



## HOW TO GET OVER YOUR FEARS & PUBLISH YOUR CREATIVE WRITING

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My first attempts at publication were, in retrospect, doomed before I had addressed the envelopes. I was 18 and a freshman at Evergreen. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea what made a story fulfilling. I pored over *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury, trying to capture the inner world of humanity he somehow revealed, if only for a moment. So I gave it a shot: I wrote a short story about a man who uses a medical procedure to stop himself from aging. I bought some manila envelopes and stamps, printed my story, and sent it to genre publications like *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, *Analog: Science Fiction & Fact*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. Each magazine swiftly rejected my story, to my heartbreak. As a writer trying to publish, this rejection was bound to happen. I'm glad I got the I'm-a-wonderful-writer-without-any-practice bandage ripped off my ego before anyone could tell me what receiving a rejection letter was going to be like—otherwise I may not have submitted at all. But I hope that by sharing what I've learned, I'll save you some pain.

Whether or not you believe your work will actually get published, there's no harm in putting yourself out there and taking a chance. For the writer who writes for others, submitting to journals and magazines is a skill to learn and perfect. It takes practice, but your poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction can find a home. So how do you navigate the world of creative writing publications?

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### Overcome Your Fears

*Rejection:* A rejection from one publication does not mean your piece is unpublishable. "Rejection is always disappointing, but it needn't be any more disappointing than throwing a dart at a target. You missed? The bullseye is still hanging on the wall. Pick up another dart and try again," explains author Bruce Holland Rogers, who has seen stories published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Sun*,

and many other publications.<sup>1</sup> The most important aspect of submitting your work for publication is perseverance. The writers who publish are the ones who don't give up.

*Loss of Control:* You may feel as though your writing is a part of you and can't be anything else. While it's easy for writers, especially new writers, to feel attacked or personally harmed by a rejection letter, no rejection is a critique of the writer's worth as a human being. The difference between an acceptance and a rejection is no more than one person's opinion. A writer who seeks publication cannot monopolize the meaning of their work. Others will inevitably interpret your work differently than you envisioned. The reader's interpretation is no less valid than the author's intent. I believe that when an author hands a piece of writing to someone, anyone, it is no longer the author's interpretation that matters.

*Working with Editors:* Editors are in a position of power; they are the gatekeepers to their publications and may stand in the way of the writer's ambition to publish. But don't fear them—editors are editors because they love their work and they love the craft of writing. They are experts in their fields and they know their audience—listen to them if they give you feedback on why your work was or wasn't right for their publication.

### **Find A Publication**

Identify publications your piece is suited for. Don't send a piece of high fantasy to a literary magazine that features ultra-realism. Use the Internet to find publications for the work you're trying to place. For instance, if you wrote a piece of creative nonfiction, search for “creative nonfiction literary journals” and you'll be greeted with a tidy list. The same is true for literary fiction, genre fiction, and poetry. Google searches will find the most popular magazines in your genre.

However, the most extensive database in which to find publication opportunities is [Duotrope.com](http://Duotrope.com). Duotrope lets you search for magazines that are actively accepting submissions. It also gives you the option to specify genre, sub-genre, and length. But Duotrope does come with a caveat: it is a paid service, though it's well worth the money to familiarize yourself with publications in your genre if you submit regularly and to a wide range of publications.

If you're unwilling or unable to shell out the money for Duotrope, [PW.org](http://PW.org) (the *Poets & Writers* website) also has a searchable database for publications, though it is less extensive.

### **Learn the Submission Basics**

*Formats & Platforms:* Once you've found some magazines you'd like to see your piece in, read the submission guidelines closely. Many magazines have done away with snail mail submissions and use an online platform called Submittable. Submittable is free for writers and makes it easy to track your

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Holland Rogers, email message to author, October 18, 2016.

submitted work through the site, though you will need to create an account, and individual publications may charge a small reading fee.

Most magazines require manuscript format,<sup>2</sup> but some journals have their own format requirements. It always helps to read the submission guidelines and follow them closely; you don't want to be discounted simply because your margins are not the right width.

*The Reading Rule:* Most publications ask authors to read back issues before submitting. Yet if I read an issue of every magazine I sent work to, I would have little time for anything else in my life. Familiarity with a magazine may improve your chances of publication, but you shouldn't be scared to submit somewhere you haven't read. Instead, read the publication's summary of the types of work they're looking for online. Usually this summary is included in the submission guidelines on the publication's website.

*Simultaneous Submissions:* More publications than ever before allow simultaneous submissions. Yet some publications, typically popular ones, do not allow you to submit one piece to more than one publisher at a time. Many magazines will take six months or a year before they respond to your submission. If you waited for every publication to respond to your submission, it could take years for any of your writing to be published. For any magazine to restrict your submission practices like this is unfair to your piece, and to you as an artist. Therefore, I suggest ignoring this rule with caution. If one of your submissions is accepted for publication, you must then withdraw it from all other magazines you submitted to. While Submittable does require you to make a note of why you wish to withdraw your submission, you can always use the excuse of "revisions," and nobody's the wiser. However, some journals require you to submit your work through email, or their own specialized online form. If this is the case, withdrawing your piece is a more difficult process, which involves communicating directly with editors.

*Defining "Published":* When you read through submission guidelines, you'll likely notice magazines call for unpublished work. In this digital age, it's difficult to know where the line of publication is. Publication rights are in a constant state of flux as the Internet has changed the landscape of the industry. There are some gray areas when it comes to online communities and your work. If a piece is publicly posted online, for example on your Facebook or blog, it is considered "published" and so shouldn't be submitted as unpublished work. But if you're part of a more private forum that requires a signup and login, your piece is likely safe from the majority of the public and may be considered unpublished. The question is an ethical one for the author, as any piece that has been previously published (online or in print) will devalue the magazine that opts to print it, especially if the magazine only accepts unpublished work. *Poets and Writers* has a simple and informative guide so you know exactly which rights you retain and which you have waived once you publish a piece.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See for an example: William Shunn, "[Proper Manuscript Format: Short Story](#)," *Shunn*, accessed February 8, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "[Copyright Information for Writers](#)," *Poets & Writers*, accessed November 23, 2016.

*Stay Organized:* Now you're ready to submit your work, but how do you keep track of it all? Submittable and Duotrope both offer submission trackers, but I use a spreadsheet. It's invaluable since I submit the same piece to 8–10 magazines at a time to improve my chances of publication. I put an "X" on rejections and an "A" on acceptances. Not only is it helpful knowing where I've sent my work, but I also get a healthy reminder of my triumphs.

	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
1	Do Your Best	The Way We Drown (A Novel) (Agent Query)	Earning the View (Nonfiction)	Pa's First Rule	The Story of Grandma Snow	Directions	Pain is Progress	Aporia Astra
2	Smokebox (Never got back)	Eddie Schneider (X)		TLR (X)	Brevity (X)	Smokebox.com (Accepted)	F&Sf (X)	Abyss & Apex (X)
3	TLR (X)	Russell Galen (SGGlit.com) (12/8/2016)		Split Lip Mag (Submittable 12/23/16)	Hunger Mountain (X)	Best American Experimental Writing Anthology--reprints okay (X)	Clarkesworld (X)	Story (open Jun)
4	Best American Experimental writing (X)	Catherine Cho (Geller's assistant)--Curtis Brown (queried 12/9/16) (CONTACT MADE: PARTIAL AND SYNOPSIS SENT)			TLR (X)		APEX (X)	F&SF (X)
5		Sarah LaPolla -- Bradford Lit (X)			The James Franco Review (X)		Nebula Rift (Submittable) (X)	Spark: Antholog (X)
6		Allison Devereux (Wolf Literary 1/18/17)			Tinhouse (X)		The Machinery (X)	Moss (X)
7		Jaida Temperly (green leaf literary)			The Atlantic			

However you choose to track your submissions, make sure you keep a tab on which publications have rejected your pieces, as well as accepted your work. Nothing will put you in the bad graces of an editor like sending them the same story or essay just because you were disorganized. If an editor encourages you to submit in the future, keep track of them. The more familiar an editor becomes with your work, the better chance you have of being published.

### Print vs. Digital

Readers will always enjoy the feel of a paperback in their hands. However, many pro and semi-pro publications don't go to print often because it's expensive. It's sad, but most magazines and journals do not turn a profit, and most don't break even. Instead they rely on the love the editors hold for the work, and oftentimes crowdfunding, to continue. While you may like the idea of having a

physical copy of a journal or magazine with your name printed in it, don't discount digital publication.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the way readers consume journals and magazines has changed. Author Roz Ray, who's been featured in the *Taboma Literary Review*, *Hobart*, and other literary journals, only submits to magazines that have a digital edition, as that's how she reads short fiction. She told me she rarely enjoys a literary magazine in its totality. Instead, she picks one, maybe two, stories or articles out of select publications. However, with a collection of print magazines, Ray struggled to recall her favorite issues: “[Online literary journals have] something print magazines don't have: searchable databases. That is some *spiffy shit*.”<sup>5</sup>

Few people read magazines front-to-back, and for those who read or subscribe to multiple publications, an option to search for specific issues and authors is a real selling point. Because of the convenience of digital publications, you may actually find a larger readership in this medium than the hardcopy option.

### Your Readers Await You

So, why should you publish? “A piece of writing doesn't come to life—it isn't ‘real’ like the Velveteen Rabbit—until it finds its readers,”<sup>6</sup> explains Ana Maria Spagna, a mentor of mine and author of *Reclaimers*, a work of environmental journalism and a finalist for the 2016 Washington State Book Award. Spagna says, “Every piece of writing has readers awaiting it,”<sup>7</sup> implying the function of the written word is not only to be written, but read.

While writing is a solitary act, submitting to journals and magazines is social and gets you involved with editors, many of whom also write. Editors can be some of your most engaged readers. Submitting regularly and being part of a critique group will make you a better writer and give you a community to lean on. And nothing is more satisfying than developing a relationship with an editor through correspondence and then meeting them in person when they come to town to read. You might even end up for a drink with your new best friend.

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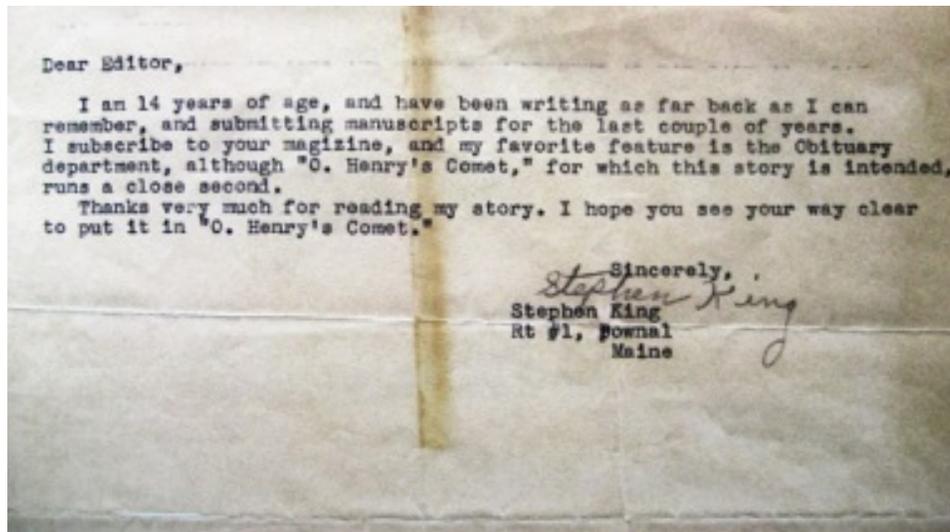
<sup>4</sup> Becky Tuch, [“Should You Publish in Print or Online Journals?”](#) *The Review Review*, accessed February 8, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Roz Ray, email message to author, October 24, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ana Maria Spagna, email message to author, October 10, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Every published writer was once unpublished. If you want to publish someday, it's not too early to try. Stephen King began submitting manuscripts, he claims, by the age of 12. All I found to corroborate this claim is a letter King sent at the age of 14 to *O. Henry's Comet*.<sup>8</sup>



He wasn't published until he was 18, which is young, but it still means he spent at least four years submitting without success, which just goes to show that everyone starts in the same place. I was petulant as a young writer; I felt that if people criticized my work it was because they "didn't get it." As I grew, I started to understand that others' criticisms can be valid and helpful.

What really matters is your growth as a writer and artist. And that takes perseverance. Though it may sound scary, your voice deserves to be heard, and can be, if you choose. You should seek publication because the only person who could have written your piece is you.

<sup>8</sup> [Stephen King to O'Henry's Comet](#), in *Letters of Note*, ed. Shaun Usher, April 27, 2011, accessed May 4, 2017.