

The 10 Biggest Mistakes Writers Make That Keep Them From Getting Their Books Published



[A BARNCAT Special Report by Jami Bernard](#)

Common wisdom says it's hard to get a book published. Perhaps that's why you're not too surprised when you receive a rejection letter. After all, *it's hard to get a book published*, right?

It doesn't have to be that way. The *uncommon* wisdom is that if you are serious about getting published, **you can improve your odds enormously by avoiding making a few simple mistakes** that can knock the most promising manuscript or idea out of the running.

Too many writers give up too early. Whether you're working on fiction, non-fiction, memoir, or a book to anchor your business and establish you as the go-to person in your field, you should not assume that if your book isn't getting traction, that's just the way things are in the publishing industry. Don't throw your hands up as if the fates are against you and shove the manuscript or idea you've nourished—sometimes for years—in a drawer. Don't explain it away with "I guess

I'm just not good enough" or "Those people wouldn't know a book if it broke their foot coming through the mail slot."

Once you give up on your book, your chances of getting published plummet to zero. It's time to give your manuscript its best shot by first ruling out garden-variety mistakes that are easy to fix once you're aware of them.

By the way, these mistakes are also true for many writers who intend to use alternative forms of publishing, such as POD (Publish On Demand). For example, don't assume that traditional publishers are out of your league before testing for these errors.

Here are 10 common mistakes (which, by the way, you will never make again after reading this!) and how to fix them:

MISTAKE 1: Thinking you don't need an agent

If you're planning to save money by selling your book on your own and thus avoiding having to pay an agent a 15 percent commission, here's a remedial math quiz for you:

Question: How much is 15 percent of zero? **Answer:** That's how much you'll ultimately save.

Here's another little quiz for you. **Question:** How much is your time worth? **Answer:** Less than a penny an hour if you decide to waste it on a hit-or-miss strategy because you don't have the right contacts or enough knowledge of the industry and how it works.

Agents know how to pitch. They know who to pitch to. How do they know this? *Because they spend all their time reading the trades and having lunch with editors.* A good agent knows exactly what different publishers are looking for, and can pair you up with an editor who matches your style and temperament.

If you still think you can do their job better than they can, consider that 99.9 percent of publishers *do not want to hear personally from Joe Blow Author off the street.* They only want to hear from legitimate agents who have done the work of pre-screening the zillions of people out there who think they can write a book.

I asked me to ghost edit her health and nutrition book. She was a good writer who had published many medical papers, but she had been trained in the academic style so beloved of grad schools and such a turn-off to the average reader. She insisted on self-publishing, even

though I told her I thought the book had a very good shot at traditional publishing (you know, the kind where *they pay you*). She was sensitive on the subject, so I dropped it. Only later did I find out what really happened.

Not a single publisher agreed to meet with her. Why? Because she called them herself! On the telephone! Without an agent to grease the way! (She didn't even have a proposal; see Mistake No. 3.)

J is a very can-do personality, so she just picked up the phone. Naturally, they wouldn't take her calls. The publishing industry isn't like the film industry, where you line up a "pitch meeting" and get to act out your idea for 15 minutes with some producers in the room.

Publishers are not required to meet with anyone who happens to have their phone number. It's as pointless to insist that they should as it would be if they came to your place of business, took a quick glance around, and told you you're doing your job all wrong.

THE MISTAKE: Pitching in the dark.

THE FIX: Don't try to reinvent the wheel here. Tailor your pitch to *agents* and let them do the heavy lifting.

MISTAKE 2: Making life harder for agents and editors

Agents and editors receive untold numbers of submissions every week. These range from legitimate book ideas to crackpot conspiracy theories that go on for one paragraph that covers 500 pages. They have to sift through all this stuff in search of the occasional gem—no wonder they're cranky before noon.

They know the gems are somewhere in that pile. But insisting in your cover letter that they'd be crazy not to buy YOUR book, or that they'll rot in hell if they pass up this one-of-a-kind opportunity, is *not* the way to make them reach for their checkbook.

Think of their workload. Think of all the junk they have to wade through. **Put yourself in their shoes.** When they finally get around to your manuscript, what kind of mood would you ideally like them to be in—relaxed and receptive? Or with smoke coming out of their ears?

Keep in mind, too, that like everyone else in journalism and the media, agents and editors have the attention span of a mayfly.

If their first impression of your submission is a bad one, there is no reason for them to keep reading and "give it a chance." They already *gave* it a chance!

If you want them to give your submission their full, focused attention, then *don't piss them off*. It's very simple: Don't spell their name wrong. Don't query an agent who only handles murder mysteries with your idea for a physics textbook. Don't make it harder to read your manuscript than the others in the pile; that is, don't use an extra-fancy curlicue typeface on expensive colored paper. Your book will stand out if it's good, not if it's delivered by someone in a wacky costume.

Kate, a client in Paris who is now a friend, was a first-time writer who was very serious and methodical. She was also professional and neat. All of that counts. Fortunately, she sent me a copy of the final proposal and sample chapters of her memoir before sending the same package out to her first round of agents. She had slipped each sheet of her 60-page proposal inside a beautiful, high-quality transparent plastic sheet protector and bound all 60 pages together in a tastefully decorated package. It was lovely.

It was wrong.

Now, I'm the biggest sucker out there for gorgeous, pricey office supplies, but there are times when you *must not foist your office-supply fetish on others!* I called Kate in Paris immediately—she owes

me for the trans-Atlantic call—and told her to go back and take every one of those pages out of every one of those pretty but pointless sheet protectors. *Immédiement!*

Agents don't want pretty. They don't want special. They want "industry standard," from the typeface (a serif font like **Times New Roman**) to the spacing (double) to the page numbering (upper right-hand corner). (Why is THIS document in a sans-serif typeface? Because you are probably reading it on your computer screen, where sans-serif rules!)

By the way, of Kate's initial mailing to 10 agents, three were interested—an astronomical number for a first-time writer. She signed with the excellent Sterling Lord Agency in New York.

Don't do something you think is cool—like sending your proposal rolled up inside a set of nested Russian dolls. Agents and editors don't want *different*, they want what they're used to—something that conforms to industry standards in terms of look, format and readability.

In his memoir *On Writing*, Stephen King tells of a rejection he received for a story he submitted as an adolescent to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. It was a form letter, but at the bottom, some unnamed

editor did him a favor by scrawling: “*Don’t staple manuscripts. Loose pages plus paperclip equal correct way to submit copy.*”

There are no staplers in the world of publishing. For some strange reason, agents and editors do not like getting scraped, stabbed and bloodied by bent or errant staples. They like the option of working with unbound manuscript pages so they can write notes in the margins. It was true for Stephen King and it’s true for you.

THE MISTAKE: Irritating the people who can decide the fate of your book.

THE FIX: Do things *their way*, by which we mean “according to industry standards”—unless they specify otherwise.

MISTAKE 3: Sending the wrong kind of pitch

Do you know the difference between a pitch letter and a book proposal? How about a cover letter and a query? (Watch out—trick question!) Can you name the six essential elements of a proposal for a non-fiction book? Under what circumstances can you pitch a portion of a manuscript without having to complete the entire thing first?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, then you are not ready to pitch your book! Sending the wrong type of pitch, in the wrong style, length, or format, will probably get you a form rejection letter (or, worse, a personalized nasty one) even if your book is Pulitzer Prize material.

John came to me in frustration because his memoir, a real nail-biter about his trip to cancer hell and back, wasn't finished. He had been struggling with several chapters for years and was now too tied up in knots to work on them.

John was already a successful, accomplished journalist. I had no doubt I'd be able to help him get past his block and complete the remaining chapters. Out of curiosity, though, I asked him why he wasn't capitalizing on resources by putting the chapters aside until he got a deal, and pitching his book on the strength of a proposal and a few sample chapters. His answer?

"I didn't know that was possible."

Yes, sometimes that is possible. It depends on a number of factors. Wouldn't it be nice to know what those factors are before you do any unnecessary or counter-productive work?

Agents and editors aren't mind readers. Nor do they have unlimited time and resources to decode your materials and see what you're really driving at. Make sure your pitch is the right kind, with all the expected information, for the type of book you're writing.

THE MISTAKE: Sending the wrong kind of pitch.

THE FIX: Read up about query letters, book proposals and synopses so you can show your book in the best light.

MISTAKE 4: *Leaving off the spit-shine*

I had a client, M, who came to me after collecting rejection letters for two years. I looked under the hood to see why that baby wouldn't start. Well, **the editor in me flinched at all the typos and grammatical errors.** They were on every page! When there are that many, they are no longer "typos," they're "warning signs."

A huge percentage of writers are bad spellers (you'd be surprised!), so it's not as if this is rare. What's rare is when bad spellers think it's no big deal. (Even being "a good speller" doesn't count when it comes to the final polish.) Words are a writer's tools and grammar is the writer's tool belt, and while that might mean little to to

some people, it means everything to the agents and editors you query. Many of them come from copyediting backgrounds themselves, and every dangling participle is like a stab in the eye.

I asked M why she hadn't hired someone to clean up her writing as a last step before sending it out, or why she hadn't at least paid attention to all the wavy SpellCheck and GrammarCheck lines that were making me seasick.

"Oh, the editor will fix it later," she said.

What editor? The one who is going to look at this and be dismayed by how much work is ahead for the editor who has the bad sense to buy this? As for "later" ("the editor will fix it later"), meaning *when?* Before or after that editor rejects this book as the work of a lazy, unprofessional incompetent?

Don't treat the editor who acquires your book like the hired help! It's also a misconception that editors today will hold your hand through lengthy and numerous rewrites or scurry to your side with a soothing cup of tea, or give your shoulders a mini-massage the way the manicurist does in a nail salon. The days of the editor as personal handmaid are long gone.

The word “editor” has many connotations. **The editor who buys your book at a publishing house is not a proofreader whose job it is to fix your apostrophes like the mother of teenagers picking up underwear that was tossed on the floor.** Although they have proofreaders on staff, publishers are increasingly looking for the equivalent of a turnkey operation—meaning that your book is in good shape and that *you* are low-maintenance and easy to work with.

Do you go on job interviews wearing cut-offs and figuring you’ll take a shower “later”? Or do you make an effort to present well?

THE MISTAKE: Sending in sloppy work that undermines an agent’s or editor’s confidence in your abilities.

THE FIX: Even highly successful authors hire “ghost editors” to fix problem areas and apply a final polish *before* they pitch. *At the very least*, hire a good proofreader to catch glaring errors.

MISTAKE 5: Not doing your homework

One of the many things agents and editors want to see before signing you is whether you are professional and know what you’re doing. *This does not mean you have to be a published author*

already, only that you can demonstrate by what you do and don't do that you are reliable and reasonably up to speed.

Which of the following are neon signs that you have not done your homework?

- A. Announcing that you expect to make several million dollars on the sale of your book, "For the Love of Lint: My Lifelong Fascination with Dust Bunnies."
- B. Hiring your own designer to create a lovely cover for your book.
- C. Demanding a clause in your contract that guarantees you'll be on *Oprah* or the equivalent (if there is such a thing).
- D. Asking to whom you should make out your check.

Yes, that's right—the answer is "E," all of the above.

It's okay to say you don't know, when you don't know. But it's not okay to stumble around blindly when you could easily pick up the basics online or from a how-to book. It's not okay to ask someone to take on the financial risk of publishing and promoting your book when you refuse to take a few moments to educate yourself on

what's required of you, what the process is like, or what you're up against.

THE MISTAKE: Expecting others to take a financial risk on you and your book when you wear your ignorance proudly.

THE FIX: There are resources all around, from magazine stands and bookstores to websites and chat rooms. In 15 minutes, you could sound like a publishing pro at cocktail parties.

MISTAKE 6: Forgetting (or denying) it's a business

Here's what a lot of writers tell themselves, sometimes because they actually believe it, but more often to protect themselves from the pain of possible rejection or the reality of hard, unglamorous work:

"I am an artist. I will not compromise my artistic vision for those [choose one] troglodytes / capitalist pigs / philistines."

Writers and publishers do have creative differences at times, but the idea that "artists" should not, must not and do not have to go to the effort of compromising is ridiculous—because

writing is a business. It is not wrong to make money from it. And it's not true that just because you wrote something, it can't be vastly improved by shortening it a few million words, or by NOT writing it in iambic pentameter.

What do you call writers who refuse in the name of "art" to budge on perfectly legitimate suggestions for making a book more marketable? Well, you can still call them "writers," because they wrote. But you might not be able to call them "published."

Not every disagreement is really over artistic merit. If the marketing department says a yellow cover will likely sell 100,000 more copies than a green one, will you still dig in your heels in the name of art? You'll never be lauded as the next James Joyce if your book never sees the light of day.

Writing is, of course, an art. *It is also a business.* If you can get your book into the hands of actual readers, it may mean more to you ultimately (especially when you're early in your career) than insisting on the green cover. In any case, the publisher is not a non-profit or a charity. The company deserves to at least try to recoup their investment in you.

As for protecting the sanctity of art, it actually devalues the important role of writers in our society today to keep writing in the “art” ghetto—meaning inaccessible, unpublished, underpaid. It encourages the belief that any professional-quality writing that proves popular with readers must be worthless trash ... and that is not the case! (Well, not *a/ways* the case.) And it perpetuates the stereotype of the sensitive writer who is so difficult and uncompromising that publishers would rather work with someone arguably less talented but way more professional.

Remember, selling a book does not mean “selling out.” The real sell-out is the one who clings to outdated notions of what it means to get one’s book into the right hands.

THE MISTAKE: Refusing to compromise on anything regarding the writing, selling, marketing and publicizing of your book—making you the kind of person publishers like to avoid.

THE FIX: Pick your battles. The writers who tend to make a good living at doing what they love are the ones who take a professional attitude toward their art, their craft, and the realities of the world in which they live.

MISTAKE 7: Not having an elevator pitch ready

Why should someone pay you a lot of money to publish your book? (Hint: "Because it's the best darned book ever written" is NOT the correct response.)

If you can't explain in a few sentences what your book's about and who would buy it—all in the time it takes to ride an elevator with a big-time agent—then you are not ready to pitch your book. ("Just read it and you'll see what I mean" is also not an acceptable response.)

Put yourself in the agent's shoes. You've got a busy life and a groaning workload. Your time is valuable. Someone gets on the elevator and tries to interest you in buying something they're selling. Which of the following "elevator pitches" will make you salivate, take out your wallet and write a big check?

- "I just need a few hours of your time—today is good—to explain the backstory of my five-volume memoir so that when you read Chapter One you'll kind of get it."

- “I want you to pay me a lot of money for this book I wrote—it’s in my bag here somewhere—because, frankly, I need it. My rent is due.”
- “You should buy my book because I’m a really great person and my ideas are fantastic. I don’t want to spoil any of the plot points for you so you’ll just have to read it yourself—but trust me, you’ll make a million off this baby!”

I’m going to take a wild guess that none of these pitches land.

The question that lingers is, *what’s in it for you?* Why should you buy a book you can’t get a bead on?

Practice pitching your book in a way that makes it sound

tangible and enticing. Whet the appetite for more. You have to be able to describe it quickly so we know what it is, whom it’s for, and why the world needs it.

Many writers feel they shouldn’t have to boil down their fine book and complicated thoughts to what sounds like a sales

pitch. But you know what? How else are you going to sell it? You can’t expect other people to sit down and spend hours reading the manuscript of a virtual stranger just because you want them to. If you can’t make a good case for your own book—and you’re the one who

knows it best—then how is an agent or editor supposed to share your excitement and how are the marketing and publicity departments supposed to convey that excitement to booksellers and readers? “It’s, uh, about a love triangle, you know? And it took me forever to write, so, really, everyone on earth ought to buy it.” This is not a compelling endorsement for your book.

The elevator pitch is longer than a sentence and shorter than a summary. It’s partly plot and partly overarching theme. Clock it at 30 seconds. Practice it out loud until it sounds conversational, as if it occurred to you on the spot.

THE MISTAKE: Getting tongue-tied when someone asks what you’re writing.

THE FIX: Practice your elevator pitch out loud until you feel the shiver that says, “I can’t wait to read that myself!”

MISTAKE 8: Not dotting the i’s

Early in my career, when I was being trained as a copyeditor for a New York City daily, one of my colleagues gave me an invaluable piece of advice:

When the little red flag goes up at the corner of your mind, pay attention.

This is something you have to cultivate. **It's much easier to ignore those tiny pinpricks of doubt**, or to tell yourself that, okay, maybe there's a slight discrepancy between what you wrote in the intro and what you wrote in the conclusion, but either no one will notice or it's really not that big a deal.

I'm not talking about those moments of self-doubt where you suddenly convince yourself with a stab of lightning clarity that you're a hack and a fraud. Those are devil-on-your-shoulder moments, and they'll go away if you swat the nasty thing or ask the angel on your other shoulder for help.

What I'm talking about here are those little feelings of: Um ... did I repeat myself in this chapter? Or ... did I ever remember to look that thing up and double-check? Or ... if I were the reader, would I be confused right around now?

When I was little, I was deathly afraid of insects. (Okay, I'm still afraid of them.) Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I would see what I thought was the fast, subtle movement of a creepy-crawly. I went by a little rule of thumb: *If you think you saw it, then you saw it.* To

paraphrase this inelegant bit of childhood wisdom in light of the present discussion: ***If you think there's a potential problem with your book, then there's a problem. And if there's a problem, it's up to you to fix it before going any further.*** The idea that no one else will notice is just wishful thinking.

Vanessa, a student in one of my online Master Workshops, brought in a scene for her memoir set in a public health clinic. She was writing about a time in her life when she couldn't afford health coverage.

"Why did you go to the clinic?" I asked.

"What does it matter?" she said. "The point of the scene is the fight I have there with my husband."

"People who can't afford health coverage don't just hop on over to one of those awful clinics for kicks. They only go in an emergency."

"I thought no one would notice."

We tried an experiment. She posted her scene in the online classroom and let the other students read it. You know what comments she got?

"Why were you at the clinic?" No one paid attention to the fight with

the husband. They were stuck on why this character was in this hellish place to begin with.

You don't want to stop readers in their tracks and leave them asking questions and wondering what you're hiding from them.

It turned out Vanessa had been suffering from a minor rash in an embarrassing place. I told her that her attempt to fudge this little fact left readers to assume she was hiding a fatal illness, a sexually transmitted disease, a husband who beat her, or an ill-advised pregnancy. Yes, those are the only choices.

THE MISTAKE: Cutting corners in research, writing, fact-checking or self-editing.

THE FIX: Any sharp reader—such as an editor at a publishing house—will notice at once, and see it as a sign of sloppy writing or lack of judgment.

MISTAKE 9: Saying too much/Saying too little

This mistake is so common, I have yet to see a writer who doesn't make it—the tendency to go on and on in a pitch letter about

every single thing a book covers, or to say so little that it's unclear just what is being pitched.

It takes a while to develop a feel for this balance between over- and under-abundance, but again, put yourself in the shoes of the person reading your pitch. Where is the point at which the reader begins to grasp what sort of book this is? At what point does the explanation become tedious?

As far as pitch letters go, here's a clue: **It should never exceed one typed, single-spaced page.**

Here's another clue: What makes fiction interesting isn't so much the particulars of the plot as the larger themes they raise. What makes non-fiction interesting isn't so much the particular chapters as the clarity of their ideas and the overall wisdom they collectively impart.

Okay, just one more clue: **Never, ever pad a pitch letter with anything unnecessary or tangential. The point of the pitch is to drive them to want to know or read more.**

THE MISTAKE: Boring them to death, or teasing them to frustration.

THE FIX: A pitch letter (or “query” or “cover” letter) should contain just enough to whet the appetite.

MISTAKE 10: Working hard, not smart

How about this for exquisite pain: Agents or editors give you encouraging feedback, but they don't specify just what you need to do to push it to the next step—a signed contract. You try to fix it, but it seems to get worse every time you touch it. You're anxious, second-guessing yourself. You don't know what to take out, what to leave in. You've done so many rewrites the book is starting to feel both overwritten and cannibalized.

Pretend for a moment that you're a brain surgeon. No! Pretend that you're the patient awaiting brain surgery, and you see the surgeon is agitated, pacing, muttering to himself about how he can't remember whether to snip the blue wire or the red wire. To you, the patient, the next step is clear: You get up off the gurney (if you're not tethered to any monitoring machines) and you get the hell out of there! You don't want a surgeon in that condition poking around in your delicate brain.

When you're not sure what's wrong with your book, and when you have so much riding on it that you are no longer making

rational decisions, now is NOT the time to cut open your manuscript with a scalpel and hack away at the innards.

This can happen sometimes to a writer at any level. A lot of what we do at Barncat is helping writers see and correct problems when they have lost perspective. Or, you can bounce ideas off other writers in online forums or take classes or workshops.

The important thing to remember is that when your book still needs a little something, but you're not sure what that "little something" is, don't just guess. Don't get lost in endless rewriting without purpose. When you're in need, it's okay (and, ultimately, cost effective) to call in the cavalry.

THE MISTAKE: Suturing your book without a medical license.

THE FIX: Don't try this at home, kids! Call in a professional or hook up with a support group of writers at or above your level.

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