

## ***SUBMISSIONS***

Assuming his work isn't lost in the mail (or in the mailroom), two outcomes await the writer making a submission to a publisher: acceptance or rejection (q.v.). Because the latter outcome is usually the more likely one, we have devoted an entire entry to the process of overcoming the depression and self-doubt associated with a negative response from an editor. The purpose of this entry is to discuss the basics of submissions:

how to decide where to send a piece of creative writing and what to do after making that decision. We'll begin by walking the reader step-by-step through a poetry submission, then point out variations in that process when submitting in the other genres.

## POETRY

Imagine this: After much frustration and revision, a talented beginning poet finally has four poems she really, really likes. Each one, she feels, can hold up to and even benefit from repeated rereadings. She's proud of her work, and she wants to share it with the world. What does she do now?

Let's call our new writer Sara and walk her through the submission process. While the details of Sara's search for publication are geared to poetry publication, the general course of action she takes is the same one that is followed by fiction and nonfiction writers.

First of all, Sara should consult a directory of poetry listings to find out which magazines currently print poetry and where they are located. Before the Internet, the two standard sources were *Poet's Market* (Writers Digest Books) and *The Directory of Poetry Publishers* (Dustbooks). While Web listings have made these books less crucial than they once were, both give solid advice about making submissions, and they remain valid ways of checking out potential markets: the listings explain editorial biases, describe the physical appearance of a journal, provide circulation numbers and reporting times, and let the writer know the percentage of manuscripts accepted each year. (The equivalent volumes in the other genres include *The Novel and Short Story Writers Market*, *The Writer's Market*, *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, and the *Dramatists Sourcebook*.) The percentage of manuscripts published is particularly helpful for a new writer deciding whether or not to submit to a journal. The *New Yorker* and *Poetry* magazine accept a tiny fraction of 1 percent of the poems that are sent to them. If Sara were to send her work only to first-tier journals such as these, she would probably be in for a world of discouragement. Granted, an acceptance by an exclusive magazine would represent a phenomenal start to one's career as a poet. And new poets may have heard that even writers who have been rejected by a journal many times will give it a try if they have a poem they feel is especially strong and/or that might be particularly appealing to a specific editor. Sara may have also learned that once she develops a solid body of unpublished poems, most poets follow a policy of submitting to journals that are probably out of their reach *and* magazines they believe will pub-

lish their poems. Moreover, since a steady diet of rejection is bad for any writer, experienced poets in need of an emotional pick-me-up may occasionally send their work to journals with generous admission standards or to brand-new magazines desperate for submissions.

Sara, however, is a pragmatist. She is just starting out, and she doesn't expect to become famous overnight. After purchasing a copy of *Poet's Market* in her local bookstore, she scours the listings for a journal somewhere between the *Atlantic* and *Lily's Love Letters*, a 5-page corner-stapled newsletter. Sara settles on *Blood Relative*, a relatively new magazine published by a state college in the Midwest. Most print journals now have a Web site, which—in addition to providing current submission guidelines—typically also post at least a few sample pieces from the current and past issues of the journal. Even if a writer is working from a print directory it pays to visit the journal's Web page, so Sara does just this, discovering that the deadline for the upcoming issue is just two weeks away. A statement in italics at the bottom of the Writers Guidelines page saying, "*We're still looking for good poems!*" encourages her. Maybe this is a sign, she thinks, intuiting what most creative writers come to believe, that getting published often depends as much on timing as it does on talent. She is intrigued by the fact that *Blood Relative* has a page entitled "Best of the Rest," which publishes poems on its Web site that don't appear in the print edition of the magazine. As she surfs through other literary journals, she comes to understand that combining print and Web publication is a trend. The *Texas Poetry Journal*, for instance, is a biannual print magazine, but it also posts a weekly "featured poem" that the editors have selected from submissions received during the week. And journals like *CrossConnect*, which are primarily online venues, publish a "best of" print annual.

Following the advice she has received in just about every book she's consulted, Sara writes a short cover letter, introducing herself and stating that the four poems she's enclosing are unpublished and not submitted elsewhere. She places the letter on top of her poems, each of which has been carefully proofread several times, and makes sure that she has her name and address and e-mail address on the upper-right-hand corner of each page. (Some writing guides have recommended that she include her phone number, too, but Sara has decided that's too much personal information to disclose to someone she doesn't know.) She folds the letter and poems in thirds and puts them inside a standard business-size envelope. Then she prints out a stamped, self-address envelope (SASE), folds it in half, and slides it inside the original envelope. Many editors, including

those at *Blood Relative*, ask that potential contributors purchase a sample copy of the magazine before submitting. This serves the dual purpose of boosting the magazine's sales and giving the submitter an idea of the type of work published by the magazine. Sara decides to purchase a sample back copy of *BR*; she slips a check for \$5 in with her poems and seals the envelope. She knows that her submission weighs two ounces rather than one, so she makes sure to include sufficient postage. Then she takes it down to the mailbox, kisses the envelope for luck, and goes home to wait.

Two weeks later, her sample copy of *Blood Relative* arrives. She reads it through, cover to cover, and feels good about her chances. Each of her four poems, she believes, is as good as anything in this issue of the magazine.

Then she continues waiting to learn the fate of her submission. She waits and waits and waits. And then she waits some more.

Four months pass before she finally hears from *Blood Relative*. One day, though, her SASE appears in her mailbox. She has read that this doesn't necessarily mean she's receiving a rejection: more often than not, editors use a writer's SASE to send a letter of acceptance. Unfortunately, what awaits Sara is a 2" x 3" photocopied form note informing her that while the editors of *Blood Relative* appreciate her submission, they cannot use it as this time. (Could they use it *another* time? she wonders sarcastically.) There is no indication that her poems have been read by a living human being other than the "Sorry" someone has scribbled at the bottom of the note.

Sara sits quietly in her chair for half an hour. She is disappointed, of course, but stunned, too. She feels certain her poems are strong; why can't a bunch of undergraduate "editors" see that? (A thousand miles away, at the same moment, one of those editors, the one who wrote "Sorry" on the note because he blanked and couldn't think of anything more eloquent to say, is remembering a particularly poignant line in one of Sara's poems, a poem he wishes he could have talked his coeditors into publishing.)

After a while, every rejected writer who believes in herself will pull herself together. Sara knows all writers get rejected and that quitting isn't an option if she wants to be published. It is now the middle of June, however, and as she scans once more through the listings of poetry publishers, she realizes that many, if not most, of the journals sponsored by colleges and universities do not read during the summer, since their staffs are on vacation.

For a time, she considers making a simultaneous submission of her lone batch of poems to a number of different journals, knowing this will

increase her chance of success and eliminate having to wait so long to hear back from a single journal. She notices that some journals accept, or even encourage, simultaneous submissions, their editors sympathetic to the long wait time writers face. These journals *do* insist that if a poet has her poems accepted elsewhere that she immediately contact them so they may take her poems out of consideration. Sara learned early on that publishing the same poem in two different journals was forbidden. She's even heard rumors from her creative writing teacher that there is a "blacklist" circulating among editors with the names of writers who have tried to double up on a publication without the editors' permission. To avoid situations like this, some journals explicitly forbid double submissions. The *Iowa Review*, for instance, requires writers submitting work to state explicitly that their work is not being considered elsewhere.

Grumpy at the number of print journals that aren't reading during the summer, Sara decides to look at publication in an e-zine. She's read that the rapid development of electronic literature (q.v.) has made online journals more appealing as potential places to publish. Many of these Web sites now have an extremely polished appearance and present the work they accept in an attractive, readable format. Sara finds several comprehensive sites linking to literary journals: Litline ([www.litline.org/links](http://www.litline.org/links)) lists print and online journals, small-press book and chapbook (q.v.) publishers, organizations for writers, and miscellaneous links to bookstores, literary agents (q.v.), and grant opportunities (q.v.). The site is a full-on writers' resource (q.v.). The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses ([www.clmp.org](http://www.clmp.org)) also includes links to a variety of resources, and writers sampling its database of member journals can narrow their search down to the magazine's main genres and special interests. WebdelSol.com hosts or links to many of the top Internet literary journals and is another good place to begin exploring. Sara notices that while submissions via e-mail are unwelcome by the majority of print journals (although she has heard this has been slowly changing), nearly all online journals ask that writers submit their work either as attachments or as text pasted directly into the body of the e-mail.

Sara ultimately settles on an electronic journal called *Zap*. According to the About link, its editors are "coffee house denizens" who make their living in the straight world as Web designers, and that technical expertise is evident in the journal's sleek look. Each issue contains work by several photographers and poems by eight to twelve poets, making the overall page count considerably less than that of most print journals. Since *Zap*

has no print component, all five back issues are online, allowing Sara to browse without having to pay for a sample copy. The poems are solid, and Sara even recognizes the names of several of the poets. It seems like a good match, so she cuts and pastes her cover letter and her four poems into an e-mail and sends it off to *Zap*. A week later she hears back from the editor. The journal would like to publish all four of Sara's poems. The editor tells Sara that the next issue is going up in two weeks, and sure enough, two weeks later when Sara logs on, there it is.

Sara is now a "published writer," although she won't feel she's truly accomplished her goal until she sees her name in print. On the whole, though, the submission process wasn't nearly as daunting or as mystifying as she'd initially feared.

Sara plans to keep writing, but it will be a long time before she wants to begin trying to publish a book of poems: most publishers suggest that the majority of poems in a book-length manuscript be previously published in magazines. Moreover, Sara can already tell from reading *Poet's Market* and *Poets and Writers Magazine* that it is very difficult to get a book of poems published by a reputable publisher. The great majority of poetry collections that are not self-published are published through contests (q.v.) or through network connections made by the poet—in writing groups (q.v.) or at conferences (q.v.). Mostly likely, Sara will want to print a half book, or chapbook (q.v.) first. And when she does arrive at the point when she has fifteen to twenty strong published poems, she will find that the same print and online resources that list poetry magazines also list publishers of chapbooks and full-length collections.

#### SHORT FICTION AND CREATIVE NONFICTION

A fiction writer submitting a short story or a writer of creative nonfiction submitting an essay will face much the same situation as a poet, with the following exceptions:

- Unless the writer is submitting a short-short story, or a microessay—that is, the piece is less than four double-spaced pages long—normally he should include only a single story or essay in his submission.
- Because they are considerably longer than poems, fewer stories and essays are published in literary magazines, making it all the more important for a potential contributor to become familiar with the journal's biases *before* submitting work.

- With less space for stories and essays, the likelihood of relatively easy publication in a reputable journal—as in the narrative about Sara—also decreases.
- Online journals don't have the space issue of their print counterparts, but since Web readers typically have short attention spans, a story on-screen will probably not receive the same careful attention as it would if it were printed on paper.

### THE NOVEL, MEMOIR, STORY AND ESSAY COLLECTIONS, STAGEPLAYS AND SCREENPLAYS

As indicated above, poets seeking book-length publication depend to a large extent on contests. While there *are* contests resulting in the publication of novels and memoirs, writers of these works normally begin by submitting their work to agents (readers should refer to this entry for detailed information about that process).

Short story and essay collections sell fewer copies than novels and memoirs; consequently, they are more difficult to get published. Again, contests may offer the best option: many of these are listed in the bimonthly online classifieds section of *Poets and Writers Magazine* ([www.pw.org/mag/classifieds](http://www.pw.org/mag/classifieds)).

Dramatists nearly always seek a production of their play before they even consider publication. A play, after all, doesn't really come alive unless it's on the stage, and in any case, most theatrical publishers won't consider a play unless it's been produced in New York or by a strong regional theater. An agent will prove useful for playwrights, but it is not necessary to have one in order to have a play produced. Many small theaters are actively looking for new plays and are willing to read unagented scripts. Since most theaters have a Web page, playwrights may find it easiest to get in touch with artistic directors via an e-mail, which should include a short description of the play, a brief statement of the playwright's credentials, and a 5-10-page sample—probably the opening scene—from the play itself. Theaters looking for specific types of scripts post calls online at The Playwrights' Noticeboard ([www.stageplays.com/markets](http://www.stageplays.com/markets)), The Playwrights Center of San Francisco ([playwrightscentersf.org/Resources/](http://playwrightscentersf.org/Resources/)), and Playbill ([www.playbill.com/jobs/find/](http://www.playbill.com/jobs/find/)).

The entry for scriptwriters (q.v.) outlines the basics for entering that world. Once again, agents are crucial, although screenwriters may take

advantage of an increasing number of annual competitions. Among the most prestigious are the Chesterfield, the Nicholl Fellowships, and Sundance. While winners generally do *not* emerge with a signed studio contract, these contests are good at “generating notoriety, providing springboards to careers, and doling out upwards of a million bucks a year in cash and prizes. Many production companies, studios and talent agencies are plugged into these events, so a strong showing can grant instant cachet. Meanwhile, competitions that are tied to festivals create incredible opportunities to meet colleagues and create synergy” (Lent 2004, 209).