

The Stress-Free Guide to Nailing Your Agent Submission

by Jennie Nash, Author Accelerator CEO

Welcome

The best way to take the stress out of submitting your manuscript to agents is to make sure you avoid the most common mistakes writers make when querying. This guide is designed to help you do that, but before we start, let's make sure you understand what agents are likely to do when they get your manuscript:

> *Please note: This guide is intended for those who received a request to submit materials from an agent at the conference. In other words, you pitched an agent face-to-face and received a request to send in a manuscript. If you are reading this and did* not *receive such a request, you are pitching "cold" and will need to prepare a query letter and go through that initial step. See the Bonus Lesson at the very bottom of this document for guidance on writing a query letter.*

- Every agent is different, but the first thing most agents will do when they receive your submission materials is to read the first chapter.
- If there are problems in the first chapter, they probably won't read anything else. This may be all the attention you get. A NO takes far less time than a YES, so if there is something that quickly disqualifies a manuscript submission, agents will grab onto that and be done.

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- If the first chapter is great and they are riveted by the work, they may continue to read straight through the manuscript. They might miss their subway stop. They might stay up all night.
- If the first chapter is good enough (so it is neither problematic nor riveting), the agent might consult the synopsis to get a sense of the big-picture sweep of the story.
- If they like what they see, they might quickly scan the rest of the manuscript to see if it's worth spending more time. They know how to dip in and out, how to look for common problems, and how to quickly assess the shape of the manuscript. Here, too, it's easier for agents to identify problems and say NO than it is to carefully read the whole manuscript and say YES.

If you know the common problems agents are looking for in the first chapter, synopsis, and manuscript, you can identify those issues in your own work, shore them up, and pitch your work with confidence.

Table of Contents

Part 1
The Chapter One
Good-to-Great Checklist
Story Fundamentals
Character Fundamentals
Writing Fundamentals
Part 2
The 5 Elements
of an Effective Synopsis
Synopsis Realities
The 5 Elements of an Effective Synopsis
Taking the Synopsis from Good to Great
Synopsis FAQs

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Part 3
The One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review

- The Big Five Editorial Problems
- Reality Check
- How to Conduct the Review
- Plan and Execute Your Revision

Part 4
Write a Killer Query Letter

Part 5
Make Your Pitch!

Part 6
Connect with Book Coaches Who Specialize in Coaching the Pitch

Could book coaching be your dream career?

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Part 1

The Chapter One Good-to-Great Checklist

The first chapter of your thriller has to be pitch-perfect. You've already proven to the agent(s) in your face-to-face pitch that you have an idea they are interested in. Now you have to prove that you can execute it.

If agents don't see evidence of excellence in the first chapter, they are unlikely to request or read any more of the manuscript. It doesn't matter if your novel gets good in chapter three or 13; it has to be good from the very first page.

Go through this checklist and be honest in your assessment. If there are any boxes you *cannot* check, revise the chapter—and look for evidence of these same issues in the rest of the manuscript using *The One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review,* which you will find in Step 3.

If you don't understand any of the checkpoints on this checklist, refer to *Blueprint for a Book: Build Your Novel From the Inside Out*, which is available for download in Step 5.

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Story Fundamentals

- ☐ The stakes of the story are clear. We know what might be gained if the protagonist gets what they want AND what might be lost if they don't.
- ☐ The story is making a universal point (about good vs. evil, or crime and punishment, or corruption or climate, etc.) and the first chapter gives us a solid sense of it.
- ☐ The story does what the genre needs it to do. Certain genres have clear expectations around word length, content, outcomes, and conclusions, among other things. Make sure that your story meets them. If you are deliberately choosing to bend the rules or mash up genres, that's fine, as long as you are intentional.
- ☐ The world of the story is believable and logical. If there is a historical setting, the language and references adhere to that time. If there are fantasy, sci-fi, or speculative elements, the rules of the world make sense to the reader and they don't have to struggle to figure them out.
- ☐ There is a cause-and-effect trajectory to events that happen—each action causes a reaction (physical or emotional), which leads to the next action and propels the story forward.
- ☐ The narrator's point of view is accurate and consistent. There is no head-hopping and the narrator only narrates what they can logically know. The requirements are different for first-person narrators, third-person close narrators, and third-person omniscient narrators.
- ☐ The passage of time is clear and consistent; the reader knows where they are in time at all times.

Character Fundamentals

- ☐ The protagonist's desire is clear. What do they want? To feel safe? To be free? To save the day?
- ☐ What is standing in the protagonist's way of getting what they want is clear. The obstacle(s) should be clear. This will be the antagonist, but it might also be external realities in the community or culture and/or internal realities in the protagonist.

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- ☐ The antagonist's motivation is clear. The reader knows what they want and why they want it, as well as what is at stake if they get it.

Writing Fundamentals

- ☐ You are writing with authority, leading the reader confidently through the twists and turns of the story.
- ☐ You are writing in scenes; the chapter is not a bunch of random things that happen.
- ☐ You are showing the reader events as they unfold, not *telling* them about events.
- ☐ You *are* telling the reader about the character's emotional reactions through subtext, body language, and internal thought so they know what the characters are thinking and feeling at every turn.
- ☐ Flashbacks and backstories are directly connected to what is happening in story present. These elements are there to move the story forward. There are no info dumps (places where you are dumping a bunch of information on the reader because you, the author, think they need to know it).
- ☐ There is a balance of exposition and dialogue.
- ☐ Dialogue is used effectively to move the story forward.

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Part 2

The 5 Elements of an Effective Synopsis

The synopsis is a summary of the entire story, which gives the agent a chance to understand the full sweep of your story, including whodunit, how they did it, and how the mystery or the crime was solved if that is part of the mix. It's a critically important piece of your pitch.

Agents are reading the summary for a different reason than readers. They are not looking to enjoy the unfolding of the plot; they are seeking to quickly understand exactly what happens.

The synopsis must be clear, concise, convincing, and well-written—and all of this in no more than two pages. And yes, that is two pages in standard manuscript formatting, which is double-spaced 12-pt. Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins.

Synopsis Realities

A lot of writers panic at the thought of summarizing their entire book in just two pages, especially if it is long, complex, or twisty. This panic is borne of several fears:

- Writing a synopsis makes you confront the stark reality of your idea. If there are holes in your plot or unintended flaws in your protagonist or

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antagonist, they will become clear when you are writing a synopsis. There is nowhere to hide from what may be wrong. That's never fun.

- Writing a synopsis makes you confront the stark reality of the marketplace. When writing a summary, you can't ignore the fact that you are preparing your work to pitch—which means being judged. That's scary under any circumstance.
- It's a completely different kind of writing than you are used to doing. Writing a book is storytelling. It's generative—you are creating scenes and scenarios, characters and tension. Writing a synopsis is reductive. It's subtraction rather than addition. You are taking away, not building up.

If you feel any of these realities, just know you are not alone. Lean into the work of the synopsis and give yourself the time to get it right. It's a primary selling tool for your novel—and one that many writers skimp on. An excellent synopsis will set your submission apart.

The 5 Elements of an Effective Synopsis

An effective synopsis is going to include the following 5 elements. They don't necessarily have to appear in this order, but each of these elements should be present.

1. **The context**
    - What are the circumstances and context of the story? Where are we in time and place?
    - What are the circumstances of the protagonist just before the story starts? What is this world and who is this person in that world?
    - Why should we pay attention to this story or problem or idea NOW? Why not yesterday? Why not tomorrow?

2. **What does the protagonist believe/want?**
    - What is their prevailing worldview/belief? Story is about change. Something is going to force the protagonist to change. What is their belief about their circumstances, or how they see or value things *before* they change?

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- What does the protagonist want and why do they want it? What does it mean to them?

3. **What is the force of opposition that is keeping your protagonist from getting what they want? What is standing in their way?**
    - Show the external realities, including the antagonist.
    - Show the internal realities. Very often we get in our own way, because of things we believe about ourselves that we learned from our family, our community, and our culture.

4. **What is the main narrative arc for the story?**
    - Include the primary twists and reversals.
    - Consider excluding subplots if you don't have room for them.

5. **How does the story resolve?**
    - Be sure your synopsis shows how the plot resolves. In other words: Give away the ending. Here is publishing guru Jane Friedman reiterating this point:

        > *"The synopsis is sometimes required because an agent or publisher wants to see, from beginning to end, what happens in your story. Thus, the synopsis must convey a book's entire narrative arc. It shows what happens and who changes, and it has to reveal the ending."*

    - Show how the resolution impacts the protagonist. Did it give them the result they wanted externally? What about internally?

Taking the Synopsis from Good to Great

If your synopsis includes the critical 5 elements, that's good, but it's also just table stakes. To take your synopsis from good to great, make sure it also has these elements:

1. **Narrative drive**
    - Show the cause-and-effect trajectory of the story. Make it clear how one scene causes the next so that the synopsis has a sense of propulsive

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energy. If there is something that feels like it stops the flow of the synopsis, change it, or consider removing it. (If your synopsis points to a flaw in the manuscript itself, revise the manuscript!)

2. **A sense of tension**
    - Although you are giving away the ending, try to preserve a sense of mystery or tension in the synopsis so that reading it delivers some of the same experience as reading the story.

3. **Style and voice**
    - Write the synopsis with the same style and tone of the manuscript itself.

The Synopsis as a Test

What if your synopsis reveals that your story has some plot holes or other problems? Don't despair! This is actually quite common—and is another good reason to work on a synopsis.

Consult Step 13 in *Blueprint for a Book,* which you can download in Step 5. Blueprint Step 13 directs writers to build an Inside Outline for their book and offers a checklist for making sure the story holds together. The Inside Outline is typically created before the book is written, but it can be a very effective tool for testing a story, as well. You can take your synopsis and put it into the Inside Outline framework. It will highlight all the places where there are problems that need solving – and if you know where the problems are, you can solve them!

Synopsis FAQs

1. **What tense should I use for the synopsis?**
    - The standard practice when it comes to a fiction synopsis is to write in the present tense, regardless of the tense of the story.

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2. **Does my synopsis really have to be just two pages?**
    - Yes. Some agents even request that they be shorter. Follow the submission guidelines of the agents you are submitting to.

3. **Do I send the synopsis with the manuscript if *only* the manuscript was requested?**
    - Most agents will appreciate a synopsis, so you can send it as an attachment along with the manuscript, *but if their submission guidelines request no other attachments, follow the submission guidelines and don't send the synopsis*. You can mention in an email that you have it.

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Part 3

The One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review

The One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review is what agents might do to quickly scan your manuscript. They are not reading the story to find out what happens; the synopsis tells them that. They are assessing how skillful you are at telling the tale—and just as they did with the first chapter, they are looking for big problems, common problems, and fatal flaws that make it easy for them to say NO.

You can learn how to do a One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review yourself. It is an effective way to take a high-level view of your story and to see if you can spot any of the common problems.

The Big Five Editorial Problems

There are, of course, a whole lot more than five big editorial problems, but these are the ones that come up time and again in so many fiction manuscripts. If you can learn to understand, recognize, and solve these five things, your manuscript will be several steps closer to getting a YES.

- **Too much telling.** This is the big one and it is something that is very often misunderstood by writers. Everyone thinks it's literal: show the reader what people and places and things look like. But it's not literal. It's not about showing us the color of the sky, and the time on the clock, and the bowl of lemons on the table. It's about showing us the *meaning of the moment*. It's about showing the

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reader the emotional reaction to what the characters are doing and deciding. It's about showing the reader what it feels like to be in the character's skin as things unfold.

- **The story is not on the page.** One of the strange realities about writing a novel is that it's alive and well in your mind; the work of writing is to get it out of your head and onto the page. A lot of times there's a disconnect where the writer *thinks* that they've put the story on the page, but the reader can't follow what's happening and can't feel what the characters are feeling. Take off your writer's hat and make sure that a reader who is not YOU can become immersed in the story.

- **The passage of time is confusing or inconsistent.** Sometimes writers forget that they need to tell the reader how time is passing. A reader needs to be grounded in time and space so that they know where they are. Readers can get lost if writers don't put these kinds of timestamps into the narrative. The skillful handling of flashbacks is also important: make sure something in story present triggers the flashback, and make sure that when you bring the reader *back* to the main story, they know where they are.

- **There are info dumps.** Dictionary.com defines info dumps as "an act or practice of presenting an indigestible or incomprehensible amount of information all at once." It's common to see info dumps in Chapter 1. It's also common to see them when a new character is being introduced or the intricacies of a crime or other big event are being described. When a reader encounters an info dump, they feel the author of the book intruding on the story. It's as if the author is saying, "Wait, hold on a second. You need to know this information before we can move on." It's like seeing the puppet master peeking out from behind the curtain; it breaks the spell. Instead of being swept away by the story or into a world of possibility, the reader is pulled out into the real world where the author wants them to know something. The reader feels like they should be taking notes because there's going to be a test. Break up info dumps by putting the info into scenes or letting it unfold in dialogue.

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- **Dialogue is flat and ineffectual.** In first drafts of manuscripts, you will often find dialogue that is wooden or flat. It doesn't sound like real life. It's not the way people actually speak to each other, and worse, it doesn't move the story forward. Remember to include both context and subtext when writing dialogue, and use body language to show the reader what's going on beneath the words. Tell them the character's emotional response to everything that's being said.

Reality Check

Despite the name, it might take you more than an hour to do a One-Page Big-Picture Manuscript Review, and that's fine. The goal is to make sure that you don't start reading your story chronologically, a line at a time, the way you likely did when you were writing or revising. Challenge yourself to do your review in three hours, or perhaps five. You will look at it in a different way than if you gave yourself all the time in the world to carefully go through it. You are not looking for skillful writing on the level of the line or paragraph. You are looking for evidence of the big problems writers commonly get wrong.

How to Conduct the Review

Here's how it breaks down if you are trying to do a One-Page Big-Picture Manuscript Review in an hour. Adjust according to what is realistic for you.

1. Read Chapter 1 quickly but carefully – **7 minutes.**

   If you went through the Chapter 1 Good to Great Checklist and shored up this chapter, you should find no evidence of the Big 5 Editorial Problems.

2. Scan Chapters 2 and 3 – **8 minutes.**

   Now you're going to scan Chapters 2 and 3, paying particular attention to the beginning and ends of the chapter, how they link up and connect. Does the plot move forward in a logical way? Do we know where we are in time and space? Is the point of view consistent and clear? And is there any sense of the *consequences* for this character, of conflict, and what is at stake?

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3. Scan two random chapters in the middle – **8 minutes.**

   Next, you're going to scan two random chapters in the middle of the novel, paying particular attention again to the beginning and the end and how they connect to the ones around it. Is there narrative drive? Would a reader who turned to these chapters out of the blue know what's happening, why it matters, and where they are in time and space? If you encounter anything that feels like it doesn't move the story forward, make a note of it– and make a note to later look for those same issues elsewhere in the book.

4. Scan the penultimate chapter – **5 minutes.**

   Scan the penultimate chapter, paying particular attention to the beginning and end. Does it feel like this story is coming to its conclusion? Is it winding down, are things being resolved? By reading the second to last chapter, you can get a really clear sense of whether the end is going to pay off or not.

5. Read the last chapter – **7 minutes.**

   Read the last chapter to make sure there is a resolution to the problem that Chapter 1 set up and that there an *emotional* payoff for the protagonist.

6. Make notes about where you saw evidence of any of the Big 5 Editorial Issues and, if you have time, what to do to fix them. – **25 minutes**

Plan and Execute Your Revision

If you find any big mistakes while going through the Chapter 1 checklist, developing your synopsis, or doing your One-Hour Big-Picture Manuscript Review, don't despair. Most agents would rather wait for you to send in an excellent manuscript than have you rush and send in something that doesn't hold together.

There is usually not an "expiration" date on a submission request from a conference. You have time to get your book into shape.

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Part 4
Make Your Pitch!

One mistake writers frequently make is ignoring the submission requirements of the agents. Follow what is written on their websites to the letter ***unless they give you different instructions in person.*** Sometimes agents will offer a special email or subject line to conference attendees. ***Do exactly what they told you to do. Ignore anything I am saying here in favor of what they told you to do in person or what they say on their website.***

In general, here is what to do when submitting a requested manuscript.

1. Write a very short email. I suggest these words*:

> *Dear [Agent Name],*
>
> *We met at ThrillerFest, where I pitched you my [GENRE—ie thriller/mystery/romantic suspense] entitled [TITLE].*
>
> *This is a [WORD COUNT]-word story about [two- or three-sentence catchy description of story**.]*
>
> *I am [SHORT BIO***.]*
>
> *As per your submission requirements, I am attaching a Word document of the entire manuscript and a short synopsis of the story.*

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Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
[YOUR NAME]

2. Attach your manuscript as a Word document
3. Attach your synopsis

*If you are pitching cold and need to write a proper query, jump to the *Bonus Lesson* on How to Write a Query Letter at the end of this document.

**Think of this as the logline for your story – the high-level catchy description of what it's about, who the protagonist is, and what's at stake. To learn more about this kind of logline, jump to the *Bonus Lesson* on How to Write a Query Letter at the end of this document.

***For this bio, only include the most relevant information (e.g., *I am an award-winning short story writer whose work has appeared in [JOURNAL].* OR: *I am the winner of a New York State Arts Fellowship and hold an MFA from the University of New Hampshire.* OR*: I worked for 12 years at a meat packing plant and this novel is based on my experiences.)*

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Bonus Lesson

How to Write a Query Letter

This lesson was written by Author Accelerator Certified Book Coach Julie Artz. Thanks, Julie!

A query letter for a book-length work is a one-page business letter that introduces you and your work to the agent or editor you're querying. You absolutely want your personality to come through. You absolutely do not want to make offensive jokes or personal comments.

A good query letter:

- Identifies your genre, age category, and comp titles
- Illuminates your "Why"
- Distills the heart of your story into 300 words or less in a way that leaves agents wanting more.

Personalization and Nuts & Bolts

Open your query with the nuts and bolts of your story: title, genre, word count, age category, and comparable titles. If you have a specific reason why you've chosen to query this particular agent or editor, include it in the query letter. This is a chance to show them that you're familiar with their clients, sales, and tastes. But don't force it. Some writers prefer to include the personalization after the pitch, which is also fine.

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Here are some ways to think about your comp titles:

> Comparable titles, sometimes called competitive titles, are other books that you ideal reader is reading in the same genre or about the same subject matter. Comp titles can be books or a book-movie mashup, but beware of comping the absolute bestseller in your category. Everyone thinks they're writing the next *Wild* or *The Hunger Games*, but very few actually are. Show your knowledge of your category here and go with recent titles (last five years) and fresh mash-ups that will catch an agent's eye. If nothing comes to mind, you may need to do some more reading in your category to find appropriate comps.

The Pitch

You only have 200-250 words to wow the reader, who is likely scrolling queries on their phone during a busy work day. And the bulk of those words are going to be used in the pitch. Think of this pitch as teasing the first quarter of the book or otherwise provoking curiosity, but ending on a choice or life-or-death stakes that will make the agent want to keep reading. Aim for 200 words as a starting point, although some unique formats may require more.

Here's a formula you can use to start the process of writing your pitch:

> **When [INCITING INCIDENT] happens, [PROTAGONIST] decides [STORY GOAL] against [ANTAGONIST] before [TICKING CLOCK] or else [STAKES].**

The Bio

Although it's possible to sell a book without having any specific credentials or personal connection to the subject matter, if you have a strong story about why you've written the book or what makes you uniquely qualified to tell this story, it should be mentioned in the bio. And of course, other publishing credits, professional organizations, or awards should be included as well. Do include your MFA in creative writing. Do not include your BA in Underwater Basket Weaving (unless your book is about underwater basket weaving, of course!).

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You can find more help with queries in these places:

- Julie Artz's Craft Your Query workbook.
- Podcast: The Shit No One Tells You About Writing

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Part 6

Connect with Book Coaches Who Specialize In Helping Writers Pitch

Author Accelerator coaches have undertaken more than 100 hours of coursework and training and have passed the high bar for certification that we set, so you can feel confident that they are well-trained. They run their own businesses and determine their own packages and pricing. Search our directory to find a coach who is a good fit for your project.

Show me the directory!

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Could book coaching be your dream career?

Launching a successful book coaching business is a lot easier than doing a job that's driving you crazy.

You'll have the freedom to work where, when, and how you'd like and the joy of working closely with writers to help them bring their books to life.

Here at Author Accelerator, we've seen this transformation happen for burned-out English teachers, frustrated freelance editors, and people working corporate jobs they took back in the day because they thought it was their only choice

If this sounds intriguing, I'd like to invite you to a free course that walks you through what it takes to build and launch a book coaching business.

This course teaches you how to:

📚 Define your motivation for helping writers. It's the BIG difference between work that burns you out and work that lights you up.

📚 Find your Zone of Genius—the sweet spot where work you love doing meets work writers will pay for.

📚 Uncover the infuriating reasons so many freelance editors fall into race-to-the-bottom pricing—and learn the secret to pricing your packages in a way that will keep you away from that trap.

📚 Discover the mindset shift that lets you see marketing as part of an overall mission and not something to dread

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📚 Put your business plan on just one page—it's the kind of "creative constraint" that works for writers, too. If you can pin it to the page, you can bring it to life.

I've helped over 260 book coaches launch businesses and know it can be a great career for people who love words and stories, big ideas, and creative challenges.

I made this crash course so you can decide if it's right for you.

Go **HERE** and use the code *Anyway* to get free access to *The One-Page Book Coaching Business Plan*, a 5-step course that invites you to visualize what it would be like to do work you love, be in charge of your time and your money, and finally put all your talents for story to use. ***This free code is good through December 10, 2024.***

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