

# Questions for the Writers Panel

## 2015 VHPA Reunion

### Washington, DC

#### **FINDING A POTENTIAL PUBLISHER OR AGENT**

##### ***Why do I want to write and publish a book?***

Before you start down this process, you need to figure why do you want to write a book? Is it for posterity? Do you want to become a full time author? Is it going to be a hobby? Do you care if someone besides your family and friends will read it?

Figure this out, understand why and what your vision will be. Knowing this will help you make smart decisions throughout the process. It will act as a guiding light throughout the process. You'll need it!

##### ***What should I write, fiction or non-fiction?***

That's up to you. Depending on what fiction genre you choose determines what kind of "facts" are used in the book. Fantasy lets you create your own world while historical fiction has to be kept in the context of the world in which the novel takes place.

Non-fiction means you have to stay as close as possible to verifiable facts. If you stray too far, the book will lose credibility.

##### **How do I find a publisher or an agent?**

Once you decide what genre or the topic of your book, what follows are six sources that you can use:

1. *Reference books* – there are tons of books that list publishers and agents that are updated every year. Pick one that has the most agents/publishers on what you want to write but also one that gives you some insight into the type of books that are the agent's or publisher's specialty.
2. *Books of the same genre* – Go to a bookstore or a library and look at a dozen or so of the books on the topic (if non fiction) or genre if it is fiction and right there, it will tell you who the publisher is. Often in the acknowledgements, the author will thank his agent.
3. *Internet* – you can do searches and it is easy. You will find yourself often going down rat holes but it is a useful tool. Beware, there are a lot of charlatans in this industry out there.

4. *Publisher or agent web sites* – Normally, you wouldn't go to the agent or publisher's web site unless you wanted to find out if they specialize in your genre or topic. These sites will help you hone your research
5. *Networking* – if you know someone who has been published or who works for an agent, publishing company, book distributor, law firm who specializes in working with agents/authors/publishers and ask for an introduction.

### **So you want to write a book, what's process?**

There are seven major steps in the process:

1. *Determine if the book will be fiction or non-fiction* – You have to start with the answer to this question because it drives a lot of what follows.
2. *Create a summary of the plot* – Write a summary of the plot or the book. How long is up to you, but it should contain the essence of the story line or what the book is about. From this, you can write the same chapters or the outline. Think in terms of answering the question, “you have two minutes, why should I buy the book?”
3. *Write the manuscript or outline with sample chapters* – If it is fiction, write the book. Most publishers or agents won't talk to you unless the manuscript is finished. If it is non-fiction, you can sell a concept for a book and get away with the first three or four chapters and a detailed chapter outline for the rest of the book. If it is non-fiction, provide a list of your sources.
4. *Research agents/publishers* – This is covered in another question, but you have to decide whether or not you want to go through an agent, direct to a publisher or self-publish.
5. *Send Query letters* – have to send these out because, with the exception of self-publishing, no query no published book.
6. *Follow-up* – persistence pays. You need a thick skin because you will hear the word no in a hundred different ways and you need to keep going.  
*ML Comment* – A friend told me that 29 agents/publishers turned down GONE WITH THE WIND before something thought the manuscript had potential.
7. *Negotiate and sign a contract* – at some point, you'll be signing a contract whether it is with an agent, publisher or a company that facilitates self-publishing. See section about the contract.
8. *Production of the book* – this is the process in which the publisher helps you polish the manuscript and then turn it into either a paper or e-book.

**What's the difference between self-publishing, pay-to-publish, traditional?**

1. *Self-publishing* – you write a book and then “contract” with a firm who facilitates e-distribution. The service they provide is converting your Word or Pages document and making it available in e-book catalogues. You pay a fee for this service and they then facilitate collection of your royalties and send you checks.
2. *Pay-to-publish* – you, as the author, pay a publisher to edit, proof, print and, if your budget permits, promote, warehouse and distribute your book. The motivation of these types of publishers is efficiently generating fees throughout the publishing process, not necessarily selling your book.
3. *Traditional* – the publisher provides coaching to help you re-write it as needed, proof, and take it to market. How much help you will get with publicity depends on the publisher. For first time authors, they may ask you to pay for a book editor.

### **What does a book editor do?**

On the behest of the publisher, they will help you improve your manuscript. Scenes will have to be rewritten, the plot tweaked. Some of what you think is brilliant prose will wind up being deleted. If you work with a good book editor, he/she will coach you but it is tough love. You need a thick skin for this part of the process and go into it with the goal of making the book better.

### **What kinds of edits are there?**

There are four kinds of edits:

1. *Conceptual* – The editor works with the author to create the actual story. The author does most of the writing with the editor providing input and corrections.
2. *Developmental* – The editor takes a complete manuscript and works with the editor to polish it by improving the character development and plot
3. *Line or copy edit* – This is a word for word edit in which the editor corrects the grammar and sentence structure. He/she also works with the writer to eliminate overused words and improve the overall product. Fact checking occurs during this type of edit.
4. *Proofreading* – This is the final check on the manuscript and the editor goes through the manuscript with a fine tooth comb looking for grammatical, punctuation, spelling, capitalization or any other type of error. Those involved in any one of the first three should not be the proofreader. The last person who should be considered as the proofreader is the author.

### **What role does an agent play?**

The agent has four roles once he accepts you as a client. One, to find a publisher that will invest in you and negotiate the publishing contract. Two, help you publicize the book. Three, help you sell the serial rights, i.e. movie, TV, distribution outside the U.S. and last but not least, collect your royalties because that's how he gets paid. The agent gets a percentage which is usually 10% or more for first time authors, less for authors who have a brand.

### ***Who's going to publicize my book?***

You are!!! Unless you are lucky to get picked up by one of the large publishing houses who have the money to invest in you, promoting your book is your job.

### ***What's POD?***

POD stands for print on demand. It is growing in popularity, particularly for fiction. The book isn't printed until someone orders it. You place an order with Amazon or Barnes & Noble and the printer gets an order and out pops the book. POD eliminates the need for large inventories of books sitting in a warehouse.

The mode does have some significant disadvantages. It doesn't print color or pictures well. Also, large purchasers of books tend not to like POD for reasons known only to themselves. They can't seem to get over the idea that books are only printed when purchased so their distribution costs are much lower. Book distribution is the subject of another question.

### ***What's in a book marketing plan?***

This a two part answer. The first part of the answer is that if you don't have one when you start this process, create one.

The second part is that the publisher wants to know if you have begun to sort out how you are going to help sell the book. This is all about return on the publisher's investment in you and your investment in the book.

In the marketing plan, you need to identify the target market and how you what you are going to do to help sell the book. Answers such as "go on a book tour" are not good enough. You'll need to come up with a strategy that defines your audience and how you are going to reach it. Be practical because advertising, travel, PR firms, etc. are expensive and the publisher has finite resources to help you.

*ML comment* – I went to the extreme of creating a straw man business plan with targeted numbers of book signings per month, assumption on how

many books I would sell per signing, which magazines I would target for reviews, etc. It took a lot of research to create and a lot of the estimates and assumptions were inaccurate, but it gave me a plan of action to at least start.

### **How long should the manuscript be?**

There is no real answer. If it is fiction, it should be long enough to tell the story. If it is non-fiction, it is however many words are needed to cover the subject.

*ML comment* – I've often heard that for first novels, the magic number was 80,000 words. When I submitted my first book – BIG MOTHER 40 - to Fireship, it was just under 90,000 and the published version is just over 147,000! RENDER HARMLESS was 197,000 words and CHERUBS 2 about 170,000.

### **What should I look for in a publisher?**

Three things. One, experience in your genre and topic. Two, a willingness to invest in you as an author. This investment is in time to coach you in the process of bringing the book to market. The publishing house doesn't want a crappy product and neither do you. The last three is distribution. The publisher has to have access to readers of your topic.

### **What is a publisher looking for in a first time author?**

Commitment to the craft of writing!

*ML comment* – In the process of getting my first book published, almost every agent or publisher who was interested in the manuscript asked me questions about what am I trying to do. I told them I wanted to be a full time author who writes a commercially successful series of novels. What I found out later was once they determine your manuscript has possibilities, they want to know how hard you will work to make it a top-notch book.

### **What is the difference between small, independent presses and the large ones?**

Large publishers such as Random House, Doubleday, etc. have several different imprints or brands. Each imprint specializes in specific genres or topics. The good news is that they have the resources to invest in you and to a large extent "control" distribution. The bad news is that they rarely take on first time authors unless they are represented by an agent.

Small, independent presses are more flexible and are willing to take on new authors. They usually “own” two or three imprints for each genre and will make decisions faster than the large houses. Bad news is that they don’t have the funds to help you with promotion and may not have the required distribution.

*ML comment* – I’ve had agents and even one publisher tell me that the odds of getting picked up by a large publisher for your first book is somewhere around 500,000 to one against you.

### **How will my book be distributed?**

There are four channels to the market.

1. *E-books*. This channel includes self-published books as well as those that are available through Amazon and Barnes & Noble. There are three common electronic formats – Kobo, Kindle, Apple - and expect some consolidation in the formats and the industry continues to grow. Also in this category are audio books.
2. *Traditional hard cover or paperback*. Books marketed in the traditional way are printed by the publisher and then sent to distributors who have access to bookstores of all types. Either the publisher or the printer maintains the inventory and once it is in the distributor’s catalogue it is up to the publisher, distributor and the author (i.e. you) to create demand for the book. Keep in mind that this channel has huge costs and if the book doesn’t move off the shelves in 90 – 120 days, it comes back to your publisher with a restocking charge that you pay for out of your royalties.
3. *POD*. Print on demand came about through the e-book revolution. It enables the publisher and printer to maintain a library of books on a server. When someone orders it, the printer “pushes print” and out comes the book to be shipped. Bad news, if you order through Amazon or Barnes & Noble, it takes 5 – 7 days to get the book. Good news, books can be reasonably priced and there is no risk of re-stocking charges!
4. *Pay-to-publish* – Publishers of this type will offer you the option of how you want the book to be printed, i.e. hard copy or soft and whether you want them to inventory the book or should you. Each option comes with a price tag and it is up to you to choose. Most of these publishers claim to have access to the distributors who can move your book but again, it comes at a cost to you the writer. This option is ideal if all you want to do is write a memoir for your family and friends.

## **QUERIES**

### ***What's in the query?***

Every agent and publisher has a slightly different format. Either the reference books or their web sites will tell you what they want in the query.

At the very least, fiction or non-fiction, you'll be asked to provide in a very concise document:

1. A two or three sentence summary of the book that will get the reader's attention. Try to write it as the blurb on the back of the book.
2. Why your book is different from others in the genre if it is fiction or the topic if it is non-fiction.
3. If it is non-fiction, you may be asked to provide a chapter outline.
4. Experience as a writer, i.e. what else have you written that has published. Books and magazine articles give you credibility as a writer.
5. Other qualifications to write the book.
6. Short outline of your marketing plan.

### ***How do I submit my query?***

The agent or publisher will specify the how. Usually, they will give you a choice of a mailed in query accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope while others prefer an on-line submission. Some even provide the format in an online form.

### ***How do I format my query?***

Each agent or publisher will give you their guidelines and you need to follow them. There's no "standard" query letter. Every query you submit will be different with about 80% of the content the same.

*ML comment* - The trick is to make your query stand out. Your query has about 30 seconds to generate interest. How you do that is up to you, but I found that sticking to the basics, being concise and fact based worked best.

### ***How long does it take for an agent or publisher to respond?***

Most agents and publishers will tell you on their site. You'll see anything from three to four weeks to much longer. The reality is that agents and publishers are overwhelmed with inquiries and your query letter has to cut through the clutter.

### ***How is it used by the publisher/agent?***

First and foremost, it is a sample of your ability to write. If the query letter piques the interest of the person assigned to go through the queries, it then goes to either a committee, or if you are lucky, the reader will ask for one of

three things – the first fifty pages, the first three chapters or the whole manuscript.

If your query piques the agent or publisher's interest, the next step is that several individuals in the firm will review the document and if they like it, you will get asked to submit more of the manuscript unless they asked for the whole thing. At some point, the agent or publisher will take your manuscript to the "acquisition" committee who will give it either a thumbs up or thumbs down.

### **How do I follow up on my query?**

This is the toughest question to answer because the agents/publishers have small, overworked staffs and they don't usually like to take calls or answer e-mails. However, as a first time author, you can feign ignorance about the process and after the estimated response time, you can lob in an e-mail or try to reach the individual you targeted. Or if there was no one, try to contact who you think is most likely involved in the decision.

*ML comment* - I was arrogant (dumb?) enough to follow up with phone calls and e-mails. I focused on those who asked for something beyond my query because, right or wrong, I assumed that if I hadn't heard from them two to three weeks after the time noted on their web site, the answer was no. Much to my surprise, I did talk to a half a dozen agents who were as surprised as I was when they answered the phone. I promised that I wouldn't waste their time and asked three simple questions on why the book was turned down so I could improve as a writer:

1. Was it my writing?
2. Was it the plot?
3. Was it the characters?

Each of these led to a 15 – 30 minute conversation. What I found out and this was back in the 2008 – 2010 time frame was that despite the fact that their web site said they were looking for new authors, they really weren't. Instead they were using the queries as market research to help them figure out what books might be hot or might not. At the time, the book industry was undergoing transformation because the e-book was arriving on the scene and literary agents were struggling to figure out how it was going to affect their livelihoods.

I also learned that to bring a book to market, the agent is going to spend about \$25,000 - \$50,000 on you to get the manuscript to the publisher and this doesn't include any publicity. The money is mostly labor spent on editors, proofreaders, artists and the like and it spent before they see first royalty check. Keep in mind, most literary agents are small businesses. So the investment dollars are coming out of their pockets. In a nutshell, it is



all about the money and how fast and how large they think the ROI on you, as first time author will be.

### **What should my query strategy be?**

It depends. Some “experts” say send as many out as you can at once. Others say send only a few out at a time. It is a matter of preference, but if you do your research well, depending on the topic or the genre, you could have as many as a hundred or more possible candidates.

*ML comment* – Some agent web sites require that you tell them if you have contacted other agents. My answer was that I was reaching out to a few targeted agents who specialize in my genre, i.e. military historical fiction. I would recommend that you send them out in small batches, i.e. 5 - 20. Each query package is going to be different and may or may not require a lot of customization. Take your time. It also allows you to tweak the content which a “mass” mailing will not permit.

## **FORMATTING THE MANUSCRIPT**

### ***Should I pay to have my manuscript edited before I send it to an agent/publisher?***

NO! The agent or publisher is more interested in your writing skills. Unless you are the second coming of Hemingway, acquisition committees can smell a polished manuscript a mile away. Once they accept your manuscript, they will provide or ask you to pay for a book editor and a proofreader.

### ***What type face or font should I use in the manuscript that you submit?***

There are a lot of opinions out there on this. It used to be that everything as to be in “courier.” Microsoft Word offers a variety of type fonts. It is best to use one of the following fonts for the book that are commonly used in the printing industry. Only deviate if you are inserting a handwritten letter or something unique into the text. The fonts are:

1. Times New Roman
2. Palatino Linotype
3. Bookman Old Style

### ***Should the manuscript be double spaced?***

The core of the text should be either double spaced or one a half spaces between lines. You can, of course deviate as needed.

### **What about typos and grammatical errors?**

It's a given that your manuscript will have typos, grammatical errors and occasionally, poor syntax. Try to minimize the number. By the time you are ready to submit it, you have read it, edited, re-read it fifty to a hundred times and may not see what is on the screen. The agent/publisher knows that and it is their job to fix them during the "production" process. What they are looking for is a well-written, engrossing story they can polish and take to market.

### **Are there any software packages that will help me improve my manuscript?**

Yes. A lot of them. Some are better than others. You have to look at each one and decide whether or not you want use one.

*ML Comment* – Right now, I am experimenting with Autocrit. It is reasonably priced and does what I want it to do. The "need" has been expressed as a criticism by several editors. So, in order to improve, I looked for a package that will help improve my manuscripts.

## **ACCEPTANCE**

### **What happens once the publisher accepts the manuscript?**

Assume you submitted a completed manuscript has been accepted by the publisher and/or agent. The process from this point on is based on one simple concept - every writer needs an editor. If you don't accept that fact, go the self-publishing route.

If you got a chapter outline or a partially finished manuscript accepted, then you have to finish it and then the following happens.

1. *Suggestions from the acquisition committee* – A member of the committee and it may be the book editor will offer suggestions, sometimes in gory detail and in others guidelines and suggestions and you will be expected to make those before going to the next stage.
2. *Book editor* – His or her job is to take your manuscript and turn it into something that can be published. The process will take a few months. You'll go back and forth over his/her suggestions but keep in mind, she's done this before and has expertise. The comments and suggestions are going to be painful at times and this is where a thick skin is helpful.
3. *Proofreader* – once you and the book editor finish the manuscript, the proofreader takes over to correct any punctuation and factual errors. Again, there will be some give and take and questioning of some of your "facts." This process only takes a few weeks and you get to read the final version one more time.

4. *Acceptance letter* – Once you finish reading the version completed by the proofreader, then the publisher will ask you to sign a “letter of acceptance” for the book. This document will to be signed before it is released to the marketplace.
5. *Production* – the manuscript is converted into a book

## **THE CONTRACT**

### ***What are the key issues in a contract?***

The contract will have all kinds of language that dictates who owns what. Essentially, it is all about intellectual property rights. The intellectual property is your manuscript and what the contract does is provide a legal vehicle for you to transfer certain rights to the publisher for the commercial purpose of publishing the book.

What follows are six topics that you have to pay close attention to before you sign the contract.

1. *Serial rights and split of fees* – serial rights are those that cover rights to turn the book into a movie or a TV show or a play. To get those rights, a producer will pay your publisher or agent a fee. You want to have a say in the process, who purchases the rights as well as a split of the fees. For a first time author, don't take less than a 50—50 split. If the publisher or agent won't accept that, you have a business decision to make.
2. *Ownership of the characters and the rights to the manuscript* – if you are writing fiction, you should own the rights to the characters, not the publisher. This allows you to move the series to another publisher if you are unhappy. Your initial contract should be for the first book you write, not any follow-on ones.
3. *Distribution rights* – The publisher has to commit to the countries in which the books will be sold. For those of who reside in the U.S., the most likely countries are the Australia, Canada New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S.
4. *Royalties* – the amount will differ based on the media, i.e. hard copy or e-book. It can be either a percentage of the sale price or a fixed fee. What the clause should cover is each category, the formula, timing and who is responsible for ensuring that you get all your royalties. Hint, the responsibility for you getting your royalties resides you're your agent and your publisher, not you. If you self-publish, it depends on the firm you used, some pass the entire purchase price on to you, some take a percentage.
5. *Roles and responsibilities* – this clause covers what you, as the writer will be required to do as well as what the publisher is committing to do to bring your book to market and, if you are lucky, help with

promoting it. It should list the distributors in whose catalogues the book will appear.

6. *Timing* – the contract should specify how long the publisher has to bring the book to market. There's no hard and fast rule because it depends on whether or not you are starting with a finished manuscript. What you, as an author want is a deadline so that the publisher can't keep you in limbo.

### ***How do I get paid royalties?***

The terms will be in the contract and normally, they are paid quarterly. You should get a statement from your publisher or agent roughly 30 days after the end of the quarter. Then, about 30 days after that you should get a check or electronic payment.

### ***What about an advance?***

If you are a first time author, don't plan on getting one. Any advance will be deducted from your royalties.

### ***What role does your publisher play in distribution?***

It depends. Almost every publisher I talked to had relationships with book distributors. The larger the publisher, the more influence they have with the distributor because they can offer all types of incentives. Plus, the publisher has a marketing arm that generates demand. As a result, it is hard for small, independent publishers to get more than a mention in a catalogue for your work.

### ***Do I have to get my manuscript approved by the Army, Navy, Air Force or the Marines?***

The short answer is that "it depends." It depends on what clearance level you had as well as what you did and what is in the manuscript. Theoretically, once you leave active duty or the Guard or Reserve, and no longer have a commitment in the inactive reserves, the answer is no.

However, if you were in the intelligence or special operations community or had access to special weapons, etc., you signed pieces of paper saying you will not divulge this information for a period of time which, in some cases is until they put you in your grave. Unfortunately, the documents themselves that grant you access are themselves classified and you don't have a copy. The last thing you want to have happen is the guys with the guns and badges to show up at your front door asking why you violated your clearance.

Each service has a program to approve manuscripts. Get a copy of the instruction and then make a decision.

Most publishers will want to know before they start down the editing process as to whether or not the manuscript needs approval. If it does, it is up to you to get it and provide the proof at the time of contract signing.