

Leaping Out from the Slush Pile

(Adapted from a workshop I ran a few years ago)

by Ian Bone

1. What are publishers looking for?

The first thing a publisher looks for in an unsolicited manuscript is a STORY! That might sound obvious, but it sometimes gets forgotten in the hype around presenting manuscripts and dazzling tired editors. Publishers want a story that will excite them, grip them, move them, keep them turning the page. Be it picture book or novel, that is what they are looking for.

Every editor or publisher who opens an unsolicited manuscript would like to discover the next great talent. Why else would they be in publishing?

2. The Manuscript

Think about these qualities:

- Original versus derivative
An opening chapter that will leave them wanting more
- A story that brings them in and *keeps* them in.
- Living characters versus stereotypes or 'wooden' characters
- Fresh approach (Don't do another Paul Jennings or Harry Potter)
- Voice. (Melodic, gripping, entertaining, dramatic) NOT BLAND
- Language and image

AVOID:

- Messages
- Hot topics

Are you a well-informed writer?

- Do you read in the field?
- Do you read reviews and articles in the field?
- Do you read professional writing texts, and/or do workshops?

How do you know if the manuscript is ready?

- Feedback from critical readers. Not necessarily kids or class or friends who like books.
- Polish the text.

- It may take many, many drafts
- Manuscript assessment
- EDIT! EDIT! (For English's sake)

Before you prepare to send your manuscript, ask these questions.

- Is this the best I can get?
- What if I left it aside for a month then came back? Would I still want to send it?
- Are there any sections that frustrate/worry/nag at me?
- Are there any typos or grammatical errors?

Mechanics of a manuscript.

- Single-sided A4 paper. WHITE ONLY
- Healthy margins
- Consistent lay-out according to Style Manual or publisher's style. (Look at their website)
- Palantino, Times font. Keep it simple. No font changes unless absolutely justified by the story.
- Double-spaced
- Pages numbered
- Your name & title of m/s on each page
- Title page with: Title, Your name, approximate word length, FULL contact details including address and phone number.
- DO NOT bind. A rubber band will suffice.

3. The Publisher

Who will read your manuscript? It could be:

- Junior member of team
- 'Sift' reader
- Editor
- Senior editor
- Sometimes the publisher

Who are these people?

- Dedicated to the publishing industry
- Lovers of children's literature!
- Overworked
- Predominantly female
- Will have a variety of attitudes to the slush pile. Fear, loathing, excitement, dread, weariness.

Know the market

- Choose the publisher who publishes what you write
- Choose the publisher who has the 'hole'
- Get any inside information that you can
- Ask the publishers what they want. (You'll only get the secretary)

4. The Submission

Who do you send it to?

- Check website or call publisher to get *submission guidelines*. They should govern first and foremost how you submit your manuscript.
- Ring and ask for a name to address the envelope to
- Get the correct mailing address
- Make sure you're sending to the appropriate department within the publishing house. State that you have a *childrens picture book* or *novel for primary school readers* or *early reader* or whatever.

Covering letter.

Para 1: State you've sent a m/s titled *XXX*, around X thousand words, a *Childrens picture book/teenage novel/primary novel/title for your series/*fill in the blank, for their consideration.

Para 2: Give a brief description of your manuscript.

- Make it sound interesting by stating what is unique about the idea or what is the selling point of this book.
- Give a brief overview of the story.
- If you've written a mystery, find a way to show you've finalised the story without giving away the ending.
- DO NOT mention that people have read it and liked it. (Especially children.)
- DO NOT put in any praise, hyperbole or selling phrases. (Unless the praise comes from an independent, professional assessor)

Para 3: Give a brief description, biog of yourself.

- Keep it simple.
- You can include some of your own character in here.
- Mention any *relevant* publishing history.
- DO NOT give a lengthy CV.
- DO NOT try to sell yourself.
- DO NOT make promises.
- DO NOT apologise.

Para 4: Give full contact details.

- Address
- Phone number during daytime
- After hours phone number if appropriate
- Email address

Keep the letter to ONE page if you can. One and a half pages is MAXIMUM.

Envelope

- Make sure it is big enough so that you DO NOT have to fold your manuscript.
- Include a SASE, the same size as the one you sent. ATTACH stamps.

Wish it good luck!

5. The Response

If you get a letter declining your manuscript, what do you do?

- Think they're a bunch of idiots?
- Give up?
- Rework the manuscript and send it to someone else?
- Send it elsewhere unchanged?
- Start a new story?

DO NOT send it back to the same publisher unless you have either been invited to do so, or you have called the editor who wrote to you and received an okay to do this.

If you receive a letter offering feedback and suggested changes, but still a decline, what do you do?

- Rework and resubmit to same publisher? (See above caveat)
- Rework and submit to different publisher?
- Use this as a brag with another publisher?