Specter Services

Proudly Presents:

BLUEPRINTING YOU PRINTING

WHERE TO BEGIN WHEN YOU REACH THE END

SPECTER SERVICES

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THIS BOOK BELONGS TO THE ONE AND ONLY RACONTEUR EXTRAORDINAIRE AND MASTER WORDSMITH:

_____

[YOUR NAME HERE]

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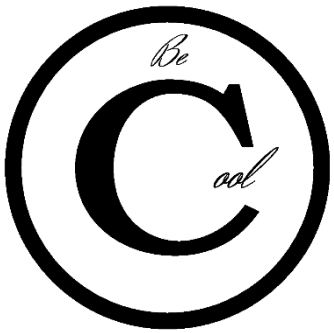
It isn't right to copy, right?
That's black and white to any fool.
You needn't be the least bit "bright" to not be COLD . . .



— YOU FINISHED YOUR BOOK! SO, WHERE'S THE PARADE? —

Writing "Fin" is not the win.
To think as much invites the bin.

Well, you did it. You navigated the horrors of self-isolation and—like Dr. Frankenstein himself—brought forth new (if somewhat recycled) life. An ocean of instant coffee later, your friend base may be in shambles, but how sweet will it be when all those magpies who doubted you eat crow? Subsisting on a less-than-ritzy (Ritz-cracker) diet and burning the candle in a blast furnace, you sacrificed your very sanity to manually manufacture and manicure that manifestly maniacal manuscript.

So, now, at last, having reached the proverbial light at (carpal) tunnel's end, emerging in the vast expanse of—drumroll—plain-old life (just as you left it), you may be wondering, "Where's the parade?" and "When will those paychecks start coming in?"

We'll give it to you straight, friend.

With its boundless backaches and blocks, the collective strain inherent to writing a book is difficult to quantify. One thing, however, is sadly certain: it's nothing compared to the pain imposed by "breaking out," by which we mean ensuring that your masterpiece is read by someone who isn't your mom, your dad, or your cornered bestie.

It's a long, tortuous (read: torturous) path to publication—one that leaves art's playful jungle behind, wending its way through a wasteland of money-minded misanthropes, unromantic algorithms, raw rejection, and garden-variety despair.

No, we're not trying to rain on your parade . . . because there *is* no parade—not yet, at least—and the sooner you make peace with that fact, the sooner you'll be prepared to embark on the last leg of your

journey. It's not the kind of excursion that requires a bit of bravery and a few banknotes. Getting to print is nothing like skydiving, though many newbies do take this route (sans chute). Your true trajectory is assuredly "uphill" . . . or, rather, to scrap that sugarcoating, straight up the ice-slick face of Mt. Moolah, whose skyward summit remains obscured by a thunderstorm of industry secrets, corporate math, and avarice.

Making it to the top will require the right equipment and intimate familiarity with every last foothold. Luckily, your friends at Specter Services, here, are stunning sherpas. Not even the best can always crest, but one thing that we won't allow is for anyone to plunge to their doom on account of a rookie mistake.

With this strategically compact guidebook in tow—and the Specter Staff but a message away—you're all set to pick your course (yes, there's more than one way up), prep for the expedition, and navigate assorted perils preceding sweet success.

While it's true that you've got a lot of competition, there's some good news about this colossal climb. The vast majority of your contemporaries never even make it to base camp. They're navel-gazing elsewhere . . . chasing butterflies . . . waiting for *their* parade. The fact you're planning (or planning on planning) has already put you out in front. And—hey—we've got your back.

Don't be fooled by "feelgood" mantras claiming work should be pure fun. Some tedium's the price to pay for getting primal projects done. So, take a therapeutic breath, embracing your impending fate. It's hard to write a brilliant book but harder still to *prove* it's great. You've reached "The End"? Then, let's begin . . .

— QUESTION TWO: ARE YOU REALLY THROUGH? —

Cutting corners, seek desire.
Know, though, that you play with fire.

The number one reason writers fail to find representation, get printed, and garner a grand following? They jump the gun, viz., start crashing through hurdles before the race has actually started. To wit, they try to sell a book that isn't truly finished, and as one might imagine, this rarely works out.

Now, we understand that it's been a long, arduous process getting this far, but odds are, your title isn't yet where it needs to be. Sure, that's easy (and suspiciously convenient) for professional editors to say, but it's also the statistical truth. By way of example, consider that a liberal 1 percent of peddled manuscripts get picked up. Sure, a sizable sum of proverbial "slush pile" specimens are disastrously derivative and/or meander like the Büyük Menderes.[1] Surely that's not true of *your* stuff—nor are you sifting through psychological issues on the page, which, yes, is known to happen. But as they say, we mustn't break our arm whilst patting our own back. Not being a total outcast doesn't make you one of the country club cool kids. Just because you're "impervious to malaprops"—props there (we've yet to see it)—doesn't mean that your manuscript represents the FL diamond that publishers are scouring humanity's rough for.

Was that an offensive amount of tough love? Well, know this: we don't mean to take the wind out of your sails. We mean to put the win in your sales.

[1] The Büyük Menderes River (Ancient Greek: Maeander/Meander); our reputable reader's word derivation of the day.

So, even if you're pretty sure that you've crossed all your Ts and such, bear with us. Remember that little mistakes can be lurking anywhere. For instance, why would that be Ts instead of t's? (Did you catch it?) You've almost certainly crossed an errant T or two—so beware . . . and read on.

The Comprehensive Not-a-Speck-Missed Self-Defensive Writer's Checklist:

1. Have all the loose ends been tied up (tightly)? ☐
2. Do your characters have their very own voices (and plausible motivations)? ☐
3. Are your genre and market clear as day? ☐
4. Can you read the whole thing without cringing in places? ☐
5. Is the manuscript free of platitudes, cliches, self-praise, redundancies, annoying jargon, homonym flips, indulgence, typos, Freudian slips, syntactic screwups, grammar goofs, citational sins, and dummy subjects? How 'bout dangling modifiers? Awkward constructions? Formatting flops? Nefandous superfluity? Erratic pacing? Ice cream koans? Historic mistakes? Historical errs? Corrosive inconsistency? Passivity? Subjunctive issues? Comma splices? Casual racism? ☐
6. Does the opening content engage as much as (or more than) the latter portions?[2] ☐

[2] Most literary agents/publishers will only take a look at the very beginning of your book (along with relevant query materials [e.g., synopsis, etc.]), so don't count on hooking anyone around the end of "Act I." Your audience will be long gone.

7. Could you adequately sum it up in an elevator pitch with ease? ☐

8. Did you read it back printed out (aloud)?[3] ☐

9. Has the title transitioned through multiple drafts?[4] ☐

10. Have you hired pro editors[5] to comb through the book and ensure it's both mechanically and stylistically sound? ☐

11. Have you also sprung for proofreading[6] services (so as to smooth out the finished product)? ☐

12. Were several beta readers given the chance to have a look-see?[7] ☐

13. Do you feel the completion in your bones? ☐

As for lucky number thirteen, it's never so simple. Us arty types are doomed to ponder endless revisions. At a certain point, of course, the law of diminishing returns will kick in, however. Mortality and all that good stuff. You've gotta bite the bullet at some point—not too late . . . *or* prematurely.

Tick all the boxes above and within? Well, great, but wipe away that grin. We're only getting started!

---

[3] Getting a fresh perspective is key. If you typed your story, then change the font, print it out, and go through each sentence—slowly.

[4] Everyone has heard of Jack Kerouac's legendary *On the Road* "scroll," but in reality, no one puts out their best prose on the first run—and even said title went through several rewrites (folklore notwithstanding). Pro tip: Let it sit a bit. Recall each trick and clever twist? It's hard to see the lines that "missed."

[5] https://www.specterservices.com/editing/

[6] Ibid.

[7] An alpha author sends their book out to bountiful betas, so don't get lazy at this stage. Furthermore, you can't expect useful feedback without putting in some work yourself. Create a classy questionnaire to guide responses—that's the spirit! Book-swap with a fellow scribe. Embrace the self-improvement tribe.

— SELF-PUBLISHING: THE PROS AND CONS —

You've got a story for the ages.
Where, though, should you push your pages?

Publish yourself or print for the shelf? Now, *that* is truly the question. If you've just finished your debut title, you may be wondering how it is, exactly, writers go about getting to print. The answer, in short? With great resolve, tenacity, and a liberal pinch of legendary luck.

In many respects, things are easier than they once were. If you're looking to land a literary rep, you won't have to print out physical copies of your manuscript and mail 'em out to myriad agencies.[8] And if you intend to go it alone, there's no need to fill up your garage with (costly) copies of a book that may never sell.[9] Reaching out to agents has never been simpler. Self-publication has never been swifter. But don't celebrate just yet: that very ease of access has flooded the market like never before—*inundated*, let's say (we're all writers here)—so, doing your homework (and acing it) is vital. To that end, we'll only be supplying the CliffsNotes, but by the end of this chapter, we hope you'll know which course sounds right for you.

Feeling limited? When facing a fork in the road, there are actually *four* possibilities. If you don't want to pick one of the paths before you, there's always the option to turn tail and scurry back to safety. In the present context, this would amount to a rewrite, new project, or career

[8] A few oddballs still demand tree-shredding (as a means to "weed out" less serious applicants), but for all practical purposes, we're dealing with a digital landscape these days.
[9] Still a thing via vanity publishing—not our recommendation!

change. (Hopefully, we're past the point of cold feet and this wouldn't even cross your mind.)

Oh, and, sure, you *could* reject the road altogether, go off-grid, and hack your way through the adjoining verdure. Plenty have entered *that* dusky wood. Its floor is littered with bones-obscure. Such courage is commendable, but "bold" and "bright" are different things.[10] Don't squat in a lonesome thicket writing doggerels to yourself—what a waste.

Are doctors who don't see patients doctors? Well, what about writers who haven't got readers? You've tons of talent, and so it's your duty to share that gift with others—but how? Self-publishing makes it simple (read: *deceptively* simple). Read on:

The Joys and Woes of Self-Slung Prose

There are plenty of positives when it comes to autonomous authorship. Just don't get too excited, as the list of downsides is equally ample. Instead of delivering one dramatic dopamine hit before dragging you back to depressive Earth, we'll bundle together the good and bad in a boldly balanced yin-yang fashion, keeping things nice and real.

(+) Creative Control Is Yours!

Rigid independent thinker? Rugged individualist? Have wild ideas that don't conform to mammon-minded company hacks? Distraught by the thought of a humorless henchman shredding your beautiful baby to bits? Perhaps you should pull yourself up by the bootstraps, as this way, you needn't deal with "backers" breathing down your neck.

[10] As a buffer against the possible pain of possible failure (rejection and such), it's common for artists to *guarantee* their failure via "apathy's" crutch.

(-) Creative Control Is . . . Yours

Autonomy is great and all, and being free is truly swell. But anarchistic echo chambers culminate—at times—in Hell. If Einstein had some bad ideas, maybe you'll have bad ones too. Real pros can reel your prose in when your *skull* needs breaking through.

Besides, there's more to selling books than putting together top-notch tales. You'll need to format (not so fun), create a cover, advertise, conduct a consequential launch, build hype, and manage online sales. A wiz with words you may well be, but trust us when we tell you that those "words" don't often translate to effective business tactics.

(+) A Bigger Piece of the Pie for Thee

It wouldn't make sense for us to provide a list of the best places to sell your e-book, as we'd have to update *this* e-book on a weekly basis. Suffice it to say, the platforms are many, and you can use any number of them—not true in traditional territory. Best of all, though, is the fact that your royalty rates are rather respectable, ranging between 50 and 70 percent on average. Yes, it takes some blood,[11] sweat, and tears, but when you do the baking, you can hold on to most of the dough.

(-) Likely Far Less Pie

You probably saw this coming, eh? The superficial figures may beckon, but 99 percent of a pittance will only leave your pie hole agape. It isn't easy to land amongst the "upper crust," in any case—so keep things in perspective and prepare to work for your cut.

(+) Total Tweakability

[11] Stress-based hypertension

One major advantage of self-publication is the ease with which changes can be made. Find a flub? Go back and scrub. You needn't be haunted by biting bloopers, gruesome gaffes, or indelible defects. Need to update? Great. Go on then. One can beat stupidity by way of full fluidity. Lucidity ain't fun unless a recognized validity can still result in saving face. Perfection may, indeed, be yours (despite the poky pace).

(-) Less "Unique Ability"

Rad. You've got a "living doc" that positively twists and bends. But mankind tends to dig the tomes that sit on shelves in stores with musks (however few customers frequent those husks). Self-publication should carry no shame. Yet—shooting straight—you won't likely claim the same respect as your printed pal.

(+) Longer Life for the Book

Unless your story goes on to become a "modern classic," it will only remain in bookstores for a limited time. E-books, on the other hand, are practically immortal. You can keep a self-published title on sale . . . even if it's not selling.

(-) Shorter Life for the Writer

Okay. That may be unduly dramatic. But the truth is, when you score an agent (and publisher), your hands are freed up to type, scribble, and otherwise squeeze out literary genius on the reg. Self-publication takes tons of work, and while doing it all may furnish self-*pride*, you may not be jazzed about the fact that little time remains for fresh art—and that's the most important part!

(+) Speedy

When you've devoted years—dare we say decades?—to the creation at hand, depleted patience is understandable. Alas, traditional publication requires some serious longanimity in itself. Just hearing back from an agent can take many moons . . . and you likely won't get any response unless you put together a powerful query package. And that's just the first step. You may have sold the agent, but—reminder—the agent has gotta sell *you*. And assuming they do, it's a good long way before your book sees the light of day. The timeline varies, but "offer to launch" will often take up to two years.

When you go your own way, you can publish today, though we don't recommend a major rush job. That's the mistake that most newbs make—and newbs need not be rubes.

(-) Spendy

Sure, if you bypass all the vital processes that make a book great, you won't break the bank—and you won't break out—but we know *you* plan to carry clout. So, put aside your need for speed and first consider the need for *seed*. When you do your own thing, you pay for the bling, and those upfront costs do often sting.

Remember, though, to be the best, you always need to self-invest. You don't get rich by pinching pennies—only copper, zinc, and blisters. At "The End," be set to spend. The pain won't be in vain.

Word to the Wise

— Self-Publishing Tips —

Must you catch a genie or a bit of lightning in a bottle? Nope. You've got more active hope. You're both the chief cook and bottle washer—meaning you forge your own fortune.

- Budget beforehand, not en route, and outsource *most* of the work.
- Research the strongest sales platforms (and look into lending libraries).
- Incorporate a copyright page and understand ISBN numbers.
- Make use of beta readers (beyond your circle of friends and family members).
- Lack a white-knuckle grip on your genre and general market? You aren't quite ready—always know your niche!
- Hire a top-notch editor/proofreader. "Saving" money here will cost you!
- Snag an awesome cover designer. BEWARE: The bulk of prospective buyers will only see a thumbnail version, so make sure your cover looks stellar small.
- Create an author website and an array of social media pages.
- Even if it feels beneath you, start an author blog—they work!
- Put in place and populate a mailing list, as newsletters keep you connected to your readers.
- Start marketing early (six to twelve months before your book's release).
- Make sure your title, subtitle, blurb, and tagline are out of this world. NOTE: We're here to help with that!
- Confirm your book description is teeming with gleaming SEO.
- Debut authors, remember the goal: to build a massive following, so keep your eyes on the prize (and don't get hung up on making your millions just yet).
- Never rely on those you know to make your book blow up.
- Be realistic but not defeatist.

- Be proud of your prose but not elitist.
- Gather reviews like golden nuggets (and don't let the bad ones go to your noggin).
- Lastly, may the contest be amusive, not abusive!

Forget the snobs who try to say that independence doesn't pay. It offers better royalties, more freedom, and some super perks. But if you're bent on old-school cool—intent on selling noble yarns at Barnes & Noble—that's just great. We'll give you (almost[12]) every tool you need to wholly dominate. Celebrity and cash await, but winning the West won't be easy.

[12] Writing chops not included

— MEGA-CONGLOMERATES VERSUS BOUTIQUES —

Traditional publication the mission?
Know you've got mad competition.

Despite their polar differences, those with a penchant for creative expression and those with an acute talent for creating cutthroat business contracts will always be forced to pair up and dance—because both vocations will always exist and neither archetype will ever possess the skillset to take the other's place.

Lacking renown, you may be feeling intimidated as you approach the palace, so we'll want to equip you with as much industry knowledge as possible. (You shouldn't hit the dance floor till you know your prospective partners, of course.)

You've heard of the Big Five, right?

- Penguin/Random House
- Hachette Book Group
- Harper Collins
- Simon and Schuster
- Macmillan

Well, consider these publishers royalty—and they're not to be approached directly (about royalties). You can certainly try, but unless you're already a well-established author, expect resounding silence, as these people are deaf to the peasantry's pleas.

What you'll need is a literary agent—a.k.a. matchmaker—to point you out from across the bustling ballroom and put in a good word. So, how does one go about securing such a pivotal personage? We'll take a

look at that very process presently, and soon enough, you'll be tripping the light fantastic . . . busting moves . . . cutting a rug.

Unwearying Querying 101

You've been at this thing for a while now, but don't rush through the process of seeking representation. It's like growing out your hair. Sure, getting a little trim may seem counterintuitive, but you're not doing yourself any favors by growing out split ends. Take your time, do it right, and shine like a L'Oréal model.

Ahead, we'll cover the several steps involved in finding your lifelong savior—to whom you must, yourself, appear the source of clear salvation.

NOTE:

There's more than one way to ~~skin~~ pat a cat, but this is our method—and, yes, it works wonders.

1. Know What You're Up Against

Go in blind—you'll be in a bind. Before you move, propel your mind. Determine who you're dealing with, and let that info guide you.

- Literary agents receive thousands of submissions annually (read: these people are busy). Ninety-nine percent of said submissions are rejected (read: these people are picky).
- From your perspective, agents may look like Übermenschen—glorious gatekeepers with untold powers—but really, at the end of the day, they're simple salespeople, and like *all* salespeople, they want a product that sells itself. So, frame your pitch in such

a way that demonstrates that working with you will mean no work for them.

- Some agents will accept unsolicited manuscripts. Some won't. Don't bother chasing the latter bunch. You'll only be wasting your time—and theirs.
- The majority of agents work for a literary agency, but reading the company homepage is never enough. You'll need to research each agent to identify their unique submission guidelines, wish list, and "ish list" (e.g., genres they don't touch—heads up, poets and memoirists). Again, if they say they don't want what you're pushing, be smart and elsewhere peddle your ware.
- Unless your strategy is to lasso a greenhorn,[13] the agents you're looking into will have a client list. Figure out who they've worked with before to understand if you'll be a good fit. In fact, you can start at the end and work backward—like many forward thinkers do. (Consider books akin to your own; then, hone in on their respective agents.)
- Cyber-stalk to your heart's content. The more you know about your mark, the better your odds will be.

2. Quadruple-Check Your Work

We've been through this before, but . . . are you, like, totally sure your manuscript is ready? If the Specter Staff has had their way with it, you should be sitting good, but the story we edited isn't necessarily the story you're trying to sell—and there's a big difference between proofreading and developmental collaboration. Approximately zero agents will sit down and read your whole book right away, which means that the first leg is critically important. (Being the only leg you've got,

[13] This isn't an actual strategy—at least not one we'd recommend!

that baby best not be broken!) It's a painful decision to rewrite your opening chapter(s), but most writers don't know what they're doing when they start a story. They hit their stride at some point but need to retrace their steps and do damage control. You haven't gone back for another draft? Expect a querying backdraft!

3. Knock Your Synopsis Out of the Ozone (Pros Recommended)

Virtually every agent/agency will ask for a synopsis (i.e., a full overview—including spoilers). Even for excellent writers, this can be a real nightmare too. After all, it was hard enough condensing your story into a hundred thousand words. Now, you're supposed to pack it into a page or two? (That sounds bananas.) We won't try to tell you how to craft the perfect synopsis within *this* book, but let us either polish yours or make from scratch a glitzy hook. You want to get published? You better believe that this doc means as much as your manuscript.

4. Absolutely Kill Your Query (Pros Recommended Again)

When we say "query letter," what we (modernly) mean is a query *email*. This is your first point of contact, so dropping the ball here isn't an option. All queries will include a brief explanation of your story along with the genre, market, and word count. In most cases, the final paragraph will be used to highlight your credentials and/or further explain your connection to the artwork (e.g., #OwnVoice).

Again, we'd like to write up the core query for you, but if you intend to go solo, be sure to play around with the piece early on. You want to know precisely what you're selling before you seek out an agent, so have a nice long meditation, and do consider these caveats:

- Don't be overly cute or creative. These vendors need neither bells nor whistles. They won't be fooled by smoke and mirrors.

What they want is a short and sweet—succinct—summation of why your work will buy them a better set of wheels.

- Write to a person. "Deer Agent" won't cut it.
- Don't get entangled in boring "themes." That's not the way to garner squat. You wouldn't pitch Harry Potter as a "coming-of-age tale." Sell the *plot*. While everything under the sun has been done, you've got a twist they can't resist—so focus on that alone.
- What do the following lines have in common?
  - Fabulous fun for the whole family!
  - Perfect for young and old alike!
  - A raucous genre-bending adventure with no particular market in mind!

  This isn't a three-ring circus you're selling. It isn't made for everyone. And even if it is, you'll need to pick a demographic, son. Plus: never come up with a novel genre—even if the name's on point. Your agent is looking for "standard fare" with just enough newness to placate the masses. Don't scare 'em off. They're skittish by nature.
- Resist the temptation to liken your book to mega-hits. (They've heard it before.)
- Include a mini-bio, but—Lord—don't let yourself go overboard. Avoid:
  - Your non-related degree.
  - An anecdote from way back when.
  - How all your pals and profs can see you're a virtuoso with a pen.
  - A full account of all your pets (however hip their names may be).
  - A shout-out to the New York Mets.
  - The places that you'd like to see.

You may be all that and a bag of chips (along with several fancy dips), but please: dispense pure relevance. Digress from the jump—you'll land in the dump.

5. Compile a Kickass List of Agents (Organization + Patience Required)

So, at this stage, you've got the lion's share of your query package put together, and it's time to go get 'em, tiger.[14]

"Matchmaker matchmakers" aren't a thing, but you can see this through. It's cool—like clipping all the grass in town with a nineteenth-century reel mower.

Easy.

Hard is an existential crisis. Hard is having no clue what to do. But now you're certain of what you're selling (and, plus, you have yourself a passion). Motorlessly manicuring lawn upon lawn may prove a yawn. It may be a bore *and* painful chore. But when you're truly motivated, busywork is gladly accepted. Want to get? You sweat. Forget the very notion of shortcuts (nuts). We'll show you how to mow the whole nine yards (though it's more like nine hundred).

Easy.

Open up a virgin file and title it "Query List" (we insist). And then the fun begins . . .

- The perennial query *we* get: "How many agents should I send my book to?" The answer: "As many as possible—as long as you're not just "playing the numbers." Quality trumps quantity . . ." (Some agents ask for "exclusive submissions," but that's—in a word—derisible, so don't let it throw you off.[15]

[14] Mixed metaphors plague your writing? Nip that problem in the bud!
[15] Boy and Girl Scouts, cover your ears here. What they don't know won't hurt 'em.

- One thing to get straight: no agency will want you to send off submissions to more than one of their agents at once, so you'll be reading a whole lot of profiles. (*The Count of Monte Cristo* offers a comparable *word* count to what lies before you.) Just look at the process as a game called Who's Gonna Make My Dreams Come True? This isn't something to rush.
- When it comes to finding the agents themselves, you have any number of options online. You can subscribe to a pay site such as *Publishers Marketplace* (if you have money to burn), but there are plenty of free databases (e.g., *Query Tracker*) that make the hunt a no-brainer. At a certain point, it'll get hard to remember which agencies you've already scoped out, though, so do yourself a favor and stay organized. Find someone looking for your kind of title? Add these details to your list:
    - Agency name (+ homepage link)
    - Agent name (+ bio link)
    - Relevant information

  When you find an agency that just doesn't jibe with your wonderful work, respectfully note as much on your list (so you'll never see those schmucks again).
- For starters, you should have a "magic number" in your head. You're the magician here, so that number is one you'll have to choose, but let's say you go with twenty-five. Once you get there, give yourself a "Big (high) Five." Then, let's keep moving.

6. Cater to Each as if They're Your Only

In reality, it would be ridiculous to write a whole new query letter for everyone you contact—which is why you've already done most of the legwork. Even so, we have to say: a personal touch goes a long, long way (think vibrating cushions vs. masseuses).

Hitting multiple agents with an email blast is criminal. You wouldn't do that, but nearly as bad is the clearly generic message with a name subbed in. (How personal!) When you open a piece of junk mail beginning with "Mr./Ms. (Surname), run don't walk . . ." do you get that warm and fuzzy feeling that letters (texts of yore) supply?

You're reaching out to someone with whom you hope to do business, so sound profesh.[16] You won't be able to wine and dine 'em, but make sure they do feel nice and special.

Mention something personal that can't be pasted, but then move on (as no one likes a suck-up).

- I write you today because you've expressed an interest in fiction titles. (Broad)
- I write you today as a HUGE fan of your work with author X. (Obsequious)
- Hey! As a fellow feline lover, I'm dropping a line to clue you in to a manuscript you need right meow. (100 percent NO)

Here's an example of what might delight, not fill the reader with mortal fright:

> Having read your recent interview in *Trendy Times*, I'm pleased to present the very title you mentioned topping your current wish list—a YA urban fantasy story that sets its sights on social themes.

Don't rush. Don't gush. Don't get too lush. Just show 'em you've put in an honest effort—and bring things back to your book!

[16] The word *profesh* is not profresh.

7. Further Improve Your Odds

Some agents will respond within twenty-four hours. Some will take a number of weeks, and others several months. Then you have the swellheads who can't be bothered to write back at all. That's okay, though. How bad do you want a general-purpose rejection letter anyway? If you're expecting a bullet-point breakdown of how to blossom as a writer . . . expect other things (e.g., "Thanks but no thanks!").

Truth be told, it's a tricky trade. Like, no one works more without being paid (respect or money) than writers, right? But worry not. Don't plead or beg. It's you who lays the golden egg . . .

So . . . while you're waiting for those nos to trickle in—nonetheless holding out hope—use your time wisely. *Don't* beat yourself up or sit in a dark room, contemplating follow-up letters. The next step is finding even more agents. You know how it works now. Seek and destroy.

8. Repeat Until Your Goal Is Complete

You can call us out for dipping into the self-help waters, but Michael Jordon has got you covered here:

> *I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I've lost almost three hundred games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.*
>
> —GOAT

Ballin' and scrawlin' are different sports, but be it on the court or page, the blazin', bound-for-glory sorts account for every latent stage. Prepare yourself, *then* share yourself. You'll *then* be "all the rage."

Alternative Agent Access

It's always good to explore every option, and when it comes to connecting with reps, you're limited not to agency profiles. Let's take an expeditious gander at other ways to "hook up" (with candor).

Social Media

Many writers aren't so social—hence the whole hermetic trade—but making millions takes a team, and friends are fun. They must be made. What's more, SM has deets galore: what agents now are digging for. Explore these cats' accounts—a bore but possibly your chance to score.

Conferences

More of a down-home charmer type? Prefer a chance to sell your stuff in person—perhaps over drinks (on you)? A conference then makes lots of sense, and oftentimes they're soothing too. Surround yourself with blotter kinship—rhapsodist camaraderie. You'll get to wag your idle chin and learn a vital thing or three.

There's nothing like a handshake when it comes to getting foot through door. So, shake things up. A real-life date with Lady Luck is worth the chore.

Blogs and Online Classes

Many agents maintain blogs, and some teach online writing classes. These can furnish killer knowledge (rarely credit; go to college). Better

yet, they offer up an inlet free from hungry masses. Thus, your brainy boat may find the perfect channel for its haulage.

Treat each line of cybertext with all the care you would your prose. One keenly crafted post could woo the agent host—who knows?

A Peek at Sleek Boutique Mystique

Unlike old-school Goliath, a boutique publisher—David in this analogy—slingshots specialized content, so due diligence will ensure that you're on brand and on *target*. Your Nordic noir may be too niche for those within the Big Five club, but find your base and scratch its itch—you'll never dumpster dive for grub.

Let's first dig through the pluses:

- These guys are always glad to hear from "rookies"—any time of year.
- The New York crew does "tried and true." Boutiques embrace the bold and new.
- Intent to give a proper home to pearls that met commercial cracks, these acquisition editors will read beyond your maiden line. Disposed to use a fine-tooth comb instead of an exclusive ax, they tend to be not predators but teddy bears—indeed benign.[17]
- Compared to hotdog NY joints, these small fries kick back queries fast.
- You'll likely have more input, which can prove a boon—and total blast.

[17] Know they're still just *business* bears—exuberant with buck in paw—so show 'em that they'll soon get theirs (and that they're struck with awe).

- Your royalties (read: royalty percentages) are often vast, which means when you break through, at last, great sums of cheese will be amassed.
- These independent, philosophic, radical, eccentric teams can be a lot more fun than stuffy poohbahs with their digit dreams.

Alas, for every single pro, you know there, too, exists a con, and though they've got no afterglow, they're crucial to reflect upon:

- While "nicheness" has a certain richness, "smaller press" means "smaller fame."
- Though "tried and true" may trouble you, "untried and false" is also lame.
- Like lemonade that's sold by tots, the operation may be "sweet," but—you're astute; connect the dots—the expertise is incomplete.
- The five colossi shall survive, but little presses often fold, which means that when you do "arrive," you may still wind up in the cold.
- You'll likely have to handle both the marketing and proofing work.
- Boutique advances may be smaller—sure to starving artists irk.
- That dreamer-teeming dream team can become a monumental drag, for raging eccentricity is bound to be a random bag.

Admittedly, most writers use whatever foothold they can find. A beggar can't (or shouldn't) be a chooser, right? And signed *is* signed. So, do explore each avenue, and soon your gift to humankind will be on course to blow (with force) society's collective mind. Remember, reaching greatness takes a rather grating grind.

— A WORD BEFORE YOU GO (FAR) —

It's almost time to fly the nest.
But give those wings a pre-flight test.

Affecting upward of 75 percent of the population—99 percent of writers[18]—*glossophobia* is a formidable fear, and unsurprisingly, there's no shortage of advice regarding how to keep yourself calm before delivering a speech. The strategies are manifold, and many do prove efficacious. Belly breathing. Slumber. Yoga. Cardio. Complete hydration. Yet, the "trick" that's good as gold—that's absolutely perspicacious? Easy (yet so very hard): extreme amounts of preparation. When you're really ready, you'll be steady in your station.

Sure, that may seem like a no-brainer, but most of us are hardwired to "save time" . . . which accounts for a mountain of waste.[19] So, when you hear that unctuous voice that says, "You've got this," don't rejoice. Be sure *yourself,* and even then, keep preppin'. It's the soundest weapon.

Now that your book baby's been born, you may be experiencing some "post-artum" depression. (Natural enough.) And you may be riddled with anxiety as well. (Totally normal.) After all, a "happy home" is what it's really all about. But once again, when you're in doubt: prepare, prepare, prepare. *Prepare*. Don't rush it. Plan the perfect route. Then, be a tortoise—not a hare.

All else above, write on with love, and mind these final points with care . . .

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[18] A Specter Services supposition
[19] Mt. Irony

Ten Valedictory Tidbits

I. Don't Go It Alone

Writing is a solitary endeavor, so it's common for writers to develop a standoffish, lone-wolf attitude that hurts them in the long run. While working, feel free to embrace your solivagant status. Revel in it! Yet, like Buck in *The Call of the Wild*, you must by teamwork be beguiled. Done right, when your adventure ends, you'll be amongst a pack of friends. (Think: beta readers, cover artists, agents, proofers, merchants, fans.) Direct your snout to sniff them out, traversing foreign lands.

II. Envision Success

Sure, this is a bit self-helpy, too, but imagining yourself having "made it" is a tremendous tool nonetheless. Why? Because it forces you to consider what it is that you're actually after, which then allows you to deconstruct the whole maze. (You're famous! Writing for whom, exactly? What are you penning? Where? When? Why? Just how did this happen [non-abstractly]? Are you poised to reach the sky?)

III. Got a Great Schtick? Forget It!

This bears repeating: if you're considering novel ways to make the query package for your novel "stick out," then stop—immediately. Crazy fonts and colors? Awful. Comedy? Just quit it, Carlin. Glitter and balloons? Oh, no. There's only one real way to go. A streaker screaming curses down in Central Park *will* get attention. Yet, attention has gradations—run in fear vs. salutations. If your book needs fireworks or only gets a passing mention, agencies will pray you scope out other occupations.

IV. Pause to Pinpoint Problems

Trying to get your poetry chapbook published by a major outfit? Submitting a thousand-page children's story? Still attaching a mid-manuscript excerpt to queries (instead of the requested pages)? If and when you hit a wall, sit back and seek a window, door, or hole through which to army crawl. (Engage a poesy magazine. Consider a series. Follow instructions!) Typically, these "mystery issues" don't take grand deductions.

V. Reward Yourself Along the Way

This needn't be as simple as an ice cream binge—though the stony streets of life *do* call for some rocky road" now and again. So as not to go insane, you've many means to cachinnate. Remove the salesy ball and chain. In literature, luxuriate. Compose a few-page story and remind yourself that writing's fun. Enjoy completion's glory. Then, return to get the real work done.

VI. Ply Your Trade with Patience

Peddling a prosal "product" may feel worlds away from the craft you love, but—hey—you're still a storyteller here. Now you're just telling the tale of your tale. A tricky task. So, test yourself! 'Cause that's a tale you've gotta nail before you claim your rightful shelf. You had the Zen serenity to bring a book to life—alone. *Maintain* that calm identity until your name is known.

VII. Redirect Rejection and Dequantitate Dejection

The querying process is a *learning* process, and "no" doesn't mean "no good." (When "adult coloring books" are topping the sales charts, it's quite possible that your writing is *too* good.) In all likelihood, you're looking at your manuscript as a piece of artwork. *That's* good. Without

question, though, the publishing people see it as prospective *merchandise*. Just because it doesn't strike one agency as lucrative does *not* mean that another won't. And even more importantly, a "rebuff" doesn't mean your stuff falls short of brilliant beauty.

VIII. Look Ahead

Hunched over a keyboard, it's easy to botch this one, and many writers peg "the publication game" as something of a lottery. (Write a hit and sell that sucker. Then, kick back forevermore.) However—in reality—the challenge is a bigger chore. You've got a brand to slowly build. A fanbase to accumulate. A site with content to be filled. A business to incorporate. So, don't just sit around and wait for "yes" amidst a stream of "nos." Collaborate. Conceive. Create. A happy end compose.

IX. Snag Yourself a Specter

We love stories of every description, but *success* stories are our personal favorite—especially when we play a pivotal role in 'em. The Specter Staff has got one mission: put you in the best position. Breaking through: reserved for few. So, let us stack the odds for you. Indeed, you're full of erudition. Yet, to garner recognition, one must trounce the competition. What *we* deftly do.

X. Embrace the ~~Cold Hard~~ Warm, Soft Truth

You may not want to hear this, but most inaugural efforts never "land." It's all part of the journey, though, so don't despair. Consider Harper Lee, for instance. In the 1950s, she wrote a novel called *Go Set a Watchman*, which was ultimately thrown to the wayside. Did *she* thus succumb to gloom? No way. She grew. And have you heard? She wrote draft two in some dark room. It's called *To Kill a Mockingbird*. So, don't

let pessimistic (or hubristic) thinking mar *your* word. See every step as progress, and your vision won't be blurred.

Personal Applause

Writing ain't for tickers-faint. It takes some brass to face the utter blankness of a brand-new page—to tear from nothing, grip, and mold a cast and its respective morals. Look at you: without complaint—without a witness or a wage—you spilled your heart (a goblet-gold), afforded neither love nor laurels.

Now, your work is scarcely done. In fact, you've only just begun. For this is where you finally share—and fight to bite the fruits you're due. You're on the rise—no setting sun. Completely you (the only one), it's time to tread with crowning care, in navigating this debut.

Despite your righteous writing, though—despite your poignant plot and charm—the world, in all its senselessness, may fail to ever understand. Should this be so, espouse not woe, aggression, worry, or alarm.

You've dared to dream and *coalesce . . .*

So, give yourself a hand.