In many ways, publishing is like a game with it's own rules. When you're new to any game, the rules feel unfamiliar and maybe even confusing.

If you want to be published by a mainstream publisher, the first step is to become familiar with some of those rules.

Once you start to learn the rules, it's possible you could realize you really don't like the publishing game and decide to go another direction with that book idea that's growing inside you. Or you might realize it isn't the right time or season for you to pursue traditional publishing. Or you could in fact decide to move ahead and begin to learn all the rules you possibly can!

The bottom line is you don't want to make a decision about how to move forward with your book idea based on misconceptions of what you're getting into, one way or another.

We hope this brief newbie's rulebook helps you in some small way to have realistic expectations of the game, to discover if traditional publishing might be the way for you, and to begin thinking like a Pro.

*From your Hope*Writer team: Emily, Brian, and Gary (Dad)*
Five Basic Publishing Truths That Often Surprise Newbies

1. When writing non-fiction, you don't write the whole book before you pitch it to a publisher.

2. You don't just send your book or proposal to a publisher uninvited.

3. You probably won't pick your own title or cover.

4. You need to help sell your book.

5. The publisher loses money on most books they publish.

Surprised by any of these? If so, this quick mini-guide can help you know what to expect.
The publisher is simply the company who prepares and issues your book for sale. This includes editing, titling, covering, and positioning in bookstores. They pay for all of that, and because they often don't get their money back when your book goes on sale, they are usually taking a chance on a new author (unless you've won an Oscar or been President or something).

When you have a publisher, you work together. With non-fiction work, you write a book proposal for the book you want to write and if they want to publish it, they contract with you to write the book.

With fiction work you still prepare a proposal, but you also complete the whole book before it will sell to a publisher.

If you've self-published a book and it sold well, they might see your book as already proven and this could be a good way to establish yourself as an author they might want to work with.

The publishing house has editors who work with their writers to produce the book. When the editor first gets your proposal and likes your idea, they take it to a committee who decides if they'll buy your book.

Typically you don't approach publishers and editors on your own. That's the job of the agent. However, you may meet an editor (at a writing conference for example) and they might be interested in your book even without an agent.
The literary agent represents you to the publisher.

The agent knows the editors in a publishing house and has the relationships you don't have. The editors simply don't have time to sift through a million book ideas from people who want to be authors. But they do have time for an agent. The agent has helped them by doing the work of deciding if you're a serious candidate for a book.

The editor knows that if the agent represents you, then you've crossed one threshold of credibility. The agent becomes an official person who believes in you.

The agent is on your side, representing your interests in your relationship with the publisher. It's like having someone in your corner. You don't pay an agent directly from your pocket. Rather they receive a percentage from your advance (and potentially royalties) once your book sells to a publisher. So if you don't get paid, neither do they.

Not all agents have the same skills and talents. Some enjoy the literary process while others are more into the business side of things. In general, all agents should be able to help with your book idea, pitching your proposal to editors, and especially with your contract.
The slushpile is the stack (or unopened emails) of unsolicited proposals and manuscripts that have been sent to agents and editors that they don't have time to read.

**Fact of Life:** There are far more people who want to be authors than there are agents and editors. There simply isn't time to evaluate everybody's book idea.

You may think someone is carefully pouring over your hard work, evaluating your potential, when often the truth is your book idea is sitting unopened in the corner of some office under an old box of stale donuts and a pile of Christmas garland.

You don't want this to happen.

That's why you want to get someone's attention, ideally through a personal relationship, or possibly with a query letter.
An agent or editor may not have time to go through your whole book or proposal when you send it unsolicited, but that doesn't mean they aren't looking for good book ideas.

Some will accept query letters. The query letter is an introduction from you to the editor or agent that briefly tells who you are and what your idea is. It's like a mini-proposal on one page or so.

The idea is to quickly convince them you have a good idea and to ask if they'd like to see an entire proposal.

Ideally, you want to first have a connection with the person to whom you're sending the query by either having already met them or through someone who knows them and whose name you can use in the letter. (It's good practice to ask permission to use someone's name if you go that route.)

You can also do your homework to discover agents and editors who handle the kind of book you want to write. You can usually find info on their website on how to contact them.

Send a brief email first to ask if they'd accept your query. In that case, your email would be a mini-query to help them know if they want to see more.
This is the document you prepare that will convince an agent and/or editor that you have a valuable message that people will buy.

The proposal is to convince the publishing team you know what you're talking about and your book is worth taking a chance on. They need help to believe your book will sell and that it's worth the effort. You have to help them.

The proposal presents your book idea, who it's for, why the reader will buy it, how it helps the reader, who you are, why you're the one to write it, and how your idea fits into the current marketplace. You'll also include a proposed outline for your book as well as a few sample chapters.

The proposal is your voice in the agent's and editor's ear. Your proposal becomes your presence in the room where the publishing committee decides whether to buy your book. And just as important, writing the proposal forces you to sharpen what you have to say and how you're going to help people.

Writing a proposal is good for you and makes your book better. Plus, when you've completed your proposal, you've actually completed a big part of your book - you've already done a lot of the necessary hard thinking and writing.
When you get a 'book deal' this means the publisher has decided to buy your book from you.

The contract is the technical details of what that means and exactly what they're buying, for how much, and for how long.

Usually there's an advance involved and this is negotiated by your agent. You receive a portion of your advance when you sign the contract (typically 50%) and the rest comes once you turn in the manuscript and it is finally approved by your editor.

Advances are usually lower for first-time authors, but could be influenced by the size of your platform. Even if your book doesn't sell one copy once it's released, your advance is yours to keep. You don't have to pay it back.

Depending on how much your advance is and how well your book sells, you could also get royalties from the sale of your book after your advance earns out. Royalties can vary and might sometimes be in the range of a dollar per book sale. All that is part of your contract.
In your book contract, one of the agreed upon terms is how long you have to write your book and the deadline to turn it in. Usually it's anywhere from six to ten months, but it is negotiable.

One thing newbies are surprised to know at this point is your editor will probably leave you alone while you write your book. This is normal so don't feel like you are missing something or doing it wrong! If you have questions, ask your editor - they are on your side.

When you sign your contract, a whole series of behind-the-scenes pieces begin to get connected around publishing your book. They're counting on getting your book from you on time.

Once you turn in your manuscript, you'll still have several rounds of editing with your editor and/or a team of editors. At some point in this process, titling and covering conversations will take place, sometimes before you even turn in your first draft.

Usually your book won't be in bookstores until about a year after you first turn it in. Yes, it's crazy long, but there's a whole production system to it and that's the way the game works, especially for first time authors.
The publisher is an expert at turning your words into a book and getting it into bookstores. That's why it's great to be published!

They are not usually as expert at making sure people actually buy your book. That's why they want you to have a 'platform.'

Your platform is simply your way of connecting with a group of people who are aware of you, who like what you do, and who you can contact.

In general, the best platform for you for publishing is an email list of those people. Followers of a blog, Instagram, or Facebook can count, too.

The publisher would like to know that they have a certain number of buyers 'built in.' Obviously, the bigger the platform the better they feel, but there are no absolute numbers that qualify or disqualify. If you have a small platform but you have a plan and you're working on it, that helps.

Most importantly, you want your book to sell, right? You don't just want a book deal to have a book deal. You want to serve people with your message. A growing platform can be the difference between being a one-time author or having a writing career with multiple books.
If you need help to figure out your writing direction, hope*writers is offering a 50% discount on our online course *90 Day Direction* for a limited time. You can write (and share!) meaningful words without sacrificing your meaningful life. We'd love to show you how!

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YES I'M INTERESTED!