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# For Beginners Only

## Beat the Submission Blues

By Noelle Sterne

**A**re you ambivalent about sending out your work? I used to submit nothing for months and then, when I got a Great New Idea, dash it off and click it out. Certain it would be accepted, I gleefully envisioned finally showing off to my parents, relatives, teachers, and all the boys who'd ever asked my best friend out instead of me.

But the rejections came back almost before I'd tapped "Send." With each reply, I fell into a desolation that froze both writing and mailing.

A writer friend helped me off this all-or-nothing seesaw. "The secret," he said, "is patience, hope, and regularity. Keep polishing until you know it's your best, no matter how long it takes. Then keep sending out. When one piece comes back, you know you've got others out there—and you've got hope. Now it's easier to keep writing."

My friend was right. Part of my depression came from pinning all my hopes on my latest Gift to Great Literature. I began to learn the elusive balance between submitting too soon and not submitting at all, or too spottily. In the process, I discovered two principles that work together to lessen refusals and boost acceptances.

### Slow Is Fast

The first principle: Take your time with what you write. As the Zen saying wisely counsels, "Slow is fast." Wayne Dyer updates this in his quotation from *A Course in Miracles*: "Infinite patience produces immediate results." This paradoxical wisdom was vividly illustrated when I watched a tugboat push a barge six times its size, loaded with metal pipes. In what seemed agonizing inches, the tug nudged the barge at just the right angle into the narrow space between two boat-filled docks. If the captain had rushed, impatient for his next cold beer, the barge

would have crashed into the boats lined up on both sides, and all those pipes would have tumbled into the water. Slow was fast.

The rush to submit your work before it's really ready is self-defeating. No matter how brilliant you think your first draft, it's only that—your *first*. Bernard Malamud speaks for writers of every genre: "First drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about."

In one of my manic sprees, I was about to e-mail what I'd judged a magnificent first draft. The phone interrupted, and when I resumed, blunders leapt out at almost every line. Glad no one else could see my burning cheeks, I went straight to the computer and revised until my neck ached and fingers locked. And I raised my eyes to the quote taped on my monitor, where the words of Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century author and lexicographer, supported my efforts: "What is written without effort is read without pleasure."

With patient and insistent editing, you'll develop a sense of knowing when a piece is close but still nagging—a limp sentence, a redundant phrase, an outworn adjective. This sense comes from relentless revision and, as I did not do, from walking away. Veteran writing teacher Stephen Goldsberry says, "Put your work away when you're done, and let it sit. At least a week." Turn to other things, writing or otherwise. When you return—and you may need to leave and return several times—in that always mysterious process, you'll see the piece anew and know just what to do. Slow is fast, and satisfying.

### The SOAL Principle

While I'm letting my almost cooked piece stew, I practice the second principle, SOAL: Send Out A Lot. It's based on perfect logic—if you don't send anything out, you won't get published, anywhere, anytime. No matter how much you and you mother are convinced that you're a genius, editors won't storm your e-mail inbox begging for manuscripts. You've got to risk, as we all have for centuries, the sword of rejection. After as many drafts as you need to make the piece as good as you can, shove it out the door.

And yes, the more you send out, the more rejections you'll get back. But so what? Kipling was informed that he didn't know English. A publisher told Stephen King that *Carrie* would never sell. Tony Hillerman, who's sold millions of books about a Native American police officer, was advised to "get rid of all that Indian stuff." Countless other successful writers have weathered torrents of rejection letters. Did these stop any of them? You know the answer.

Prolific published writer Linda Formichelli uses the SOAL principle in her sane response to rejection: "I never get upset by rejection. . . . If [writers] work on getting plenty of queries circulating, they'll be too busy to sit by the phone like a jilted prom date, waiting for a call from that one magazine they pitched."

As many have said, rejections are inevitable in our trade. The more you get, the more you'll get used to them. After a few, they'll feel less like gashed chunks of your heart and more like knee scrapes. Apply your choice of bandages—a repeated prayer, a few drinks, a gallon of ice cream, a long run by the lake, a string of curses—and get back to the computer. And, as Formichelli advises, remind yourself that since you've got so many manuscripts out there, you still have hope.

Using the SOAL principle also relieves that gnawing pressure to let fly yet another too green piece. With a lot of things perking, you're more willing to give the needed time to each unfinished query or manuscript. And the more attention you lavish before send-out (remember Dr. Johnson), the more you're likely to see the editor's ecstasy-spurring words: "We'd like to use this."

### **Steady SOALing**

Divide your time, energy, and attention between the actual writing, so you'll have something to submit, and the submitting process itself. This is tricky and takes discipline and planning, and the following techniques will help your balance.

### **Know Thy Writing Self**

You're either primarily a writer who loves to write anything for almost any market or one who must write what your gut tells you and then look for markets. Whichever you are, to activate the SOAL principle, you've got to develop a stable of pieces. If you're the first type, list subjects you know or crave to learn more about. Jenna Glatzer gives refreshing and helpful guidelines in her article "How to Outgrow 'Write What You Know.'" Once you've identified your subjects, generate different slants for each.

If, for example, you're a travel writer and you've noticed few articles on air travel with toddlers, your article could deal with baby-proofing a plane trip (to the eternal gratitude of the other passengers). Or your article on road trips with kids could suggest innovative ways to keep restless darlings from demolishing an RV.

If you're the second type of writer—let's say enthralled from childhood by extreme sports but a little timid to try a cycling-swimming-clog-dancing triathlon—find an experienced athlete and a coach. Interview them for insights and tips on training, motivation, and courage. Or enter an event yourself (please warm up first), start a journal, and write an informative and introspective personal essay about your experience.

Once you've identified your subjects, make a list of working titles, with a file for each. For the travel-baby piece, your title might be "See Baby Behave: Air Travel Tricks for Harried Moms." For your debut athletic piece, "I Was a Triathlon Tenderfoot."

### **Markets**

Research markets. With your working title, you'll have a good handle on likely publications, as indicated above. The travel pieces are perfect for in-flight and parenting magazines; the triathlon saga is great for sports, women's, and men's magazines. The most well-known books listing markets are the annual *Literary Market Place* and the *Writer's Market* and its companion volumes for novels, short stories, poetry, and children's writing.

Online resources for magazine markets can be excellent, too, such as [writersmarket.com](http://writersmarket.com), [writermag.com](http://writermag.com), [absolutemarkets.com](http://absolutemarkets.com) and [allyoucanread.com](http://allyoucanread.com). They're all updated frequently and offer amazing amounts of information.

But online shouldn't be your only universe. Get out of the house and tour the live magazine racks. The established writing magazines have regular market reports, and specialized magazines will show you current trends. Notice, too, brand-new publications. They're birthing all the time, and you could be one of the first to submit—for which editors may actually be grateful.

Sometimes you'll find markets when you're searching for something else. A writer friend preparing lessons for teaching his business-school course discovered a company that offers summaries of many types of business books. He contacted the vice president and soon, combining his passions, he signed a contract to write abstracts of new business books on management.

Once you've done your research, in your file for each article, record the likely markets. I keep a list in my hard-copy file of drafts and notes. Some writers store the list at the top of the latest draft or as a bookmark in the work's computer file.

Exchange information with other writers. Beyond the seductive commiserations of writing angst and can-you-top-this-block stories, other writers have much to tell you. We may seem to jealously guard our publication secrets, but writers are generally a generous breed. When you share great new markets, in return you'll get back many ideas and leads.

Say yes to giving your time and knowledge. If you're asked to give a talk or workshop to your church group or local high school English class, do so. Students are great sources of new marketing information. In a workshop, one woman told the group about two Australian magazines that consider international submissions. So, another aspect of SOAL is Speak Out A Lot.

### Schedule

Allocate specific days, times, or segments of writing sessions just for submitting. With a schedule, you won't be torn between those two fierce magnetic poles: "I should be writing... No, I should be sending... No, I should be writing..."

In your chosen time, set measurable goals: a certain number of queries and/or manuscripts out the virtual door per day, week, or month. Divide the tasks among your sessions, and you'll meet your goals more successfully.

### Write Your Queries

I know, we all hate to write queries. But stop whining. Some markets don't require queries, but many do. In either case, despite the universal writers' groan, query writing sharpens your synopsis powers and heightens your marketing savvy. When you're writing the piece, make a file for the query. The best time to write it is when you're in the thick of the first decent draft, or just after it.

### Organize

Organize your query files. I like all my queries in one place, so I created a "Queries" folder for fiction, nonfiction, and children's pieces. In this folder, my file for each piece is named "Title-Query." You can also group queries for specific genres into their own folders: "Queries-Travel"; "Queries-Extreme Sports."

Or you can save the query in the same file as the piece itself. Even with several drafts in this file, the query can be bookmarked for easy location and the next submission.

### Mechanize

For surface mail submissions, make two kinds of labels, one for your return address and the other for publications you're targeting. Master the label function on your computer, in which you can save your return address and those of your markets. Alternatively, you can address envelopes on the computer—it's not that hard to master.

For e-mail submissions, add the editors' information to your "Addresses" folder. Since some editors' addresses don't include the publication, for quick reminders, I add the publication's title in the "Nickname" box.

And, please, for all submissions, use the editors' names. No "Dear Sir," "Dear Madame," or "Dear Editor."

### Beating the Blues

So, keep revising, get organized, keep submitting. Once you start and continue to send out your work, you'll find it not only necessary but natural. Granted, the process may not be as satisfying as writing itself. But when you make organized submission a habit, you'll more easily ride that writing-sending seesaw. You'll practice regular and efficient sending and discover more writing time. And you'll have beaten the submission blues.

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### ■ Fabricating Reality continued from page 48

When you are building your world—whatever the basic setting and daily life aspects and whatever the overarching situation—make sure you have room for these or similar secondary themes.

Finally, though *Star Wars* would never have made it without all of the foundational ideas already covered, the heart of its success is found in the beautifully original *core pillars* around which the entire fictional universe was constructed. These are light sabers, the Force, Jedi knights, storm troopers, Darth Vader, and a few others. These ideas are what people think of when someone mentions *Star Wars*. If you want to build an excellent world, find core ideas of your own that have a similar impact. Jedi and light sabers worked because people love elitism and great skill. Darth Vader was a thrilling villain with an intimidating presence. Storm troopers were excellent symbols. All of these core pillars gave something significant to the *Star Wars* universe. Think up your own core-pillar ideas when constructing your universe. Find things that will appeal to the root emotions in every human and give those things form and function. Once you have thought of a fundamental system and chosen a central theme, these core pillars, if good, will provide your alternate world with all the support it needs. Now write a story and you have your work of fiction.

These are the tools necessary to world-build—a fresh idea, familiarity and difference, popular themes, and core pillars. If you want your work to gain a cult following on a national or international scale, get thee to the drawing board and address these four necessities. Otherwise, your books will sink to the back of the bargain bin, along with many other new works of fiction.

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