

## Agents

An agent acts as a mediator between writer and publisher by managing a writer's business affairs. An agent will select manuscripts; find a publisher; negotiate the publishing contract; maintain liaison between the writer and publisher; and collect the royalty and other payments.

Agents will not usually give you detailed comments on your work unless they take you on as a client. Agents see lots of manuscripts and they don't get paid for reading them. In the harsh world of commercial reality, they can't afford to give comments to every writer who comes along. The best place to get comment is through an assessment service or a mentoring scheme.

On the other hand, if you do get comment which indicates that an agent has read your book and thought about it, you should take this as an encouraging sign.

There are many advantages to having an agent including marketing (the agent knows the market and can save the writer time); negotiation (your agent knows what's possible for your book, which clauses to negotiate for better terms etc); advice (your agent will have up to date professional advice on book trade matters); peace of mind (your agent should protect you from unscrupulous publishers); opportunities (your manuscript gets taken more seriously when submitted by an agent. Some publishers both here and overseas will only consider manuscripts submitted by an agent).

Agents operate on commission only due on sales actually made. The amount charged can vary but should be between 10% and 25% of total earnings. Many agents charge the higher amount for overseas sales.

You should be careful, too, to find out exactly what is subject to the commission and what is not. For example, some agents will want commission on prizes you win for a book the agent has sold.

We advise authors to get the full terms of the agency agreement in writing, either in a formal contract, a letter or email.

**Warning!** Be very careful about people acting as agents who charge a fee for selling your book. This is not the normal practice and such 'agents' are not generally respected by publishers.

There are two ways of finding out if an agent is any good. The best way is, probably, to ask other writers. However NZALA is an association of NZ based literary agents established to maintain professional standards. All NZALA members

subscribe to a code of ethics that includes:

- working on commission
- not charging up front fees for the promotion of manuscripts
- not charging fees for reading manuscripts for agency purposes

NZSA only recommends agents that are a member of NZALA.

Contact details of NZALA agents are available from National Office or via our website [www.authors.org.nz](http://www.authors.org.nz)

### *How to contact an agent*

Here are some tips on how to approach an agent:

- E-mail first (or write including SAE).
- Give a brief statement of your background.
- Briefly describe your book.
- Say which publishers you have already shown it to, if any.
- Do not send electronic or hard copies unless you are asked to.
- If you are asked to send a hard copy, make sure you include a prepaid return envelope.

Be aware, however, that it may be as hard to find an agent as it is to find a publisher. An agent will only take you on if she or he thinks there is a good chance of a publisher taking your book.

### **And a last word**

In summary, Manuscript Assessors are paid fees for assessing manuscripts. Freelance Editors are paid fees for editing manuscripts. Literary Agents do not charge fees to market your book to publishers; they receive commissions on the income received for marketing their clients' manuscripts, and from supervising their contracts, rights, book royalties and fees.

*The information provided here is of a general nature and may not be up to date. NZSA will not be liable for any reliance placed on this material and specific professional advice should be sought in any specific circumstance*



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ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND FOR AUTHORS

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# Getting help with Your Manuscript

USING ASSESSORS EDITORS AND AGENTS

*NZ Society of Authors (PEN NZ Inc)*  
*TE PUNI KAITUHI O AOTEAROA*



## Editing, Assessing and Using an Agent.

Writing is essentially a job done alone. But sooner or later in order to get one's work published, a writer is likely to have to involve other people.

If your book-length work or shorter piece has been commissioned by a publisher or editor you'll be able to send the completed manuscript off with every expectation of it being published, particularly if you have a contract.

For most of us though, the route to publication – whether by a commercial publisher or self-publishing – is more complicated. Part of that process is getting the work up to publishable standard. To know how to do this, it is important to understand the difference between editing and assessing and what an agent does.

### Manuscript assessment – what is it, and who does it?

A manuscript assessment is an informed *impartial professional opinion* of your work. Don't expect *publishers and agents*, who are usually too busy and too swamped with unsolicited material, to send out detailed comments with a rejection letter. *Friends and relatives*, while admiring of your effort, will offer feedback which, though morale-boosting, won't improve your skills in general nor this manuscript in particular. An opinion from an *agented or experienced writer* is more valuable, but most working writers are not interested in assessing other people's manuscripts, and, in any case, shouldn't be expected to do so without payment.

Manuscript assessment is time-consuming and intensive. A good assessor will read your manuscript closely and thoughtfully, and provide a *detailed written report* that relates closely to your text. A good assessment discusses the *strengths and weaknesses* of your work, and offers specific *suggestions* on how to re-work it to bring it closer to publishable standard. Depending on whether it's fiction, non-fiction or poetry, an assessment should deal with vital elements such as narrative flow and credibility, characterisation, clarity, structure and style. Assessments are not for the faint-hearted. Be sure you are serious about your work, have completed it as far as you can, and are ready to hear the bad news as well as the good, before paying someone to assess it.

Assessment of non-fiction is also done by agents and publishers.

Most assessors charge according to word-count. You could be asked to pay all or part of that fee before the assessment is begun. Ensure you get a tax receipt for each payment. Where fees are not based on word-count and/ or not paid in advance, be sure to negotiate with the assessor the maximum fee you are willing to pay before any work on the manuscript is commenced. Get written quotes for the work to be done including extra costs, such as couriers and postage; that way you won't be invoiced later for work you did not request or for other unexpected costs.

Assessors should clearly state what they expect from you in terms of payment and manuscript presentation.

Don't be persuaded that an assessor can do more than offer a professional assessment. Be suspicious of an assessor who promises publication or to bring your work up to publishable standard; that ultimately depends on you, the writer. The New Zealand writing community is a small one, so *ask around* – particularly amongst NZSA members – about assessors: their *qualifications and experience* in your genre, and the quality of their assessments. Don't be afraid to question assessors themselves – they are in business and you are a potential client.

A number of *professional assessors* offer their services to New Zealand writers. Most will assess book-length works as well as shorter pieces. *The New Zealand Association of Manuscript Assessors* (NZAMA) has a code of professional practice.

For more information check our website: [www.authors.org.nz](http://www.authors.org.nz) under *Getting Published*.

### Editing – what is it, and when do I need it?

Editing is not assessment, and editors are under no obligation to offer an opinion on the merit of the work. Manuscripts are always edited before publication, and a publisher committed to publishing a manuscript will arrange and pay for editing after the *contract* is signed. Occasionally a writer might be charged part of the editing costs against royalties if a manuscript needs more than the normal amount of editing.

An editor is responsible for a manuscript from the time it leaves the author until it reaches the printer, working on it line by line to make it a sharper, *more professional piece of work*. Editors eliminate repetition and ambiguity, correct mistakes and omissions, check spelling and punctuation,

and ensure consistency and clarity by making detailed changes. They should consult with the writer on any more significant alterations.

Sometimes publishers tell senders of unsolicited manuscripts they will reconsider it *if the writers pay them* to have it professionally edited. In this case, it's vital to ask the publishers *exactly what they mean, and what the cost would be*. They might be suggesting that:

- you have your manuscript *professionally assessed* because, although it's not yet publishable, they believe more work might make it so
- you have your material *re-written* by a ghost-writer because, while it is interesting, your writing skills don't do it justice
- you have your work *edited* to improve clarity – in, say, the case of a non-fiction work by someone for whom English is a second language – to allow the publisher to better assess the manuscript
- your work is unpublishable and this is their way of politely *rejecting* it.

Editing is *time-consuming* and *expensive*, and editors generally charge by the hour not by word-count. Editors quote on sighting the job and the fees can range from \$20 to \$80 per hour, depending on the complexity of the job and the expertise of the editor.

Don't be persuaded into parting with what could be a lot of money on a vague indication that a publisher might look at your manuscript again. Immaculate presentation and superb copy editing alone do not make a manuscript publishable. Your money might be better spent on an *assessment*, or you might want to try your work on another publisher. If a publisher continues to recommend you pay to have your manuscript professionally edited, think carefully before proceeding.

As with assessments, it's important to be *businesslike* if you decide to go ahead. Talk to the prospective editor and find out how long the work is likely to take. Get a *written estimate*, and state, in writing, a cost-ceiling above which you will not go. Be sure you know exactly what you're paying and for what work.

The Local Publishers Forum has a listing of freelance editors on their website. [www.lpf.org.nz/free/](http://www.lpf.org.nz/free/) They don't make quality judgements on the people who list there but you can see the editor's experience and specialist area.