

The 10 Things You Need to Market Yourself and Your Writing

Writing is a commitment. This is something that many beginner writers don't understand. They think they will sit down and write something spectacular one day, just because they feel like it. Some new writers are disappointed that no one seems to think their work is as great as they think it is. Others are surprised that publishers and film producers aren't knocking at their door.

These writers haven't done their homework. Becoming a professional writer is no different than starting a business or becoming a doctor or engineer; it takes time and training. You need to have a foundation on which to build your writing career. The first part of the foundation is knowledge of the writing craft, which can be learned at school or through private study of books and websites.

Let's assume you've gotten that far; you have a good grasp of how to write. Maybe you're even quite talented. The second part of your writing career's foundation is knowing what you need to do to get your writing career on a roll. You might be surprised that "talent" is not even on the list. Again, writing is a learned skill, like carpentry. Some carpenters are more natural at their work than others, but anyone can learn carpentry, just as anyone can learn how to write if they work at it. Talent certainly helps, but it is not a prerequisite for a writing career.

To work as a writer you need to market yourself and your writing. Before you start, you will need everything on the below list.

What you need to market YOURSELF:

1. Courage

Successful writers tell of pitching stories to Oscar-winning directors in bathrooms or elevators (in fact these short, pithy pitches are called "elevator pitches.") Others talk of picking up the phone and cold calling top publishers and agents. You will also have to read your work in public and enter contests. Shrinking violets need not apply. Writers need to be brave and bold.

2. Patience

You're in this for the long haul. Getting a single writing project off the ground takes a long time, much less a whole writing career. You will have to wait three to six months, often more, for agents, producers and publishers to read your submissions. Once accepted, film scripts typically take more than five years to go from page to screen. Novels publish an average of two years after acceptance. Even magazine and journal articles are contracted up to 12 months in advance. Pack a lunch. You're going to be at this for a while.

3. Perseverance

Marketing your writing takes a lot of stamina, and successful writers never give up. Countless best-selling books were rejected by more than 100 agents and publishers before they finally found their way to the bookstores. Some of your projects may never be accepted. Screenplays may be optioned but never produced. Other projects might be

published or produced only to fizzle on the remainder shelves. Don't lose hope. Commit yourself to a writing life and it will happen for you, eventually.

4. A thick skin

You will get a lot of rejections. Some of them will be polite, some of them not so much. "Start over," is one well-known agent's standard response for failed queries. Others just never get back to you. Even after you've had a project accepted, you will get rejections. "We're disappointed with this draft," "This joke isn't funny," and "Delete these five chapters" are all part of your daily life now. Whatever you do, don't take it personally. You will lose your mind.

5. At least two good manuscripts, the more the better.

Never pin all your hopes on one manuscript. Good advice is to not even START marketing yourself until you have completed at least two projects. There are several reasons for this but one important one is this: if your manuscript is rejected as unsuitable but the agent/producer/publisher adds: "We like your writing style though, what else have you got?" you REALLY want to have something else.

What you need to market a project or manuscript:

Once you feel like you have the requirements for marketing yourself covered, you are ready to begin marketing a particular project. To do this you will need a few items directly relating to each project.

6. A good, polished manuscript

Never market an unfinished or unpolished manuscript. You should be marketing at least the third draft. Have it professionally edited and/or proofread too. It needs to look professional and read well. There are no do-overs in this game. Get it right the first time.

7. A one or two page synopsis

Although this is rarely called for in fiction, screenwriters use these often. This is something akin to a "Coles Notes" version of your story, outlining the main characters and plot, and including the conclusion. This should be well written and match the tone of your manuscript – funny manuscript=funny synopsis; serious manuscript=serious synopsis. Regardless of the tense of your manuscript the synopsis should be written in present tense.

8. A (short) one-paragraph synopsis

This shorter version of the synopsis, also written in present tense, is very much like the jacket flap copy on a novel, or the description on the back of a DVD case. It should tempt you to read the manuscript by introducing the main character and conflict, but not reveal the ending.

9. A one-line synopsis (logline or hook)

There are two types of one-liner. One, the logline, is a very straightforward summary of the plot – something like "Two neighbours fall in love after years of friendship". This is sometimes referred to as the "TV Guide synopsis". You will start with the logline/TV

guide synopsis when verbally pitching your project in bathrooms and elevators. The other type of one-liner, sometimes called the “hook” (for novels) or “tagline” (for movies) is a clever, pithy enticement to read on. These are used on movie posters, and they occasionally begin the jacket flap copy on books. An example might be “Sometimes the love of your life is right next door”. This hook/tagline will be included in your query.

10. A query letter

You query letter will always, ALWAYS follow a standard formula. Don’t try to be cute. The agents, publishers and producers reading your query don’t have time for cute. Start with a greeting, tell them what you are pitching to them, and, if applicable, why – “In response to your call on xxx.com for scary mysteries I am writing to tell you about...” (this paragraph is optional)

Then you move onto the hook or tagline (also optional), followed by the one to two paragraph synopsis (about 300 words). You tell them the page count of the screenplay and word count of a novel.

You have one sentence about your “comps” (Books you can compare yours too. These should be popular but not “phenomenal” (like Twilight, HP or 50 Shades). Use two or three comps.

Next you include a short RELEVANT bio. Film or writing school, publications or credits are in; your job in a pet store is out, unless your submission is about pets. DON’T include self-published credits or try to make a vanity press publication look like a mainstream publication. It won’t work.

You conclude with your contact details and a brief thank you. Take care to follow any submissions instructions. Some people want emails only, some snail mail only. Some want the synopsis, pages or even the whole manuscript attached. Give them what they want, and how they want it, just like a short order cook.

So that’s it; those are all the ingredients of marketing a writing career. If you’re wondering what to do once you have this list covered, this depends a lot on what you are writing. Agents are an appropriate place to begin if you have novels or screenplays, but make sure the agent represents your genre. You can submit queries directly to some publishers and producers, but do your homework – make sure they accept submissions and are legit. Short stories and articles go directly to magazines and journals – follow their submission guidelines.

Another foot in the door is through contests or special funding programs. There are hundreds of writing contests; and many countries, such as Canada and Australia, have special government grants for promising aspiring writers. One thing to note: while entry fees are discouraged or lowish in reputable fiction contests, \$50+ is pretty standard even in top screenwriting contests. Try to aim for contests that include “coverage”, which is a professional written assessment of your manuscript. Usually costing over \$100, this is well worth a \$50 entry fee. Do your research and target these contests and programs well.

Finally, exploit any personal or professional connections you might have. Many deals are made with the brother of someone’s babysitter’s gardener. Ask around. Be bold. Be persistent, but most of all, be prepared. Your writing career will only be as successful at YOU make it.