

## The Elements of a Good Fiction Pitch

### 1. Query Letter

When pitching a fiction manuscript to a publishing, your first task is research: **familiarize yourself with the publisher's website**, beginning with determining who you should address your query letter to. If someone's title or pronouns are not expressly declared on a website or social media, open the letter with their full name (e.g., "Dear Sam Gallant") rather than a potentially incorrect "Mr." or "Ms."

In the letter itself, include one paragraph that describes your book (include title, genre, and word count), one paragraph that describes you (your background, previous publishing credits, why you wrote the book), and one paragraph that describes why you think this publisher would be a good fit for your work. If this is a simultaneous submission, the query letter is the place to let them know this and that you will notify them if the book receives another offer.

As with all of these submission elements, there are many resources and sample query letters you can find online. Just be sure that you **personalize each pitch according to each publisher's stated specifications**, which will be clearly outlined on their website.

### 2. Synopsis

A synopsis should be brief (about a page), set up the book's premise, introduce the important characters, and clearly outline the protagonist's growth arc. Be sure to explain the beginning, middle, and end of the book. Now is not the time for cliff-hangers.

**Focus on big brush strokes:** what is the major conflict, who are the important players, how does the conflict resolve? No need to mention the mailman that shows up on page 94 for one paragraph and never appears again, or the protagonist's emotional support cat who doesn't really have anything to do with the plot. And stick to an objective, third-person description—don't write your synopsis in the voice of a character. You're simply boiling down your story to a one-page pitch, so make every word count and focus on using clear, concise language.

### 3. Manuscript

Make sure to **note what length and type of manuscript sample the publisher is looking for**. Do they want to see your entire book? The first fifty pages? Any fifteen? Be sure to format your submission to their exact specifications if they ask for a particular font, margins, or spacing. Don't assume your work is "so good" they won't care that you haven't followed their instructions. This goes for your entire submission package. Attention to detail shows that you are someone who a publisher can work with, who will listen to edits, and who will act professionally. A properly formatted submission will stand out simply because many authors don't take the time to do this. Give the publisher no reason to toss your submission on a technicality, but use your attention to detail to guide them to the work itself.

**Rework the first fifty pages of your sample** to ensure they don't lack oomph or character development. Don't try to explain away a slow start in the notes by promising the publisher a more interesting chapter five. If they've asked for a first chapter, that's what they want to see, so make it sizzle.

If they simply ask for 5,000 words or fifteen pages, you can **mix and match from different sections of the book** to give them an idea of character development or style. In this case, just consider how the various scenes fit together and make sure you're sending them a manuscript sample that follows the length guidelines exactly.

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### 4. Marketing Plan

While not all publishers require a marketing plan with your pitch, it is increasingly common. This is perhaps the most daunting element for many writers. After all, most of us aren't PR professionals or marketing directors. We just want to write and leave the book promotion to the publisher!

As nervous as you might be, know that a marketing plan is also a tremendous opportunity for you to show that you have knowledge of the publishing industry and would be an *asset* to the book's promotion rather than a liability.

First things first: **know your audience.** Who do you think will read your book? For example, Louise Michalos's novel *Marilla Before Anne* could appeal to fans of L.M. Montgomery and readers of Atlantic Canadian and historical fiction. It also helps if you've read or at least skimmed the publisher's back catalogue so you can say "my book is similar to two or three of your titles in these specific ways, and it is also unique or fresh in this specific way."

If you have connections, **now is the time to namedrop.** "My college friend is the host of the local morning show and has agreed to get me an interview slot." "My cousin runs a literary blog and will review the book." "This well-known author was a professor of mine in undergrad and would like to write a blurb for the back cover." "I work at a café and my boss has said I can use the space rent free for a book launch." Mention these connections only if you have spoken to them ahead of time, of course, and gotten their permission so you can be sure you'll deliver.

**Share your own plans to promote the book.** Perhaps you have an email list with several hundred readers, a large social media following, or cost-effective ideas of how to promote your work virtually across several cities. Speaking of social media—NOW is the best time to Google yourself and comb through your social media accounts. Remove embarrassing or offensive content from your past, tighten your privacy settings, and delete old or unnecessary accounts. These days, even if it's not official policy, you can count on a publisher to look up your online presence before they offer you a contract.

Some publishers might also want to **know why this book is important.** Does it touch on a current and pressing social issue? How are you connected to the communities you're writing about? What about your background makes you the perfect person to tell this story? If you can't answer these questions yet, you've got some more thinking and researching to do before sending your manuscript off.

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### 5. Submission Timing

Over the past two decades, National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) has become an increasingly popular activity for writers across North America. Participants are challenged to write a 50,000-word novel in the month of November, and there are many resources and local writing groups that offer support and encouragement through the month. While NaNoWriMo can be a motivating and positive experience for many writers, we do have one word of caution: every year, **many publishers are inundated with unpolished manuscripts in December**, submitted by overly excited NaNoWriMo participants who have not taken the time to edit their work.

On this note, we encourage you **never to send a first draft of your book to a publisher**. You need time to ruminate with a manuscript, taking breaks and coming back to it with fresh eyes, and seeking outside feedback whether from family and friends, a mentorship, writing group, paid editor, or beta readers. There's no perfect amount of times to go over a manuscript, but whether it's draft three, five, or seven you're sending out, make sure you've gotten the work to the best possible level you can before submitting it.

In addition to competing with NaNoWriMo submissions, December is not a great time to submit your work because publishing staff are thinking about the holidays and won't be highly motivated to consider new work in a timely fashion.

Aside from the end of the year, it is generally fine to submit a manuscript anytime. Some publishers may have submission blackout dates such as during the summer months or when their spring or fall title are released, so check their website for details. Wherever you submit, you'll be at the bottom of the slush pile, and it may take a number of months or even a year before you hear back from a publisher. We recommend you **consider sending out simultaneous submissions to several publishers at once** to cut down on waiting time. Publishers don't want to be badgered by overeager writers about the status of their submissions every few weeks, but if it's been five months and you're coming back to notify them of another offer you've received, they may be highly motivated to speed up their review process.

As with your manuscript, give your pitch package time to settle. **Before submitting your package, always ask someone else to look it over for typos**. You'd be amazed how many obvious errors can melt into the background after looking at the same pages over and over again on your own!