHUR MILLER AND JAMES CUNNINGHAM'S ADVICE FROM THEIR 1981 ARTICLE "THERE'S A S.M.A.R.T. WAY TO WRITE MANAGEMENT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES."

S **SPECIFIC:**
What do I want to accomplish?

M **MEASURABLE:**
How will I know when it is accomplished?

A **ACHIEVABLE:**
How can the goal be accomplished?

R **RELEVANT:**
Does this seem worthwhile?

T **TIME BOUND:**
When can I accomplish this goal?



TIP 2

THE JOURNEY



WRITE YOUR BOOK

CHAPTER TWO

How To Tackle The Journey: Write

While this part may seem the most straightforward, it takes a lot of grit to take your book from start to finish. When I wrote my first novel it took a full year: eleven months writing, one month stuck not knowing what to write next. When I wrote my second novel, it took me nine months. This second time through, I had a writing mentor who taught me the importance of setting a deadline.

To help me meet my deadline, he taught me how to break each writing day into actionable steps.



Here is the way that works for me.

- Decide how many words you can write per day
- Determine how many days a week you will write
- Now that you know your genre, look up how many words are typically in this genre

Bonus tip: If you want agents and publishers to take your work seriously, be sure to stay within the recommended word count for your genre. For additional help on this, see the resources section at the end of this guide.

Let's say you are writing a young adult novel of 70,000 words. You decide you can write 500 words per day, five days a week. Now it's time for some simple math.

500 words a day x 5 days a week x 4 weeks a month
= 10,000 words a month

It will take you 28 weeks (or seven months) to complete your rough draft. Add in two weeks for missed days such as:

- Sickness
- Procrastination
- Unexpected life events
- Emergencies

Now you have 30 weeks to complete your novel. Set your deadline 30 weeks from your start date, and you're ready to begin.

A top-down view of a desk with a laptop, a pen, a notebook, and a coffee cup. The text is overlaid on the image.

EDIT AS
YOU
DRAFT
OR WAIT
FOR
LATER?

The second lesson I learned from my writing mentor was NOT to edit as you write. This may sound counterintuitive, but stay with me.

Instead of editing as you try to get your daily word count in, simply write. The next day, edit your first 500 words (or the word count you set for yourself), then write your words for the day. This ensures several important aspects of the writing process happen:

- You can free-write without worrying about editing
- You still get an edit in (the next day)
- You familiarize yourself with your previous day of work when you edit
- This launches you into your new day of writing

This process works extremely well for me. Consider testing it for a week to see how it goes.

WHAT ABOUT RESEARCH?

The third and final tip I'll share for writing your book is when to do your research. The amount of research varies depending on the genre you write. However, it's easy to get deep in research and forget about writing.

Here's my recommendation: Two weeks prior to the start date of your writing period, dive into research.

- If you write historical fiction, learn the customs, societal norms, and context of your specific time period.
- If you write fantasy, research mythical creatures, magic, or whatever relates to your plot and characters.
- If you write contemporary romance, consider delving into interpersonal communication and taking a few personality tests from your characters' perspectives.

The goal of this two-week period is to conduct as much preliminary research as possible so that when it comes time to write you can focus strictly on writing.

NONFICTION WRITERS

If you write nonfiction, your process will look a little bit different. Landing a nonfiction, traditional publishing contract heavily relies on your platform. Publishers want writers to have a platform regardless of the genre they write, but nonfiction specifically demands a large platform. Rather than write your entire draft and only then query agents, take the following steps:

- Write a standout first 3 chapters
- Write a 3-5 sentence description for the rest of your chapters
- Create your book proposal

Agents can get a good feel for your writing from your writing sample, the direction of your book from your description, and the marketability of your book from your proposal. Additionally, literary agents can land authors nonfiction contracts based on their proposal and sample chapters alone. For first time authors, usually the rules fluctuate a bit, but generally this is industry standard.

Chapter 2

Every little step counts

▪ LIVE YOUR DREAM ▪

You can be a writer without devoting your entire day to pursuing your dreams.

If your goal is to draft your 70,000-word manuscript in 30 weeks, that's just 500 words a day, (or roughly two pages, double-spaced).

Breaking up your writing time into chunks may help your goal seem more feasible. For instance, if your life stage allows, consider getting up 30 minutes earlier, using part of your lunch break, and spending 15 minutes before bed, to write.

In today's age of doom-scrolling, part of becoming a writer is using these little pockets of time to write instead of scroll. The benefits will be so much more rewarding!



TIP 3

THE JOURNEY



FIND AN AGENT

For writers who choose to traditionally publish, finding an agent, also called representation, is key. Many writers query agents prior to securing a book deal. Why? Most larger publishers do not accept unsolicited manuscripts, meaning agents are the gatekeepers to publishers.



To query an acquisitions editor (the one who initially accepts or rejects your book) you must go through a literary agent. An agent can get you in the door of your dream publisher. That said, there are some publishers who have a submissions portal on their website.

However, whether you find an agent prior to a publisher offering you a book contract, or have an offer and need to find an agent, agents are integral to your publishing journey. Here is a condensed list of the many ways an agent works on your behalf:

AGENTS:

- Read your manuscript and help you editorially
- Query specific editors who they believe will find your idea interesting
- Get you seen by the Big Five publishers (if applicable)
- Negotiate book contracts to ensure you receive the best offer possible
- Help you build your author career
- Work on your behalf to give you time to do what you do best, write!

A FEW THINGS TO BE AWARE OF:

A legitimate agent will never ask you for compensation upfront. Typically, agents receive a 15% commission after you sign your book contract.

When querying agents (more on this later), be sure to follow their guidelines.

If an agent does not request a writing sample or book proposal in your initial query, be prepared to send your material in a timely manner if they do request it.

It is perfectly normal (and a huge accomplishment) for an agent to express interest and request your full manuscript. This is industry standard practice.

Good agents are not on the lookout to steal the next great idea, but to support aspiring authors in their journey and sell great books to reputable publishers.



So how do I find a literary agent?

There are many routes you can take to find an agent, but utilizing these few will get you started in the right direction.

Publisher's Marketplace

Publisher's Marketplace requires a \$25/month fee. However, they also offer a \$10 "Quick Pass" that gives you limited access to their offerings.

Manuscript Wishlist

Eager to discover what an agent is looking for? Manuscript Wishlist is a vibrant community that helps you take the next step in your publishing journey. You can join with a Basic Membership (\$49.99/month) or Gold Membership (\$69.99/month).

Writer's Digest

Writer's Digest is a well-known name in the publishing world and offers a plethora of resources. Simply type their name and "literary agents" into your favorite browser and you're bound to find a variety of helpful blogs.

Query Tracker

I love Query Tracker because it's a streamlined way to both find and submit to agents. While you don't need to create an account, I find it's helpful to do so to keep track of your queries.

Use Keywords and Google

If you don't want to invest financially in finding an agent, simply search online. Try typing in your specific genre with "literary agents" and see what comes up.



TIP 4

THE JOURNEY



QUERY AGENTS

The Query

You did your research and found a list of agencies to submit to. Now it's time to narrow down your options so you can start querying.

Let's say you found 20 to 30 different literary agencies you want to submit to. Before sending in your query, it's crucial to determine the best agent to represent your project.

Many agencies have several agents that represent similar genres. Read through every agent's bio, any blogs they have written, peruse their social media, and go to their personal website if they have one.

cont.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Do everything in your power to get a well-rounded idea of who the agents are and what type of projects interest them. Sending your query to the right agent helps increase your chances of a favorable review.

A word of caution: if you find your dream agency it could be tempting to send queries to every agent who represents your genre. It's unlikely this will help you, and it will likely make you look both desperate and unprofessional.

Agents talk among themselves, so simply find one agent per agency, and send in your query.

Don't worry. If you send your query to the wrong agent and they like your writing, they may forward your query to another agent within the agency.

In order to make the best impression possible, keep a detailed spreadsheet of your progress.

There's nothing quite so cringy as submitting to a particular agent, and then a month later, submitting to them again.

It's easy to lose track of which agents you have queried and which you still need to query. To avoid this pitfall I built a spreadsheet to track the following information:

- LITERARY AGENCY
- NAME OF AGENT QUERIED
- DATE QUERIED
- DATE TO HEAR BACK
- ALLOWED TO FOLLOW-UP? Y/N
- DATE ACCEPTED
- OR REJECTED
- FEEDBACK RECEIVED
- CONTACT INFO

NEVER GIVE UP

Keeping, and tracking, your feedback is an extremely economical way to solicit free advice from agents.
More on this in tip 5.

If you'd like my custom Agent Query Tracker Spreadsheet, contact me at my website.



TIP 5

THE JOURNEY



PURSUCE FEEDBACK

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

The benefits of constructive criticism are enormous and potentially life-changing, while the repercussions of ignoring it can destroy what could have been a flourishing career.



Seeking feedback early on is crucial for the longevity of your writing career.

KEY BENEFITS OF SEEKING FEEDBACK:

- Reorient yourself in the direction of your goal
- Save effort working to achieve goals that don't serve you
- Pivot to focus on your strengths
- Learn how others perceive you
- Embody humility to achieve long-term growth

Beta readers are great sources, particularly early on. This type of reader is simply someone who looks at your manuscript before it's published. They provide timely feedback on their reading experience. This feedback typically includes areas they liked and areas for growth.

Working with beta readers (although beta readers typically read free of charge) helps accustom you to receiving feedback and considering whether it rings true or not. As the author, you get to make the final creative choice, but learning from early readers is a tremendous privilege many writers take advantage of.

EMBODY A GROWTH MINDSET

Understanding that there is always more room to grow helps soften the sting of others pointing out areas for growth. Humility goes hand in hand with embracing constructive criticism, the path to long-term growth.

A second way to pursue feedback is through the rejection letters you receive. Even if you don't have an agent yet, if you attend writing conferences or pitch to publishers that do accept unsolicited manuscripts, you may receive valuable feedback on your work.

Be sure to always submit your absolute best work, but in an industry like traditional publishing, it can be tough to break in. You're bound to receive some rejections on your way to success. Instead of allowing yourself to get discouraged, consider using them to your advantage.



2 Steps

Two specific steps can help you make the most of the feedback you garner from publishers. Whether positive or negative, early feedback can benefit the trajectory of your career for years to come.



01

SAVE EVERY REJECTION

I've found it extremely helpful to copy every rejection into a Word document. I include the date, name of the acquisitions editor, and name of the publisher. No matter how much or little feedback you receive, save everything.

02

COLOR CODE YOUR FEEDBACK

Next, highlight every positive comment in yellow and every negative comment in green. Yellow helps me easily see the encouraging comments, and green reminds me there is always room for growth.

See the next page for a visual example.

Use these made-up examples to see how to make the most of what can often feel like a painful email!

Dear [Name],
Thank you so much for your submission of [Insert Title]. Unfortunately, it is not right for us at this time.
Best, [Name]

While this is a typical form rejection, there are a few areas to note. First, highlight "not right for us" in green. And second, ask yourself why it may not have been right: does this publisher accept your genre? Does your manuscript fit the type of books they publish?

Dear [Name],
Thank you so much for your submission of [Title]. I really enjoyed reading your sample chapters and connected well with your protagonist. However, the plot felt a little weak in areas, and for this reason, I have to decline.
Best, [Name]

This rejection has more to work with. In green, highlight "connected well with your protagonist." Well done! You created an empathetic character. Next, in green highlight "the plot felt a little weak in areas." Ask: are there scenes you should cut? Did some pages drag on without advancing the plot?



BONUS TIP

PLOT TWIST



**USE REJECTIONS TO
YOUR ADVANTAGE**

TURN THE TABLES

Done correctly, you can actually use your rejections to pique the interest of an agent or even a publisher.

When considering this option, use discretion. Avoid using specific names or over-promising. Instead, based on the examples in tip 5, you could start off like this:

Dear [Name],

[Intro you query]

Here's what people are saying:

- *I connected well with your protagonist.*

[Finish your query]

Best, [Name]

As you collect more of what I call positive rejections, add them to your list.

Discover what works best and run with it.

What works for me may not work for you, and that's okay. Every writer's journey looks a little bit different, as it should. We are each a unique individual after all. With this in mind, I hope some of the tips and tricks I shared help you push toward your dream and save you time along the way.


It can feel overwhelming trying to keep your day job, work your dreams into reality, build an online presence (your platform), and know how to keep track of everything at the same time.

If any of the tips I recommended particularly resonated with you, please reach out and let me know! I love hearing what most helps writers so I can create more of that content for you.

Whether you are in the trenches of drafting your manuscript or querying, I wish you all the best on your writing journey.

Remember to take advantage of everything you learn on the way, and embrace the process so that ultimately you fall in love with the journey, rather than just the success at the end. Anyone can try to publish a book, but to enjoy the process, highs and lows, is a true privilege worth pursuing.

NEVER



THE ONES WHO MAKE
IT KEEP WRITING NO
MATTER WHAT.

—KRISTIN HANNAH

GIVE UP