

Questions to Ask a Prospective Agent

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You can hardly contain your excitement. Amy Awesomeagent has just emailed to say how much she loves your novel and wants to talk. It takes you three times as long to compose a response because you've suddenly lost track of your entire vocabulary (not good for a writer). And then you wait for hours or days to pass. You calm down a bit, maybe tell your spouse/a trusted friend/the cat that you're about to get "The Call."

It's one hour before Amy's call. All of a sudden, your heart triples its tempo, blood and adrenaline race through your veins, and you realize you don't know what to say. Should you call her "Ms." "Miss" "Madam" "Your Highness" or "Hey!"? Should you small talk? What if she asks tough questions like, "How are you?"

As Janet points out (here: <http://jetreidliterary.blogspot.com/2015/05/query-question-when-call-isnt-call.html>), when an agent calls, it's not necessarily "The Call" (i.e., to talk about representation). But when an agent is ready to talk turkey, it's good to have your chickens in a row. There are many good questions you should ask an agent that will help you decide if you want to accept an offer of representation. Here are a number of those questions for you to choose from when Amy calls, courtesy of Janet Reid.

Have you read the book all the way through?

Janet says: Now I know you think this is stupid. It's not. If an agent hasn't read the entire book before dangling a hook, you know a LOT about how they work. Of course, if the agent has sent you back the manuscript with notes, questions, comments, etc. you don't need to ask this. You know the answer.

How long does the agency representation last?

Janet says: Many very reputable agencies offer contracts for a specific period of time (six months, one year.) If the book doesn't sell, or you want a new agent, you're free to leave after the time period.

Are you a sole practitioner or part of an agency?

Janet says: Some of the very best agents in the biz fly solo. I'm pleased and honored to consider them colleagues and friends, and I refer prospective clients to them knowing they would be in excellent hands.

If you're considering a sole practitioner, ask what the plan is if the agent dies or becomes disabled. This is probably one of the most difficult questions to ask. It sounds morbid. It sounds AWFUL. Yet, I get queries from prospective clients who've lost their agents through death or disability, and boy oh boy, that's not much fun either.

Solo practitioners are perfectly legit. But, you should know which you prefer, and you should ASK before you sign on the dotted line.

Are you in this for the long haul?

Janet says: *Experience is great, but if you're considering an agent with lots of experience, it's entirely kosher to ask if they intend to retire soon. This is almost as bad as the death question, but again, it's better to KNOW than assume.*

And if your prospective agent is new to the game, remember this is a tough business to make a living in, and burnout in five years isn't uncommon. ASK about their experience.

Do you really want to be a writer?

Janet says: *I'm going to get an enormous amount of flack for this, so I'll preface this by saying: I represent agents who are writers; agents who are writers work at our agency; I've got NO problem with agents who write.*

However, scratch a writer with a day job and you'll find someone who would rather be writing full time. That's just the godiva's honest truth.

I'm not saying you shouldn't sign with an agent who also writes, but if it is something that bothers you, ASK FIRST.

What's the subsidiary rights set up?

Janet says: *Does the agency have a sub-rights director or agent? An in-house film agent? A marketing person? A publicity person? Increasingly these are jobs handled in-house. Does the agent you're considering have that? If not (such as a sole practitioner) with whom does s/he work? ASK.*

Do you maintain an electronic presence (i.e., web site, blog, or social media)?

Janet says: *For some prospective clients this is not a plus. I tell all prospects about my blogging and tweeting. I don't want any of them to be surprised. And if you think an agent who blogs and tweets isn't working hard enough for her clients, you'll want to ask before you assume an agent doesn't blog or tweet. ASK.*

Are you hands-on or hands-off?

Janet says: An agent should know this about him/herself. And his/her clients will know for sure.
ASK.

What's the commission structure?

Janet says: 15% on domestic sales is the norm. 20% on subrights handled by the agency.

Is there a written author/agency agreement?

Janet says: Is it negotiable? I have a written agreement. And it's not negotiable. Every client agrees to the same thing. Yes, I'll send it to you. Yes, I'll explain it to you.

What changes do you envision for my book?

Janet says: Obviously if you've gotten notes from the agent (assuming they've read the book) you know this already. If you have not, ask. Make sure the prospective agent has the same vision for the book that you do.

Do you have comp titles in mind?

Janet says: What are they? Do you think they're correct? If not, talk to the agent about this.

Do you have editors in mind already?

Janet says: What publishers are they with? If you're envisioning a big sale to a print publisher, and the agent is talking about a digital only publisher, you want to know that NOW.

Can I get in touch with some of your current clients?

Janet says: If the answer to this is "no", run for the hills.

What do you do when a client wants to change genres?

Janet says: Even if you think you will write dino porn forever, you'll want to ask.

How long does it take to reply to emails, and read new work?

Janet says: Ask this of the current clients too. I'm guessing the two answers are quite different.

What does the agency offer in terms of guidance on promotion and marketing?

How do I get paid?

Janet says: Some agencies have payments divided, and the author's portion sent directly from the publisher. Some agencies process checks and pay you directly. You should know which before you go any further.

How often will you update me when a project is on submission?

***Janet says: Failure to keep you updated on the status of your submission/s is textbook bad agenting.** I know several editors who prefer phone pitches, or whom I know well enough to yap at on the phone on various topics (meanwhile by the way how's my stunning book on Kale Gardens of Karkoon doing on your to be read pile?)*

BUT when I have those conversations, I note it on my submission data base. Some agents might keep index cards, some might keep written sheets of paper, some might keep notes on their handy-dandy telephonic magic machines, but any agent worth her salt keeps those notes so she can remember what's up.

Bad communication is one of the reasons people leave their agents, and it's the reason I hear most often when those writers are looking for new agents. Writers put up with bad communication far longer than they should because they're afraid of rocking the boat; appearing to be a pest; or afraid their agent will no longer like them.

This is utter crap.

This is YOUR work, sold on YOUR behalf, and it's YOUR career. You should never be made to feel that you are somehow a lesser part of the publishing process. You should never be made to feel bad or intrusive for asking for regular status reports (weekly is fine, monthly is the norm; daily is TOO MUCH, don't ask for that.)

Be prepared for conversations with new agents about what you're looking for and how soon you'll have something new to sell. I won't take on someone without something I can sell. It doesn't make any financial sense for me to do so.

A final word from Janet:

You're perfectly entitled to ask these questions.

Sending a list is of these questions is probably not the way to go. Having a conversation and touching on these topics is more diplomatic. Think of it as a job interview, only you're the one asking the questions.

And keep the list of questions to a reasonable number. I remember one prospective client sent me a list of 52 questions. That didn't feel like a job interview. It felt like an interrogation.

An agent should be willing to answer each question for you. She's not obligated to spend hours on them, but you should understand the answer, and if you don't, ask for more explanation.

The last, and I mean VERY last thing you want to do is sign with someone you end up not wanting to work with.