

You've Written a Book—Now What?

Once you've written your first picture book, first novel, or first 600-page tome dedicated to Nova Scotia shipwrecks—and after you've finished your celebratory chocolate cake / bottle of wine / private dance party—you're probably wondering what to do next.

The traditional publishing industry seems like a mysterious place to most new writers, but a bit of research and a little guidance can go a long way.

The Publishing Landscape

The Canadian publishing industry can be broken down into a few different kinds of publishers:

- **The “Big 4” publishers** (Hachette Book Group; Harper Collins; Macmillan; and Penguin Random House, recently merged with Simon & Schuster)
- **Small to mid-sized publishers** (such as House of Anansi, Cormorant Books, or Nimbus)
- **Independent publishers** (such as ECW Press, Invisible Publishing, or Gaspereau Press)

You don't have to limit yourself to Canadian publishing, of course. Depending on submission guidelines (more on that below) you can also submit manuscripts to publishers in other parts of the world, such as the US or the UK.

What You Need to Submit

That depends on what you've written and who you're submitting to. First, you'll need to research a few publishers—and **decide if you want a literary agent to represent you** and to manage the submission process. If you're aiming for one of the Big 4 publishers, you will need an agent in order to submit at all.

If you plan to submit to an indie, small, or mid-sized publisher, your next stop should be the [submissions page](#) of the publisher's website, where you'll find a checklist of the publisher's **submission requirements**. This page will also indicate whether the publisher requires you to have an agent. Don't skip this step: each publisher's requirements are a bit different, and they often have hundreds of manuscripts to sort through per year.

Whether you submit directly to a publisher or start by submitting to an agent (believe it or not, agents have submissions pages too), there are **a few basic things you'll need to have ready**.

Fiction: a complete first draft; a query letter; and a literary CV (curriculum vitae) listing your past publications, readings and performances, and other literary activities and contributions.

Non-fiction: a proposal; a table of contents; a few complete sample chapters; and a literary CV (curriculum vitae) listing your past publications, readings and performances, and other literary activities and contributions.

Poetry: a complete first draft; a selection of your strongest poems from the draft (10 – 15 pages); and a literary CV (curriculum vitae) listing your past publications, readings and performances, and other literary activities and contributions.

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The Submission Process

Now that you know where you want to send it, you need to **make sure your work is ready to go**. Remember, some publishers and agents get hundreds of submissions a week, so you want to make sure your work is as strong as possible. Most published authors recommend putting your manuscript away for a few weeks and then giving it one more fresh-eyed polish before submitting.

Then it's time to **check those submissions pages again** to make sure you have everything that's required. You'll also want to make note of the method of submission: some publishers expect submissions by email, others through a submissions management platform (like Submittable), and a few via snail mail.

Once you've sent off your work, try to resist the urge to refresh your email for hours on end. It's going to be a few weeks at least before you hear back. It might even take six months. It's even possible you won't hear anything at all, because some publishers only contact authors if they want to make an offer. This information is also usually on the submissions page, so check that out and make a note before you send. **Polite follow-ups are okay and expected**—but only once the estimated turnaround time for that particular publisher has passed.

Responding to an Offer

Obviously, a publication offer is the goal! First, revisit that cake / wine / party situation. Then it's time to figure out if you want to accept. If you have an agent, they'll take care of most of the details for you—but it's good to be informed, and they should keep you in the loop. If you don't have an agent, **consider having a lawyer look over the publication contract** included with the offer. There are a few clauses you'll want to be aware of—a first-right-of-refusal clause, for example, means that the publisher would have first crack at your next book.

The publication contract will outline **deadlines and other expectations**, so be sure to pay attention to these clauses. Make sure that you're able to deliver on time and that you're comfortable with what the publisher is committing to.

The contract should also include an **advance-on-royalties** clause. The advance is a lump sum that's provided to you within a couple months of signing the contract. Sometimes this sum is split up: you might get half upon signing, for example, and half when the proof-reading is done. All that information should be in the contract.

Once people are able to buy your book, you'll start **earning royalties**. Those royalties will go to the publisher until the advance is paid off. Once that happens, the publisher will start sending you royalty cheques. Note that some advances never get paid off, which means the author never ends up receiving subsequent royalties.

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The Editing Process

Once the contract is signed, the editor will provide **developmental edits**: these are the overarching comments that focus on the big picture. If your manuscript needs to be restructured, this is when you'll do that. Next you'll move onto the **substantive editing** process, when the editor will take a close look at the writing itself. They might ask you to clarify a piece of dialogue or improve the pace of a chapter. **Line editing** (or copy editing) comes next: the editor will read through the work for grammar and spelling. **Proofing** is the final stage, during which you'll need to sign off on all changes, before the manuscript is sent to print.

It can be difficult to let go of your work and allow it to be edited, but it's very important—for the book, for your reputation, and for your relationship with the editor—to go into the process with the idea that **your editor is a partner** and not an adversary. You don't have to accept every change, but you do need to consider your editor's recommendations carefully. If a recommendation is off-base, respectfully explain your point of view. Your editor should be respectful in return.

Making the Book

After the editing's done, your editor will pass the manuscript to the **production team**, who will format the text, add photos (or illustrations, if there's an artist involved), and other design elements. This is when your work will really start to look like a book.

The production team will also start on **cover design**. Some publishers allow input from the author while others don't, so be prepared for either situation. If input is very important to you, this is something you should negotiate during the contract stage.

When the book is formatted, you'll be given a **final chance to review the work** before it goes to print. This is usually a few months before your publication date.

Sharing Your Book with the World

Your publication day will probably be **both exciting and stressful**. It's absolutely normal to worry about what people will think of your book.

You can help make sure your book gets into as many hands as possible by connecting with your publisher's **marketing team** at least a couple of months before your book is published. You'll need to know what marketing the publisher is responsible for so that you can fill any gaps in publicity yourself. It helps to remember that your publisher is there to promote your book but not (necessarily) you. Typically, your publisher will do things like advertise, pitch coverage to media, and mail out review copies and award submissions. But you'll be responsible for building your author platform, doing interviews and Q&As, and reading and speaking at events.

It's also important to know that profit margins are stretched quite thin in this industry—and that's why it's so important to maintain a strong, communicative relationship with your publishing team. You need to know up front what they plan to do so that, if you want more, you can either learn to do it yourself or consider hiring a personal publicist.