

Should I Sub to Editors First?

by [sally apokedak](#) | Tue, Mar. 31, 2015 | posted in: [About Literary Agents](#), [Publishing info for Authors](#), [Queries to Literary Agents](#)

I got this question a few weeks back:

Just curious—does it help a manuscript get pulled out of email purgatory if we let you know if it has received interest from a publisher? A manuscript that I sent after meeting you last year at a conference, has gotten some interest from a publisher. In general, does it help that a publisher is interested, or does it hurt, knowing that the author has already submitted it to potential publishers on her own?

Good question.

There is no “one size fits all” answer to this ... but generally, I prefer to see projects before any bridges have been burned.

- You are more likely to be rejected if you send the project yourself simply because the editors see author-submitted projects as not having been vetted and they read them with less care.
- If you send it out and get rejections, I can't resend to those publishers.
- If you send it out and get an offer, that offer is likely from a smaller publisher that allows unsolicited submissions, and now that you have the offer, it's hard for me to say, “We'll give you an answer in six months, after I look for a bigger publisher.”

For those reasons, I'd rather target well-matched editors from bigger houses before you submit to anyone.

However, if you have submitted to publishers, then you need to mention this in the query, whether you have an offer or not.

If you have an offer from a small house, I am probably less likely to want to get involved. Small houses don't have much money so they often don't offer advances. I'd hate to get involved and take 15% of the author's earnings when I'm probably not going to be able to get more money out of the publisher for him.

If you have an offer from a mid-to-big-sized house, I will want to jump in and negotiate the contract. I offer this deal to potential clients: If I can't get you more than a 15% increase in the advance, I won't take anything. So far I've been able to get more than a 15% increase in pay. I think an agent should be able to get you a 50% increase over the boilerplate offer. So if you get an offer for 800 dollars, you should look for an agent and she should be able to bring that 800 up to 1,200. If your offer is for 3,000, your agent should be able to get 4,500. If the publisher originally offered you 6,000 your agent should be able to get them to come up to 9,000.

Those are small numbers. Your boilerplate contract is going to be small, probably. What happens when the numbers get bigger? If a publisher offers you 50,000 for a book, I can't

say for sure that an agent will be able to get you 75,000. I haven't ever seen a publisher offer that much to an un-agented writer. So I don't know how much an agent could get publishers to come up in that instance.

In any case, I firmly believe that if you have a boilerplate offer from a mid-sized-or-larger publisher, you are doing yourself a great disservice if you don't contract with an agent to negotiate your contract for you.

But are you wise to get that one offer and then get the agent? Or would you have been better off getting the agent first? I think you have the best chance of getting the best offer if you have an agent before you meet editors and send them your stuff.

Here's what I think is the smartest order for a writer to use:

- Join critique groups/go to conferences
- Write a great book
- Go to conferences to meet agents
- query agents
- sign with an agent
- Put together a great verbal pitch with a fantastic hook
- Let your agent send your proposal to several editors
- Go to conferences to meet editors
- ask the editors you meet if you can have your agent submit a proposal

It's not all that uncommon for a writer who has an agent to make the initial contact at a conference with the editor who buys her book.

I've heard people complain about that, saying, "Why should the agent get 15% when she's not the one who made the contact and sold the book?" That's wrong thinking. The agent and the author are a team. The agent is working on her end to send to editors. The author is working on her end to meet editors. When one editor offers, the agent now is able to go back to the several editors who have the proposal, and she is in a good position to get the best deal for her author.

It's not true that the agent did nothing to make the sale. Merely the fact that the author has an agent should give her more confidence when she speaks to editors. It will also, most likely, make editors take an author more seriously. It's just human nature: We think that if others value you, there is something valuable about you. So when an author tells an editor at a conference that she has an agent, the editor will pay closer attention to the pitch.

So ... generally speaking, I think you're better off getting the agent before you sub to the publishers.