

HOW TO GET A LITERARY AGENT

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The Writers' Workshop

From Here to Publication



1) What is a literary agent and do you need one?

Literary agents have several main roles:

- *selecting saleable manuscripts* from all those submitted. Bear in mind that well under 1% of manuscripts are strong enough to sell.
- *working with the author to get the manuscript in perfect condition to sell.* That can mean extensive editorial work, quite likely lasting over a period of months.
- *identifying the right editors at the right publishing houses* for your book. That means that the agent needs to have excellent contacts and to keep those contacts bang up to date. It also means understanding the current market for fiction and non-fiction and making sure that your book is in tune with that market.
- *conducting an auction.* There's no single way to sell a book. Your agent needs to choose the right way, then sell it professionally and with drive and conviction.
- *negotiating a contract.* Publishing contracts are long and technical. Additionally, with the advent of ebooks, those contracts are changing fast and key terms are constantly moving. So you do need an expert on your side.
- *making foreign sales, and handling film and TV rights.* Again, that's a complex business involving expertise and strong contacts. Not a game for newbies.
- *guiding your career.* Longer term, a really good agent should be nudging your career in the right directions and keeping you away from wrong turnings. Writing is a heck of an insecure business, so a good agent can make a massive amount of difference.

All that might make you think that you HAVE to have an agent under all circumstances – but remember that agents make their fees on sales they make. (Typically they take a 15% commission. You can get more info on [literary agent's fees here](#).) Because agents work for money not for love, they simply won't have an interest in representing you if there is no realistic prospect of them making any money. So you need to be realistic about whether your book is likely to get an agent or not.

You DO need an agent if:

- you are writing a novel
- you are writing a mainstream non-fiction manuscript (the sort of thing that might be sold at the front of a shop, or feature on a bestseller list)
- you are writing fiction for children
- you are writing a 'how to' type book in a major category (eg: health or diet)

You DO NOT need an agent if:

- you are intending to self-publish
- you are writing poetry
- you are writing one-off short stories
- you are writing journalism
- you are writing specialist non-fiction (eg: “how to train your horse”)

In all these cases, there simply won't be enough money to interest an agent and you should simply approach the appropriate publishers directly. There are a couple of intermediate categories too. You MIGHT WANT an agent if:

- you are writing children's picture books. I'd probably recommend having an agent to start with, but you could go either way.
- you are writing a themed collection of short stories. Such collections are tough to sell, but not impossible. A really good collection will attract an agent. Anything less than wonderful certainly won't.

2) Where to find a complete list of UK literary agents

It's strangely hard finding a complete list of literary agents. The list on Wikipedia isn't remotely complete. The Association of Authors Agents does not represent all agents or agencies. The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook lists agents not agencies – and its list of the latter is not even complete.

Fortunately, help is at hand. [Agent Hunter](#) is a website that lists every single UK agent, with very detailed info on each one, including (where available):

- biographies (with photos)
- genre preferences
- client list status (ie: are they looking to take on new writers?)
- existing authors represented
- submission requirements
- Twitter feeds and blog references
- Likes & dislikes
- And more.

The data is completely searchable and filterable – so you can, for example, look for “agents who like Young Adult fiction and are seeking to take on new clients”. Subscriptions cost as little as £5 and our data is being expanded and revised all the time.

We recommend looking for about 8-12 agents who are active in your genre, who represent authors you like, and who are looking to add to their client lists. Like the sound of it? Then go straight to [Agent Hunter](#).

***Disclosure:** Agent Hunter is the creation of the Writers' Workshop, so our recommendation is not impartial – but there really is not an equivalently powerful search tool available anywhere else.*

3) A step by step guide to finding an agent

Finding a literary agent is easy – there’s only one tricky part to the entire process. Here’s what you need to know.

A) Write a good book

No, don’t smirk. That’s the only bit that really matters. *Write a good book*. If you do that, and you aren’t a total numpty about approaching agents, then you’ll be fine. If, on the other hand, you are amazingly good at approaching agents but your book isn’t yet up to scratch, then you won’t get anywhere. Even if, by a fluke, you get taken on by a decent agent, there’s no way you’ll get a publisher.

So write a good book. No – scratch that – not a good book. A stunning one. A dazzling one. One that echoes in the consciousness. One that makes a professional reader (ie: agent/editor) sit up late with tears in their eyes. That’s how good you have to be. More on this subject a little later.

B) Sign up with a good online literary agents listings site

In the UK/Ireland, that means you need to subscribe to [Agent Hunter](#), the leading search tool of its kind. In the US/Canada, there are a number of online sites, but we recommend [AgentQuery](#). If you’re from SA / Australia / NZ, then you are probably better off writing to London based agents than NY based ones, but it’s your call. You can go either way.

C) Select your hit list

It’s fine these days to make multiple submissions to agents, and we strongly recommend that you do just that.

How many agents to approach?

Our own view is that you should send your work to no more than 8-12 agents, in 1-2 waves of submissions. If you’ve gone out to 12 agents and haven’t yet found someone who loves your book, that’s 99% likely – probably 99.5% likely – because your book isn’t yet strong enough to sell, in which case you need to address your manuscript, not chase after more agents. The one exception: there is a lot of prejudice against fantasy / sci-fi, so we usually recommend going to 15-20 agents. (Unless you’re North American, where SFF is better catered for.)

How to pick agents

In the bad old days, getting an agent was a more or less random process. Yes, there were books which listed a range of literary agencies (though not a *complete* list of agencies, even so.) But so what? You’re looking for an agent, not an agency – and how do you find the one that’s right for your genre, your style, your voice?

Fortunately, those problems have now been solved by tools such as [Agent Hunter](#) which for the first time make it possible to search in a genuinely rational way. When it comes to using its search tools, we would recommend:

- locating agents who accept work in your genre
- avoiding the ones who are obviously too busy
- prioritising the ones who seem more engaged with new writers
- using client lists, likes/dislikes info, photographs, Twitter feeds and other ‘gut feel’ type criteria to make the final selection. Agent Hunter collates all that data in one place, making the whole process as easy as pie.

And do bear in mind ...

Literary agents are very generalist. A typical agent might well represent crime writers, chick-lit writers, literary authors, dead authors, serious non-fiction writers, popular non-fiction writers, and so on. So if you are writing a near-future techno-thriller, you are NOT looking for an agent who specialises in such things – indeed, we don’t know of any such agent in the UK. All you’re looking for is an agent who is open to such work, but who may also represent non-fiction, literary fiction, chick lit, and whatever else. You’re probably eclectic as a reader. Agents are too.

D) Write a good query letter

Americans can make their query letter a little more sales-y, a little more pushy. Brits should make their letters a little more businesslike. But the essence either way is to keep the letter short, informative and well-written.

You also need to check what your agent wants. Do they want a query letter before you send your manuscript? Do they want you to send the letter, three chapters and a synopsis? Do they want a CV (unusual, but some people do)? Do they want submissions by email or in hard copy? Whatever the agent wants, you need to give it to them. You’ll be marking yourself down instantly if you don’t comply with the instructions you’ve been given. See later in the PDF for more info.

E) Write a good synopsis

A synopsis is a short (1-2 page) summary of your plot. Basically, you are giving your story away, in full. You are not writing a sales blurb. See later in the PDF for more info.

F) Present your manuscript in a way that won’t make agents scream

Mostly that means writing:

- in a decent sized font (12 is the standard)
- in a normal type face (Times New Roman, Georgia, Garamond. Arial, Courier are all fine.)
- with decent line spacing (1.5 or 2)
- normal margins – use your computer’s defaults
- single-sided
- with numbered pages

- A4 (if you're a Brit) / letter size if you're American
- without too many typos
- with proper punctuation
- your name and title in the header / footer of every page

You should not need copyediting if you are not dyslexic and you are a native English speaker. (Copyediting is generally done for free by publishers, so no need to spend money that you don't have to.) You can get further [manuscript presentation tips](#) here.

G) Don't bother 'copyright protecting' your work

You don't need to do it at all if you're British, and you only need to do it once you've got a publishing contract if you're North American. In the latter case a publisher will do it for you. No need to worry about this issue. It's a non-issue. Copyright theft is virtually unheard of. Just don't worry about it.

H) Light candles, tie a black cat into a knot – and go for it

Get your manuscript out there. See what happens.

I) How long to wait?

A really good agency will respond in 2 weeks or so. 6-8 weeks is more typical. Over 10 weeks is pathetic. Personally, we think it's OK to nudge after 8-10 weeks. Some agents are prickly about being nudged, but if so they shouldn't have been slow and unprofessional in the first place.

J) What might they say?

There are basically four categories of response:

- *go away, we hate you.* Maybe 90% of writers will get a standard-form response from a given agency, one that just rejects your work without giving you any reason why.
- *go away, but we don't hate you.* If agents are interested enough in your work that they ask to see the whole manuscript – and sometimes if your opening chapters moved an agent without quite convincing them – you may get a personalised response which says, 'I don't want to represent you, but there were certain qualities in your work which I did like'. That's a 'positive rejection'. It's grounds for encouragement, actually.
- *we're currently unsure if we hate you or not, so can we have a second date?* If an agent doesn't think your work is saleable, but they are keen to work with you, they may send back some editorial gripes and ask you to resubmit. Sometimes they don't actually *ask* you to resubmit but are clearly leaving the door open. In such cases, you'd be nuts not to have another crack at your manuscript and send it back when you're ready.
- *we love you, we adore you, we want to have your (literary) babies.* Or best of all – and this happens to about 0.05% to 0.10% of authors – you may get an agent asking to meet you, which is basically code for 'we want to represent you'. Which is basically code for wanting to have your babies. In a literary way, obviously.

K) And if I do all this and don't get anywhere?

If you follow all this good advice and don't get taken on by an agent ... then may we gently suggest that you have not yet completed Step 2 – the one about writing a good book.

Writing a good book is hard. A good agent reviews 1-2,000 manuscripts for each one that's taken on. Some top agencies review more like 4,000 manuscripts for every one they take on. So standards are high. If you approach agents in a professional way, and your work is rejected, then your work is not yet good enough. So get it right. Work harder. Locate the problems and fix them. This CAN be done. The gold-standard method for improving your manuscript is to get [editorial feedback](#) from the Writers Workshop. You will get a [superbly qualified editor](#) to read your manuscript and give you a [detailed report](#) on what isn't yet working and how to go about fixing it.

That's not an easy solution, by any means. It takes a good writer to work successfully with an editor. You need the courage to change things and the persistence to do so. Yet the results can be outstanding ([check them out here.](#)) You may also wish to think about taking one of our amazingly popular [self-editing courses](#), which teaches the skills needed to assess and improve your manuscript on your own.

4) Tips on how to write your covering letter

Query letters matter massively. A typical literary agent in New York or London will see approximately 2000 manuscripts a year, and may take on just 1-2 new authors. Of the 2000 manuscripts submitted, the majority – let's say at least 1750 – will be rejected very quickly, because of errors in the query letter or synopsis. So here's a checklist for how to write the perfect query letter.

1) No obvious errors

No howlers, no spelling mistakes, no saying *it's* when you mean *its*, no calling your book a *fiction novel* when it's just a *novel*. (All novels are fiction; saying 'fiction novel' makes you sound like an idiot.) But you're smart enough not to make those basic errors, so I won't say any more on that topic.

2) No bad sentences

A slightly different issue. Plenty of query letters don't have errors as such, but they still give off plentiful indicators that the writer is a little clumsy in expressing themselves. Here's what I mean:

This novel, which is the first one I have written, is called 'The Adventures of Crazy Jane and I would say it falls into the genre of fantasy, or maybe even chick-lit.

That's a hideous sentence, absolutely awful. No literary agent will read any further than that – but the sentence doesn't actually have any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors in it. So it's not just about avoiding howlers. It's also about writing well.

3) Brevity

Keep your letter to a page. It doesn't need to be longer than that. Two pages absolute tops.

4) Introduce the book

We generally recommend a sentence or two at the start of the letter which summarises the key data: the title, the genre, the word count, the rough thrust of the story. Then a longer paragraph about the book. You don't need to summarise the plot – the synopsis will do that – but you do need to say what the book is about. That could be about setting, about theme, about period. Whatever matters most.

5) Don't say much about yourself

No one cares about you – they care about the book. So a sentence or two is fine. Keep it short. If you've got a proper publishing track record, then say so – but it doesn't matter if you don't. If you've just published articles in the parish magazine, then shut up about it. No one cares. The one exception to this rule: if you are writing subject-led non-fiction and you are an acknowledged expert on the topic, then make that clear.

6) Don't get cute

Most jokes don't work. Lavish grovelling is pointless. 'I will call you in two weeks to discuss': you've gotta be kidding. This is a business letter. So keep it businesslike. In the US, you can be a bit more pushy, a bit more sales-y. In the UK, it's better to play it straight.

7) Remember what the query letter is there to do

All the letter is actually there to do is encourage the agent to read the opening page of the manuscript. If that page looks good, the agent will read the first chapter. If he/she likes the first chapter, then they'll read on. But the query letter is just the very start. No one will make up their mind from a query letter. Your letter just has to get the agent interested enough in the project to make a start on the manuscript itself. It's not hard to write a decent query letter. It's VERY hard to write a decent manuscript.

5) A sample covering letter

This section offers you an actual example of a covering letter by way of a model. Before we get there, however, we should say that the letter relates to a real author (Harry Bingham, the Dark Lord of the Writers' Workshop) and a real book. Since Harry already has an agent, the letter which follows simply pretends that this book is a first novel and the authors is without a track record in the industry.

The second thing to say is that we've assumed the agent has invited submission of a synopsis and opening chapters along with the query letter. (That's standard practice in the UK, though things can be different in the US.) But obviously you need to check what the agent's requirements are and follow them.

Third, this letter does NOT say anywhere, 'I love Mr Angus Author, whom you represent, so I felt that your tastes and mine might have something in common.' If you want to put that in you can. We've got mixed feelings about whether it's helpful. (Most literary agents represent 2-3 well known clients and a huge chunk of their query letters will reference those 2-3 authors. It's therefore questionable whether you do anything positive by doing likewise. Agents tend to vary in what they think about these kind of personalisations. We tend to recommend the lower effort option, but it's no big deal. You can do as you please.)

OK. That's enough preamble. Here's the letter:

Dear Amy Agent

I'm writing to seek representation for my first novel, TALKING TO THE DEAD, a police procedural of 115,000 words.

The book opens with news of a murder: a young woman and her daughter have been found dead in a rough area of Cardiff. The house where they're found is in very poor condition – a squat, with no power or working toilet – yet in the corner of the room is a platinum bank card belonging to a local millionaire. A millionaire who died in a plane crash some nine months previously.

Puzzling as this crime looks, it's not the heart of the book's mystery. It becomes rapidly clear that Fiona Griffiths herself is a very peculiar woman, who is withholding crucial secrets from the reader. Who exactly is her father? What was her childhood illness? And what is it with her and corpses?

I'm a [thirty-five year old lion tamer] and this is my first novel.

I enclose the first three chapters and a synopsis. I very much hope you like what you see and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours,

Wrichard Writer

There! Simple, no? All the letter actually has to do is:

- give a very brief 1-sentence summary of the book
- a somewhat longer, 1-2 para, introduction to the book. (Not a plot summary – that’s for the synopsis)
- a brief introduction to you
- not be badly written

If you achieve those things, then the literary agent will turn with curiosity to your manuscript. That’s all you can hope for at this stage – the rest is down to your novel.

6) How to Write A Novel Synopsis

What is a synopsis?

A synopsis is simply a clear, factual summary of your novel's storyline. It is not a blurb and the text should not be 'salesy'.

Why do agents want a synopsis?

If an agent likes your opening chapters, he or she will probably want to check the general direction of your story before they ask for the rest of your novel. They're not likely to scrutinise the story in pinprick detail because it's very hard to do that from a bald summary. Rather, they're checking that the basic thrust of the story feels attractive.

For that reason, you probably don't need to worry excessively about your synopsis: it's certainly the least important part of your submission package. So just follow the guidelines below and you'll do just fine.

How to write a perfect synopsis

A perfect synopsis should:

- Be short: preferably no more than 1000 words. If your synopsis is in the 500-800 word range, you're doing very well
- Be businesslike: clear, to the point, neutral.
- Be well-presented: no typos or spelling mistakes
- Tell the story: your job is not to sell the book, write dust jacket blurb, or anything else. Just say what happens in the story. That's all you need to do.
- Things you don't need to do:
- Go into great detail about setting. If you were writing a synopsis for a Jane Austen novel for example, you might simply say "This novel is set in a small village in Regency England."
- Go into vast detail about character - a few quick strokes are all that you need. For example you might say: "Bridget Jones - a ditzy, mildly boozy twenty-something - ..."
- Be scrupulous about plot detail. It's fine to skip over subplots or ignore some of the finer detail of how X accomplishes Y. The truth is, you won't have time to include those things in a 700 word summary anyway. Agents know that the synopsis is at best an approximation of the story so you don't need to have a troubled conscience.
- You also don't absolutely have to give away your very final plot twist - though you should make it clear that there is one. For example, you could write, "When Olivia finally catches up with Jack at the abandoned lighthouse, he tells her the real secret of his disappearance

- and their final bloody reckoning ensues." Mostly though, a synopsis is the ultimate plot spoiler, and your job is just to spill the beans whether you like it or not.

You get extra brownie points if:

- You highlight the names of key characters in bold for easy reference. (see example below)
- Your opening sentence or paragraph offers a swift summary of the book's premise or hook. For example, a certain Ms Rowling might have opened her synopsis with, "Harry Potter, an orphan, thinks he is an ordinary boy when an owl brings him a letter inviting him to attend wizard school." That's not strictly speaking synopsis material, but it does instantly emphasise the book's appeal.

A sample synopsis follows in the next section

7) A Sample Synopsis

This synopsis is a real one – it’s a summary of *Double Cross* by Tracy Gilpin. Tracy was an editorial client of the Writers’ Workshop and ended up with a literary agent and a book deal. It wasn’t the synopsis that won her those things – it was the quality of her manuscript – but what follows is a fine example of a good, clear, clean synopsis.

Dunai Marks discovers the strangled corpse of **Siobhan Craig**, an activist who is not only her employer but also a mother figure; Dunai had been abandoned at an orphanage as a baby.

Siobhan was about to present to government the results of a controversial population control model for possible implementation at national level. Dunai believes this is the reason she was murdered.

The investigating officer on the case is instructed by an agent of the National Intelligence Agency to treat the murder as a botched burglary. Although some evidence points in this direction, Dunai believes Siobhan’s murder was work-related, which means she and **Bryan**, an American statistician, could be in danger.

She strikes a deal with **Carl**, a private investigator. If she is able to find a motive for the murder he will show her how to go about catching the killer.

Dunai discovers Siobhan was blackmailing five people who stood in the way of her pilot project, and was involved with a subversive group of radical feminists called ***Cerchio Del Gaia*** whose insignia is a double cross.

Dunai and Carl investigate the individuals blackmailed by Siobhan. They include: an anti-abortion activist, the head of an all-male religious fundamentalist group, an Anglican bishop, a member of local government, and a USAID official. One of these suspects was the last person to see Siobhan alive, another is known to have approached a contract killer a month before her murder.

Cerchio Del Gaia becomes increasingly entangled in both Dunai’s life and the investigation, and she is told that if she joins the group she will have access to information about her birth. The National Intelligence Agency is on a similar tack; if Dunai infiltrates *Cerchio Del Gaia*, which they believe is an international terrorist organisation, they will provide her with information about her origins. Dunai turns down both offers and the mystery of her birth and abandonment is eventually revealed by a woman claiming to be Siobhan’s sister, Dunai’s birth mother and the head of the South African chapter of *Cerchio Del Gaia*.

Throughout the investigation Dunai has searched for **Mr Bojangles**, a schizophrenic vagrant who may have seen the murderer. When she eventually finds him he seems to be of little help, yet it is his ramblings along with another clue that leads to her close friend and colleague, Bryan, who has been wanted by the FBI for twenty years for terrorist activities in the US. Bryan murdered Siobhan after discovering she intended betraying him to the National Intelligence Agency to deflect attention from *Cerchio Del Gaia* and as proof that she abided by the law even when it meant personal sacrifice.

Carl, who is now romantically involved with Dunai, offers to continue her training as an investigator and she agrees to divide her time between this and Siobhan's NGO.

8) A checklist for the most common manuscript problems

At the Writers' Workshop (the sister company to Agent Hunter), we see hundreds of novels every year. Now, our clients are a successful bunch. At a rough guess, the average writer has about a 1 in 1000 chance of being traditionally published. Our own success rates are something like 10-30 times better than that. Certainly, our own rigour and editorial excellence plays a part in those successes, but we are also lucky enough to attract gifted, determined and persistent writers. (Or, as we like to call them, *real* writers.)

But still: hundreds of novels. Years of experience. Loads and loads of time spent understanding what agents want and what they really, really don't ... it all adds up to a pretty good idea of the commonest mistakes made by would-be novelists. So here goes with a checklist of what mistakes are most often made – and, more important, what to do if you think you're guilty.

To make it more interesting, we've taken a stab at guesstimating how many manuscripts commit these errors – and given them a howler rating according to how hard they are to fix.

1. A terrible concept

Some concepts just don't work. An 'educational' novel for Young Adults with reams of explanation about climate science stuffed into a creaky plot. A book for adults that features the life history of the author's parrot. A sad story about a woman's not-very-terrible mid-life crisis that ends with her deciding to work part-time and take up baking. None of these books stand any chance of interesting an agent. (Well, OK, if they were handled by an out-and-out genius, perhaps, but you're not one of those. Almost no one is.)

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 1-3%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ******

Comment: You can't fix this error. You just have to start again. Sorry!

2. A book that doesn't ramp it up enough

Thrillers that don't quite thrill. Comedies that don't really make you laugh. Romances that aren't actually all that romantic or sexy. Literary fiction which doesn't really attempt to dazzle the reader. You can't be so-so about these things. If agents and editors are faced with a choice between (a) a really thrilling thriller, or (b) one in which someone gets thumped, a bit, two-thirds of the way through, which one do you they'll pick?

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-20%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ******

Comment: Still bad. You *can* fix it in theory, but sometimes it's better just to pick a better idea

3. A manuscript that's written for a different era

Peter James, Mark Billingham, Stuart MacBride, Peter Robinson ... these are big selling authors, no? So if you write like them, you'll get sales like them, right? Well, actually no. Those guys wrote for the market as it was when they got started. They dominate that market. Unless you do something distinctively new, there is no reason why agents, editors or readers should favour your book over theirs. Same thing with kids books that hanker after the 1950s. Or comedies that reprise the 1980s comedies of Tom Sharpe. Just don't do it. Either invent a time machine or write for the world as it is now.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-5%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): *****

Comment: This error is all but unfixable in truth. Sorry!

4. A manuscript with no discernible USP

Sometimes, a manuscript ticks the boxes. It's a love story with genuine warmth. It feels contemporary. The writing is fine. The manuscript might well be in the top few per cent of an agent's slushpile. But so what? You have to be in the top nought point something percent of that pile to get taken on – and the thing that marks the winners out is usually an angle, a concept, a pitch that's immediately captivating. *Time Traveler's Wife*? I want to read more. A school for wizards? Tell me about it. An Aspergers Swedish computer hacker? Great! If your book doesn't even have the breath of such a concept, you have seriously disabled yourself in the search for an agent. (Get help on building a strong elevator pitch/USP [here](#).)

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 20-30%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): *****

Comment: It's a lot of work, but you can fix this. Think big and bold!

5. Lousy presentation

Those manuscripts written in purple ink? With awful spelling or weird fonts? And punctuation that forgot to turn up for work? This is less common than folklore would have you believe, partly because computers and spellcheckers eliminate the most egregious faults. Nevertheless, tell-tale clues can often be enough. You have to make sure your MS is well presented, spelled and punctuated. Those things, minimum.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): * to ****

Comment: On the one hand, punctuation is simple to fix – that in itself earns a one-star rating – but the problem is that poor punctuation is almost always allied to sloppy prose, which takes a lot more work. But both things matter. If you need help with [copyediting](#) then go ahead.

6. Lack of clarity in prose

Your prose needs to convey meaning, clearly and succinctly. That sounds simple and it is. If you read the work of John Grisham, Stephen King, Stephenie Meyer, you'll notice that their prose is workmanlike *always*, but seldom good. There are few strong, quotable, breath-taking sentences. That's OK. Those writers have other glories. But you can't be worse than competent. Your

meaning must be clear. You must know the meaning of the words you use. When you use pronouns ('it', 'she', 'he', etc), it must be clear who or what is being referred to. The reader needs to know where they are and when and what's happening (unless, of course, you are being deliberately mysterious.) This is so simple and so basic, but not all manuscripts achieve success.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ** to *****

Comment: Sometimes, a rigorous line edit is all that's needed – sometimes better writing.

7. Writing is not economical enough

Most writers don't think enough about making every sentence as economical as it can reasonably be without loss of meaning ... Or, as we'd prefer you to say: Most writers aren't economical enough. That first sentence used 20 words; the second one used 5. Extrapolate that difference to book-scale and you can easily be talking about many 10s of 1000s of extraneous words. No book can bear that weight of excess verbiage, so prune ruthlessly, then prune again. If you haven't cut at least 10,000 words from your manuscript, then you haven't really tried. We see plenty of manuscripts that need to lose 30,000 words or more.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 10-50%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): * to *****

Comment: Usually easy!

8. Writing is over-the-top

Forceful language is essential to an interesting story, but you need to be careful and moderate with its use. We see a fair few manuscripts that are just loaded with extreme language – *scream, agony, torture, yelling, misery, overwhelm, fury* – all on the first page, sometimes even all in the first paragraph. Too much! Let the story and the characters do the work..

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 1-3%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ****

Comment: Easy to fix, except that the issues are often broader than poor word choice.

9. Writing is clichéd

Full on clichés are (thank goodness) relatively rare in the manuscripts we read. So we don't get all that many *wet blankets, sick as a dogs, or giving it a hundred and ten per cents*. But cliché is much more insidious than just those howlers. We see plenty of passionate flame-haired Irishwomen. Or scenes of domestic bliss that involve log fires and crumpets. Or killers who are steely-eyed and probably have craggy jaws. In the end, a cliché is anything which makes us feel we've read this before ... and, sorry to say, in that broader sense, we see a LOT of excessively clichéd manuscripts.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 20-50%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ** to *****

Comment: Simple (if time-consuming) to fix. It's finding the dang clichés that's pesky.

10. Points of view are mishandled

We read quite a lot of work where one character is thinking and feeling something ... then all of a sudden we find that we're in the head of some completely different character, sharing their thoughts and emotions. And obviously, it *is* OK to move about between characters, but the transition has to be properly handled. If you get that wrong, you cause giddiness and confusion in the reader – and rejection letters will come a-fluttering down onto your doormat.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): * to ****

Comment: Very fixable, but there are normally a whole load of consequential changes.

11. Descriptions absent or bland

Doesn't need much explanation, this one. We've read some novels where all the action seems to take place in a white and featureless void. Also novels where any description is bland or muted. Readers want to be transported to a different world – so transport them, OK?

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ***

Comment: easily fixed – but do check there isn't a broader problem with prose style.

12. Unliterary literary writing

We get plenty of 'literary' novels that aren't actually very well written. And, if your book relies on a wonderful plot or a stunning premise to hook its audience, that might not matter. But if you want your novel to sell as a 'literary' one, it *has* to be well-written. Basic competence is not enough: you must demonstrate something more.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 10-30% (of literary novels)

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ****

Comment: Pay careful attention to prose style, but the exercise is usually manageable

13. Um, what happened to the plot?

Strange but true: some writers complete an entire novel without really knowing what their story is. And stories don't create themselves you know. It's *your* job. Jane Austen, Shakespeare and Charles Dickens weren't too posh for plot, so you're not either.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): *****

Comment: Get this right – we don't care if it's a lot of work!

14. Unbelievable/bland characters

Sometimes everything seems to be moving along all right in technical terms – story, check; descriptions, check; prose style, check – yet somehow a manuscript is failing to connect with its readers. That's very often because the central character(s) simply aren't really showing up for work, and that in turn is usually because you, the author, don't yet know them sufficiently – almost as though you don't trust your imagination to feel out the limits of the people you're writing about. Needless to say, such books *can't* succeed.

How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): ****

Comment: Easy enough to fix, albeit there's some work involved.

15. You haven't really finished your novel

Yes, we know: you've reached the final full stop. But when you reach that milestone, you are perhaps, *if you're lucky*, halfway done. Most novels need to be reworked and re-edited and reworked again. That's how they get better – that's why all professional authors work closely with a professional editor, supplied via their publisher. As a newbie, you don't yet have that vital support and advice from publishers – but you can [get editorial support right now and right here from the Writers' Workshop](#). It's what we do! We'll check your manuscript for all these mistakes and many more. We'll explain them so you understand them – and help you fix them. We also run an [awesome self-editing course](#) so that you can develop your own editorial skills.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? **Hard to say!***

Comment: Agents reject 999 in 1000 manuscripts, so arguably 999 people are sending their work out too soon. That seems a bit harsh, though ...

9) What to do if you need more help

The Writers' Workshop and Agent Hunter exist to make *your* job easier. Here are the main ways we can help:

A) Help you write an amazing book

Authors need editors – and we have the best in the business. Getting detailed editorial feedback on your work is the single most useful thing you can do to improve its quality. All our editors are published authors of real quality, or have worked as commissioning editors in major publishing houses. [More info.](#)

B) Build your skills

We have a range of excellent courses, ranging from ones aimed at total beginners to ones designed for people who have already completed their manuscript and are in the process of making it better. All our courses are led by proper professional novelists with loads of editorial experience. [More info.](#)

C) Introduce you to literary agents and publishers

We run a range of events that bring together serious amateur writers with literary agents, publishers and other industry professionals. These events routinely end up with good writers being offered representation by excellent and ambitious agents. The best event we run is the annual Festival of Writing, held every September in York. [More info.](#)

D) Help the process of agent search

Do you remember when finding an agent meant leafing through a telephone directory? We've changed all that. Agent Hunter is an online database with massive detail on every agent, every agency, and every publisher you're likely to need. The data is completely searchable – and you can sign up for as little as £5. [More info.](#)

10) About Us

The Writers' Workshop was founded by Harry Bingham. Harry is the author of 8 novels (and counting) plus four works of non-fiction, including the industry leading texts on [How To Write](#) and [Getting Published](#).

His novels have sold in Britain, America, Germany France, Italy, Spain, China, Japan and numerous other smaller markets. He has been short- and long-listed for major literary prizes. His work has been adapted for the TV. He has received a lot of critical acclaim, including starred reviews in Publishers Weekly and Kirkus plus various 'book of the year' type selections.

The Writers' Workshop exists to help new writers develop their writing, and our team consists almost entirely of passionate professional authors and former commissioning editors. Our [success stories](#) speak for themselves.

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