

### **Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Author!**

Where are you in your writing career? I find it useful to categorize prepublished writers in one of four stages, Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, or Senior. You should not assume that you automatically advance one level per year. One year is a reasonable amount of time to spend at each stage, but it is possible to take much longer. I think I spent eight years as a junior. That's about seven years too long.

Freshmen are novice writers. They often have very fine content, but their craft is unpolished and they usually don't have any contacts at all. Most Freshmen are scared to death by the very idea of talking to an editor. Or they have an outrageous scheme for getting an editor's attention with the creative use of explosives and lingerie. Some Freshmen are simply astounded that editors aren't lining up to write checks for six-figure advances. But most Freshmen are convinced that they will never sell anything and they might as well give up. It's fair to say that all Freshmen are very confused. That's OK!

Sophomores have a bit of writing under their belts. They've improved their craft and probably also their content and they're starting to get restless. Just how long does it take to get published, anyway? And how do you write one of those book proposal things? And do I really have to meet editors? Does anybody ever actually get published by going to writer's conferences? Why can't those editors see that my book is a heartbreaking work of staggering genius and just publish the thing?

Juniors have gone even further. They've become strong writers. They've submitted some actual proposals at conferences. They've had an editor say those magic words – "Send me that proposal." They've gotten that unmagic letter – "We've studied your proposal carefully and it does not meet our needs at the present time." They now know a few editors. More importantly, editors are beginning to know their faces. Juniors are a frustrated lot. Their friends can't understand why they're not published. There is a reason, of course – they're not Seniors yet. But they soon will be . . .

Seniors are those few who are ripe to graduate. A Senior is writing excellent stuff. Explosive. Powerful. Moving. But still unpublished. Seniors are worried sick that those mean editors are never going to notice them, that they'll be

submitting proposals forever. Seniors don't realize that the editors are watching them, hoping to see the perfect proposal that can make it past the committee. Seniors are closer than they think. There is nothing worse than being a Senior. There is nothing better than being a Senior on that magical wonderful stupendous day when your son is busy ironing the cat, rain is leaking through the hole in the roof that you could swear you patched with toothpaste just a week ago, and the phone rings. It's one of those cranky editors you sent that proposal to last year and . . . she wants to buy your book!

### **Your Plan of Action**

The key thing is to be patient. If you are a Freshman, work on becoming a Sophomore. Don't try to jump to the Senior level in six months. It won't work. Move up the ladder one step at a time. Here are some practical things you can do at each stage:

**Freshmen:** Work on your craft. This means going to writer's conferences, taking writing classes, reading books on writing, joining a critique group, and most of all . . . writing. You develop your craft by writing. You should also meet other writers at conferences. It's amazing how many lifelong friends you can make at a five-day conference. I've developed an electronic course, Fiction 101, specifically for Freshmen who want to move up. Work on your craft faithfully for a year, and it's very likely you'll wake up one day to find that you're a Sophomore . . .

**Sophomores:** Keep working on your craft, but begin working on your proposal skills. This means reading books on how to write a book proposal, working hard at polishing an actual proposal, going to writer's conferences with the best proposal you can possibly write, getting critiques on your proposals, and then doing it all over again. Continue making friends with other writers and do whatever you can to help them. Don't worry – someone will help you too, so just relax and have a good time. I've created a second course, Fiction 201, especially for Sophomores. After a year or so of hard work, you'll be amazed to discover that you're one of those enviable writers who have advanced to the rank of Junior . . .

**Juniors:** Strive for excellence in your craft. Strive for excellence in your proposals. Broaden your contacts. This does not mean getting in editors' faces at conferences and making them sick of you. It does mean meeting people. Lots

of people. Not just editors. Writers. You may find this hard to believe, but knowing lots of writers is better than knowing lots of editors, and it's a whole lot easier. If you find an editor you specially click with, keep in touch. Editors are people, not ogres, and they like having friends. Be friendly to agents but don't expect them to take you on just yet. Agents want to work with Seniors, not Juniors. Don't get lazy on your writing! If you keep it up, it won't be many moons before you start hearing that people are talking about you. You'll be a Senior . . .

Seniors: Strive for perfection in your craft and your proposals. Keep in contact with all your friends—writers, editors, conference junkies, agents. If you find an excellent agent who's interested in you, it won't hurt to sign on. But be aware that the wrong agent is worse than none. You can sell a book without an agent. I've done it and so have many of my friends. Keep writing! One day, a golden idea will smack you in the face. You'll realize that everything you've written until now was tripe, but now you have the goods. You'll write feverishly on that idea for a few months. You'll craft a stunning proposal. You'll show it around to your many friends. And somehow, from a direction you least expect — probably an editor you've never met, who happens to be a lifelong friend of one of your lifelong friends — you'll get a contract offer. It's different for every writer. It's the same for every writer. You'll be an author.

Comments on Networking: Quite frankly, all those books on networking make me puke. I've said quite a bit here about making friends. Friends are important. Your friends — writers, editors, agents, teachers — will make your career. Now please forget I said that! If you spend your time at conferences trying to figure out who can help you the most, and kissing up to those people, trying to get them to do you favors, you are going to waste your time.

First off, the whole publishing game is so random and bizarre that you will never be able to guess who will be the magic person who unlocks the door to your publishing career. So it's pointless to try. You'll just be wrong and waste time.

Secondly, isn't it ridiculous to make friends solely for the purpose of using them to advance your career? Isn't it disgusting? Fergitaboutit!

My advice is to make friends with everyone you meet, hang out with the ones you click with, and try to do something nice for as many people as you can – preferably for people who can't pay you back. And don't tell anyone what you did.

### **How To Get Published**

I hear quite often from aspiring writers who desperately want to know how to get published. It doesn't take a magic wand to break into the publishing world but it does take some effort. OK, it takes a whole lot of effort. I'd love to help each one of you in person. However . . . there's only one of me and there are many of you. Which means I really can't mentor you all. I'm sure you understand. I do mentor people on occasion, but honestly, neither I nor Tom Clancy nor the pope can help you unless you have done your homework. So first let me sketch out what that homework involves.

Your Homework: I believe strongly that you need three basic things in order to get published:

Content – what you have to say

Craft – how well you say it

Contacts – who you know that you can sell it to

When you have excellent content, excellent craft, and excellent contacts, you will radically improve your chances of getting published. Please remember that there are no guarantees in the publishing world. It's a tough, tough business. But from what I've seen over the last couple of decades, content, craft, and connections are the three things that contribute most to success. If you are short in any of these categories, then you need to work on it until you're excellent. That's your homework assignment. Simple, no? Well, keep reading . . .

#### **Content**

Developing content is easy. So easy that I never bother to teach it. All you have to do is be a genius with tons of brilliant ideas who reads, reads, reads. Presumably that describes you, approximately, so your next step is to learn the craft of writing. This is less easy, and will take the bulk of your time.

#### **Craft**

Becoming a publishable writer is a multi-year project. When a publisher buys your book, they are risking tens of thousands of dollars that you will at least break even.

Would you risk that much money on someone who'd only been writing a few weeks? Neither will an editor.

Take a minute right now, please, and read my article Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Author! It will help you figure out where you are in your career. It will also tell you (in very general terms) what you need to do in order to amp up your craft and your contacts. The rest of this page will have more specific info on how to improve, but you first need to see the forest before we start talking about trees.

Now, if you've read the article, you know where you stand. If you're a Freshman or Sophomore, you probably need to spend some money on a few books. For some sterling advice on which books to buy, see my page Books on Writing. I'm sorry, but it really is easier to read a few books on writing than to figure it all out for yourself. Life is too short to painfully discover the secrets of Scenes and Sequels (see Dwight Swain's book), or using dialogue to advance conflict while revealing your character (see Sol Stein's book). Buy the ones you need. Read them. Apply them to your writing. And watch your critique group's eyes get wide over the next year as you slowly develop your skills. One thing you'll need to learn is how to write a scene. This is so important that I've got a page here on my site on Writing the Perfect Scene. I hope you find it helpful. It contains some of the tips I've given to a number of writers that have proven especially valuable.

Let's say you're a Sophomore or Junior or Senior, or even a published novelist. If you've got the basics down, I'd like to share with you my own methods for organizing my efforts. I can't help you be more creative. I'm assuming you already are extraordinarily creative. But maybe you could use a little help in getting it all organized. In that case, let me recommend my Snowflake Method for designing a novel. I use this set of techniques for my own novels and I'm constantly refining my process.

Hundreds of thousands of people have read my Snowflake page over the years. No kidding, hundreds of thousands. People all over the world use the Snowflake Method. You may find that some of my ideas work for you and some don't. OK, here's a huge tip – USE THE ONES THAT WORK FOR YOU AND IGNORE THE ONES THAT DON'T. Different people are different. I don't expect that all my methods will be gold in your grubby paws. But hey – if half my methods work out for you, that's still an improvement, right? And if you find that it does all miraculously work out and you are suddenly writing better than you ever have before, well . . . be a doll and mention me in the acknowledgments of your Great Lithuanian

Novel, OK? I won't expect any royalties, but a brief mention of my name when you accept your Pulitzer Prize would go a long way to easing my bitterness that you got the prize and I didn't.

How to Write a Proposal. OK, so at some point you've got most of the basic craft skills down and you've become a Junior or even a Senior. At that point, you need to learn how to write a proposal. There are several books out there. Seems like a new one comes out every year. I've read some of these over the years. They were a bit helpful. But truthfully, I've never thought much of the sample proposals they showed. I think the proposals I write are better. You may agree or you may disagree, but you can't argue with the price. Free.

Click here for a PDF file containing most of the proposal that John Olson and I wrote for our Christy-award-winning novel, Oxygen. Be aware that we were targetting this to Christian publishers. If you're targetting the general market, there are some obvious changes you'll want to make in your proposal. Also, because our book is actually in print and we don't want to spoil all the surprises, we have snipped out roughly the second half of the plot synopsis. There's enough to give you the idea of what a proposal should look like. Our editor told us this was a stellar proposal and sailed through committee. Which is kind of the point of a proposal.

#### Contacts

There are two main ways to contact editors, if you are part of the Great Unwashed Masses who don't have an uncle at Random House. You can either meet editors at writers' conferences, or you can get an agent. One way to meet agents is at writers' conferences, but you can also just contact them directly (see the usual market guides for contact info), but another way is to get a recommendation from an author who has an agent.

I sometimes recommend an author to agents I know. Please don't write me asking me to hook you up with an agent, because here is my rule on recommendations: I ONLY recommend authors to an agent if it was my idea. If somebody asks me to set them up with an agent, my answer automatically becomes NO. If you think for five seconds, you'll see why I have to have a rule like that. Many authors have the same rule.

Be aware that a bad agent is worse than none. A bad agent is defined as "one who does not work well with you". Some agents work great with one author and terribly with another. You do NOT need an agent to sell your first book, but it does help - if you've got the right agent. The wrong

agent will just slow you down, so don't be in any big rush. And I believe that agents who charge reading fees are scammers, so I advise you to just skip those kind and deal with the ones who don't charge.