

# Path to Publishing for Writers Groups

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## Introduction

**Y**ou may have many reasons why you're part of a writers group. Maybe you like the weekly social interaction. Maybe you have some long-time friends in the group. But most likely it's because you love to write and you need to be around other people who write too.

Writers groups often start out with a lot of energy. Writers get excited when someone else is finally reading their stories. But some of the energy can get lost over time if nobody's books are getting to market. Sure, it's fun to read each other's stuff. But wouldn't it be great if these stories that your group has worked on for so long could be out there where other people could read them?

Your writers group doesn't have to just focus on writing. It can also be a publishing cooperative. By working together, you can keep your costs down and produce high-quality stories. Aiming for publication will help inject new energy into the group.

## Getting Group Cooperation

Writers groups are full of different personality types. Some people are very direct and to-the-point. Others are sensitive and a little bit insecure about their writing. For the publishing cooperative to work, your group has to set some ground rules for dealing with feedback.

Hold a discussion to talk about any uneasiness about the manuscript feedback process. Find out how the group wants to handle negative feedback. Help everyone feel comfortable with the prospect of being told by the other writers that a manuscript isn't good enough yet for publication. A bit of advance discussion will help ward off hurt feelings later on.

## Identifying Publication-Ready Manuscripts

Not all stories are worth publishing. But sometimes it's hard for the author to decide that him/herself. The first task for your group is to sift through finished manuscripts to figure out which ones are ready, nearly ready, or are one revision away from publication.

Think about your own writing. Do you have finished stories parked in a drawer or an archive disk? Did you send them to publishers only to get repeatedly rejected? Did you decide they weren't good enough? Get your group to take another look.

Here are steps in helping your group identify good stories for publication:

**1. Get your group to dig out their old manuscripts.** A ten-year-old story with a rip-snorting plotline and a memorable character is just as good today as it was when you wrote it. Maybe you'll have to update a few details of the setting, but it wouldn't take you more than a few hours. There's something exciting about pulling out an old story you haven't thought about in years and giving it another try.

**2. Exchange entire manuscripts.** Many writers groups focus on small segments of a novel. They talk about this paragraph or that punctuation. When assessing books for publication, your group needs to read the whole thing, beginning to end. Aim for each manuscript to get read by three people.

**3. Consider genre.** Genre fiction (romance, mystery, science fiction, etc.) and fiction that has a broad appeal (comedy) or a very specific audience (dog stories, young adult fiction, early reader chapter books) will sell far better than a novel that doesn't fit neatly into a category. The problem with generic novels is that the buyers have a hard time finding them. Is there a way this novel could be revised to fit into a genre or category? If your writers are shy about bringing those romance novels they wrote and hid in their sock drawer, encourage them to bring them out. Genre fiction is big bucks.

### What sells best:

- Genre fiction (romance, historical romance, science fiction, fantasy, mystery, thrillers, inspirational novels, and any genre-benders). Genre-fiction readers are the biggest buyers on Kindle.
- Comedy. Everybody loves to laugh.
- Niche fiction (pets, places, historical periods, etc.). A special-interest hook draws in the buyer.
- Young adult novels. The young adult market is slowly growing as more and more teens receive Kindles and ereaders as gifts. Currently, the largest demographic group using Kindle is seniors. But that is changing.
- Children's chapter books in a high-interest series. Few children have Kindles, but that is changing. Parents don't like spending a lot of money on books for their kids. Research the reading level and attention level of your target age group by studying children's book series at your public library. |

### What sells least well:

- Short stories, novellas, and poetry

# Manuscript Assessment

Up till now, your group has probably been focusing on small parts of each other's stories – maybe a few pages or a chapter. But now you're reading entire books. What should you look for?

## Overall Reading Experience

Read the manuscript as if you were a buyer who just bought it on Kindle. Would you be pleased with your purchase? Did you enjoy it? Were you drawn in? Sure, you could point out the comma errors or the weak verbs. But the first task is to identify whether it's a sellable reading experience. If you liked reading it, then it passes, regardless of the commas and verbs.

Keep in mind that we could find a lot of weaknesses in JK Rowling's books. For one, the first book had a very slow opener. Two of the later books had ploddingly slow Quidditch sections. And in many ways, the sheer number of characters made the plots difficult for the readers. But who cares? The reading experience was magical, the characters were lifelike and touching, and the plots were fun. Enough said.

**1. Print the manuscripts to look like books.** Manuscripts are double-spaced in 12-point type on full pages. When you're reading a manuscript, you're aware that it's not a book. You'll have a harder time getting into the story.



Instead, get your group-mates to print their manuscripts to look like books. Turn the layout to "landscape" instead of "portrait." Set the text to 10-point, two columns, single-spaced. Now the manuscript looks like two pages of a book. Your readers will be better able to imagine that they've just bought this book on Kindle for 99 cents. They'll sit back and enjoy reading it instead of looking at the job as an editing task.



**2. Put the red pens away.** Read each other's books as if you'd just bought them. Nobody reads a book with a red pen in hand.

**3. Identify core weaknesses only.** Here are the two weaknesses that make a story unsellable:

- **An unmemorable protagonist.** If you find it hard to care about the protagonist, then likely other readers won't care either.
- **A meandering plotline.** If you find the plot drags, changes directions too often, or lacks interesting obstacles and crises, then other readers will experience it the

same way.

Don't bother talking about smaller problems till these bigger problems are sorted out.

Keep in mind that even major problems can often be solved with a few simple revisions. Once the writer knows what's wrong, he/she can focus on fixing it.

## Detailed Feedback

If the manuscript is a good overall reading experience, then it's time for a full manuscript feedback. Compile your reactions to the book. It's best if you do this after you've read the book, rather than while you're reading it. Whatever you forget by the end of the book isn't as important as you might have thought while you were reading that chapter.

Always remember to read the book from the perspective of the *buyer*, not from the perspective of an *editor*. Here is a list of questions to help guide you.

### General:

1. What were the book's strongest parts (e.g., beginning, chapter 6, ending) or best aspects (e.g., suspenseful writing, plot twists)? List them. The writer needs to know what works.
2. What were the book's weakest parts or least favorable aspects? List them. If you find you have to work hard to figure out what the weakest parts are, then that's a good sign. Perhaps they don't really matter.

### Characters:

3. Are the characters consistent? Are their actions consistent with their personality? Does the writer accidentally change characters (personality, physical appearance, family connections, career) partway through the book?
4. Are the characters purposeful? Are there any characters that just seem to be taking up space without serving a real purpose? Do any characters mysteriously disappear? Do characters introduced in the opening chapter appear enough in the book to warrant being in the opening?
5. Are any characters clichés? There's nothing wrong with using archetypal characters, but you want to point out any characters that seemed two-dimensional.
6. Do the characters have powerful motivations for their actions. Do these motivations develop?
7. Do the characters grow, learn, and change?

## **Plot:**

8. Is there enough variety in the pacing of the story? Are there action parts as well as slower parts that help the reader recap what's going on? Is there tension and suspense? If there's despair, are there sections of renewal as well?
9. Are all the scenes vital to the story? Are there scenes that could be deleted? If there's one bit of essential action or information in an otherwise purposeless scene, could that action/information be tucked in somewhere else?
10. Do the timelines work? Is there a plausible amount of time for the story's events? Does the story skip days or drop seasons?
11. Are any parts of the story confusing or hard to follow?
12. Does the opening paragraph grab your attention and pique your curiosity? Does it introduce the theme, setting, action, or main character in a sharp, interesting, and original way?
13. Does the ending work? Is it disappointing? Does it make sense based on the characters, their motivations, the setting, the themes, and the problems set out at the beginning of the story? (See *Dan Wells on Story Structure Part 1 to 5* on YouTube.)

## **Writing:**

14. Is the setting clear? Does it seem real? Can you visualize it? Is it unique enough to be interesting?
15. Is the background information skilfully woven into the opening chapters, creating suspense and stringing the reader along? Or is it all in one dull chunk in the opening chapter?
16. Are there places where the author needs to "show not tell"? Is the author relying too much on description instead of action and dialog?
17. Does the story have a theme (or themes)? If a theme is introduced, does it get resolved? Are any themes mysteriously dropped?

## **Editing**

When you're editing each other's stories, you're identifying problems related to words rather than to story. When words clutter a story, the reader has a hard time getting drawn into it.

Look for the following types of problems.

**1. Overwriting.** Many excellent writers overwrite. Overwriting occurs when the writer has too many good ways to paint a scene—and ends up using all of them. If you find a scene is slow, look for overwriting. Lightly cross off the last sentence in every paragraph, as well as descriptive details in the dialog sections. Then reread. You may find that you've quickly and easily reduced the overwriting.

**2. Telling instead of showing.** You can find "telling" sections more easily than the author. Circle them. Suggest that the author rewrite it as dialog or action or insert the details into another scene's dialog or action.

**3. Purple prose.** Some writers like pretty and unusual words. But ordinary words work best. The whole point of writing is for the words to disappear as the reader gets drawn into the story, so odd words will just get in the way. Circle jarring words.

**4. Typos.** Circle these as you read.

**5. Repeated and over-used words.** Suggest substitutions if you can.

**6. Grammar and sentence structure.** Read enough of the story to get a feel for the writer's syntax before you start redlining every paragraph. Unusual sentence structure may be a deliberate feature of the writer's narrative style. Beware of trying to apply your Grade 3 teacher's grammar rules to a novel. Only identify those grammar and sentence structure problems that create reading problems.

However, if there are many grammar and sentence structure problems, stop reading after a couple of chapters. Return the manuscript, lend the writer a grammar guide, and get a rewrite before continuing. You don't want to spend an entire week-end marking up an entire manuscript.

## Proofreading

Once the writer has worked on edits and revisions, exchange manuscripts again for a final proofreading. If possible, give the book to a group member that hasn't read the book yet. You want fresh eyes.

As proofreader, your job is to catch the typos and errors, nothing more. Unless the write has asked for feedback, don't give any.

Once you're done your proofreading, the writer will send in the manuscript for publishing.

## After Publication

Once your group's books are up for sale, you can still help each other maximize sales. In the old days, this would involve seeking out newspaper reviews and talk show appearances. Those are great if you can get them. But the internet is a far more efficient place to market a book.

Consider the following ideas.

## Seeding the First Reviews

If you're publishing on Amazon or Amazon Kindle, you'll be relying on reviews and ratings to get your sales going. At first, your book will be buried at the bottom of the last sales page. Most buyers will never find it. Sales help lift the book from the back page. But how can you get those first few sales? Through reviews and ratings.

Buyers sift through new books to find the ones that have good reviews. If your writers group can write reviews for each other's books, you'll seed the first sales.

Here are some tips for writing useful reviews for each other:

- 1. Buy the books.** If the books are on Kindle, priced at 99 cents, then buy each other's books. If you don't have a Kindle, Kobo, Nook, or iBook, you can download Microsoft Reader for your computer. Reviewers of Kindle books have to purchase the book in order to write a review. It's impossible to buy someone else a book on Kindle.
- 2. Read other reviews.** To get a feel for what a review sounds like, glance through some reader reviews of other books on similar topics. Reader reviews tend to be short and simple.
- 3. Don't mention any personal connections.** Some reviewers believe they should identify themselves as a friend of the author. If any of your group-mates feels this way, withdraw your request for a review. A review that says "I've known Helen all my life, and she's great" will do harm to your book sales. Stated personal connections look lame and announce that the book is self-published. Ask your reviewer to write from the neutral perspective of a buyer, not from the biased perspective of a friend.
- 4. Keep the review honest.** Ask your reviewer not to exaggerate. Exaggerated claims just lead to disappointed readers, which leads to poor future reviews. The review should be an honest summary of the book's strong points. It should avoid describing any weaknesses.

**5. Start strong.** The first sentence or phrase in the review should be enthusiastic. After all, someone reading the review is trying to decide whether to spend money on this book. For example: "Great read for a buck!"...or: "I couldn't put it down!... or: "Finally, a mystery for dog-lovers!"

**6. End with recommendations.** Who should read this book? Who would like it? A recommendation helps potential buyers decide to take a chance on your book. For example: "This is a great book for dog-lovers"...or: "If you're a fan of Oliver Wentworth's mysteries, then you'll like this one."

**7. Rate the book 4 or 5 stars.** Keep in mind the price of the book. If it's 99 cents, then 5 stars is not an unreasonable rating for a good read. The 5-star rating doesn't mean it's an instant classic. It just means you were happy with your purchase. A 4-star review is acceptable as well, but beware of splitting hairs. There's nothing wrong with giving a good book a 5-star review.

## Creating Online Interest

Remember that your book is selling online, not in bookstores. So you should put some group energy into drumming up online interest in your books. Your group can help with the following:

### Creating Author Websites

Free websites are available at WordPress. You'll need to spend a bit of time choosing themes and background, adding your book image and description, and incorporating links to your book's Amazon pages. But it won't take you very long.

WordPress sites are blogs. So you'll need to come up with blog material to keep it going. But if you're a writer, maybe you'll enjoy blogging. Avoid blogging about your book, the book publishing process, or anything else that smacks of deliberate marketing. Online audiences don't like to be manipulated. Wordpress allows you to create a static page about your book, so you can put all the information there. In your blog, just be a person.

You can write about the themes you introduce in your book. But write about them because you enjoy them. For example, if your novel has a dog in it, then write about your day-to-day life with your dog. If it's a humor book, then write funny stories. You can also write interviews with each other about each of your books.

If you don't want the extra task of writing a regular blog, then consider paying for a simple, static website that you can update as you publish more books. This kind of website simply creates an online presence and helps potential buyers answer the question: Who is this author?

## Creating Author Videos

Videos are great online marketing tools for several reasons. First, a potential buyer may look around the internet to find out more about this new author before buying the book. If you have a video, either on your website or on YouTube (or on YouTube but linked to your website), you provide them with something to find when they Google your name. Second, a video is an opportunity to talk about what your story is about and get your potential reader curious. Third, it's something to put on your Facebook page to ask your friends to pass around.

You have several options for creating videos. If you set aside a day to do your videos together, then you'll have some fun and get the job done. Consider contacting your local high school to hire a teenager to help your group with this project. A teenager will know how to use video and internet technology and will be able to get the job done fast.

**1. The Talking Author.** Sit in front of your computer with a vase of flowers, a bust of Socrates, and excellent lighting. Hold your book, smile, and talk cheerfully about the story. Your group-mate videotapes it. When it's done, you download the video to your computer and add a title at the beginning and links at the end. Easy video-making software programs are available to pull the final product together. If you hired a teenager, you could have a polished video in a few minutes.

What if the video is terrible? Terrible isn't necessarily a problem. In fact, if it's truly, truly ghastly, it just might go viral. But be sure to make a second version that's more professional.

Also, if you have a lot of outtakes, don't toss them out. Consider compiling them into a bloopers video. If it's funny enough, get your friends to send it around on Facebook. There's no such thing as bad publicity when you're a new author.

**2. The Musical Montage.** Use audeo-video software to record your voice (or someone else's voice) talking about the plot of your story. Choose some photographs from free photo websites and create a changing montage of photos to fill in the video. Your photos should suggest the mood of your story. Finally, add some quiet music in the background. Place a title at the beginning and links at the end, and you're finished.

**3. The Funny Video.** Experiment. Try to create something funny. People cruise YouTube looking for amusement. Provide them with something creative and original about your book that has the potential to get forwarded a lot.

## Other Suggestions

- 1. Create an Amazon list.** Amazon permits users to create lists of their favorite books organized by theme or topic. One member of your group can create a list that includes your book, and you can do the same in exchange. The books in the list should be similar to your books (for example, great novels about dogs, great Quebec mysteries, etc.) so that you draw in people who like that sort of story.
- 2. Create a Squidoo page.** Squidoo allows you to create a website on a theme. A member of your group can create a theme related to your book's topic (e.g., dog fiction), setting (e.g., Quebec fiction), or storyline (e.g., quaint location mysteries). Somewhere on the Squidoo page there would be a brief review of your book, as well as related books, websites, products, and blogsites.
- 3. Find online book reviewers.** If your book has a theme, find bloggers and online reviewers who might be interested in that theme. Ask them if they'd read and review your book. Arranging this kind of review is challenging if your book has just a Kindle edition, since you can't send a free paper copy. However, as a no-strings-attached thank you, you can send your reviewer a \$10 Amazon gift card. Note that the Nook allows you to lend a book up to two weeks to another Nook owner.
- 4. Create local buzz.** Small newspapers often look for filler stories about local writers. If your writers group has published a set of novels, that's a great story.
- 5. Start a book review blog.** You and your group-mates can establish yourselves as the go-to people for getting reviews of indie novels. State that you accept Amazon gift cards in lieu of free copies (if no paper copies exist), but that you retain the right to write the review as you see fit. If your whole group is involved, you can specialize in your area of interest. Note that writing lots of bad reviews or nitpicking about little issues in an otherwise good read won't make you look like great reviewers.
- 6. Open a stall at the local farmer's market.** If your group has paper books, consider the tourist market. Tourists troll markets looking for gifts to bring back home. If your group has a stall, you can showcase your books as gifts of local literature.

## The Michael Grass House Writers Cooperative

As Michael Grass House brings more writers groups and writers on board and broadens its selection of titles, we plan to develop a writers cooperative. The cooperative would function as a publishing community and promote each other's books. By working together, our authors will be able to avoid the isolation and disappointment of solo self-publishing.

- **More reviews.** Our authors will be able to contact other authors in the cooperative for reviews, either to offer to write the review, or to request it. This will help our authors get genuine reviews from strangers, expand their audience reach, and gain web exposure.
- **Genre/theme groups.** Our authors from different regions will be able to group together according to book genre (e.g., romance writers) or themes (e.g., dogs). They'll promote their books as a group, looking for new trends in online marketing and book vending.
- **Newsletter coverage.** Our newsletter and blog will be able to showcase collections of reviews, both positive and negative, of a single book. A balanced set of reviews will help potential buyers decide if the book's strengths outweigh the weaknesses.
- **Unique imprints.** Our authors will have the choice to publish under the name of Michael Grass House or create their own imprint (for example, Canine Lovers Press, Murder Mystery Press). As the first author under their imprint, you would be the editorial director of your imprint. Editorial directors would determine whether or not to invite new authors with relevant manuscripts to publish under their imprint. In this way, authors can establish, control, and expand their brand.
- Other future initiatives may include promotions, free-book weeks, etc.