

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: EDITORIAL FACTS

QUESTIONS MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED BY CHILDREN'S BOOK WRITERS

by Beverly Horowitz | VP & Publisher, Delacorte Press, Random House Children's Books

SCBWI



PREPARING &
SUBMITTING
YOUR WORK

Where should I send my writing?

It may be difficult to think about your manuscript from the other side of the desk, but do so for a moment and the process may seem a little less overwhelming. Editors need to discover new talent, and indeed, it's what makes their job exciting. With this in mind, you have a real shot at finding a home for your manuscript. It does, however, take some serious work. Unfortunately, many people believe that writing is easy. These same people do not realize that their text goes off into the world alone and must withstand the tests of a variety of readers and tastes as well as changing trends. In light of these demands, it is encouraging that so many manuscripts do find their niche.

The match between the kind of project you've written and the house/editor to whom you send it is important. You may receive a response that says your project is "not right for our list." For some editors, that may simply be a kind way of saying no. For others, it is true—your specific project does not work for them because they do not edit picture books, or nonfiction, or whatever genre you have submitted. No matter how good your manuscript is, you won't get on that list. One thing many authors should know, however, is that if there is some element in a project that strikes the editor as inventive or well written, he or she may take the time to write an encouraging note even if the work is declined. You may have written a work that will, in fact, appeal to only a limited readership; it may not be appropriate for wide distribution. This should not deter you, but should help you put in perspective the enormous task ahead. Now let's assume you are willing and ready to seek the widest recognition possible and form a relationship with a publisher.

Begin to think about where to send your work and develop a plan of action. Some questions to answer: What are you selling? Fiction or nonfiction? A picture book? A middle grade or young adult novel? There are some general rules for picture book submissions. Do not send a text that is equivalent to a greeting card, or send one that is so long it cannot possibly fit the standard thirty-two-page picture book format. Do your research. Never assume your book is for all ages. An editor as well as a bookseller or librarian needs to place the book in some category. Who is really the best reader for your work? Of course, a book can cross over and appeal to other groups, but you should understand that it needs to start in some specific category. Once you know what kind of book you have written, it will be easier to focus.

The SCBWI's "Publishers of Books for Young Readers" list (page 41) is updated annually and is a good place to begin your research. In

addition, the SCBWI's "Edited By" list (page 77) will help you research specific editors' tastes and the types of manuscripts for which they look.

Another valuable resource is the Children's Book Council (CBC), a nonprofit organization of the children's book industry. The CBC maintains a list of publishers who are committed to publishing books for young people. See their website, www.cbcbooks.org, for more information.

Literary Market Place (LMP) is another source for a list of publishers; it also lists literary agents. It is available at any reference desk at public libraries across the country and is updated annually.

Although the CBC and *LMP* are important sources for you to use, your real work is more complex. You need to determine whether there is a publisher who is currently publishing titles in the vein of your work. This seems obvious—send a picture book to any children's publisher, because they all publish picture books, right? Not really. A better approach is to try to figure out exactly what you've got. If you have a holiday story, try to figure out who might have a subcategory of holiday titles. If you don't see any general trend, then you need to visit a bookstore and really look at what is similar to your work and check who the publisher is. Be certain to find the exact imprint and not just the overall corporate name. Many large publishers are umbrellas for smaller imprints. Each imprint has its own staff and its own mission. You can see this for yourself by visiting various publishers' websites. These sites will list each imprint, with examples of exactly the type of books each one publishes. It may seem to you at first glance that all the imprints are essentially the same, but they are not. Within the large houses especially, the identity each imprint has is important.

This distinction, however, leads to another rule: Decide which imprint/editor you are writing to, and do not send your submission to someone else in that group at the same time. Once you have your list of publishers and specific imprints, find out whether unsolicited manuscripts are being accepted. Post-9/11, many houses determined that for security reasons they would return manuscripts addressed simply to "The Editors," without a specific name attached. This may make you feel as if it's even harder to find a home for your work, but understand that from the publisher's side, security measures are not unreasonable. Your research should include finding the names of editors to whom you should submit your work. This security policy applies to many literary agencies as well. It is up to you to find out each recipient's requirements.

How do you discover which agents and editors will accept unsolicited submissions?

No need to hire Sherlock Holmes. The SCBWI has conferences across the country (and throughout the world). Find out about editors who are speaking, even if you do not attend their sessions. Another way to keep up with editors and who might be working where is to read *Publishers Weekly (PW)*, which should also be available at your library and is even sold in some of the larger bookstores. Twice a year, in February and July, *PW* has ads, interviews, reviews, and general coverage of trends and issues in children's books. Some people feel that submitting a manuscript is as anxiety-provoking as applying to college. And in some ways the two are alike! There are plenty of places that could be a perfect match for your manuscript, but not all of them will work out. Nonetheless, like any teenager applying to college, you need to put time and energy into the process so that your manuscript finds a home.

Should I register my work with the US Copyright Office before I send it to a publisher?

The copyright law states that work is copyrighted as soon as it exists in tangible form, so there is no need to register it before mailing it out. Once the work is published, the publisher will file the necessary forms with the Copyright Office at Library of Congress to register your work.

The news in Publisher's Corner is informative, but it can also be dismaying. How can any manuscript, no matter how good, hope to make it out of such a huge slush pile?

If a house has an open-door policy, then submitting your work is worth it. Try to send the project to a specific editor by name. Also, contests are a good bet because the house running the contest wants to find a winner. That is why they bother to run the contest.

A friend and I wish to collaborate on a picture book. One of us is a writer, the other an illustrator. We both know it is not advisable to send a manuscript with proposed artwork unless you are the author and illustrator. Yet we do see books done by teams. Both of us are published, but neither of us is well known. How best to propose such a book?

Realistically, it is best for the author to send in a text, and if this is accepted, the author can suggest the possibility of using the artist he or she knows. However, do not expect that this will be an accepted match. If you do send the project along as a team, you have a smaller chance of acceptance—although it is possible.

What is the best procedure regarding picture book manuscripts? Should I send the manuscript only, or make up a layout by preplanning the actual pages as they will appear in the book, leaving blanks where the art will go?

Most editors can imagine the possible visuals for a picture book text, so it is unnecessary to lay out the book. A double-spaced manuscript is preferable. Remember, part of an editor's job is to work with the art director to create a vision for the final book. Type the manuscript and leave extra space where page breaks fall. The editor who acquires your book will be able to envision as he or she reads the text.

I've sold a story to a magazine. Is it all right to try to get it published in book form as well?

Usually yes, but this always depends on the rights the magazine has purchased. If the magazine has bought nonexclusive serial rights

and agrees to return the rights to you after publication, then the story is yours to do with as you wish once the rights have reverted to you. However, some magazines buy exclusive rights in perpetuity. Check your agreement with the magazine before going on to submit the work to a book publisher. For further information about rights, see "Contract Questions and Answers" (page 277).

Do I really need a cover letter when I submit my manuscript? What difference does it make if I've included an SASE?

An editor gets many submissions. Your cover letter is a way for you to pitch the project so that the editor gets a taste of what to expect. Don't concentrate on selling yourself as much as succinctly letting the editor know about what he or she will be reading. Short and to the point is best; not more than one page should do. If you have published books, you should mention that and list the titles.

Isn't it true that a word-processed manuscript set in type to look like a book will catch an editor's eye and make him more likely to buy it?

No. This is unnecessary and can be off-putting. Send a double-spaced text with one-inch margins all around. Anything else is a waste of effort.

I sent my manuscript off and waited a year for an answer. It came with a form rejection letter. This time I'm sending it out to five different publishers at once. I can't afford to have my work sitting around in an editor's office for a year. I want to get published!

You have every right to submit to anyone you'd like to send your work to; however, you should say in your cover letter that it is a multiple submission. You should also check to be certain that you are submitting to only one editor at an imprint. Do not submit to more than one person at an imprint. Editors find this annoying.

The following procedure is fair to you and the editor and recommended by the SCBWI:

Send a copy of your manuscript and say in your letter that you are doing so.

If you haven't heard within two months, write the editor a friendly note (do not telephone or fax) asking whether she's made a decision. Editors find telephone calls annoying and intrusive, taking them away from the work on their desks. Editors also do not personally keep track of all the unsolicited material that comes in and cannot answer telephone inquiries about the status of a writer's manuscript; letters are much better. (It's a good idea to enclose a self-addressed postcard; the editor can jot a note on it and return it to you quickly.) If the editor says the manuscript is having a second reading, or she'd like more time with it, grant her another month or two before you write again.

If you hear nothing at all during the three months your manuscript is with the editor, write again, stating that you are withdrawing the manuscript from consideration.

Most editors, agents, and the SCBWI believe it's best to send one manuscript to one publisher at a time. It is strongly advised that writers not send more than one manuscript to a publisher at the same time. Save the second one to offer after the first one has been declined—or, more happily, bought.

Will I have better luck with an agent? How do I go about finding one?

It is not necessary to have an agent if you do your research and

submit to a house that has an open policy, or if you learn of an editor and write directly to that person. However, an agent is the person whose business it is to have contacts in the publishing industry. What an agent might do is match your work with an appropriate editor more quickly. However, it is difficult to make agent connections, and the process takes time.

The “Agents Directory” on page 135 of this guide is a listing of agents and artists’ representatives. Once you’ve selected a few agents to write to, send one of them a query letter (with an SASE) outlining your writing history and a sample of your work. Do not submit your work simultaneously to several agents, even though you may need to query several before you find one willing to take you on and with whom you will feel comfortable working. Most agents will not charge you a reading fee or ask you to sign a contract with them or charge you for incidental expenses such as telephone calls and messengers; some agents, however, have instituted such practices.

After you’ve published a number of books, you may find an agent a great help in negotiating better terms and relieving you of concern about various business details. In short, there are arguments for and against new writers having an agent, and the final decision rests with you.

Several publishers have turned down my book. Should I pay to have it published?

This is a decision only you can make. Self-publishing has its place: as a gift for the family, to make a controversial political statement, or to put forward an unconventional point of view. But as a means of selling your book, it falls far short of what a commercial publisher can do. Most libraries and schools won’t even consider purchasing a self-published book for children. Today, technological advances do make it possible to self-publish. The issues after creating the actual printed volume arise in terms of distribution and publicity. It is a big job to do alone; however, the choice is yours. Sometimes it is satisfying enough to print your book and share it with those you most care about. 📖