

Literary Agents

Literary agents represent a range of creative artists, including adult and children's fiction authors, scriptwriters, script editors, illustrators, composers, playwrights and journalists.

Some literary agents represent a wide field of literary endeavour, whilst some do not accept poetry, short stories, romance, science fiction and other genres. An agent will usually provide information about the types of manuscripts they accept – along with submission guidelines – on their website. Most will consider non-fiction, such as autobiography, biography, historical works and cookbooks and exclude educational material.

Agents also represent artists who do not create work directly on the page but rather from it, such as producers, directors, actors and designers. For a listing of agents who cater more specifically to creative artists working in film, television and stage production, refer to the [Encore Directory](#), a directory of film, television and video personnel.

The Agent's Role

If you are an established writer, or a new author with an unsigned contract in your hand, a literary agent can take a lot of the worry out of selling your work by approaching publishers and negotiating deals on your behalf. Many large publishing houses will not consider your work unless you have an agent. Manuscripts sent without the approval of an agent are what publishers call 'unsolicited manuscripts'. Agents can also provide marketing advice, find new markets for you and negotiate film, television and multimedia rights, as well as overseas, foreign language and translation rights. The specific work of a literary agent is to:

- Negotiate favourable terms with a publisher and confirm them in a contract
- Handle correspondence relating to contractual matters
- Negotiate terms for the reproduction of your work in different territories and in different media such as film or television
- Manage the receipt of royalties
- Generate work opportunities for you

Agents should have a good knowledge of the marketplace and keep up-to-date with its fluctuations. Although most agents do not have formal legal qualifications, they should have a very good understanding of contract law and intellectual property rights. They should be able to offer advice to help shape a client's career and may also give editorial suggestions.

Finding an Agent

The NSW Writers' Centre recommends finding a literary agent through the [Australian Literary Agent's Association](#) (ALAA). The ALAA was formed in 2003 to provide a public presence and a point of contact for Australian literary agencies and their staff. Members of the Association are obliged to adhere to the professional code of practice published on the ALAA's website.

In addition to a members directory, the website offers advice to writers on finding a suitable literary agent and presenting their work to best advantage. It also contains dozens of links to other literary contacts in Australia, including writers' organisations, writers' centres and manuscript assessment services. A list of Australian literary agents can also be found in the [Australian Writers' Marketplace](#).

Are Agents Necessary?

In some countries, such as the USA, you cannot get a foot in the door of a publishing house without an agent. It is different in Australia, where some publishers will at least consider unsolicited manuscripts.

However, because publishers receive so many unsolicited manuscripts, they are increasingly relying on the recommendations of literary agents and manuscript assessors. An agent's recommendation will certainly help your manuscript rise to the top of a publisher's slush pile.

If you are an established author you may need a literary agent if you:

- Have trouble approaching and negotiating with publishers and would prefer to work through a third party
- Believe that you are not receiving as much income as you might for your writing
- Are finding that administering your finances and contracts is a burden
- Believe that you have a commercial manuscript but are not able to access the market

An agent can also play a key role in sorting out any issues and disagreements that may arise between you and the editor/designer/publisher during the long and complex process of producing your book. By intervening on your behalf, an agent allows the relationship between you and your publisher to remain friendly.

Not all published writers use agents. Some successful authors negotiate their contracts themselves, or use solicitors. If you are accustomed to reading the fine print of contracts and have well-developed negotiating skills and the time to spare, you might consider handling both your contract and all the correspondence which arises from the publication of your work. Doing so will save you the agent's fees and give you total control of the process.

If you choose not to use an agent, we recommend seeking professional advice before signing a contract. The [Australian Society of Authors](#) provides a contract advisory service, as does the [Arts Law Centre of Australia](#) and the [Australian Writers' Guild](#).

Agents' Charges

Agents' terms vary but generally they take a commission (10% - 20%) on any money that you earn, whether from a manuscript, a short story, a public speaking engagement or from overseas sales.

Some agents ask you to sign an agency agreement outlining the terms and conditions of the arrangement, while others are satisfied with a verbal agreement. If you are unsure about anything you are asked to sign in such an agreement, you can use any of the contrary advisory services listed above.

The Australian Literary Agents Association has developed a code of practice which prohibits its members from charging clients any reading or editorial fees. Agents who charge fees for reading work and representing authors cannot be members of the ALAA.

Finding International Agents

Most local agents have contacts or reciprocal arrangements with agents or agencies overseas. Agents who think you have a manuscript which is marketable overseas will forward it, together with a covering letter of recommendation, to their overseas colleagues.

If you wish to contact an overseas agent directly, you can find listings of international agents in books such as the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* (A & C Black, London), the *International Literary Market Place: The Directory of the American Book Publishing Industry* (Information Today) and the *Guide to Literary Agents* (Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, Ohio). All these books are published annually and contain up-to-date information about overseas agents.

Remember, however, that you are unlikely to engage the services of an overseas agent if you are an unpublished author. It is extremely unlikely that an overseas publisher will take on an Australian writer with no profile or previous publications. Nonetheless, there are always exceptions to the rule and some Australian writers who have had no luck with local publishers have been successfully published overseas.

Submitting to an Agent

Most agents make their living from professional writers with an established readership and market. They rarely undertake the representation of first-time writers unless they have a contract in hand, have produced an exceptionally good manuscript, have a good reputation, or are recommended by someone in the business. Your work will only be taken on by an agent if they believe it has the potential to sell and thus make money for the agency.

Approaching a literary agent is similar to approaching a publisher. See our Resource Sheet on Getting Published for more information.

Although agents are reluctant to read unsolicited manuscripts, they are, nevertheless, always on the look-out for work of exceptional quality. To avoid having your manuscript returned unread, your best approach is to telephone, write or email first to give the agent some idea of your proposal before you send anything through the post.

Some agents have submission guidelines and business terms available on their websites. Check this information for the agent's preferred mode of initial contact.

If an agent agrees to look at your work, send a cover letter (see below for sample) and include a resumé of your writing experience, a synopsis of the manuscript and two or three sample chapters (preferably the first three) to give some idea of the content and development of your writing. The work you submit to an agent should be as polished as if you were submitting to a publisher. See our Resource Sheets on Drafting and Manuscript Development for advice on how to achieve this.

Your manuscript should be presented to an agent in much the same way as it would be presented to a publisher. Text is presented on one-sided, A4 paper, with spacing no less than 1.5 lines and wide margins. Put your submission in a manilla or wallet-type folder secured with a heavy-duty elastic band, cloth tape or a fold-back clip. Do not staple the pages together.

If you have no history of publication either in book form or in literary journals, you are unlikely to be taken on by an agent. A history of winning literary competitions and receiving publication in literary journals can, however, persuade an agent to look at your manuscript. Subscribe to the NSW Writers' Centre's free weekly electronic newsletter, *Newsbite*, to receive information about current competitions and literary journals accepting submissions.

Always include a sufficiently large stamped, self-addressed envelope (SSAE) for the return of your manuscript. If you do not wish your manuscript to be returned to you, send a smaller stamped, self-addressed envelope for the agent's letter to you. Allow eight to twelve weeks for a response but keep in mind that most agents do not offer critical feedback, although some do provide manuscript assessment services.

If your work has been rejected by several agencies you might need to think about getting a critical assessment or go back to the drafting stage. See our Resource Sheets on Drafting and Manuscript Development for more information.

Sample Letter to an Agent

Joe Smith
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25 September 2009

Ms Sally Curtis
Curtis Literary Agency
GPO Box 123
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Ms Curtis,

I am enclosing for your consideration three sample chapters and a synopsis of my historical novel titled *A Devil at My Table*.

It is a fictional account of the true story of a convict woman who, despite her origins and many difficulties, established one of the finest restaurants in Sydney in the middle of the last century. Some of her original recipes are included in the text of the novel.

This is my first full-length novel manuscript (total 90,000 words) but I have published many short stories, poems, interviews, articles and reviews and won numerous literary competitions (see attached résumé).

Please find enclosed my résumé and a reader's report from Ms Angela Williams, a well-known fiction writer, academic and book reviewer.

I have also enclosed a stamped self-addressed envelope for return of my sample chapters. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Joe Smith

NSWWC Books

[A Decent Proposal](#) by Rhonda Whitton & Sheila Hollingworth
[The Australian Writers' Marketplace](#)

Further Resources

Australian Literary Agent's Association <austlitagentsassoc.com.au/>

Australian Society of Authors <www.asauthors.org>

Arts Law Centre of Australia <www.artslaw.com.au>