

The Wrong Way

By Deatri King-Bey

I debated for days whether to write this article or not. As you see, the write it side won. I recently started working at a traditional publishing house. I'm amazed at what people do to sabotage their chances of being selected by editors. Half of the proposals that cross my desk literally have some sort of vital error in them. And I'm not talking about the sample chapters.

I'm talking about easy to fix formatting errors that an aspiring author should have addressed BEFORE the submission leaves their desk. This article walks you through what not to do in a submission. You worked too hard writing your novel to submit it to editors the wrong way.

I apologize if anyone thinks I am speaking down to them. That is not my intention. As I mentioned, half of the manuscripts that reach my desk have one or more of the ten logistic issues I'll cover.

For simplicity, the procedures discussed in this article are based on the publishing house I work for. I'm sure other publishing houses have similar procedures.

Arrival Mistakes

Mistake One - Addressing the proposal to the physical location of the publishing company without any additional information.

For example:

Publishing Company

123 N. Fake St.

Anytown, USA 12345

This is a major mistake that I see way too often. What area of the company will the correspondence be sent to? This error could cause your manuscript to bounce around for months, be tossed, or lost. If for some reason you can't find the name of the editor, at least put Attn: Editors, or in the lower left hand corner of the envelope write "Manuscript Submission" or "Manuscript Proposal." Do something to let people know where this piece of mail belongs.

Your best bet is to address the envelope properly with the Attn: Editor's Name

Mistake Two - No name on the return address portion of the submission envelope.

This is a minor error and fixed at the publishing company (at least at our company it is). The manuscripts are filed alphabetically by the author's last name then first name. It is easier if the name is already on the outside of the envelope.

Mistake Three - Overstuffing or over-taping the submission envelope (This includes boxes).

This is a minor mistake but annoying.

We like to keep the submission in the original packaging. The packaging works as a protective cover. Some folks jimmy-rig the envelopes so that they can only be opened once. It's the darndest thing. And don't get me started on the pounds and pounds of tape. I bet their shipping costs are doubled from the weight of the tape alone (just kidding).

Submission Mistakes

Okay, now it's time to open the submission. The first person to see your submission will be an office manager, secretary, or clerk. Why are these people allowed to see your submission before the editor you addressed it to? They catalogue your submission.

Cataloging – To keep track of submissions that come into and out of the company, information about each submission is kept in a database. These are some of the categories in our database: Author Name, Manuscript TitleType (Fiction, Non-Fiction, Poetry), Genre (Mainstream, Self-help...), Agented, Date Received, and SASE.

SASE=Self Addressed Stamped Envelope

After your submission is catalogued, it is filed alphabetically (by Author).

Mistake Four - Query letter without clearly stated information.

This is a major mistake.

The person who catalogs should be able to browse through your one page query letter and easily find the information for the database. I have seen query letters and proposals that go on for pages and pages without stating the name of the work, if it is fiction or non-fiction, or the authors name (sometimes the envelope is ruined and we have no name on the submission at all).

It is extremely important that your submission be catalogued correctly. For that to happen, you must clearly state what you are submitting. Otherwise the cataloger is left to guess. Your autobiography may end up in the hands of a fiction editor. I know next to nothing about poetry. Your poetry manuscript may end up in my hands. At a minimum, your query should have the author's name, title of the manuscript, and type (fiction, non-fiction, poetry).

Side note: I absolutely love the database. It allows me to quickly sort out the manuscripts addressed to me. If they are of a genre or type that I do not handle, I can easily reassign them to the appropriate editor.

Mistake Five - No Query Letter

This is a major mistake.

Oftentimes people send their previously published book (traditional or self) without any type of query letter. It's just the book. Our company participates in several writing organizations. What is it you want us to do with your book? Consider it for reprint? Forward it to another organization? What?

Mistake Six – Hand Written Query Letter

Besides being unprofessional, good penmanship is not stressed in most school systems. This often shows in hand written query letters. Go to the library if you have to and type that query letter so your submission can be cataloged properly. You also want to make a good impression on the editor.

Mistake Seven - No SASE

This is a major mistake

The other day someone called wanting to know if we'd reviewed his manuscript. I looked in the database and quickly noticed he did not send a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE).

This person's manuscript had not been reviewed yet. I told him to send a SASE so we could send our reply. I know this sounds mean, but companies receive thousands of submissions. It is not economically wise for companies to pick up the mailing expenses.

Mistake Eight – Hand Written, Audio Taped, and strange font Submissions

This is a major mistake

There are very few cases where we will accept hand written or audio taped submissions, and I'm not telling what they are.

Some people also like to use fonts other than Times New Roman or Courier New. I've seen entire submissions written in italics. Artists being artists I guess. But these fonts are hard on the eyes. Do you really want to be hard on the editor's eyes?

Mistake Nine – Hiding the SASE or query letter

This is an annoying and possibly major mistake.

Sometimes I receive a manuscript that the cataloger thought didn't have a SASE or query letter. Occasionally I find the query letter and/or SASE stuffed within the manuscript pages.

Mistake Ten – No page numbering

I've never done this (smile), but every so often a manuscript is dropped. Page numbering is a good thing. The header of your manuscript could look something like

Last name / TITLE OF BOOK

Page#

That's the end of the logistical mistakes for now. Make sure you follow the submission guidelines for the publishing house, and do not send more than they ask for.

Happy Writing