



Info Sheet: Literary agents

What exactly is a literary agent?

Literary agents negotiate the sale of an author's work to book publishers, television and film producers, or agents in other countries or territories. Agents use their industry expertise and contacts to get you the best deal possible and to protect your financial and legal interests.

They deal with the business of publishing: royalties, copyright, language rights and subsidiary rights.

They can provide a specialist insight into editors' preferences and publishing industry trends.

Why do I need an agent?

There are many advantages to having a literary agent. Some of the main benefits are:

- Literary agents can negotiate higher royalties, advances and retention of rights (e.g. language rights, film rights).
- The author can focus on the writing and the agent can do the selling.
- Reputable agents have industry contacts and information, such as the habits and preferences of editors and which publishers are downsizing or expanding.
- Some publishers do not accept unsolicited manuscripts, which means you'll need an agent to submit on your behalf.
- When selling to larger publishing houses, your chances could be improved with a reputable, talented literary agent.
- If you're attempting to break into the American publishing industry, you will definitely need an agent.

Why don't I need an agent?

There are also arguments for why you don't need an agent:

- Many publishers now accept direct submission from authors so you don't need an agent to pitch a manuscript for you



- Agents take a percentage of your earnings, usually 15%.
- It can be as hard – if not harder – to get representation from a literary agent as it is to get a publishing contract.
- Literary agents are more common overseas, and there are only a small number of literary agents operating in Australia.

How can I find an agent?

Word-of-mouth is often the best way to find a suitable agent, but listings of literary agents can be found at The Australian Writer's Marketplace, Australian Society of Authors and the Australian Literary Agents' Association. You might hear agents speak at writers' festivals and literary events, and check out the disclaimer or acknowledgement sections of published novels similar to yours. Published authors will usually thank their agent.

How can you spot a dishonest agent?

Anyone can set up business as a literary agent. There are no licensing or competency standards that an agent must meet.

Being a good agent requires specialist knowledge of the publishing industry. Reputable agents will never promote their own paid services, utilise 'vanity publishers', or misrepresent their expertise. Dishonest agents profit from you, rather than the successful sale of your manuscript. Reputable agents work on a commission basis. Beware of any type of fee charging – whether it is a reading fee, marketing or editing service or agent payment.

How do I submit to an agent?

You can submit your manuscript to an agent in the same way you would to a publisher. Agents list their submission guidelines online. They will usually ask for a query letter, synopsis and sample chapters. We recommend reading Info Sheet: How To Get Published for information on submitting your manuscript.

So, what should you keep in mind?

1. Write a compelling query letter and manuscript

A strong, well written submission is the best way to convince an agent to sign you. The manuscript should be edited and free of spelling or grammar mistakes. The query letter should be concise, professional and hook the reader.



2. Research and target an agent

It is best to target specific agents: know which genres they accept, their submission guidelines and what they have accepted in the past. There is no point sending a young adult novel to an agent specialising in crime fiction.

3. Be polite and professional

It is important to be polite and professional. You do not want a reputation as difficult, rude or otherwise unpleasant. Agents talk to publishers and other agents. If you are rejected, thank the agent for their time and move on. If they haven't responded to your letter, wait at least three months before following up in a respectful manner. Agents have a large workload. Be patient.

4. Know your 'hook' and be confident

Nail your log line (a one sentence explanation of your work) and brief summary of the manuscript. If you get a chance to pitch in person, this is what will sell your work.

5. Meet an agent at a literary event

If you meet an agent in-person, act professionally. Don't corner the agent in the bathroom or hand over your manuscript between canapés. Talk briefly about your writing and exchange business cards. Always be courteous and appropriate to the event. If they do not ask to see your work, don't hound them.

6. If you want an agent, submit to them first

Publishers won't look at a manuscript twice. If you want an agent, polish your manuscript and send it. Your agent will refine your pitch (and sometimes your manuscript) before submitting it to publishers. If you have already submitted to publishers, make sure to inform prospective agents.

To find agents:

Manuscript Wish List: <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/find-agentseditors/agent-list/>

Australian Literary Agents' Association: <https://austlitagentsassoc.com/>