



Seeking Publication:

A Guide to Discerning If, When,
and How to (Traditionally)
Publish Your Work

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Introduction

You feel a call to seek publication. You know it's not going to be easy, but you have a story or a message that simply can't sit just with you anymore. It's begging for room to live and move and breathe. And you're ready for a challenge.

But where to start? The options are endless. Publishing is a whole new world, and you don't know where to begin navigating it.

I'm happy to share the experience I've gained from nearly twenty years in traditional publishing. I've worked as a bookseller at Borders Books & Music, a publicity intern at Candlewick Press, a publicity and marketing intern at Abrams Books for Young Readers/Amulet Books, an assistant at the Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, and in the editorial department of Simon & Schuster's Children's Publishing Division.

I've spoken at conferences sponsored by the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and the Rutgers University Council on Children's Literature. I have worked as a freelance editor for over eleven years, and my clients have included HarperCollins, Scepter, an Amazon Breakthrough Novel Finalist, Ever Eden, Little Lamb Books, Verily, and Good & True Media.

I'm also an author: my first book, [*Don't Forget to Say Thank You: And Other Parenting Lessons That Brought Me Closer to God*](#) was published in August 2018 by Ave Maria Press. My next, working title *Quenching His Thirst: Amplifying the Voice of the Church in Recovery from Addictions*, co-written with Keaton Douglas, is slated for publication in March 2023 via Our Sunday Visitor. I contribute to [Verily](#), [CatholicMom.com](#), [WINE: Women in the New Evangelization](#), the [Blessed Is She blog](#), [Aleteia](#), [Radiant](#), and [Vigil](#), and have also been published at Catholic Women Run, the Federalist, Natural Womanhood, and Soul Gardening. I've been an active member of a writers' critique group for almost ten years, and a number of my workshop colleagues have been published as well. My fiction has been published by [Ever Eden Publishing](#) and [Ruah Storytellers](#). I am currently a candidate for a Master of Fine Arts with a focus on fiction at the University of St. Thomas Houston.

All this is to say, I've been there. I've seen a lot. I can provide the roadmap to help you discern whether publication is right for you (don't stop here; keep reading!) and if it is, how to go about seeking it out.

What do you say? Ready to get started?

How This Will Help

In an informal Facebook poll, I asked what writers wanted to see in a resource like this. What questions need to be answered? What aspects of the industry feel too mysterious or cryptic?

A number of people asked for directories of where and how to submit their work. That's natural, and a resource I would have liked to have years ago, too.

But I'm glad I didn't have it so easily accessible. That's more like step twenty than step one. If I'd jumped to submission before I understood what I was doing and why, I would have missed out on a lot of the process that helped me endure rejection and persevere through the moments when it all felt like a waste of time.

My approach to your decision to seek publication is the approach I take as an editor when I'm reviewing a manuscript. I'm going to ask a lot of questions. Some of them are going to be hard to answer.

If you discern that publication is right for you and for this idea, then you will have some important work to do.

The questions I ask will bring to the surface much more information than you can—or should—include in your proposal. But having considered your work from so many angles will help you to identify and address the weak spots in your pitch.

I'm going to tap into places that you didn't consider to be connected with your work, but that will further illuminate the process and shed light on why you're doing what you're doing.

The goal is that you will be able to handle any question about your work that comes your way. You will be beyond prepared to introduce yourself and your pitch, and thus be able to craft a specific, relevant, and impactful proposal that will be difficult or impossible for an agent or editor to pass up. You will recognize that seeking publication is a process, not a task on a list.

At any point in this process, your idea may fizzle out. In digging deep, you may see that there's not enough there to comprise a full-length book. That's okay. Everything leads us to the next thing, if we let it.

You may find that "writing a book" is a dream you once had, but aren't as passionate about anymore. Or you may see that the pitch you had would be better suited to a long-form article or a video series or some other expression. I challenge you to be willing to allow your idea to grow and change. If not, it will feel stagnant and uninteresting if it does make it to book form.

If any of those situations that don't end with a book in your hand comes to pass, my guess is that at the same moment, you will recognize some other calling—another idea, another medium, or another approach to the concept you started with. When one door closes, another one opens. Keep your eyes ready to see it and prepare your heart to embrace it.

Even when a creative pursuit doesn't turn out how you expected, you can just about always find a win.

Call to Action: Each section ends with an exercise to put the information you've gathered into action. I urge you to work through the whole process and not skip to the end, for the reasons I've expounded here. Forcing this process won't turn out well. Even if you do find a publisher with your first iteration of your first idea, your editor is going to ask for changes, which will be difficult to make with a hardened mindset.

Determination is admirable, but there are always more pieces to the puzzle than we can see right away. Be aware of this and at every step, strive to be gracious. It will go a long way.

My Story

If you look at it one way, it took me six months to sell my first book. If you look at it another way, it took eight years.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I started a blog, Young Married Mom. I wrote a bunch of posts before I told anyone about it, to be sure I could be consistent and keep up with it. My family and friends encouraged me in it, and I gained a few followers here and there. Four years in, my life had shifted and the blog wasn't the right fit for me anymore. I stopped posting, but kept the archives available online, where they remain today.

In the meantime, I'd been working on a novel that was the kind of book I wanted to read, but couldn't really find. A friend from Simon & Schuster read it and offered advice. When she left S&S to be an agent, she offered to represent me.

As I was working on that novel, every Saturday morning, I went to the same coffee shop around the corner from our apartment in Brooklyn to write. Another woman also came on Saturday mornings and sat at her laptop, typing away. Eventually she approached me and we talked about our work. She invited me to join her writers' group, and I've been in the group (thanks to video conferencing after I moved out of state) ever since. With the Park Slope Creative Writers Workshop, I work on fiction, both my novel and short stories. I continue to learn so much by virtue of editing other people's work and interacting with people with a similar commitment to writing on a regular basis.

About a year after I stopped writing on my blog, I mustered the courage to pitch an article to Verily, an online magazine that I admired tremendously. It was accepted, and I wrote a number of other articles for them (and also had pitches rejected) for about a year. At that point, my editor asked me to contribute regularly and I gladly accepted.

Over time, I added more sites to my resume, as I found publications that excited me and whose style was in line with mine. Not every pitch was accepted, and some pieces required more revision than others. I learned something with every one, and with every one, I solidified my ability to serve as a professional writer.

When I had the idea for the book that became *Don't Forget to Say Thank You*, I wrote some notes in a document on my computer. A few months later, I was very sick with pneumonia—it was July!—and wrote the bulk of the proposal as I recovered. I sent it to a published friend for his feedback and made some changes. I knew I wanted to approach Ave Maria Press, so I just went for it.

There was some confusion over which imprint the book was right for and where I was trying to send it, but with a carefully worded email, that got sorted out. Six weeks or so later, the proposal went to an acquisitions meeting and within days I had a yes. My book was going to be published.

It's not the place I thought I'd be. My first published book wasn't one I thought I'd write. But of course, I'm so glad I did. Traditional publishing is an adventure, a joy, and a gift.

Appreciating Your Beginnings: Your journey to publication began long before today. Compile the events, relationships, and opportunities that have contributed to your getting to the point where you feel ready to pursue publication. You might do this as a bulleted list, a collage of images, a series of written vignettes, or a collection of sketches. Find a safe place for this; you're going to need to come back to it.

Step 1: Why Do You Want to Publish a Book?

We often think long and hard about *what* we want to publish, but spend not nearly enough time considering *why* we want to be published. Be honest with yourself, and mark one or more of the following.

I want to be published:

- ☐ to prove that I can do it.
- ☐ to share a story about my life.
- ☐ to further a message I believe in.
- ☐ to make money doing something I love and would be doing anyway.
- ☐ to glorify God.
- ☐ to be recognized for a talent I have.
- ☐ to discover new opportunities for my ministry.

☐ _____

It could be that when you look closely, you're not quite sure why you want to be published. That's okay, but please don't skip ahead. This step is crucial and requires your attention in order for the rest to succeed.

However you sort out the hard stuff, bring this question to that method: take a walk, free write in a journal, call a trusted friend, pray, listen to the voice deep within you.

The strength of your why will determine whether you have what it takes to keep going when things gets tough. This is going to be different for everyone, so I can't tell you if you have the right or wrong answer. I can only say that if you're not honest with yourself now, an insufficient why could make you feel your time and effort aren't worth the struggle when you face rejection down the line.

Do you have a solid enough foundation to stick with this goal for months or years? Can you handle the changes in course that may come your way and still be joyful about them? Are you happy with your why? Or is it telling you you're close, but not on the right path quite yet?

If the latter is the case, talk to trusted friends and advisors about your gifts and talents. Get their honest feedback. It may well be that they see something in you that you don't see in yourself.

Readying for the Journey: Choose a quote that keeps you on track when you feel frustrated or disillusioned. Find a frequently visited location to display it in your home or workspace. This is where you refuel. This is what brings you to the finish line.

Step 2: How Do You Want to Publish?

Once you have your why, and you're confident it's strong enough to carry you through the process, it's time to address what sort of publication you're looking to pursue.

When I've asked this question of clients in the past, some have told me, "However I can get published. Any way is okay with me." I see a couple of issues with this mindset.

First, it doesn't render a specific goal, which means that in the end, it's going to be tough to gauge whether or not you've been successful. As we've seen in Step 1, "successful" can mean a lot of different things—sharing your message, generating income, creating a brand, launching new opportunities.

There are so many ways to be published, from traditional publication with a publishing house and maybe an agent to self-publishing in print or on a blog where you hit "post" and your words are out in the world instantly, with a number of other avenues available in between.

Very different processes and timelines get authors to these goals. To suggest they are one and the same muddies the waters of what it will take for you to be satisfied with the end product.

The second issue is that this mindset doesn't identify a particular audience. If you don't know who you're selling to—or if you can't get more specific than your book would be good for everyone—you're not likely to make a lot of progress getting your book into readers' hands.

While certainly any person can read any book he or she wants, the reality is that some books are better suited to certain demographics than others. Being specific and intentional about who your book is for does three things:

1. It helps you write a better proposal.
2. It helps publishers understand where your book would properly be shelved.
3. It helps the right readers find your book.

The third issue with the “I’ll-publish-anywhere” mindset is that it expresses an honest, but somewhat self-serving goal. To be published for the sake of being published doesn’t say much about your perspective on your readers. This point of view sees readers as a means to an end, whether that be prestige, wealth, or something else.

A stronger approach is to look to serve the reader. That could mean entertaining, inspiring, or informing. This is a service rendered to another, and it puts the other first. It’s using your gifts of time and talent to be gracious to another.

To better answer this question, you need to know your options. Here’s a quick overview:

With a **traditional publisher**, a company agrees to edit and publish your work, design the interior and cover, invest in publicity and marketing, and distribute the product via its established sales channels. Most of the time you will receive an “advance,” or a payment that may be divided into parts (say, half upon signing the contract and half upon delivery and acceptance of an edited manuscript), which the company expects to earn back through sales. If and when the company recoups what it’s invested in your project (when you “earn out”), you will start receiving a percentage of each sale, which is typically paid out in a lump sum twice per year. You will not have final say in every element of publication, but you also don’t have to invest any money of your own to have professionals produce your book.

It’s tougher to pin down a process as to **self-publishing**, since the options are changing so rapidly. The short version is that with this route, you are in charge of everything—editing, design, marketing, publicity, and sales. This can be a great freedom or a great challenge, depending on your strengths, your time, and the financial investment you can make to produce your book. It’s possible to hire freelancers who can assist with any part of the process you don’t want to go alone. Reedsy is an excellent resource to hire professionals who have experience in the publishing industry.

The in-between is sometimes called a **vanity press**, which will do the work of designing and producing your book (sometimes editing and marketing to certain degrees as well), but for which you pay a fee. There are a variety of packages

available, so here's another reason why you need to know what exactly you're looking to achieve before you start the process.

There's not enough space here to explore the variety of **hybrid publishers** on the scene today. What I can tell you is that if you're sure of why you want to publish and what success will look like for you, you should be able to navigate whether this or any of the above options is the right place for you to start.

Keep in mind, too, the other ways it's possible to share your work, without publishing a complete novel, thesis, or anthology in hard copy. These include:

- Post online on a blog
- Read at live or virtual open mic nights
- Create videos or a podcast of you reading your work

Finding Your Avenue Exercise: Choose two of the publication options listed in this chapter and make pro and con lists regarding your current project. Again, be honest with yourself about what best fits your project and your goals. Setting realistic expectations now will lead to the greatest likelihood of happiness down the road.

If, at this point, you determine that traditional publishing isn't right for your current project, turn to the resources in the Appendix.

Step 3: Approaching the All-Important Proposal: The What

Every agent, editor, or publishing house has its own submission guidelines. Some want a full manuscript; others want the first three chapters. Some have submission forms to complete, while others take emails with short cover or query letters in the body of the message.

The forms may be different, but they are all looking for the answers to the same three questions:

1. What is the book about?
2. Why do we need it right now?
3. Why are you the person to write it?

This is where we dig in deep. Are you excited? Cool, but hang on a second—this also may be the point that you realize you’re not ready to write this book right now. And that’s okay. Seriously.

I’m going to say it again: It’s okay if you’re not ready to write this book right now.

In the long run, realizing *now* that the pieces aren’t all quite in place can be great. If you can see the red flags in your process and solve for them in the short-term, that saves an editor from pointing them out to you (and passing on your project) later. You don’t want to present anything but the best to people you could end up working with down the line. It’s imperative that you do not rush, unless your proposal is very timely.

The reality is that agents, editors, and publishers receive an incredible number of submissions every day. Many of these are not well thought-out and/or not polished. Except in rare cases, professionals are very unlikely to let sloppy or not-fully-developed work find its way to a contract because the initial idea had merit.

Your proposal needs to stand out. And you can accomplish that by being articulate, direct, honest, and exciting. Strive to be poised and professional (you can—and

should—still be yourself, with your voice, but there's an appropriate way to do that in this context).

I assure you, not everyone is doing these things, and they make a difference. You don't necessarily have only one shot ever, but first impressions matter, and the better prepared you are now, the more that effort will pay off later.

To get started, we'll look at question 1: **What is the book about?**

You need to be able to express what your book is about in a single sentence. You also need to be able to express what it's about in one short paragraph and in two to three paragraphs. Sometimes this can feel harder than writing the book itself. How do you distill so many ideas into just a few words?

If you can't seem to do this, then your work doesn't have a clear enough focus yet. Think about how a sales person is going to pitch this to a buyer. Consider the first line of description on an online retail site. You need to be able to succinctly and successfully draw your audience in. You may feel that you simply need more words to describe this thing; that your project is an exception. I challenge you to think otherwise.

A friend who's read the book or discussed your idea with you can help. He or she may see an undercurrent that you're not aware of.

Don't be shy about discussing your work with people you know who can give you honest, thoughtful feedback. If you're going to be published, many, many more people are going to be exposed to and comment on your work. For one thing, if you pursue traditional publishing, you're going to have an editor challenging the weaker parts of your manuscript, so that every word counts. By inviting feedback now, you give yourself an opportunity to see how you will handle constructive criticism through the rest of the process.

The What Exercise: Free write an explanation of your book, not worrying about length. Get out all the important details (and those you're not sure are important yet).

Now try paring it down (or building it up) to create descriptions that are the following lengths:

- **One sentence**
- **One short paragraph**
- **Two to three longer paragraphs.**

For guidance, read through book descriptions on online book retailers' sites or check out the jacket or back-of-book copy on volumes on your own shelves.

Step 4: Approaching the All-Important Proposal: The Why

Now we can move to question 2: **Why do we need this book right now?**

“Right now” is tricky in traditional publishing, because the average book is going to be published about two years after the contract is signed. If your topic is extremely timely, that process might be expedited.

If your idea is less ripped-from-the-headlines, you still need to show how the universal human experience is expressed within your pages (no big deal, right?).

Ask yourself why people in the twenty-first century need this book. What makes this a book that people will need to buy when it comes out (or even better, pre-order in advance)? How is this book providing a service that nothing else can? What need does it fill?

Who, specifically, is your reader? (The answer *is not*, I repeat, *is not*: everyone.) Why is she going to seek out the information or story you have to tell? Consider why this message is best communicated in this format.

Some of this may have been answered in the previous exercise, and that’s okay. But dig deeper here and don’t settle for an easy answer. Be specific. Be convincing.

You also need to consider comparative titles, or “comps.” These are books that sit on the shelf where your book will end up, but approach the topic you’re addressing differently. Consider what sets your book apart from these. What does your book have that nothing else on the market does?

The Why Exercise: Write a character sketch of your most specific reader. Include age, station in life, lifestyle, interests, and whatever else you can think of.

Now consider what else this person is reading. These books are your comps. Make a list of five books, including title, author, publishing house, and year of publication. For each, write one sentence about what makes your book different and how that proves why it’s needed.

Step 5: Approaching the All-Important Proposal: The Who

Finally, we need to look at question 3: **Why are you the person to write it?**

As wise readers, we always need to consider the source from which we're getting our information. Is this author something of an expert in this field? What past experiences prove her being qualified to write on this subject? Does she have a platform from which we can know her to be credible and trustworthy?

These are the things you need to be able to show about yourself in order to have your project considered for acquisition.

Typically, this information is communicated in paragraph form, rather than as a resume or CV. As with the book description, you'll want to craft short and long bios that are *both relevant to the book idea*.

In most cases, your previous education and publication credits count, the latter sometimes even if not directly related to the work or genre. This is because these items show your ability to conduct yourself professionally, work with an editor, meet deadlines, handle sharing your writing on an emotional level, and so on.

As for a platform, I know this spot can be tough. It can feel like trying to get a job for which you need experience to be hired, except that you can't get experience if no one will hire you!

The reality is that there are so many books out there, and pre-orders make such a big difference in getting a book into a retailer's shop, that the more people who know and trust you and your work before your publication date, the better.

Having a platform before you have a book makes business sense in our culture, and when you publish traditionally, you have to keep in mind—to some degree—that you are part of a business, even if it's a non-profit.

Building a platform can mean a lot of different things:

- Host your own podcast
- Be a guest on someone else's

- Publish shorter articles on a variety of sites
- Become a regular contributor to a site that's relevant
- Speak at conferences
- Develop a social media platform

While this list *can* go on and on, this doesn't mean that you should try to do everything at once. Pick one or a few items and work on doing them well and consistently.

You may need to work on this for a time before you submit your proposal to better your chances. Don't forget that you will find greater success in looking to serve your reader than in having your readers serve you.

The Who Exercise: Write a draft of your bio and try to look at it objectively. If you didn't know you, would you be confident in the elements therein to show that you're qualified to speak on the topic you're presenting? What's lacking and how can you go about filling in the gaps? If you don't have a website, now is a good time to look into building one.

Step 6: Where to Take It

You've gathered a lot of information at this point, and some of it may have been harder to articulate than others. But you did it. You're here. HIGH FIVE.

So what to do with all of it?

It's finally time to figure out where best to submit your work. This was info most requested—a directory of where to submit and those companies' guidelines. Spoiler alert: I'm not going to do that here.

That information always has the potential to change, so including it in this type of resource wouldn't necessarily be helpful. You'd have to look up submission guidelines to see if that info was still sound anyway.

Instead of handing you a proverbial fish, I'm going to teach you how to fish.

This whole section is basically an exercise, so get your pens or typing fingers ready. (Putting it all in bold felt harsh.)

Your comps are a good place to start. List these titles and their publishers. Now look up each book online and see what other titles various retailers recommend based on the purchases of others who have bought said book.

List these with their publishers as well. To find the publisher, scroll to the details of a book—trim size, page count, etc. If you have a physical copy in hand, look at the bottom of the spine for a logo or on the title or copyright page for a publishing house's name.

Take that same list of books and read those authors' websites and the acknowledgments pages of their books to make a list of editors that worked on each book, where possible. If you're looking to work with an agent, use the same method to identify the agent that worked on each book, too.

Once you have a substantial list, there's likely to be some repeats. These are the ones that may be best suited to you.

The next step is to look up the houses (and/or editors and agents) and see what they're currently looking for. This information can be on a submission guidelines page (sometimes found under a "Contact Us" tab), editors' social media accounts (MSWL means "manuscript wish list"), and editors' bios from conferences.

As mentioned above, every house is going to ask for something a little different when it comes to submitting. The best advice I can offer here is to follow the directions for each to a T, and keep trying not to rush things.

Step 7: How to Deal Along the Way

A couple of hard truths:

This is probably going to take a long time.

It's going to be a lot of work.

If and when you do traditionally publish a book, you will not become a different person than who you are right now.

If it seems like everyone around you is more successful than you are, consider that you might be conflating what everyone else does into the accomplishments of one pretend person.

God has a plan that is better than yours.

There are going to be tough times. You may doubt yourself and your purpose. But if you can stay true to the why you established at the beginning of this process and you don't pay too much attention to *what you think other people's whys are* (emphasized because too often our perceptions are colored by something other than reality), then you're going to be okay. You're going to be great. Because you're going to be doing exactly what you were created you to do.

Appendix: What to Do If Traditional Publishing Isn't Right for You

I firmly believe that there is a place for every story. I also believe that not every story is meant to be traditionally published. This is not any kind of failure or demotion. It's just recognizing that messages are communicated in a variety of ways. Honoring the means most appropriate to your project means doing the greatest service to those who will take it in.

I doubt you only read traditionally published books all day, every day. My guess is that you read a couple of sites online regularly, you subscribe to a number of podcasts, and you spend some time on social media each week, if not every day. You probably attend a talk here or there or watch a YouTube video when a friend sends a recommendation your way. Any of these might be the best path for you to pursue, and I hope you'll give each as much of a chance as you were initially willing to give a traditionally published book.

Some further thoughts:

Pitch an article

It could be that your idea would work well as a series of blog posts or even a long-form piece on a website you enjoy reading. You'll still need to answer the three questions from the proposal chapters, but on a smaller scale. Rather than books as comps, look for articles with a similar tone and scope to be sure you're pitching to the right site.

Pitch yourself for a podcast

Would you be a good guest on a podcast? Pitching yourself can be as simple as sending an email to the host or producer expressing who you are, how you found the show, and what you have to offer.

Propose a talk

Your message may work better as a live or virtual presentation. Could you speak at a local community group or an online conference? If possible, film your talk and post the video on your website or have it ready to share elsewhere.

Make the most of social media

In some cases, your platform might be the thing you really need to share your message; in other words, it might be the end, rather than the means. Think about it: you can engage with your audience instantly and consistently. You can network for free with others by liking and commenting on their posts. And you can have direct conversations with those who may need it most.

Wherever you discern yourself and your project to be headed, remind yourself of what you deem to be “success” and focus on what you can do to achieve that.

The Final Step

I leave you with some words from Thomas Merton, “You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.”

I hope this journey has been helpful for you. I would love for you to be in touch! Let me know what in this eBook worked for you and how your project is growing and changing. If you’re in need of further editing services, I may be able to help or recommend someone.

Please take a moment right now to send an email to Lindsay.Schlegel@gmail.com. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

Until then, God bless you!