

Advice No Creative Writing Class Will Tell You About Getting Published

1. **You need a strong premise or high concept.** The terms high concept, strong premise, and big book are often used interchangeably within publishing. Every agent and editor is looking for them! A high concept book has a strong premise and/or plot that can be summed up in one or two snappy sentences, which instantly convey the story and will make most people who hear it want to read it. Can you distil your plot down to one or two killer sentences? It's a good exercise to do anyway, as it helps focus your story. For example, *Follow Me* would be:

'There's a serial killer tweeting clues as to his next victim on Twitter. What happens if you follow him?'

If it takes you paragraphs to describe what your plot is about, you need to sharpen it up. Sadly, writing a good book is not enough to get published - you need a hooky idea to elevate it over the competition.

2. **Your book is a product.** It hurts our sensitive artistic souls to think in terms of our work being merchandise, but that's how the publishing industry sees it. Can they package it? Can they market it? Can they sell it? Similarly, in an age of literary festivals, can they package, market, and sell you? It's all a bit icky thinking of hard won words, often drawn from personal experience, as a commodity. But you've got to get over it. Today's publishing market is all about sales. Critical acclaim, awards and accolades come after you've got your book out there into readers' hands. Suck it up and sell it, sister. Especially if you want a career with any longevity.

3. **Genre is important.** It seems archaic, but agents, editors, and ultimately readers like to know which category a book fits in. They want to know which area of the book shop it will be sold in. Have a wander around and think. Are you writing a romantic comedy, sci-fi, fantasy or something else? With each genre comes certain reader expectations, and your book must deliver on them. You cannot have a crime thriller with no crime, murder or thrills, for example. Take a look at the top ten bestsellers in your genre on Amazon (for example, they have a Crime, Thrillers & Mystery chart). Familiarise yourself with contemporary books that are strong sellers. Do they all have a similar rhythm? Do certain things always happen? Do they all have a similar tone? And what kind of titles do they have? What can you write that is fresh and exciting, but still able to sit comfortably alongside these other books?

4. **Publishing is very competitive.** Agents receive around 200 unsolicited submissions a week. The industry publishes 2000 books per week. Your book needs to stand out at every stage of the process. What makes it unique? Why is it the book that only you could have written? Always keep pushing yourself. The first novel I wrote was me just learning how to write a book. It had some strengths – there was a story, good characters, and humour throughout. But ultimately it didn't have a strong or unique enough concept to sell. It was well written but too similar to what was out there already. I could have wasted years tinkering with it, trying to make it fit, when what I really needed was a catchier idea.

Nothing in writing is ever wasted: you are always learning. But keep looking forward. As soon as you've finished (in terms of redrafting, editing etc) then immediately start

on your next book. If you want to be a genre (as opposed to literary) writer then this will stand you in good stead. The market is speeding up, as publishing gets to grips with the popularity of ebooks. (I'm currently contracted to write two books a year.) You are more than one idea. You are more than this one book, even if you have spent years and years working on it. Keep moving. Keep having ideas. Keep writing. Plus, it never does you harm to have one in the bag.

5. **A lot of it is DIY.** Unless you are one of the lucky few, getting a publishing deal means doing a lot of the marketing and publicity yourself. Publishing imprints tend to be made up of small teams who work on multiple book publications throughout the year. They do an amazing, fantastic job and will try and support their authors wherever they can, but there are only twenty-four hours in each day. This means authors are doing increasing amounts of publicity and marketing, including social media interaction, writing articles and short stories for free, and appearing at events. This takes up a lot of time, especially if you don't already have a social media presence. Give yourself a head start and think about how you can build your profile and audience. You could join and actively participate in a Facebook book club, start a twitter account, or maybe a blog reviewing books in your chosen genre. You'll meet and connect with people who are already working in publishing, which means you'll have an opportunity to both learn and get your name known. Plus it's lots of fun!

I started out knowing no one else who wrote, edited, published or agented, but by getting myself out there I made not only contacts, but also friends who I love. I found my people. Yours are out there waiting for you. That is something you never hear in a creative writing class: writers and readers are the best people in the world.

6. Believe in yourself. Many writers think that once you get an agent it's all turning cartwheels of joy and endless success. But in reality, being a professional writer is the same as any other job: there are good days and bad days. There are ups and downs. Except instead of enduring the lows in an office with commiserating work colleagues, you're often on your own. It's an emotional rollercoaster, with increased social media usage proving a double-edged sword for writers.

Online you can find support and encouragement from other authors. You also see, daily, hourly even, how fantastically everyone else is doing. We're all smart enough to know that online personas are curated: and people are more likely to post positive success stories than sad sack updates (and are even recommended to if it's a professional account). But still the doubts burrow their way in. I know Sunday Times bestselling authors who've been plunged into a pit of panic that they aren't doing enough. Or that other people are achieving more. This can be especially hard if you are mid-project writing your next book. Do not let fear win. Forget about everyone else. Turn off your accounts if you need to. Write an achievement list of everything you've done to date. Now think back to when you first sat down to write. Look at how far you've come. You started a book. That's incredibly brave. You continued to write a book. That's dedicated. You may have amassed a good chunk of words. I bet you never thought you could write so much, you clever bean. You may have finished writing a book. That is seriously impressive, do you know how few people ever manage that? You may have got an agent. That is incredible. You are now a professional writer. You may have got a publishing deal. Your book is real. Something that came from inside your head is now being sold for actual money. That's magic. You are a word conjuror. You are an authorial badass. You are

remarkable. Think of how far you could go. Give yourself permission to believe in yourself. You are a writer. You got this.