



FAQS FROM ASPIRING AUTHORS

What does 'no unsolicited submissions' actually mean?

A publisher who doesn't accept unsolicited material only reads manuscripts sent via a literary agent or scout. Chicken House doesn't accept unsolicited manuscripts or synopses, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding new authors' work. Although this can be frustrating for authors, the reality is that it simply isn't possible for a publisher to sift through the vast number of unsolicited submissions received. However, we do run the *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition in partnership with the *Times* newspaper. The winner will go on to have their manuscript published by Chicken House. We guarantee that, provided it meets all entry requirements, your manuscript will be read.

I'm new to publishing but I want to send my work out. Who can I send it to?

We advise all new children's authors to consult the latest version of *The Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, which contains comprehensive listings of credible literary agents and publishers, plus details of the kinds of stories they are looking for. It will also tell you which agents/publishers are currently accepting unsolicited manuscripts.

If I find a publisher/literary agent that accepts unsolicited manuscripts, how can I make my work stand out before I send it off?

Ensure that your work is in tip-top condition – edit your book to the best of your ability, proofread it and ensure it's immaculately presented. Learn how to write a pithy, engaging synopsis and a brief, polite and noteworthy covering letter. What are you offering that hasn't been seen before? What makes your book stand out from the crowd? Always read submissions guidelines thoroughly.

I'm not ready to send my children's book to a publisher or agent. How can I develop my craft?

Firstly, read and write! Devour novels from the genre in which you are writing, and see how other authors handle your subject. Write regularly – practise is a big part of honing your craft.

If you're looking for formal instruction, you might start with a couple of creative writing books. Additionally, a writing community can provide inspiration and support. Visit your local library or community college and check the bulletin board for details of local writers' groups you could join – or search the Internet. Lots of websites offer the chance to network with other writers or (if you're ready!) to share your work – Authonomy, Litopia, Wattpad, Nanowrimo and YouWriteOn to name a few. Receiving feedback can help you deal with criticism constructively and improve your writing.

If you're interested in formal tuition, consider investigating reputable writing courses. Literary agency Curtis Brown runs courses to help novice writers improve their craft, while The Arvon Foundation have been running writers' retreats for years, with visits by some amazing guest authors. The Golden Egg Academy, run by former Chicken House editor Imogen Cooper, offers great tuition opportunities and workshops for children's writers. In addition, many universities run Creative Writing degrees and MAs.

For independent editorial input, search for literary consultancies like Cornerstones, who can help develop your manuscript, or The Writers' Advice Centre for Children's Books, the only manuscript agency in the UK specialising in children's publishing.

Can I make my living through writing books for children?

Unfortunately, very few authors live off the profits of their writing – the J.K. Rowlings of the world are rare exceptions. Generally, authors work day jobs alongside their writing career. However, many supplement their income by offering visits to schools, libraries and festivals, or other writing-related work.

My sister/children/best friend/teacher/neighbour loves my work but publishers keep rejecting it. Why?

Publishers consider lots of factors when deciding whether to buy a book. For example, current trends, how the book stands out within the genre, the quality of the prose, how different it is compared to other titles on their list, and how easy it will be to sell the book to foreign markets. Your book may be excellent, but still not right for any one of these reasons. Don't take it to heart if a publisher says your book is not what they're looking for.

What exactly does a literary agent do?

A literary agent's main role is to find your book a publishing contract, submitting and pitching your manuscript to appropriate publishers, including those who don't accept unsolicited submissions. A good agent will sign you up for representation on the basis of your talent – and they will not charge a fee for this. As a rough guide, most agents will charge a 15% commission on any money they have helped you to make on your novel.

Your agent will often advise you on how to improve your work. After all, they only start making money when you do, so it is in their best interests to send out the very best manuscript and to find you the best possible deal.

Agents help authors deal with complex publishing contracts (although independent authors can consult The Society of Authors for trustworthy feedback on contracts). An agent should check important clauses and negotiate agreeable terms before the author signs. Additionally, literary agents take care of the business aspects of the writer-publisher relationship (e.g. payments or contract disputes).

If you do receive interest from an agent, do some research: Who do they represent? Are their other clients similar authors to yourself? Does the agent inspire confidence in you? Always meet in person and don't be rushed into signing a contract. Take your time. It's a very important relationship, so get it right.

Say I get an agent and they find me a publisher, how long will it be between me delivering my manuscript and the book being published?

Up to a year, maybe more. A manuscript often undergoes several editing processes before it is released into the world: a structural edit (where whole scenes, themes and characters are under discussion), a line edit (a more concentrated line-by-line edit), a copy edit (a general checking of consistency of fact and formatting, and accuracy of style and text), and a proofread (a last-minute check for errors).

What about self-publishing – should I go down this route?

Self-publishing is hugely popular and increasingly respectable. Lots of authors find that self-publishing straight to an e-reader is the quickest way of getting their work seen by the public and, very often, all they need to pay for is the cost of their book's ISBN. The self-published author also retains all rights, which means they make full profit on any foreign sales/movie deals etc. It is extremely rewarding for an author to see their work for sale knowing they have entirely self-funded and edited it.

That said, without the support services a publisher can provide, it's highly unlikely a self-published work will reach its intended audience. Most novice writers won't have editorial skills, contacts or market know-how – all the kinds of support a publisher can provide. The life of a writer can be a lonely one, and the self-publishing route should not be taken by the faint of heart.

Why don't publishers/literary agents accept manuscripts written by authors under the age of eighteen?

While people under the age of eighteen are often fantastically talented, teenage years are fraught with exams, university submissions and educational focus. The sheer amount of redrafting and editing a contracted author is required to do would be difficult for a student in full-time education to achieve. Similarly, there is often an expectation of authors to attend events and travel, and authors under 18 would need to be chaperoned and accompanied at all times.

Another reason could be that a publishing house or agent doesn't think the young writer quite has the skills/life experience/maturity needed in order to carry off the particular subject they have written about. But don't give up! A true writer writes because he or she is compelled to do so. If you are not yet 18, you have time to develop your craft – and carve out a complementary career in the meantime.