



## *Writing an Accompanying Letter to an Agent*

First things first; check they're receiving unsolicited manuscripts, or that they don't say anywhere they're not, and they accept your genre of writing. Ensure you have the name spelt right, check you have the right gender and if you don't know whether a woman is married or not, use *Dear Ms* –. Please don't use *Dear Sirs*; this is old-fashioned and risks immediately antagonising a female recipient. Check whether they want hard copy or email submission. Prime sources are *Writers & Artists Yearbook*, *The Writers' Handbook* and agents' individual websites.

Send what they ask for. This varies. The most usual is three chapters and a synopsis, but do check. Doesn't matter if your three chapter extract is just 10 pages or if it's 100 – unless they give a word or page count. Print it on good quality white paper that feels nice to handle. Single-sided of course, and one-and-a-half or double-spaced.

The synopsis is usually an outline of the book, with major conflicts, climaxes and resolutions made clear; not a chapter-by-chapter account. Make sure genre, if any, is clear, and hint at the style. If you have a definite market in mind (a huge help if you have) make sure this sings from the page.

Your letter should cover the following information:

- 1) The novel and its title (use one that grabs attention). A sentence or three about it will suffice. Have you written a back cover blurb for your novel? If so, don't reproduce it here, but do send it with the letter, synopsis and chapters. If you've finished your novel, make this clear. If not, say how far on with it you are, and when you expect to finish (if this is when you actually get a contract for the thing, don't say that!)
- 2) Who you are and what experience you have. If your job or voluntary work has involved writing professionally, such as reports, press releases or advertising copy, say so. If you've won any awards or prizes for writing, say so. If you've had anything published anywhere, say so. If you have other experience or knowledge which is relevant to your novel, for instance you're a botanist and your novel is set in the world of botany, or you've a history degree and your novel is historical, or you're a nurse and your novel is set in a hospital, make this clear.

If your relevant experience (especially your writing experience) has been wide and varied, don't try to pack this all into your letter. Summarise – and also send a CV which might contain non-pertinent information but which focuses on the relevant stuff.

- 3) Anything extra that makes you stand out. Remember an agent and then a publisher is looking for someone marketable. Has something remarkable happened to you in your life? Have you lived with someone well known? Brushed by notoriety? Had strange beginnings or life episode? A very unusual job? Or simply lived a different kind of life from most people you know? Work it in. If you can find a link between that and your novel or even generally why you're a writer, fantastic.
- 4) How you have approached your writing. If you've had your work appraised by Fiction Feedback or a similar service, say so. If we said nice things, quote them. If you scored high marks on the checklist, mention this. The aim behind this is two-fold; to demonstrate the professional approach you take to your writing, and to highlight other people's good opinion. This adds to your credibility. If you've gone on courses, got writing qualifications, attended literary workshops: say so. If you know someone who is famous, or who is a professor of English, or a secondary school teacher and they will write a short testimonial about your work: include it. Be careful not to overwhelm your chosen agent with material though. If there's a lot you could use, be selective.
- 5) Proof your market exists. Don't expect an agent or publisher to research your potential market for you. The least you can do with fiction is say which authors you see your novel sitting alongside. If you can also point to evidence of a positive trend in your genre, style or novel theme, please do so. The fact that you've bothered to do this makes you stand out and is more proof of your professionalism. But try to avoid saying your novel is going to be the next Harry Potter, or anything else! Publishers aren't looking for the latest copycat, they're looking for the next big thing.
- 6) Recognition of your agent's relevance. If you have a particular reason for choosing this agent – they deal with similar authors, you heard them speak at a literature festival, a friend in publishing recommended them: say so. Try and find something, otherwise they might assume they're last on a long list.

Try to be succinct! Two A4 pages maximum and less if you can. Remember how many of these letters an agent is trawling through and take pity. Consideration for them must improve your chances. Include your selling points, but keep to the point. Don't use staples. Always send a pristine letter and manuscript with no amendments made by hand or any dirty marks. Send a self-addressed, stamped picture postcard for a receipt; it's your chance to be creative with your choice of picture.

If emailing, send your letter as an attachment just like your chapters and synopsis, unless it's particularly short. Choose self-explanatory file titles for your attachments. Then use the email message just to stipulate your novel's title and any stand-out fact – "I have just won a short story competition". Keep the email as brief as possible. Add your name, address and phone number.

Good luck!!