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What Editors Want: A Must-Read for Writers Submitting to Literary Magazines

The Editor's Job

A magazine editor is a person who enjoys bringing new writing to the world in a publication that will be seen, read, appreciated, and talked about.

This is the first fact anyone submitting to a magazine should understand. There may be two editors, or five, or a rotating group of a dozen student-editors on a board, but for purposes of this essay, let's consider one who, if not totally in charge, has a large say in what goes on. This editor is committed to the magazine, to it reaching a readership, to its identity and survival.

The editor wants nothing more than to read something so fresh and powerful and polished there is no question it must be in the journal.

Instead the editor, having read 17 things this morning, keeps going, thinking: A run-on sentence in the first line! Oh no, another story with the character waking up hung-over and getting a phone call. Why must they flash back before anything interesting happens? That isn't really funny. We don't publish travel articles. Does no one read the guidelines? This one gets good in the middle, but then the character just sits down and thinks about stuff. Wonderful minor character but the main one is self-pitying. Almost. Good scene. Pretty good. Not quite. Please can't somebody just dazzle me?

The editor reads till unable to process any more, goes to get some more coffee, and starts again, resolving not to give in to the temptation to say no as fast as possible in order to shrink the pile on the table, or the long list of files on the computer. The editor knows that because of the accumulation of negative thoughts, it is possible to miss something wonderful and make a mistake.

The editor, despite this, notices some good pieces, puts them aside to reread, sees in the light of second reading what holds up, and then passes the work along and meets with the other editor, or four, or eleven, and listens to their views, argues, surrenders, prevails, until there is enough for an issue that matches their vision of the magazine's identity. The editor then moves on to overseeing the production of the issue (online, downloadable pdf, broadside, stapled, perfect bound, whatever it may be, this is hard, detailed work), while at the same time commencing to read for the next, trying to get together the money needed to keep this thing going, and getting the word out about the issue that just came out. Unless the magazine is a big commercial enterprise, the editor is continuously reading, selecting, working on production and lay-out, trying to get money or workers or both, and trying to get the magazine seen.

The editor is tired and busy.

Much of the editor's work is invisible. What gets published may, possibly, go on to win awards or be anthologized, which helps to cast some reflected glory back on the magazine, but recognitions for an editor are few. One pleasure is sending out the acceptances, and knowing somebody is made happy. At the same time, the editor sends out flotillas of form rejections. This is a job to delegate, if possible, it's so depressing. Those who think the editor is rejecting with some pleasure in hurting are entirely wrong. The editor, with an eye to the long run and a pang for those who come close, may send a few rejections that contain a word or two of encouragement, or even a longer letter. (See below for how to handle each of these possibilities.)

Yes, the editor is a gate-keeper, controlling entrée to something you want, but that is really of more importance to you than to the editor. The editor's eye is on the magazine.

Your Job

You, of course, are a writer. Let's say you are just starting to send out. You are thinking, Am I any good? Will this make people I love believe I'm worthwhile? Is that third paragraph unnecessary as R said in workshop, but I still like it, and if I keep it, and my story gets published then that will show R, but what if R is right after all? Is this my first step to fame and glory? Am I a genius? Am I in fact too good for this magazine I'm sending to or not good enough? Am I an idiot? Will my parents stop suggesting other jobs I could do given my education? Will strangers want to sleep with me because of my prose? Etc. etc.

None of this is of interest to the editor. Remember the editor's deepest wish: Send something perfect for us, please.

So your job is to help the editor by sending work that is developed, complete, thoroughly revised, and—of great importance—appropriate for the magazine.

To do that last part of your job well, you have to read the magazines.

Yes, you do.

Not long ago, within a few days, three aspiring writers stopped me (in the office, in the parking lot, and at an airport gate) to ask: "Where should I send my story which is over 20,000 words long?" "Where should I send my work where it will be accepted as fast as possible? The agent I approached about my novel says I have to have a track record." "What magazine likes grown-up fables that are a little weird?"

They were asking for a shortcut. It's natural to want one, when you feel small in a big unknown world, and impatient, wanting results immediately. But I said, to each: "You can't expect to be a professional if you don't do your own homework."

When I was starting out, I told my questioners, I spent at least one day each month in a library, reading literary magazines and taking notes on index cards. Yes, those were ancient times. It's easier now, but you still need to read magazines and I still advocate having a set time to do this research, keeping it apart from your writing. And then you'll be ready to send your work out.

Three out of three went on to say, "But does anybody ever read these magazines?" (Implying that because they haven't, no one does.)

Yes, I said, people do. Writers do. Writers who want to learn what kind of writing gets published where, what it takes to break in. Writers who want to learn their craft. You'll see things that you don't like and things that stun you and teach you. In addition, other editors, agents, and even some people who just like to read, read magazines. When I edited [Gulf Stream](#), a couple of smart agents and more than one editor

wrote to ask for the contact information for contributors whose work they liked.

I told my questioners, if they didn't believe me, to look at [Dan Chaon's interview](#) in The Review Review, and read the reviews there, to look at [New Pages.com](#), [AWP Chronicle](#), [Poets & Writers](#), and [Facebook](#) (where some journals have community pages which will send you helpful reminders of when they are reading), and start to make a list of magazines to investigate. Then, I repeated, choose some to read. If they are on-line and free, it's easy. If they're print journals, you may see a sample on the website, but you should go ahead and order the magazines whose samples intrigue you.

A good tip: go in together with four other people and each subscribe to a couple of journals, and then share them. So cheap! Then you can discuss the work that was chosen, which can be a great amplification of your usual workshopping. What do these pieces have (or not have) compared to the work you and your friends are writing? How unified, inventive, and polished does a story have to be to be published? Which editors like what?

Odds are you have read the work of your classmates, and the work of masters. Now you want to see the work of the people who are just maybe a step or three ahead of you. Read the contributors' notes, which can lead you to find where those whose work you like are publishing and so follow trails through the literary world. Identify magazines you love, ones where the work excites you and speaks to what you want to do. Start to create a list, making pecking orders of ones you are interested in, based on their visibility, circulation, reputation, pay, attractiveness, or whatever factors matter to you.

Then you are ready to begin sending your work out.

Submission

Keep good records of what you send where, when.

Make sure your submission is done in the format asked for on the magazine's website, and pay attention to the reading period. If a cover letter is part of the set-up, use the right name for the editor you are approaching, spelled correctly. You can include one sincere sentence about the magazine to show that you have really read it. "I especially enjoyed So-and-so's story or poem in your Spring issue, because of: say something specific here." You have no idea how ridiculously rare this is. (Note, if you do not like any work in a magazine, you should not be sending there. You and the editor are not going to be on a wavelength.)

Other than demonstrating that you have done your homework, essentially a cover letter or uploaded statement conveys information about what genre your submission is in and who you are. If you have credentials include them, but be simple and succinct. Many magazines are interested in discovering people, so there is no shame in saying, "If you select this story, it would be my first publication." I think it is better not to draw too much attention to things that almost happened. It's fine to cite winning a contest, and you can mention having been a finalist, but to say your story came in 12th just reminds the editor 11 were ahead of you. Don't assume the letter is a sales pitch. Upon arrival, your information may be read by someone opening the mail or logging files. That somebody may flag a previous contributor, a person whose submission has been solicited, or someone who has been asked to send again. But you cannot expect the editor will definitely see the letter, nor will a letter make the editor read the story differently than other work in the pile. What you send should not be full of explanations, plot summaries, testimonials ("my friends love it") and pleas ("Even if you must reject, please send me comments."). Put your creativity, humor, and sensibility into the work you submit. You are writing a business letter to a busy person. I think the best closing for a query letter is a simple, "Thank you for your time and consideration."

Send out and get back to work writing and reading.

How to Receive a Rejection

A standard rejection slip will have a wording that was worked out, sometimes long ago, to let people down and move on. It is in no way personal. Do not brood over it. Note the rejection in your records. If you have established a pecking order of magazines, you sent the submission to one high on your list. Now simply move on to the next one. (If you simultaneously submit, it should be in groups of magazines you think are equivalent. You are going to have to live with the first acceptance you get.) You want to have many tiers on your list. To go straight from *The Paris Review* to your school literary magazine is to miss the area you most need to explore.

If, while the work was away, you thought about it and saw things you really want to do to improve it, do so. Then send it to the next place you want to try. While it might be different if the rejecting journal gave some encouragement, when there has been none, I would not send this revision to the rejecting editor. (Let alone sending the work back unrevised. Despite apocryphal tales, editors do remember what they have seen before.) You shouldn't have sent there before it was ready. Lesson learned. Move on. Luckily there are loads of journals.

Do not take the rejection slip, underline words or phrases on it, and send it back with a scrawled note saying: “Doesn't suit your needs at this time? YOUR needs? Well, who cares about you and your pretentious magazine that I never liked anyway, etc., etc.” When people do this, editors post the missives in the office, to be mocked as coming from an immature writer who completely misunderstands how impersonal this is. You may set fire to rejection slips, show them proudly to your friends, use them as coasters for consolatory margaritas, but do not write anything in response.

How to Respond to a Minimally Encouraging Rejection

If you get a standard rejection with something additional written on it—“Sorry” or (better) “Try us again”—you should rejoice. And try there again. You were in the top 5% or 2% or 1% of the work rejected. Ideally, you have other work on hand to submit, but if not, do not feel you must act instantly. Let's say you have a year. When you do send to this journal, start your cover letter with, “Thank you for your encouraging note about my story ‘G.’ As you suggested, I am trying you again with the enclosed story, ‘H.’” Then go on as usual. Don't describe G to remind them! Don't talk about what you have since done to G! This cover letter, which reminds them they liked you before, may let “H” get flagged as one to look at a bit more carefully.

How to Respond to A Longer, More Personal Rejection

If you get anything longer—a signed note, a letter—again, rejoice. You have come very close. Yet this does not mean the editor wants to see a revision. The editor wants to help you understand why you are close, or promising, but not there. Unless the editor specifically says, “Please do this and send me the revision,” the response called for is to send something else, ideally after having considered the something else in the light of the qualities the editor has described as good and what was lacking in the old one. Your cover letter should begin by thanking the editor for taking the time to write a personal letter. You may say it was helpful. But don't go into the issues it raised.

Unfortunately, and paradoxically, the more an editor writes in a letter, the more likely there is to be some phrase that burns the writer's sensitive soul. It's still a rejection and may contain detailed criticism. You need to be strong, stay calm, and understand that the editor has taken trouble for you. You are not to rebut the letter, nor to go off hurt. You need to try this editor again. (I confess, I once got a note that said a story of mine “had its moments,” but that the topic was one the editor saw too often. I was very young and never tried him again. I now know this was foolish and self-defeating. The topic *was* common, the magazine a top one, and an editor's bluntness is valuable.)

One of my friends once showed me a file of over 20 items—rejection slips, rejection slips with words on them, short notes, and long notes—that he’d received from one editor before he got a poem accepted by him. The collection showed how steadily and patiently he conducted himself in this process. He learned about the editor’s views along the way, and the editor may have learned to read his poetry better (certainly more slowly and attentively), too.

And what about the item that got the editor’s note? Be encouraged (it was good enough to get an editor’s time and thought) and send it elsewhere. Of course if the editor’s comments make sense to you, you may revise before you send on. But, revised or not, send it to the next place on your list, something close to the rejecting one, perhaps. My story that had its moments was published by the next journal I sent it to. My friend’s poems were published. What happens is that a piece of work finds its level, and then, with new work, you keep trying to move up.

There is also some transformation that happens when a piece is published: it is read differently. I heard once from an editor who had rejected a story of mine, with a long note, and then, since editors read magazines, saw it in the journal that took it soon after. He liked what I’d done with it, he said. I hadn’t changed more than a few words. I’d just found a better magazine for that particular story, and their typesetting, the work around it, the glow of approval, made it look different to him.

Acceptance: Dos and Don’ts:

When you get an acceptance, you should be in a position to say, immediately, “Thank you, I’m delighted,” and then you should notify any other journal that has the work under consideration. (It is not possible to hold up the accepting editor while you see if maybe *The New Yorker* will take it. This is why you should only simultaneously submit to magazines you think of as equivalent. First responder wins.)

If you have simultaneously submitted and already been accepted elsewhere and not notified the journal, you have not only wasted their time, but you may have caused someone else’s work to be bumped while they chose you. No, you cannot now write and say, “Oops, how about if I send you this other thing instead.” You have to apologize, say you screwed up, and if I were you I’d wait a little while before I sent there again, because they are likely to be sore. So this situation is to be avoided. Keep records, inform editors promptly.

When your work is accepted, say, “Thank you, I’m delighted,” and send the editor anything requested: contact info., signed permission form or whatever is required. (Make and keep copies for your files.)

Do not immediately send the editors a revision! The piece accepted is what they wanted. You could say, perhaps, “I have since done another draft, in case you’d like to see it.” But they may look and prefer the original. On the other hand, the accepting editor may ask for some changes (generally simple ones—editors get so many submissions that they can pick ones that work and not deal with ones that need extensive editing, though there are sometime exceptions). You should not get defensive about your sacred work. Try to listen to what you are being told and give it full consideration. Of course if it represents something you cannot live with, you’ll have to say so, but I find that this is really extremely rare.

If you get galleys, do them promptly and only correct errors. You cannot now rewrite. (Which again goes to show that you should really have done your revising before you send out.)

Make sure the editor has your up-to-date information if you move or change email address.

How to Greet the Issue Your Work Is In

Read the magazine (not just your own piece!) and send the editor a thank you note that remarks on the issue, whether the look, the cover, or some other work in it. Email is fine, but a real letter is more memorable.

Do not, as one person did, upon receiving her copies of an issue I edited, write a note saying, “Why wasn’t mine the first story in the magazine? Mine was better than Q’s.” This revealed the seething ego of the writer and her failure to understand the many factors that go into ordering a magazine, including wanting a piece that is catchy or short or that sets a tone or theme up front. Layout is full of many decisions invisible to the author.

Ask, if you haven’t been told, whether it will be possible to order some copies (if it’s a print publication) with author discount, and if so, order them. What, pay for copies? Yes, and give them away: just a couple of copies will help the magazine and help you. Send them to your former teachers or friends who have read your work, thanking them. Whether the journal is print or digital, use whatever platform you may have to announce the publication and link to the magazine. At this point, your interest and the editor’s overlap: you both want the magazine to be seen, enjoyed, and respected. Start listing the magazine in your bio, as you go on to submit and publish elsewhere.

Last Advice

Try editing. Volunteer to read submissions for a magazine near you (or, with web journals, far away). Start a little magazine or a one-time anthology with some friends. Seeing how much is sent when it is not ready and how a single work reads amid a mass of submissions will teach you a lot. You may not enjoy it or you may get hooked. But once you have been an editor, you understand their arduous devotion.

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