

# **BONUS REPORT:**

## **RESEARCHING THE MARKET**

### **HOW TO STAND OUT FROM THE SLUSHPILE**

**Jon Bard & Laura Backes**  
**Write4Kids.com**

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Children's Book Insider, LLC  
901 Columbia Rd  
Fort Collins, CO 80525

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## RESEARCHING THE MARKET

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Editors always plead with authors to research the market before submitting manuscripts. This makes sense -- it cuts down on the number of inappropriate submissions an editor may receive, and presumably will lower the chance of a manuscript getting rejected. But how, exactly, does one research a market that produces thousands of new products each year? I suggest a systematic, three-part approach which works for book and magazine publishers. This involves studying a publisher's overall list, individual books or issues, and their writer's guidelines. It doesn't matter which part you do first as long as you cover all three. (Note: Illustrators can use this same system to research potential illustration markets and then send for artist's guidelines.)

Overall lists. Book publishers have two lists: spring and fall. A magazine's "list" is comprised of a year's worth of issues. To get a sense of what each publisher does, read industry newsletters such as CBI, attend writers' conferences, and consult *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (published annually by Writer's Digest Books). Note which publishers cater to the audience for whom you want to write, both in age group and subject matter. Send for these publishers' catalogs, generally free for a 9 x 12 self-addressed, stamped envelope with two to four first-class stamps (bigger publishers=bigger catalogs). For magazines, get the most recent issue and then study back issues at the library. Many publishers also have web sites that feature their current lists, though I find it's easier to study and compare material if you have a hard copy.

But what if you receive several catalogs from large publishers and they all look the same? Then it's time to read the fine print and find the differences. Does HarperCollins seem to have an abundance of fiction picture books for ages 5-8? Then they might not be buying much for this age group for the next couple of years. Has another publisher just debuted a line of nonfiction chapter books? Maybe your chapter book on whales is just what they need. Do certain publishing giants tend to repackage classics from known authors rather than books from new writers? Pick another publisher who isn't afraid to feature new talent. Narrow down your number of potential markets.

Individual books or issues. Go to a bookstore or library and actually hold books from your potential publishers in your hands. Look at the vocabulary and sentence structure, the style of writing, the pacing of picture book stories. For magazines, note length and subject matter of fiction and the slant on nonfiction topics. Though you don't want your book to be just like someone else's, it must fit in with the overall taste of the editors from each company, and the general tone of a publisher's list. Narrow down your markets once again.

Writer's guidelines. Now it's time to send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to each publisher asking for writer's guidelines. Follow the submissions procedures in the guidelines exactly. If you submit a manuscript or query letter more than a month after receiving guidelines, call the publisher to verify that they are still open to submissions.

Once your manuscript is in the mail, try to put it out of your mind and start writing something else. And be assured that all your research means your work is most likely headed to where it will be eagerly read.

### One more bit of advice....

Sometimes, in the course of your research, you'll get a general feeling about a publisher. When this happens, go with your gut. I just got off the phone with the editorial department of a large house. I had picked up their writers' guidelines at a conference, but they were very sketchy (instructions on how to format the manuscript, but nothing on the types of books needed). So I thought I'd call to get more information. After 20 minutes of trying to get past an army of surly receptionists -- each of whom gave me a different number for the children's editorial department and then either disconnected me or transferred me to the voice mail of someone on vacation -- I managed to sneak through and actually speak to a human being. She was a retired editor working part time from home who just happened to be in the office today, but by that time I didn't care. She said she thought they were taking unsolicited submissions, but since the department had been without leadership for the last month, and she couldn't be certain. I hung up convinced that if I had a manuscript to submit right now, this publisher would not be on my list.

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## HOW TO STAND OUT FROM THE SLUSHPILE

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Every editor will tell you that the fastest route to selling your work is to write a strong manuscript. But when your carefully-crafted book lands in the infamous slush pile, how will it stand out from the hundreds of other unsolicited manuscripts each publisher receives? While submission guidelines offer very little room for creative interpretation, there are a few things you can do to make your work rise above the rest.

1. **Be professional.** Though this may sound obvious, it bears repeating. Any submission that does not include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the manuscript's return (or a letter-sized SASE for the editor's reply, if you don't want your manuscript sent back), will get tossed in the trash. Cover or query letters with typos or grammatical errors mean the accompanying manuscript pages won't get read. Editors have so many manuscripts to read that they don't have to contend with sloppy presentations or authors who can't follow the guidelines. It's that simple.
2. **Include personal information in your cover or query letter when it's relevant.** If your fiction caters to a niche market in which you're considered an expert, or you're writing nonfiction on a topic you've studied for years, briefly mention your qualifications. For example, if you're proposing an easy reader series and you've taught reading to second graders for 10 years, that's something the editor should know. If you've been recognized in some way (you've earned professional awards, you chair a national or regional committee, you've been cited as an expert in newspaper articles) and it ties in directly with your

book, list these accomplishments. A magazine article that describes your research or work in an area covered by your book could be attached to the query letter.

3. **Include a related photograph with your query or manuscript submission.** If you've uncovered some interesting photographs during your nonfiction research, attach a copy of one picture to your book proposal. If you've unearthed a rare photograph of the subject of your historical novel, a copy can be included with your query. Seeing such a photograph can help bring the subject to life for an editor.
4. **Highlight your "hook".** This doesn't apply to every manuscript, but if your book is based on something unusual such as old letters your grandfather wrote while overseas during World War II, or a 100-year-old diary you discovered in the attic of your house, add this intriguing information to your cover or query letter. The same applies to cutting-edge nonfiction research, especially if you have access to experts in the field.
5. **Define the market.** If you tell the editor the size of the potential market for your book, it helps her visualize your manuscript as a finished, actively-selling product. Base your projections on actual numbers: "*Publishers Weekly* recently stated that the number of students entering middle school will nearly double over the next 10 years, creating a large market for new young adult fiction," or "Two million adopted children in the US come from foreign countries, and more and more parents are struggling with ways to assimilate these children into our society while still retaining roots to their native cultures." Note the competition for nonfiction or niche fiction books, and explain how yours is different. If you have professional associations with groups who would buy your book,

or if you regularly attend trade shows where your book could be sold, tell the editor. Finally, if you have experience marketing yourself (you've done radio interviews, you're comfortable speaking at conferences, etc.) say you'd take an active role in selling your book.

6. **Package it right.** It's tempting to include the stuffed turtle you made to go with your nonfiction series, or a dozen gingerbread cookies to accompany your Christmas story. Every editor has tales of opening a manuscript box to find some non-book item fall out, whether it's glitter, food or rubber snakes. This is meant to be endearing, but most of the time it's annoying. The same goes for electric green envelopes, scented stationery, or manuscripts that arrive by Federal Express. In large publishing houses, an editorial assistant usually opens submissions, so the accouterments never make it to the editor's desk. At smaller publishers, where editors may open their own mail, these efforts to stand out may be seen as a desperate attempt to distract from weak writing. However, if an illustrator is submitting samples directly to the art director, a bit of artistic expression on the envelope is acceptable. Just make sure the contents are presented professionally.
  
7. **Join SCBWI.** Membership to the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators tells an editor you're committed to learning about writing and have probably done more homework on each potential publisher than the average first-time writer. Some editors are taking unsolicited submissions from SCBWI members only. For membership information, visit their web site at [www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org), email [info@scbwi.org](mailto:info@scbwi.org), or call (323) 782-1010.