

Top Ten Reasons Your Novel is Rejected

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Introduction

Over the years I've given workshops and talks to several thousand aspiring writers. As an agent, I've listened to hundreds of pitches and read through tens of thousands of query letters and manuscript submissions. Being both a published author and a literary agent gives me a unique perspective. I know what it's like to be the writer whose only desire is to sell a novel, and I know what it's like to have to crush someone's hopes with a rejection letter. It wasn't until I started sending out those rejection letters that I began to have a better understanding of why so many writers receive them.

What I've come to realize is that most manuscripts are rejected by agents and editors for one or more of ten basic reasons. Writers have control over some of these reasons but not all of them. This book will discuss these ten reasons and how you can control more of your destiny by not falling prey to them. This is not a list where I save the best (or worst) for last. There's no ascending or descending order to the list because not every item on the list will apply to every writer. For some of you, only one item will pertain. For others, some or many.

bookmark:Chapter 1 – You Haven't Done Your Homework

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This really shouldn't even be a reason, but it's one of the top reasons most writers are rejected by editors and agents. You'd think that if someone spent months or even years writing a book, that person would at least devote a few hours into researching editors and agents. Sadly, most don't. I can't tell you how many queries I read that are for types of books our agency doesn't handle. Other agents will tell you the same thing. Editors have a similar lament.

Do your research. There are many places on the Internet, as well as books available that will give you basic information about what editors and agents want. All publishers and many agencies have websites. Many editors and agents have blogs. And even if an agent has neither a blog nor a website, the agency most likely has a listing on Publishers Marketplace and will be listed in the various yearly guides that are published. Check these sites and publications for current information regarding books agents have recently sold and editors have recently bought. You'll also learn what they're looking for and what they no longer want to see in the way of submissions. Editors and agents don't want to be bombarded with queries for books they don't publish or handle. It's a waste of time for both you and them.

Do You Know What You Write?

Even before you make a list of the agents and editors who handle what you write, you first need to know what you write. Seems pretty basic, doesn't it? Apparently not. It's amazing how many writers are totally clueless about genre. Take this exchange, for example, between an agent and a writer during a speed pitching session at a recent conference:

Agent: So tell me about your book.

Writer: It's a mystery called *The Whodunit Caper*.

Agent: What kind of mystery?

Writer: The kind where there's a murder and my heroine, a middle-aged former go-go dancer who now works as a customer service rep for a car dealership, figures out who did it.

Agent: So this is a cozy mystery?

Writer: Well, she does get cozy with the parts salesman, but she's also got an ex who wants to get back together, and she's torn between them. And she's also developing the hots for the detective on the case, so there's lots of sex when she's not trying to figure out who the killer is. So I guess it's a three-way cozy.

I'm sure many of you are rolling your eyes over our clueless writer. Unfortunately, there are too many of them out there.

Popular commercial fiction is divided into genres. Romance, mystery, and speculative fiction are the three biggies. However, each of these genres is also divided up into sub-genres, and sometimes the sub-genres are divided even further. For instance, romance is broken down into category romance and single title romance, but these two categories are broken up even further to include contemporary romance, historical romance, young adult romance, erotic romance, inspirational romance, paranormal romance, and romantic suspense. Speculative fiction will encompass science fiction, urban fantasy, epic fantasies, horror, time travel, alternative history, dystopian and utopian fiction, space operas, and supernatural fiction. Mystery will include cozy mysteries, amateur sleuth mysteries, soft-boiled mysteries, hard-boiled mysteries, detective mysteries, noir mysteries, police procedurals, thrillers, suspense, and historical mysteries.

Some of these genres and sub-genres have specific word counts that must be adhered to; others need to keep to certain conventions. As a writer you not only need to know which genre your work falls into but which sub-genre or sub-sub-genre because there are different conventions for each. A cozy mystery won't have graphic violence or sex. An editor who buys only hard-boiled detective novels is not going to be interested in amateur sleuth books. An agent who handles romance may only want single title romance and not be interested in seeing either category romance or inspirational romance.

Most of these categories can also be found within middle grade and young adult fiction. And just to complicate matters further, more and more books are now combining genres. For instance, you can have a romantic mystery or a middle grade time travel mystery, or an alternate history romantic mystery. What you can't have is a middle grade erotic time travel mystery. Or a middle grade erotic anything, for that matter. So learn what the genres and sub-genres are and what you can and can't do within each.

Some Genre and Sub-genre Definitions

Romance: Whether a romance is a category romance or a single title romance, the one rule to remember is that **all romances must have a happily-ever-after ending**. If the book ends with a satisfying ending but not a happily-ever-after, it's not considered romance. Romances are broken up into category and single title romances, then broken up further into contemporary, historical, inspirational (either contemporary or historical) and speculative (generally, paranormal, fantasy, and futuristic.) Romantic suspense can fall within any of these sub-genres as well.

Category (or Series) Romance: These books are published primarily by Harlequin. They're released each month and remain on store shelves for only one month. Then they're pulled to make way for the next month's releases. Word counts range from 50,000 – 75,000 words, depending on the line. (A manuscript less than 50,000 words is generally considered a novella.) Category romances focus on the relationship between the hero and heroine. Plot plays a secondary role to the relationship. There are generally only two points of view in these books, the hero's and the heroine's, and because of the shorter length, there are rarely any sub-plots and few secondary characters, although you will find some sub-plots and more secondary characters in longer lines.

Single Title Romance: These are the books that remain on store shelves for as long as they're selling (Sort of. Unless you're a bestselling author with a backlist, your book will be pulled within 3-6 months of release to make way for newer releases.) While concentrating on the relationship between the hero and heroine, the plots are more involved. They usually contain secondary characters and at least one subplot, often more. Length is generally 80,000 – 110,000 words. As with category romances, the love story between the hero and heroine is always the main focus of the single title romance.

Romantic Suspense: These are books where the suspense is a major element of the plot. The suspense plot is blended with the love story, and there's always a happily-ever-after ending. The balance of suspense to romance will vary. For the category romantic suspense lines, the balance is generally 65-70% romance/30-35% suspense. For single title, the ratio can be as much as 50% romance/50% suspense. If the romance is less than 50% of the book, it's not a romantic suspense; it's straight suspense with a romantic element of some degree.

Inspirational Fiction: These are novels in which an inspirational message of personal religious faith is a major element of the story. They can be either romances or not, contemporary or historical. If the story contains a romance, the level of sensuality is extremely low with absolutely no sex scenes. There is also no foul language or graphic violence.

Women's Fiction: Women's fiction is more a marketing concept than a genre. What it means is that the book is a type of general fiction that will appeal predominantly to women. Strange, considering there's no similar marketing concept called "men's fiction" for books that appeal predominantly to men. But since the term is used by many, I thought it important to tell you what it is and what it isn't.

Women's Fiction is *not* romance, although it can contain a romance, sometimes as a strong secondary plot, sometimes as a minor element to the story. There may not be a hero in women's

fiction. The love story, if there is one, is not the main focus of women's fiction, and there doesn't have to be a happily-ever-after ending. However, there should be an emotionally satisfying ending. Women's fiction is a sub-genre of mainstream novels (books that are more plot-driven than literary fiction but contain less of the mandatory conventions of genre fiction.) These books are shelved under general fiction in bookstores. Word count is generally 80,000 – 125,000 words and can be broken down into sub-genres that include chick lit, hen lit, mommy lit, relationship stories, sagas, coming-of-age novels, and more.

Erotica: Webster's defines *erotica* as "erotic books or pictures" and *erotic* as "of or arousing sexual feelings or desires; having to do with sexual love." Erotica are books that contain a high level of sexual content. They are sexually explicit stories, daring stories with graphic details that often push the envelope. Erotica can be contemporary, historical, or any one of the genres within the romance fiction umbrella.

Young Adult Fiction: Young adult (or YA novels) are books geared toward junior and senior high school students. The plots primarily revolve around the relationships and lives of characters within that age group and can be contemporary, historical, mysteries, or speculative fiction. The level of sensuality is usually tame, although some publishers have been known to push the envelope.

New Adult Fiction: Books are similar to Young Adult fiction, but the protagonists are older, generally 18-25, and for the first time confronting issues as legal adults. Sex scenes are permissible.

Mysteries: These are stories in which one or more element remains unknown or unexplained until the end of the story. In the mystery, a crime (often murder) has been or will be committed, and the protagonist's goal is to solve the crime. Mysteries deal with the "who" of a story (hence, the "whodunit.")

Cozy or Traditional Mysteries: Stories where the crime and all violence occur "off-stage." These books also contain no foul language or explicit sex.

Amateur Sleuth Mysteries: Stories where the crime solver doesn't work in law enforcement.

Soft-boiled Mysteries: Stories that contain some violence and profanity but are not as graphic as hardboiled mysteries. The protagonist is often a female detective.

Hardboiled Mysteries: Darker stories that contain violence, graphic description, and/or profanity. The protagonist is generally a detective.

Police Procedurals: Stories that involve the investigation of a crime by the police.

Suspense: These stories fall under the general mystery umbrella, but they deal more with the psychology behind why the antagonist committed the crime, why he chose his victims, and why the protagonist cares enough to get involved in helping bring down the antagonist. The crime generally impacts a small group of people such as a family, business, or town and often involves murder or kidnapping. Sometimes in a suspense, the reader knows "whodunit" because the antagonist is a point of view character.

Thrillers: Like suspense, these stories also fall under the mystery umbrella but are more action/adventure in nature. They focus on the “how” of the story and concern larger problems that will impact a great number of people, perhaps an entire city, country, or the world. The plot focuses on the protagonist(s) trying to prevent something terrible from happening. Often, they must overcome overwhelming odds that can be either internally or externally motivated or both.

Graphic Novels: Stories, either original or adapted, that are written in comic book format or as heavily illustrated paperbacks.

Speculative Fiction: This is the all-inclusive term for science fiction, horror, fantasy, etc.

Horror: Disturbing stories, either entirely psychological in nature or involving the supernatural, that are meant to terrify or horrify the reader by creating an atmosphere of fear or dread.

Science Fiction: Stories that must incorporate an element of science in either the plot or setting. Stories often, but not always, take place in the future or on another planet or in another galaxy.

Fantasy: Stories that incorporate magic and/or mythology in the characters, plot, and/or setting.

Urban Fantasy: Stories that place magical characters in contemporary settings, generally in the present day or the future.

Westerns: This is the only genre totally defined by location and time period. Stories generally involve a rugged hero facing down adversity of some sort in the 1800s west of the Missouri River. Many will incorporate a strong romance, but romance isn't a pre-requisite of a western.

Historical Fiction: Stories set in the past where the plot will revolve around actual historical events and/or people of the period. Sometimes the protagonist is an historical figure, but part or all of the story is fictitious. Other times the protagonist is a fictional person placed into real events of the time.

Literary Fiction: These books are all about the genius of the author as a wordsmith. The plot can be minimal, and often the protagonist doesn't experience any character growth.

Mainstream Fiction: Non-genre specific fiction other than literary fiction that appeals to a general readership. The books are generally set in present day and involve universal themes that appeal to a broad demographic.

Finally, keep in mind what I stated earlier. Lines are blurring in popular fiction. So it's often hard to pigeon-hole a book when pitching it to an editor or agent. How do you categorize your book? Sometimes that's the million-dollar question. Having a good understanding of the various genres should help you. And hey, when all else fails, make up a new genre. You could turn out to be on the cutting edge of a new trend.