



Top Ten Turn-offs and Tips from Publishers

Publishers and literary agents are in the business of publishing books and actively looking for books to publish. So why do so many aspiring authors get knocked back?

Here some of Australia's top editors and literary agents share their pet manuscript peeves:

1. Bad punctuation, spelling and grammar - it smacks of a writer with no experience, who hasn't taken the time to do training or research the conventions.
2. Unnatural or unrealistic dialogue. It needs to flow and not sound stilted. Dialogue is one of the hardest aspects of the art of the novel. If you don't feel it's your strength, I'd suggest minimising your use of it as much as possible.
3. Lack of scene setting; just 'throwing' the reader into sudden dialogue. Sometimes this occurs at the start of a section or chapter with little or no detail about each scene. We need to know where each scene is taking place
4. Characters that you just can't like or identify with. There has to be *someone* in the novel for the reader to care about and engage with – why else would they want to read on otherwise?
5. It drives me crazy when an author doesn't know the word length of their manuscript. It's important because if an author tells me, as I had one recently do, that their manuscript is 346,000 words then my response is I don't want to look at it. And that would also apply for the reverse. If a manuscript is 30,000 words, which is a novella, and the writer is a first time author, then I don't want to see it nor will a publisher.
6. A plot that hasn't been properly thought out. What's the story about? What's the best way to tell it (voice, structure, beginning, ending, etc)? Is it complex/engaging enough? Does it matter? What's the hook?
7. A dreary title can be viewed as a bad omen for what's to come! As we all know, publishers deliberate very carefully over titles and often change titles in the course of a book's publication, but a really bad title on a submission is off-putting.
8. A turn-off can begin (and end) when I read a letter of approach saying "This novel is – for example - *Wuthering Heights* meets *Mad Men*. It's a gimmick I dislike whether it's used to describe a book or a film, as what I crave most is originality and freshness.
9. No punctuation around dialogue. Some experimental authors don't use it and most editors hate it as it makes it harder to read and more difficult to follow who is actually speaking.

10. Authors who do not have a clue what market they are writing for. Writers are often horrified when I tell them that the very first thing I look for when assessing a manuscript is a market. Whether the text is actually any good is a secondary consideration. The best writing in the world is useless to me if I can't see a market for it.

Publisher's Top Ten Tips

1. Revise your work to a publishable level – don't assume a publisher will sort out your grammar and punctuation errors. Read the *Australian Style Manual*, published by Wiley from cover to cover!
2. Write a proper 'pitch' letter and a one or two page synopsis - and give the plot away. Amazing how many aspiring authors say dumb things such as "I didn't want to spoil it for you". Grrrr!
3. Write a strong covering letter describing your story briefly (include synopsis), what you are trying to achieve with your work and particular authors you admire.
4. Send your work to the right publisher at the right publishing house. It's not hard to find out who is publishing what – the acknowledgements pages of Australian novels are usually enough. It's important to find the right individual publisher for you. Publishers are people with particular likes and dislikes, so do some sleuthing! I picked up a new writer this year who wrote me a lovely passionate letter saying she was Rachael Treasure's biggest fan and writes for a similar market. She suggested that as I was Rachael's publisher, she thought I'd be the best place for her to start. She was right. I snapped her up, unagented. If not for her covering letter, it wouldn't have even got past my assistant.
5. Make sure your novel is full of colourful detail and unique and unforgettable characters. These things make a story 'real' for readers. So much of what we see lacks this spark. Even when you think your novel is complete, go back over it all again and 'colour it in', adding incidental detail (clothes, mannerisms, turns of phrase etc) to every page. Otherwise your novel will seem like so many others.
6. Present work professionally - double spaced and single sided with wide margins and a minimum of 10 point. Never decorate or send photos you would like on the cover!
7. Know your genre; know your market. Read in the genre you are writing in - that is essential.
8. When you have completed your manuscript read it out aloud. Amazing how many glitches emerge when this is done, especially with dialogue.
9. Write for a market but write a story you care about – not one you think is selling right now, because that trend will be long gone by the time your book is ready to hit the shelves.
10. Most publishers and agents have submission guidelines on their websites – read!

*This information was gathered directly from Australian literary agents and publishers.
© Amanda Hampson 2010*