



**Finding an Agent**  
**Kara Lennox**  
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**LESSON ONE**

First, I want to thank you for signing up for this workshop and sharing a couple of weeks of your valuable time with me. I am in the middle of renovating a house, so I might be a little distracted. Just slap me up side of the head if I forget to answer a question or don't deliver something I said I would.

So, why a workshop on agents? This is definitely one of my most popular and well-received workshops when I do it in person. That's because writers are obsessed with agents. Well, actually, they're obsessed with selling books, and getting an agent seems like a good way to do that. Whenever I do ANY type of workshop with less experienced writers (usually non-RWA groups), I always get the question, "How do I get an agent?"

I once volunteered at the agent-editor desk at the national RWA conference. I had people coming up to me asking if I had ANY empty slots for ANY agents. The air of desperation was palpable. This is not a strategy or an attitude I recommend.

So, first, I'm here to bust that myth. An agent is not a shortcut to publication. An agent can't sell an unsaleable manuscript. And just because an agent accepts you as a client, that doesn't mean you'll necessarily sell. I've had three good, reputable agents over the past twenty years who have tried to sell my single-title manuscripts. None have succeeded. I'm not so foolish as to believe my manuscripts had nothing to do with that!

Those writers with an air of desperation who would gladly take on ANY agent who would have them do so at their own risk. A bad agent can not only be unhelpful, they can harm your career. I'll get into detail about that later.

I was once a young, starry-eyed, unpublished writer who desperately wanted an agent. I was lucky; the first national conference I attended, I got an appointment with an agent at random. Knew very little about her. But we ended up working together for ten years; she sold my first book and many more after that. I was darn lucky. So I won't say that sometimes a random meeting with an agent never works out. I just advocate extreme caution.

Over my checkered career, I've had five agents, so I feel qualified to talk about them. Now, I might sound fickle (five agents???), but keep in mind I had my first agent for ten years (she retired) and my second for nine (she also retired). I had a screenplay agent for a few months--not a pretty experience. My fourth book agent lasted three months--a fabulous famous agent, not for me. My most recent agent I had for about four years and I recently ended that relationship. I am currently agentless but looking to sign with a new agent in the coming year, just like many of you.



I am happy to share my experience and insight here. Please, ask questions, even if they seem nosy, and I'll do my best to answer. Share your agent experiences, too (though please don't name names if you're going to say anything negative). Knowledge is power.

By the end of this workshop, I hope that you will understand how agents work, and that you'll leave with some tools to help you land your dream agent and develop a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship with him or her.

## **LESSON TWO**

### **The Bad Agents**

No one has to go to school to become an agent. There's no certification, no licensing, and little regulation. Any Joe Schmo can hang up a shingle and call himself a literary agent.

A bad agent can be merely lazy, inexperienced, ignorant, careless or scatterbrained. She can give you bad advice, tromp all over your ego, submit you to the wrong houses or editors. That's if you're lucky.

A critique partner of mine--we'll call her Audrey--was once a Golden Heart finalist, and she had an editor very interested in her book. A big name agent (one who is still out there and thought of as a power hitter and very legitimate) offered to represent Audrey, and Audrey thought she was on her way to fame and fortune. But the editor left the publishing house, and the interest in Audrey's book dried up. Audrey continued to send manuscripts to the power agent. The agent took weeks to return phone calls and claimed she was sending out Audrey's work to publishers, but she wasn't. Two years later, with no warning, she boxed up all the manuscripts, mailed them back to Audrey, and ended the relationship. Audrey's career got held up for two years, all because that agent thought she could pick up an easy commission with no work. Audrey lost any momentum she might have gained from the GH.

Another critique partner was with an agent who sold several young adult books for her (for little money). But my friend--we'll call her Debbie--really wanted to write adult books. She wanted to sell to Harlequin/Silhouette. The agent told her not to, that she was doing well in YA and she should stick with it. Debbie left that agent and went on to sell literally hundreds of adult romances--series romance and single title. Good thing she didn't listen to the agent.

Even well-meaning agents can harm your career. Sometimes they have "pet" editors that they like to work with, so they submit all your books to that editor, even if it's not a good fit. Or, they can tie you up requiring endless revisions before they will even submit. My personal opinion is, revisions and editing are an editor's job. Editing is very subjective, and I've heard stories where an editor has the author change back everything to the way it was before the agent messed with it. Again, just something to be aware of. (Lots of authors are heavily edited by their agents and love it.)



A really bad agent can be a scam artist. If you've ever subscribed to Writer's Digest magazine, you've probably received a solicitation from a certain large agency with a certain famous client. They sound legit at first, but they charge a reading fee (an ethical no-no) and I don't believe they ever actually sell anyone's work. They prey on the gullible and desperate.

Some red flags that your agent might be a scam artist:

- After reading your manuscript, they refer you to a freelance editor (one who charges you a lot of money) who "will help you polish your work," the implication being if your work is just a bit more polished, the agent will represent you and sell your book. Usually the agent gets a kickback from the editor, and they never actually try to sell the manuscript.
- They "sell" your manuscript to a substandard publisher (like a vanity press). Again, they get a kickback from the money you spend.
- They make extravagant promises about where they can sell your book and what kind of advance they can get you.
- They charge you a reading fee. (You should never, ever send an agent money. I personally don't even like it when they charge for copying and postage; if the agent believes they can sell your book, they can take those small charges out of money you receive down the road. But charging for copying and postage is an accepted practice, so it might not be a deal breaker. And, heck, now that almost everything is done via e-mail, it shouldn't even be an issue.)

A really, really bad agent can be involved in criminal behavior. There was a well-known case many years ago of an agent who represented many romance authors who got caught stealing money from her clients. She was prosecuted and convicted of fraud and embezzlement. Yet she turns up again, every few years, using a different agency name.

Finally, an agent can be just nuts. Several years ago there was an agent who told her client she had sold her romance novel to a big-name publisher for a million dollars. The author was all over the internet, telling everyone of her fabulous sale, celebrating with her friends. Turns out it was all a complete fabrication. When the author called the editor who had supposedly bought her book, she'd never heard of her. No one knows why the agent did such an awful thing.

There are drawbacks to having even a very good agent.

An agent slows things down. You have to wait for them to read your manuscript before it ever even gets to an editor. Agents go on vacations; they have babies, they get sick, they have personal problems, all of which can have a negative impact on your ability to get your manuscript in front of an editor.



An agent takes away some of the control from you. If you are a control freak like another one of my critique partners, you might enjoy researching publishers and editors and figuring out where your book fits best, then figuring out the best way to approach your desired editors. When you have an agent, you can weigh in, but usually they decide who, how and when to submit. (I mean, they do usually know best, after all.)

Finally, there is that pesky 15 percent they take out of your advances and royalties.

Now, you might be thinking Kara Lennox doesn't like agents. Not true. A good agent can be the best thing that ever happens to you. Next time, I'm going to tell you all the wonderful things agents can do.

### **LESSON THREE**

I really do like agents!

Here are some of the things an agent can do:

An agent can provide career guidance. A good agent has his ear to the ground. He talks to editors all the time. If he has a large stable of authors who are regularly selling, he knows which publishers are paying the best advances, which are hungry, which are over-inventoried. (Publishers will almost always tell you they are looking for books, even if they're not.) He is in a position to see the trends and help you capitalize on them.

An agent can help you whip your manuscript into shape. One of my writer friends describes it like this: "It's like having a really, really good critique partner, but you don't have to read their stuff." She was a wonderful, quirky writer who did not start selling regularly until she landed this particular agent who helped her slant her work a certain way, then packaged her attractively.

An agent can get your work in front of multiple editors--fast. Those rules about no multiple submissions don't apply to agents. They simply phone up their desired editors and ask if they're interested in your book--saves you so much work.

They can get your manuscript read quickly. Although this is not always a guarantee. I've had manuscripts that were sent by my agent languish for more than a year on an editor's desk (or, more likely, propping up the desk when the leg fell off). But in general, editors give manuscripts sent by agents a higher priority. The agent has screened the book for them, so they know already that it has some merit.

An agent can sell your subrights for you. A savvy agent with a big and/or powerful agency has contacts with book clubs, film agents, and foreign language publishers. When negotiating your contract with an American publisher, she knows which rights to give up and which to hold on to. This can be extremely lucrative down the road.



An agent can sometimes negotiate a better deal. Not always; some publishers have a set advance they pay to first-time authors and nothing can change that. But even if they can't get you more money, they might be able to get you perks you couldn't get on your own--more author copies, cover consultation, a bigger publicity budget (okay, not too often for that last one).

And, sometimes an agent can get you more money--lots more money. He can put your book up for auction. Of course, you have to write a really, really special fantastic book for that to happen. But sometimes it does. You are probably not going to get a six-figure advance on your own.

An agent can help you through any conflicts that come up during the publication process. If you hate the title your editor wants to slap on your book, if you get the copy editor from hell, if a check doesn't arrive when it should, your agent can act as an intermediary. He can be the bad guy and do all your arguing for you. That way, you can keep your relationship with your editor all sweet and light.

An agent can also validate you and give you confidence. Granted, you don't want to get an agent just to prove you can, or to give you daily ego strokes. But the day an agent says she'll represent you, you know for sure that you are writing at a professional level. Agents aren't in the business to be nice; they only represent manuscripts they believe they can sell. It feels good to have someone on your team, someone who thinks you're wonderful and talented. And when you feel validated, you rise to the occasion and (probably) your writing will actually improve.

Remember, though, not all agents can do all things. Each one is unique, just as each author is unique. The author-agent relationship is very often described as similar to a marriage. You have to find the right match, someone whose tastes mesh with yours, someone who meets your particular needs. That's why you need to be very careful before you sign on the dotted line.

Tomorrow, we'll talk about whether you need an agent.

## **LESSON FOUR**

Do you need an agent? That seems a silly question.

But maybe you don't. Many successful authors get by without them.

If you're not yet published, you might want to wait. It's hard to get an agent when you're not published. Not impossible, but still difficult. (Heck, it's hard to get an agent when you've published 50 books.) Many authors wait to get an agent until they have an offer from a publisher in hand. Then they approach the agent they really, really want with a much higher chance of getting representation. That is certainly one method that has worked.

If your goal is to write category romance, you don't really need an agent, especially at first. Harlequin (the only category romance publisher at present) has a standard boilerplate contract that not even the best agent can crack for a brand-new author. Plus, Harlequin is perfectly okay



reading submissions and buying from unagented authors. They consider every manuscript that is sent to them.

If you plan on negotiating your contract yourself, however, you should read up on contract terms and understand exactly what you are signing. You can also hire a literary attorney to review your contract for a flat fee--another strategy that many authors have successfully employed.

If you are mainly pursuing e-publishing, you probably don't need an agent. Since most e-publishers offer very small or no advances, agents are not much interested in these deals, anyway.

If you are a control freak, you might not want an agent. Provided you are organized and motivated, an energetic and well-informed author can manage her own submissions. It's a lot of work, though!

Most authors, though, will fare better with a good agent. You do need an agent if you've published two or three books. Once you have a track record, your contract terms are much more flexible, and this is where an agent's negotiating skills are worth their weight in gold. If your sales have been good, the publisher will try to keep your advance low while the agent has ammunition to get it raised. The publisher doesn't want you to know how well you're doing; they want to keep you humble, cooperative and easy to please. The agent cuts through the B.S.

Your agent should know when it's time to shop for a new publisher or expand into a new genre.

If you are writing single title romance or mainstream, you will most likely want an agent. While it's not impossible to sell to the single-title houses without an agent, it's much harder. Many of those publishers will not even read unagented manuscripts. Single-title contracts have more variables and thus the contract terms are more flexible. An agent can be very helpful here.

Does this mean you should drop everything and focus solely on getting an agent? Absolutely not. Conventional wisdom says it's harder to get a good agent than sell a book, and I believe it. That's why it's a good idea to pursue both a publishing contract and an agent simultaneously. Try marketing your manuscript yourself, but start the agent process. At the very least, start researching agents. Then, if you get interest in your manuscript from a publisher, you can contact the top agents on your wish list and you won't be arriving on their doorstep empty-handed.

Tomorrow, we'll talk about how you go about snagging the best agent for you.



## LESSON FIVE

How do you get an agent?

Now, we'll get to the good stuff: How do you get an agent?

First off, don't be in a rush. Nothing gets done quickly in the publishing world. Plan on this process taking a few months or even longer. (It might happen faster than that, but don't be disappointed if it doesn't.)

Your first job is research. You must find out who the good agents are. Which agencies represent lots of romance authors? Even a high-powered agent can be disastrous for you if they're not familiar with the players in your genre. You're looking for agents who represent the type of book you write, and also the type of book you might write in the future. This is a long-term relationship, remember.

Start making lists. List all the agents you can find--high-powered, established agents from venerable agencies, and brash new agents who are just making a name for themselves. Pore over the RWR and see which agents are attending conferences or judging contests. These are the agents who are looking for new clients.

Think about the kind of agent you want. Big agencies have more contacts and more clout. But if you go with a big, high-powered agency, you might end up a small fish in a big pool. Maybe you'd rather go with a small boutique agency with just a couple of agents, or even an independent agent who is less intimidating, someone you can feel warmer about. Does your agent have to live in New York? In these days of instantaneous communication, living in New York is no longer a necessity, and many agents opt to office away from the city.

The Internet is a godsend for ferreting out information on agents. I don't know how we ever did this before cyberspace was invented! Check out newsletters, authors' websites, writers' forums. I've listed some good resources in the handout.

Agents do live chats all the time. They write blogs.

Read Publishers Lunch and find out who's making what deals.

Ask your writer friends about their agents. Talk with published authors in your chapter. Some authors don't want to talk about their agent with someone they don't know well, but most are happy to tell you who their agent is and maybe even how they work. (Do not, however, ask a published author to recommend your work to their agent, or refer you. If the author is amenable to this sort of thing, she'll bring it up. And, when contacting that agent, don't use that author's name unless she gives you permission. You can say you enjoy the author's books--that's fine.)



Remember, though, that an agent who is perfect for your best friend can be disastrous for you. Doesn't mean she's a bad agent or you're a bad author. Sometimes the fit simply isn't there

Attend conferences! Reading about agents is fine, but nothing is better than eyeballing them in person. Often, in a workshop, the agent will tell you how he operates, what he's looking for, and how best to approach him. You get a taste of his personality that way. You might get an immediate, positive feeling from being in the same room, or they might turn you off completely. You might get the chance to socialize at the bar, or sit on the fringes of a small group with an agent who is dishing about stuff she wouldn't say in a workshop.

Go to the library or bookstore and check out the dedication pages of your favorite (recently published) books. Often agents will be mentioned there.

By now, you should be whittling down your list of agents, eliminating those that don't meet your criteria. Divide your list into A, B and C agents. The A-list are your dream agents, the ones who represent your favorite, New York Times best-selling authors, etc. The B-list agents are second tier, but still agents you would be thrilled to sign with. C-list agents are still desirable. (If they're not desirable, they're not on your list, right?)

Now you are ready to start contacting agents and asking them to read your stuff. We'll get to that next time.

## **LESSON SIX**

### **The Approach**

There are many ways to approach an agent. First, I'm going to talk about the tried-and-true method of sending out queries.

The advantage of sending a query is that you can do it right away. You don't have to wait for a conference or a contest result. And if you have a high-concept book and a power-packed query, and if you've done your research and approached agents who represent what you write and who are open to new clients, chances are you'll get many invitations to submit your work.

You should, by the way, only query when you have a completed, polished manuscript. These days, even if you are published, it's easier to sell with a complete book than a partial. And the moment you think, They'll probably take a few weeks to answer, I'll just finish up the manuscript while I'm waiting, you'll get an immediate e-mail or phone call wanting the manuscript now.

When you begin querying agents, you should be marketing a fresh manuscript, i.e. one that has not already received a bunch of rejections. (And you must be up front about this; no agent wants to approach an editor with a project, only to be told they already read it and rejected it last year.)



Pick your top three to five agents on your A list, and query them all at the same time. If you get a bunch of rejections, it's time to analyze your query letter. Get input from writer friends or a critique service, then send out three to five more. When you get a request, send it off promptly. Be sure to send exactly what the agent asks to see and follow all of their directions to a T. The agent is evaluating not only your work, but you as a potential client. Reassure them that you can follow through, that you follow directions, that you're easy to work with. Be sure to include the appropriate return postage, if it's a hard copy submission.

Some people (even some editors and agents) advocate including the first five pages of your manuscript with your query letter, or even the first chapter. That's up to you. I tend to be a rule follower, so I am probably more cautious than most people about sending anything that wasn't requested. But people do it all the time. The theory is, they won't be able to resist at least glancing at it. And if you have a great opening, you'll suck them right in.

E-queries are becoming more and more common, but some agents still prefer snail mail. Do try to find out which they prefer. A snail mail query shows that you went to more trouble; in my opinion, it's harder to ignore than e-mail. But gradually, e-mail has become the norm.

Another way to get an agent to read your book is if you meet them in person at a conference. A live pitch session with an agent can be nerve-wracking, but think of it this way. It's easy for an agent to dash off a rejection letter. But when they are face to face with you, they find it difficult to look you in the eye and say no, your baby doesn't interest me. Unless you are really far off base, writing in a genre the agent doesn't represent, or just personally very weird, the agent will probably invite you to send at least a partial. It's a great way to get immediate feedback, too. The agent can ask questions and get clarifications on the spot that, if nothing else, can help you retool your pitch for next time. You can ask them questions, too.

If anything about them makes you feel uncomfortable, you might be better served to scratch that agent off your list and move on. It's essential that you be comfortable talking frankly to your agent. If she intimidates you, or you feel like you're talking to your teenage daughter, move along!

Remember the motto, don't be in a rush.

Entering contests is a great way to get your work in front of an agent. Scope out the contests that have desirable agents as finalist judges in your genre. Lots of authors have found agents and editors using this avenue. Contests are just a great way to network, too. I actually found a long-lost cousin judging a contest. We're fast friends now, and I like to think I gave her a little nudge that helped her get published. You never know who might read your work, love it, and give you a helping hand.

Finally, if you can get a referral, this is the very best way to find an agent. It's considered gauche to come out and ask an author to refer you to her agent, but sometimes the offers come out of



thin air--via contests, critiques, or even casual chats. That's one of the reasons networking is so important.

Never agree to let an agent represent you without first talking with him one on one. He might look great on paper, but you have to be comfortable with the way he'll be representing you and your work. One well known agent is fond of telling a story about reading a manuscript and falling in love with it. He arranged to meet the author at a conference, intending to offer her representation. But in person, he simply couldn't stand her. He told her so (as politely as he could), and she laughed and was relieved because she despised him on sight, too. Sometimes the chemistry simply isn't there.

While you are in the midst of your agent hunt, don't broadcast online any of the details or who has requested manuscripts or who has rejected you. Agents often Google a prospective client when they're deciding whether they want you or not. Be sure whatever they find about you online is flattering. If you have a website or blog, be sure it is professional.

Tomorrow, we'll talk about what to do with an agent once you have one!

## **LESSON SEVEN**

### **Author/Agent relationship**

Before we get into the author/agent relationship, I wanted to say a word about exclusives. We touched on this earlier, but I wanted to put in an "official" word, in context, about the trend these days of agents to ask for an exclusive look when they request your manuscript.

I hate exclusives. If an agent is that excited about your work, if he/she is so afraid that some other agent is going to snap you up if you're not already wrapped up, then maybe they could get off their duff and read your manuscript in a timely manner? Because what an exclusive is really saying is, "I'm lazy, I might not read this for a while, but meanwhile I'm going to paralyze you so no other agents can read your work."

If you don't want to be "difficult," it's okay to grant an exclusive, but make sure it is really short in duration. A week or two at most. It is totally not okay for the agent to tie your hands for longer than that. IMO.

What I've found is that, if they ask for an exclusive, and you tell them you'd like to, but the work is already in the hands of a couple of other agents, they'll ask to see it anyway without the exclusive. Just reassure them that you will contact them should you get an offer of representation, before you accept, to give them a chance to have a quick look at the work.

Let's assume you've gotten the call, you have done your due diligence, the agent checks out, and you've tentatively accepted representation. YAY, you have an agent.



Most agents these days will have a contract. Usually it's pretty innocuous; it sets out some policies and procedures, like how money is handled, whether there is any charge for copies or postage, when/if statements are delivered, and most importantly, how your professional relationship can be terminated. Generally, you can end your relationship with thirty days written notice. That gives the agent time to finish up with any submissions she has already made on your behalf. Be sure to find out what the agent's policies are before you sign anything. There is nothing worse than being stuck with an agent you can't stand once the relationship has gone south. And it could. Assuming you'll be with your first agent forever and ever is like assuming you'll marry your high school boyfriend and stay married the rest of your lives. It can happen, it does happen, but it's rare.

After you read, understand, and sign the contract, you're on your way. What next?

Usually, once you sign with an agent, they automatically represent everything you write. If you want to sell magazine articles or short fiction, they'll usually tell you go ahead, they aren't interested and lay no claim to the commissions. Also, on a case-by-case basis, they may withdraw their rights to represent some projects. But you can't continue sending things out on your own, or assume that if the agent doesn't sell it, she doesn't get the commission. She does, even if she never knew the manuscript existed.

I had an agent who represented me on a book-by-book basis. Every new book, we signed a new contract addendum, so no misunderstandings there. But that is unusual.

Every author/agent relationship is different. Some will like talking on the phone. They'll call you often. Some prefer to do e-mail and save phone calls for important stuff (like contract offers!). Some will become like a sister to you, others will keep things on a professional level. The most important thing you can do with your new agent is keep the lines of communication open. If you need something, don't wait around for him to call. If you don't like the way something is done, discuss it with the agent. You might have to feel your way through how you will work together, especially at first. (A good friend and I had the same agent, and HER relationship with the agent was totally different than mine was—much more chatty and friendly.)

The agent should read your work in a timely fashion and offer feedback. ("Timely fashion" is open to interpretation, but all of the agents I've worked with tended to read manuscripts I sent very quickly, within a couple of weeks, usually.) That doesn't necessarily mean she will red-pencil your manuscript for you, though some agents do that. But she should offer her opinion as to the strengths, weaknesses and marketability of your piece. After you discuss, you might want to revise some. But I believe this step should be optional. (This is IMO only, though. Many disagree with me on this point.) An agent shouldn't require you to rewrite, especially if you do not agree with the changes she suggests. (That said, agents often give excellent advice, and you should think long and hard before refusing to follow their suggestions. I have done my share of revising at an agent's suggestion.)



An agent should develop a strategy or career plan with you. You need to be very clear what your career aspirations are--beyond simply selling that next book. Be sure he knows where you want to be in five or ten years. (Every agent I've signed with knows I want to be on the New York Times Best Seller List.) Be honest about how much time you can devote to writing, how many books per year you believe you can deliver.

You and your agent should decide together a submission strategy for each book. I generally bow to an agent's wisdom when it comes to submitting, but I always like to see who she's targeting before she contacts the editors. Perhaps there's an editor on her list that you know really doesn't click with your writing, because they've sent you form rejections in the past. Or maybe there's another editor at the same house who has read your work in the past and encouraged you to keep submitting to her. This is all information the agent will be grateful to have and to take into account.

Ultimately, you should have the last word. But try to let the agent do her job. It's what she's good at.

Your agent should keep careful records of whom your manuscripts went out to, when, and all communications regarding your work, whether it's notes from a phone call, an e-mail, or a snail-mail letter. She should nudge editors who don't read your manuscript in a timely fashion. (My former agent always let me know, in writing, the date she would check back if she hadn't heard anything. I loved that.)

Your agent should promptly forward any rejections or other communications sent to her regarding your work. It's not good enough that he simply paraphrases what was in the letter. Ask to see the actual letters, and keep them on file. Later, if you part with that agent, you want a complete and accurate record of your submission history.

Your agent should "field offers." (Remember Tootsie?) Any offer that comes to him must be communicated to you, even if the agent feels it's a bad, ridiculous, low-ball advance that only a looney would accept. He must tell you. The agent acts as your intermediary with the editors. If an editor asks whether you'll do revisions, the agent must talk to you about it before giving an answer.

Your agent negotiates your contract on your behalf. She can tell you which rights you should try to hold on to, and which to let the publisher have. Subrights are a goldmine. If you sell to Harlequin, for instance, you might make more on foreign sales than you do in the U.S. So you would want Harlequin to acquire your foreign rights, because they do a fantastic job selling them. (I hear some of you chuckling; that's because with Harlequin, there is no negotiating for subrights. The publisher gets everything.) But for single-title books, a good agent will try to sell foreign rights, book club rights, audio rights, serialization rights, etc. And if Cosmopolitan sees your book and wants to publish an excerpt, they'll contact your agent, who will negotiate on your behalf.



Your agent collects monies on your behalf and distributes your portion to you. Normally, the agency should cut a check immediately, or at least within a week. They should deposit your money into a non-interest-bearing trust account, then write you a check. If your agent holds on to your money, that is a big no-no.

If any conflicts arise between you and your editor/publisher over titles, editing, covers, deadlines, pseudonyms, etc., your agent should step in and be your advocate.

Your agent should return e-mails and phone calls promptly (no longer than a day or two unless out of the office). If they are going on vacation, they should delegate to someone else in the office, so if something urgent comes up, you aren't left blowing in the wind. A good, conscientious agent will let you know in advance of vacation plans, so you can plan for when to send in your submissions, etc. But they are human; they end up with sick kids, car breakdowns, icy roads, etc. Try to be flexible.

As you can see, agents do a lot to earn their 15 percent commission. However, your agent is NOT required to be at your beck and call 24/7. Do not expect them to be available after office hours, or to listen for hours while you sob over your break-up with your boyfriend. Tomorrow, we'll talk about YOUR responsibilities to your agent.

## **LESSON EIGHT**

### Your responsibilities to your agent

You are not your agent's only client, and it's important for you to remember that. An agent might have ten, twenty, thirty or even fifty authors in her stable, and she probably struggles to make each one feel they are her top priority. Don't make things unnecessarily difficult for your agent, or you'll find her shoving you to the bottom of the priority heap. Here are some Do's and Don'ts to consider:

#### 1. DON'T demand constant attention.

Don't call your agent "just to chat." Don't e-mail them with the joke of the day. Don't call them if a reviewer said something nasty. Don't call them if you can't remember how to spell Yugoslavia. Don't call them with gossip--unless it has a direct bearing on your career. If you're hearing a rumor that your publisher is going under, it's okay to contact your agent!

Before you dial or hit that send button, ask yourself if this matter is urgent, or if it can wait until your next conversation.

#### 2. DON'T court publishers on your own.

This can really wreak havoc on your agent's game plan. Let the agent do his job. Don't suddenly dash off a query because you heard a certain editor is looking for your type of book. On the



other hand, if you meet an editor at a conference, it doesn't mean you have to shun her just because you have an agent. In fact, your agent can be helpful here, too. Tell your agent in advance you're going to a conference and which editors are attending. He might encourage you to pitch your work to this one, but stay away from that one. Whatever you do, keep your agent informed. Make decisions together about your submission strategy.

### 3. DO make your deadlines.

Be realistic about how long it takes you to finish a book, and set deadlines accordingly. No agent wants to get that gut-churning phone call from an editor: "Suzy Author's deadline was two weeks ago, and I haven't seen the book. Where is it?"

If you aren't going to make a deadline, let your agent know well in advance, so she can warn your editor. And don't make a habit of this! Near-fatal illnesses, a death in the family, your house gets blown down by a hurricane, or your editor has required a Page 1 rewrite on your previous book--these are legitimate excuses for missing a deadline. Most everything else will make you look unreliable.

### 4. DO keep your agent informed of your schedule.

Let your agent know about upcoming vacations, surgeries, moves etc. (Not your manicure appointments, though, that's TMI.) If something comes up and he needs to contact you, don't be MIA. You could miss out on a great opportunity if your agent can't find you!

### 5. DO listen to your agent!

Carefully consider any advice she gives you. That's part of what you're paying 15 percent for.

### 6. DON'T be a prima donna.

If you're going to throw a hissy fit, it's better to throw it in front of your agent than your editor, but it's best not to throw it at all. If you're feeling extremely angry or upset, wait until you've calmed down before you make any phone calls or shoot off any e-mails. Discuss any perceived tragedies (bad cover, getting switched to a new editor, unfortunate scheduling change) in an upbeat, friendly, "I'm sure we can work this out" manner.

### 7. Above all, DO treat your agent with respect as befits any professional with which you work.

Always try to work things out before you decide to call it quits. Keep those lines of communication open.

Tomorrow, we'll talk about what to do when things aren't working out.



## LESSON NINE

How to end your relationship with an agent

If there is a problem, try to work things out before you give up. Sometimes those frank phone calls are difficult, but you worked really hard to get this agent, so don't toss him away unless there is absolutely no alternative.

Sometimes it just doesn't work out! It doesn't mean that either of you are at fault; it just means your working styles aren't compatible. I had one agent for all of three months. That's all it took for me to realize it just wasn't going to work out. This is someone I'd known for years, who had represented many of my writer friends. To this day, we're buddies. We simply can't work together.

Don't put it off. Don't assume things will get better. It's tempting to take the path of least resistance, but this is your career we're talking about. The agent has other clients, and chances are she has lost one or two of them before. Don't wait until the agent is the one to do the breaking up. You be the one to choose the timing, after you've done a bit of research and you are professionally and emotionally ready to deal with not having an agent for a while.

If you've decided to end the relationship, do it with a phone call--you owe her that much. A cold e-mail or registered letter is the coward's way out. If you have tried to work out problems, with no solutions, your phone call won't come as a shock. Take the high road, and chances are your agent will do the same.

Mutually decide what to do with current projects. You can have the agent withdraw the manuscripts, or the agent can officially "abandon" them (leave them submitted, but contact the editor(s) and tell them that agent is no longer representing you. Sometimes, you might choose to let the agent continue to represent a particular manuscript that they've already put in lots of work on. When my second agent retired, she asked if her agency might hold on to one particular manuscript for another six months, and I was happy to say yes.

Take notes during your phone call, and follow up with a letter outlining what you agreed to. Your agency contract might have additional instructions on how to bring things to a close; do what it says. Unless things got really nasty, or the agent is guilty of embezzling or fraud, you shouldn't need the services of an attorney.

The main thing is to end the relationship in a professional, sane, graceful manner. You don't want to spend the rest of your life ducking behind potted plants at conferences when your ex-agent walks by. You don't want her bad-mouthing you.

Don't shop for a new agent until you've severed ties with the old--it's considered bad form. It's like shopping for a new husband before your divorce is final. Tacky. You can do some quiet



research, but that's it. Now, I know some people will disagree with me on this point, but all I'm sayin' is, take the high road.

Do not, under any circumstances, bad mouth your former agent. Not publicly, not privately, not anywhere. Publishing is a very small world, and your nasty comments could end up biting you in the butt. I had a writer friend whose agent was very close friends with an editor the writer worked with. When she fired her agent, the editor never bought another book from her. Now, maybe the agent didn't say anything, and the editor was just naturally less inclined to buy manuscripts that weren't represented by her agent friend. Who knows? Just be aware.

Tomorrow, I want to wrap things up by reprinting the blog I wrote prior to the first time I presented this class online. We'll talk about additional resources, and this would be a great time to ask any questions.

## LESSON TEN

### Five Ways to Ensure You Never Get an Agent

1. Don't bother going through proper channels. Querying is for losers. Just send the manuscript. *I won't say this never works. Sometimes, the rule-breakers win. I've known writers who send manuscripts every which way, uninvited, and eventually they have success. But only certain people can get away with being a brazen hussy. On others, it just looks obnoxious. Tread with care.*

Hire a private detective to find the agent's home address, and mail it there so it doesn't get placed in the slush pile by mistake.

*Only if you want to get arrested for stalking.*

Be sure to bind your manuscript every which way--you want it to be secure! In fact, you might even have it professionally printed, including a cover. Your twelve-year-old can do the artwork. In your package, include a crisp hundred-dollar bill. Just a little incentive! Agents appreciate that.

*Please, send that manuscript loose leaf, bound only with a rubber band or two. No staples, no binder, no cover, no professional printing, no artwork (unless you are pitching nonfiction). Certainly no cash, no chocolates or pictures of your cat or tickets to a Broadway show. Anything the least bit cutesy or "clever" brands you as an amateur, and possibly an annoying or dangerous one. Keep it simple.*

If your novel isn't finished, send it anyway. It's the editor's job to polish it up, right? And if you have several manuscripts, send them all.

*Send only your completed work, polished to the best of your ability. Editors these days can't afford to work with you to get your book up to par. The closer it is to perfect, the better chance it has. Usually, you'll query with only one manuscript at a time, though sometimes, if you've met an agent in person, they might request more than one thing.*



2. Make sure the agent knows that your novel does not fit into any particular genre, that it transcends genre. Even better, tell him that it is experimental fiction and it has taken you fifteen years to write it.

The easier your book is to market, the better chance it has of catching the interest of agents and editors. Pick a genre, even if the fit isn't quite perfect.

Emphasize in your cover letter that your novel is better than anything else on the market today, and especially make sure she knows it is better than the work of Suzy Q Author, who is the agent's client (and a hack). You want your prospective agent to know that your work is destined to be a #1 New York Times Best Seller that will be adapted into an Oscar-winning film.

Don't praise your own book. Let the work speak for itself. And certainly don't brag that you are better than some other author. The last thing you want to do is disparage one of the agent's own clients. That's like telling her she has no taste. (It's okay to say your work is in the vein of Author X's books, as a means of describing its tone.)

3. Send your manuscript to at least ten publishers before you send it to an agent. After all, you don't want to pay the agent's commission if you can sell it yourself, right? Send your collection of rejection letters with your manuscript, so the agent will know not to waste his time on those loser publishers.

As previously mentioned, send a fresh, unshopped manuscript to your prospective agents. (It's okay if other agents have rejected it, but not publishers.) Don't even bring up previous rejections. It's like bringing up ex-boyfriends when you're on a first date. If the agent sees that many respected editors have said bad things about your work, they'll want to jump on the band wagon.

4. State up front the conditions under which you will allow the agent to represent your novel. Please, don't do this. The agent is likely to throw your work right into the recycle bin without responding at all. You are broadcasting, "I am difficult, I am a prima donna, and I don't know beans about how the publishing industry works." Once an offer of representation is made, ask questions, get answers, then decide yes or no. Don't make demands.

Make sure she knows which publishers you want to review the manuscript, and provide a deadline for them to respond.

Ah, no. As previously mentioned, you and your agent should decide on a submission strategy together. Giving a publisher a deadline is laughable. You can state when you'll check back with them, but that's about it.

Make it clear you will expect daily progress reports and full-page ads in People Magazine. Dream on.

Oh, and negotiate that commission. Fifteen percent? Come on. Your book is going to make millions, and they'll hardly have to work at all. Three percent should be plenty.

Commissions aren't negotiable. Maybe if you are Nora Roberts ...



5. If you meet a literary agent at a writer's conference, monopolize all of his free time. Sit in the front row of his workshop, then interrupt his talk with long, complex questions that pertain to your novel, only.

If you ask a question in a workshop, be sure it is of a general nature, one that is helpful to others as well as you. Ask ONE question, then sit on your hands. Don't be that one who says, "But, but, what about a shape-shifting salamander? Would that work? No? But my shape-shifting salamander is also a wizard. Would you represent that?" You will not only alienate the agent, but every agent on the panel will memorize your name and delete all of your correspondence before reading it, and every other person in the workshop will avoid you.

Corner him at the hotel bar and keep other writers away from him. (He'll appreciate your protecting him from the riff-raff.) If anyone else horns in on your conversation, don't let them get a word in edgewise. After all, the agent is sure to find every detail about your book endlessly fascinating.

At conferences, cultivate the art of listening. (I've been known to blather myself, so I should take my own advice!) If you must speak, ask intelligent questions.

And, do I even need to mention this one?

Follow the agent into the bathroom, and pass your manuscript under the stall door. She will appreciate your cleverness.

Agents (and editors, for that matter) generally do not want to take anything away with them from a conference, except maybe a business card. Don't try to give them a manuscript or even a one-page synopsis. They will request the work they want to see and ask you to snail mail or e-mail it to them. Don't even speak to them in a bathroom! Best to pretend you don't see them.

Queries:

[http://www.agentquery.com/writer\\_hq.aspx](http://www.agentquery.com/writer_hq.aspx) Great article on query letters.

There's no point in me reinventing the wheel; this is as good an article as you'll find on the subject. However, I can't resist blathering just a little bit.

I mostly agree with the one-page rule. You shouldn't need more than one page to get the job done. You aren't giving the agent a blow-by-blow account of your book; you're giving her back-cover copy. And that means you have to figure out THE most marketable aspect of your book. I call it the "Ohhhhhhhh!" factor.

You can test whether you have this factor by telling friends, family and total strangers about your book. Give them a sentence or two and watch them carefully. If their eyes widen and they say something like "Ohhhhh, that sounds cool, I'd read that," then you have it. It's that one juicy little gem of a high concept that is going to get the agent to want very badly to read that book. It might be an intriguing character (like Dexter, the sympathetic serial killer who only kills other murderers), or an intriguing incident that gets the ball rolling (what if a kid travels back in time



to when his parents met, but somehow messes it up so that his very existence is threatened?) or a romantic conflict that immediately calls to mind all kinds of fun? (a romance between a wild, hard-living cowboy and a minister's daughter).

I once sold a book on three words: Texas bounty hunters. My editor wanted me to submit to Harlequin Intrigue; they were in desperate need of manuscripts at that time because they were expanding the line from four to six books a month. (Disastrous decision, but never mind.) All I did was say, “Well, I've been tossing around this idea about a group of Texas bounty hunters,” and she said “Ohhhhh, that is exactly what will work. Write up a few paragraphs.” I did, and I got a two-book contract out of it. The editors were in love with the idea. They SO did not care about the details.

The form your query letter takes is less important than that delicious concept. So work on that. Work on it a lot, until it's a shining gem of fresh, exciting prose that will light up the agent's imagination.

I like to start a query letter by jumping right into the story. But it's also acceptable to say, “I enjoyed attending your workshop at the blah blah blah conference, and I believe I have a manuscript that meets your criteria,” or something similar. Agents like to know that you are targeting them specifically, that you know something about them, rather than that you are sending out the same query to every agent in the universe. You can also open by saying, “I so much enjoy Jane Writer's work (naming one of the agent's clients). Since I write in a similar vein, I thought you might be interested in reviewing my manuscript, BLAH BLAH BLAH, a romantic suspense novel of 90,000 words.” But do get into the story as quickly as possible.

In the end, it's going to be the story that trumps all.

As far as your bio goes, no need to list every single contest you've won or placed in. Think about mentioning your top three credentials. Do mention that you are an RWA member—many agents think this is a big plus, because they know RWA educates its members and stresses professionalism.

If you have no credentials, just don't say anything. It's okay to say “BLAH BLAH BLAH is my third completed manuscript,” but if it is your 25<sup>th</sup>, don't say so. And if it's your first, don't say so. (Most first books aren't good, but there are of course exceptions.)

The last part of your letter, you should thank the agent for their time, ask if they would like to read the book, and how to contact you.

When I send an e-query, I put my name, address, e-mail address and phone number at the top, just as you would a hard copy letter. Some people still print out correspondence, and the original e-mail might get erased. You don't want them to have to hunt you down.



Short is better. Really. The more you say, the more reasons you give an agent to say no. Get in, get out!

If you get a request for a full or partial, send it right away. Follow directions precisely. If they say "Send the first 50 pages," don't send more than 50. It's okay to send a few less, if a chapter ends on page 49, say. Don't cut off mid-sentence; try and end with a cliff-hanger (which, if you've ever taken any of my plotting classes, you know you should have around page 50).

Okay, that's it!

Are You Agent Hunting?

Here is a list of useful websites compiled by author Kara Lennox

RWA's list of "approved" agents: <http://www.rwanational.org> (sign in, go to "Members Only" page. Click "Publishers and Agents," then "RWA-Eligible Agents.")

All of the agents listed here meet some minimum requirements. They do not have to be members of AAR, but they have to adhere to AAR standards. They have to have been in business at least a year, and they have to have sold at least one book to an RWA approved publisher. If you call or e-mail the RWA office, they will tell you if there are any unresolved conflicts between an agent you're considering and any member authors.

Just because an agent isn't listed here doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong with them.

Karen Fox's list of agents: <http://www.karenafox.com/agentlist.htm>

Karen Fox is an author and former RWA board member who took it upon herself to build and maintain an agents database with contact information and submission guidelines, website (if available) and the latest market news on what they're looking for and if they're open to unpublished writers. This list is slanted more toward romance and has more complete information than P&E (see below).

Preditors & Editors list of agents:  
<http://pred-ed.com/pubagent.htm>

Preditors & Editors keeps a massive database of every agent in the Universe. Always a good idea to check here if you're considering an agent, to see if there are any warnings or cautions against them. There's also a nice, succinct little article on "How Agents Work."

Miss Snark's blog: <http://misssnark.blogspot.com>



Miss Snark is a real New York agent--her true identify is a well-kept secret, but she doesn't represent romance so she's probably not one of the ones we're familiar with. But she has apparently been agenting for many years and she knows the publishing business through and through. She gives some of the best advice--and some of the cruelest! You just have to read her to appreciate her. If you are agent-shopping, read "The Snarkives." (The blog is no longer active, as she retired it in 2007, but the Snarkives are searchable. In addition to witty advice, she is hilarious.

She also publishes a list of the worst literary agents in the world. (These are pretty much limited to scam artists or those with questionable business practices--and there are a lot of them!)

Agent Kristin Nelson's blog: <http://pubrants.blogspot.com/>

Ms. Nelson is a hip and aggressive agent out of Denver who has really made a name for herself in recent years. Her blog is interesting and informative. (And she is way more polite than Miss Snark, as Miss Snark has freely admitted.) Check out her archive of "Agenting 101" posts—great information.

Association of Authors Representatives:  
<http://www.aaronline.org/>

AAR has a searchable database of its members with contact information and profiles of the agents, and whether they accept e-mail queries. They also have a useful little Frequently Asked Questions section and a list of questions you should ask a prospective agent (one who has offered to represent you).

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc's "Writers Beware" site:  
<http://www.sfwaw.org/beware/agents.html>

This site has a wealth of information for anyone searching for an agent. An absolute must-read. They maintain a database, and you can e-mail them with any agents you're considering and they'll summarize what they know. Pretty friendly of them!

Great blog: <http://howpublishingreallyworks.com/?p=3203>

This links leads you automatically to all archived blogs related to agents.

And, for your amusement: <http://badagentsydney.blogspot.com/>

If any of you have any other links you've found helpful, please list them for the class and I'll check them out and add them to the handout for future agent classes. Thanks!