

Preparing for Success

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Preparing for Success is a three-part series targeted to aspiring writers. Any writer who decides to pursue publication, whether through self-publishing, e-publishing, or traditional publishing enters a crowded, competitive field. For most of us it will be a long, bumpy, confusing ride. If we use our unpublished time wisely, we will stand out from the crowd and our hard work will pay off.



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Part 1: The Mental Game

The moment we decide we want to be published, a mental shift occurs. The safety of writing as a hobby is stripped away. *Can I do this? What if I try and fail? Or what if I'm an instant success?* We're pummeled with excitement, euphoria, and uncertainty.

I can only speak for myself, but when I decided to pursue publication, I was **certain** I could write a good book and get it published. After all, reading was my favorite hobby; I knew a great story when I saw one. All I had to do was come up with a fabulous plot line, write the book, and send it to my target publisher. And if my first book didn't sell, surely my second book would. As I wrote my first novel, I skimmed the library's copy of *Writer's Market*, checked the publisher's website, and took notes on how to submit to them.

Imagine my happiness months later when they requested a partial. *This is it. All my dreams are going to come true. I'll have a book on store shelves next year!*

Four years later, I have yet to see my books on store shelves, but I've learned so much on my journey to this point that I'm—I can't believe I'm admitting this—glad my first books never made it stores.

In fact, I'm convinced these years have been God's way of preparing me for success. Each setback has strengthened me. Even with a supportive, fabulous agent, I keep my expectations realistic. My initial bravado morphed to true confidence in my ability to write a good, publishable book, and that confidence could only be earned by **mastering the mental game**.

Common Mental Traps Aspiring Writers Fall Into:

1. **I'm special/unique and above the average writer.**

Initially, we might not realize how many people are aspiring to be published authors. We may have a sense of entitlement or a deluded idea that we are somehow above the trials of other writers. *Sure, it took them seven years to get published, but that won't happen to me.* The reality? We have no idea how long it will take us to get published.

2. **I was born with writing talent. I don't have to study.**

Another pitfall of fresh, aspiring writers is the false belief that talent is a set trait. Most writers *are* born with special gifts, but talent must be polished, nurtured, strengthened. All writers need to continuously hone their craft.

3. **My degree in creative writing guarantees I'll get published.**

Sorry, but even with a degree, you're going to have to study the market. You'll need to read the genre you write, learn mainstream fiction techniques, and get a critique partner. Whatever your literary background, expect to spend a lot of time learning about the publishing industry.

4. **Rejected? I should quit. I'll never be any good.**

The first rejection can be brutal. I remember feeling as if I'd lost two pints of blood. It took me a few days to process everything. The only advice I can give is **don't give up**. This is a setback, a learning tool, not the end of your writing career. Keep writing. Keep submitting.

5. **No one understands how hard it is to get published.**

Well, duh! Most people have no clue how competitive the publishing field is. It really doesn't matter. We can use fear to distract ourselves by thinking about the thousands of queries we're competing against, but at the end of the day, we only have control over one thing: writing the best book we are capable of.

6. **I'm scared. I've invested years into this. What if it never happens?**

I struggle with this one all the time. I still struggle with it. All I know is writing is the only thing I want to do with my life. It's part of my soul. It's necessary. And I want to share my writing with the world, so I keep going.

7. **It's not fair! She got a book deal?**

Ah, envy, that vicious bully. Some writers will get their very first book published. It's true. And we can't help but wonder if they found some magical fast track. How did they get picked up? Why didn't we? Again—this doesn't help us. It distracts us. If you're struggling with envy, remember the countless other souls in the same boat as you.

8. **My book isn't as funny/suspenseful/outrageous/etc...as so-and-so's.**

Good! We're striving to offer something special in our books. When we get caught up in comparing our books to someone else's, we diminish our own value. We don't have to be like anyone else. Our writing should stand out for what we have to offer.

Mental Tools for Success

1. **Humility**

If you, like me, sometimes struggle with pride, facing rejections can be extremely humbling. However, when we experience lows, we're better prepared to empathize with others in our shoes. Even when I'm celebrating a writing high, I'm careful not to overdo my public excitement out of respect for fellow aspiring writers. Yes, we all celebrate our friends' successes, but if we're in a

slump or received a rejection, reading post after post about the wonderful life of a fellow author can grate our nerves to shreds.

2. **Confidence**

Confidence can be confused with pride or arrogance. Confidence in your writing is when you know deep in your soul that your writing is the best it can be at this time. I didn't gain true confidence until I entrusted my writing to critique partners, studied the craft extensively, and took to heart the advice offered in rejection letters.

3. **Peace**

I've made peace with the fact my current books may get turned down. Or they may get picked up. It may take months on a pub board to get a contract. It may take months for me to write my next book and maybe that will be my break-in book. I still have a nagging sense of wanting it now, but I no longer put unrealistic gauntlets down, like *this MUST be the one*. Really? Must it? My life will go on pretty much the same regardless.

Often, we put a time frame or other limitations on our writing aspirations. *If I'm not published in a year, I'll give up* or *If this book gets rejected, I'll know it's a sign I'm not meant to be published*.

This kind of thinking doesn't help us. **Why put an expiration date on our dreams?** We have a lifetime to do the things we want to do, so throw off the rules and embrace the fact that you're a writer. You're doing something amazing and courageous by writing and submitting your work. Be proud of yourself!

Part 2: Writing

The shift from writing for our personal pleasure to writing for publication requires a different approach to our work. The time we put in may not change, but the consistency does. We spend more time studying how to make our writing stronger, and we recognize that outside eyes are imperative to polishing our work. We also start hearing terms like marketability, hot genres, likable characters, queries, agents, and proposals. What seemed so easy—if writing is ever easy!—quickly grows complicated and overwhelming.

By chatting with published writers and reading publishing news, I've pinpointed key components to master in our writing that will prepare us for success.

1. **Put in the hours.**

Sporadic writing doesn't cut it. Writing for publication is a job, an amazing, exciting, fun job, but still a job. It's no longer a hobby to pick up or set down at our whim. We must schedule time to write consistently. Whether it's five hours on Saturday mornings, fifteen minutes every evening, or eight hours a day, five days a week, we must treat our time with respect. The obvious reason for this is to make progress on our projects, but eventually, we will be given deadlines by our publishers. Most of us will not have two years to write a book when we are contracted. We must nurture our discipline now.

2. **Practice doesn't always make perfect.**

The old advice, *if you want to be a good writer, keep writing* is true to a certain extent. The more we do something, the better we usually become. But if a child doesn't have a good teacher or coach to show him the proper techniques, he *will* grow physically stronger, but he *still won't* get

the ball in the basket or learn how to play his position. The same is true with writing. If we don't study the craft, whether through classes, books on writing, or by talking to published writers, we will continue to make the same mistakes, and these mistakes will hold us back.

3. **Study. Learn. Repeat.**

Writers are always learning. We never “know it all.” And even when we've mastered one aspect of writing, we realize we need to freshen up our understanding of a different aspect. For instance, I have a few books on basic grammar that I read once or twice a year. I also enjoy reading blog posts with short reminders about conflict, pace, and characterization, because they refresh the concepts and spur me to improve my scenes.

4. **Read.**

This one will make many writers groan, and it's just my opinion, but I urge writers to read. Read in your genre. Read non-fiction. Read magazines, newspapers, blogs. Read classics. Read comics. Read for fun. Read for work. Just keep filling your mind with other authors' take on life, and it will hone your own. Reading forces me to question my beliefs, tighten my writing style, and nourish my dreams.

5. **Critique and be critiqued.**

It's no secret we are often blind to problems in our manuscripts. We don't realize the brilliant chapter that clears up our hero's past is really a big info dump, or that our heroine is coming across as a shrill psycho until a kind reader points it out. Finding a trustworthy critique partner and having the maturity to accept her assessment propels our writing forward. Obviously, we need to use our own judgment about the advice given, but regardless, we have to be able to take criticism in order for our writing to improve.

On the other hand, critiquing other writers' work forces us to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in their manuscripts. We can't help but absorb skills.

6. **Study the Market**

So you love your historical paranormal romantic suspense set in the twelfth century told from eight points of view. Who wouldn't? Well, before you send queries out for your masterpiece, it's a good idea to study agent and editor blogs and learn about marketability. No one is saying you can't write the story of your heart, but wouldn't you rather know now if it's going to be a near-impossible sell?

Marketability isn't only about hot genres, it's about what story elements are popular in your genre, what topics haven't been selling well, the ideal book length, if multiple points-of-view are desirable, if first person or third person works best, if the setting is appropriate, and which publishers will be the best fit for your book.

The days of sitting down and just writing aren't over, but expect to devote extra time to studying the writing craft and the publishing industry. And try not to get overwhelmed and feel like you have to fix everything at once. It takes time to put new skills in practice, and slowly they become natural to us.

Most of all, celebrate each small success. In many ways, making the transition from aspiring writer to published writer is **like earning a master's degree**. We won't learn everything overnight, but we'll pave the new information on top of our general knowledge to build a foundation that will last.

Part 3: Standing Out

At some point on our journey from aspiring writer to published author, we become aware that half the human population seems to be trying to get published. Agents' in-boxes are full—they request few manuscripts and take on fewer new authors. Traditional publishers have a limited number of slots to fill each year. New e-publishers pop up monthly, but some are better than others, and many, many writers are self-publishing with mixed results. For every author claiming to make thousands of dollars every day, there are many more who've sold less than fifty copies.

So how do we stand out from the crowd? How do we get *our* manuscripts requested? How can we position ourselves to appeal to publishers? Or if you're considering self-publishing, how can you stand out from the thousands of other books emerging each month?

The most important thing we can do to stand out is to **write a good book**. That's why the first two installments in this series are so vital. Without a good book, none of our efforts will matter. The majority of our effort should be on writing, learning, revising, and improving.

Eventually, our writing becomes publishable. We aren't making newbie craft mistakes. We've figured out how to write sympathetic characters and strong plots, and we maintain high tension, fast pacing, and create unique premises. But will this be enough?

By studying blogs, reading articles by industry professionals, and talking to other writers, I've found five areas we can use to stand out from the crowd.

1. Querying

* Research agents and editors. Verify they represent your genre. Read interviews, take notes on their blog posts, and find out who they represent. Follow their query instructions precisely.

* Before you send a query letter for a novel, ask yourself the following:

1. Is my book complete? An agent might request your full the afternoon you send the e-mail. You will look very unprofessional if your book isn't done.

2. Have I gotten feedback on my novel? If you're the only one who has read it, don't query yet. Find a critique partner or hire a freelance editor first.

3. Is my query letter personalized? Do not send a form query to multiple agents.

The Query Letter: Basic Tips

a. Use an easy formula such as Hook, Book, Cook.

* The **hook** is the paragraph where you write your basic premise in an engaging way. The goal is to make the agent or editor want to read more.

* The **book** is a paragraph sharing important details such as word count, genre, if it's one in a series, and if it is completed.

* The **cook** is a paragraph listing your qualifications to write the book. Include previous writing credits, writing organizations you belong to, if you're in a critique group, and any other fact that establishes your authority to write the book.

- b. Personalize the query. Be specific. Use the agent's name and give a brief reason why you are querying her.
- c. Proofread the query thoroughly before sending it. If possible, have another writer critique it for you.
- d. Follow the agent's query instructions exactly.

2. Conferences

If you've been querying without getting requests, or you aren't sure who to query, head to a conference. Choose one that offers agent and editor appointments, and research the agents and editors first. Pitching in person increases your odds of getting a request. Even if no one requests your book, they'll often give you a reason why. This information is priceless! Conferences allow you to make a more complete impression on an industry professional. Plus, the workshops are great places to learn about craft, career, and the industry.

3. Social Media

Many agents write blogs, have Facebook pages, and are active on Twitter. If you aren't following your target agents, why not? **Hundreds of other writers are interacting with your dream agent.** Who do you think the agent will notice on a query letter—the writer who comments regularly on the agent's blog and retweets her posts? Or the complete stranger?

4. Platform

a. Whatever publishing route you travel, a platform is vital. Platform is basically your audience—the people you can sell your products to.

b. Your product is **not just your current book. Your product is your current and future body of work. In some ways, the product is you.**

We don't want to sell just one book, right? We want readers to purchase our future books, pick up our novellas, and spread the word about our writing. This is why I recommend all aspiring authors to build a platform early. Join Facebook, chat on Twitter, read and comment on blogs, start a blog, publish a website, practice speaking in front of your local writer's group. With time, these will add up to a solid platform.

c. Today's publishers want to see numbers. They prefer authors who have an audience, even if that audience is small and growing. They also want a great book written on deadline, and they want the author to play a prominent role in selling it.

d. Unfortunate fact: Many agents will not request aspiring writer's books if the writer does not already have either a website or a blog. Blogs are free, easy to work with, and simple to re-post across social networks. Think about starting one if you haven't already.

e. If you're considering self-publishing, you need a platform **more** than the average writer. Hundreds of thousands of books have been self-published on Amazon, Smashwords, and other sites. Few review sites exist, and your book will not be sold in a Walmart, Target, Sam's Club, or major bookstores. Traditional sales techniques don't work well when it comes to selling books. You can tweet about how great your book is ten times a day, but you'll only

turn people off. It takes time to understand how social media can help sell your books. And it takes time to build relationships online.

f. If you want to build a platform, but everything about it overwhelms you, read my post, “**17 Simple Steps To Build a Fiction Platform.**”

5. Generosity

Publishing is a very small world. You’ll be amazed at how often the same names pop up in blogs, articles, e-mails, conferences, and social media sites. Every day, we have an opportunity to share something good with the world. Be generous, be kind. Every writer is plagued with problems—maybe not every minute—but each phase has its own challenges. We need to support each other. And when we support each other, we can’t help but spread our joy for other writers.

Generosity and joy always stand out in the world.

Preparing for success in today's publishing world takes unique skills. It takes courage, confidence, humility. It takes strong writing ability. And it takes being able to market yourself as an author. Many writers have taken these steps and have found the success they longed for. It isn't easy, but it's worth it.