

**Public Engagement Case Study**  
**Pitching and Writing a Popular Science Book:**  
**Do You Need a Literary Agent? How Do You Find One?**

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**Category/type of activity:** Pitching and writing a popular science book

**Web links related to activity:**

[querytracker.net](http://querytracker.net) This site crowd sources data from writers who are pitching to agents so that others who use the site can learn a particular agent's behavior patterns. For example, you can learn how long it takes her to respond to a query letter, her reply rate (whether she tends to actually send formal rejections or just not reply). It allows you to search agents representing your particular genre and ensure they are open to queries. Once you have submitted query letters to multiple agents, you can track their responses online (no need to create a tracking spreadsheet). There are also success story interviews with authors who found agents using the site. Very useful. \$25/year.

[manuscriptwishlist.com](http://manuscriptwishlist.com) A site for agents and editors who post about what they are particularly interested in being pitched at the moment. Agents all have their own websites at their agencies but they are generally static, so this site has a blog and searchable database so agents/editors can post more up to date information.

[publishersmarketplace.com](http://publishersmarketplace.com) Digest of all book deals (new contracts, translations, rights, etc.). An enormous database of publishing houses, editors, agents and writers. You can look up writers who have published works similar to yours to see who represents them, you can look up agents to see how many book deals they have done in your genre and to which publishing houses, and you can look up editors to see what kind of books they have acquired in the past. \$25/ month

**1. Goal for activity:**

Goal for pitching: Find a publishing professional who can shepherd me through the contracts process with publishers and serve as an advocate.

Goal for book: To reduce the stigma associated with sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

**2. Audience for the activity:**

This activity doesn't engage the public directly, but is preparation to share writing with a wider audience.



Ina Park

### **3. Key Messages for the activity:**

For many, catching a STI is an inevitable consequence of being sexually active. STIs should not be associated with promiscuity or considered a punishment for it.

### **4. How did you become involved in this activity?**

When I realized that I wanted to try my hand at writing for the lay public, I borrowed a book about how to write a non-fiction book proposal. The proposal has some similar elements to a grant (background, information about you and why you are qualified to do this project) but is primarily a marketing document that needs to convince an acquisitions editor to fund the project. Once I started my proposal I decided to try publishing with a trade publisher (e.g., HarperCollins), and if that was not successful, then try a large university press with a trade list. For either of those publishing avenues, I learned that having an agent would be essential, so I embarked on figuring out the process of pitching/signing with a literary agent.

### **5. Who were key collaborators?**

This is a largely solitary activity, but I do recommend having multiple readers for your proposal and seeking editorial help either from writer friends/colleagues or hire a consultant.

### **6. How did the activity invite and engage in dialogue with the audience?**

I haven't developed an engagement plan for once the book is written yet. But perhaps will include readings and lectures where there are healthcare professionals, but also bookstore talks, Reddit AMAs and science cafes (maybe Story Collider).

### **7. How long did it take to plan and implement this activity?**

One year to write the book proposal (I had to do this mostly in the evenings or in small spurts of time between work/family commitments, it could be done MUCH faster if you set aside focused time). Additionally, at least 20 hours of research online into the publishing process, and creating a list of the first 10 agents that I would query. Over the course of about three weeks I sent out cold emails and received the offer from my agent (this can take weeks to years, so no typical range), three months to edit the proposal further with my agent until she felt it was ready. In January 2017 my agent submitted to nine publishing imprints (divisions of large publishing houses, in my case these were Penguin/RandomHouse, Hachette, HarperCollins, Simon and Schuster), the next month we had a verbal book deal (this can take days to months to secure the deal, some proposals never get picked up, again no typical range), and by May 2017 we had a contract in hand.



### **8. What resources did you need to implement this activity?**

Personnel: I hired a freelance editor (\$80/hr) to help revise my proposal (4 hours) before I tried to pitch the book proposal to agents. You should also have several people read your draft before you try to pitch to an agent. I also had a writer friend edit my pitch letter (query letter).

Aside from the freelance editor, there were no other financial costs from this activity. When the agent signs you, they work with you to edit your proposal and are not compensated until you receive the advance check for your publisher. Then the agent typically gets 15% of your advance and royalties.

### **9. What lessons did you learn about public engagement as a result of this activity?**

Most agents and editors are lay people without science backgrounds. From speaking with two of them who expressed interest in the book proposal, I learned that infectious disease topics can present a certain “ick” factor or fear factor that may turn potential readers away. Publishers worry that people won’t buy books about topics that they would rather not think about, so there has to be a strong sense of wonder/fascination, storytelling, humor, etc. that will draw readers in.

### **10. Other information**

Non-fiction books are typically sold based on a proposal (summary document plus 1-2 sample chapters). Don’t write the whole book before you have to! I’m happy to share my proposal to use as a template.

Novels and memoirs must be complete before they are sold to a publisher.

It is very helpful to talk to other writers during this process so you can know what to expect. Also the wheels of publishing turn very slowly, so its helpful to adjust one’s expectations accordingly.

These videos are from the [Emory Center for Faculty Development and Excellence](#):

- The first is an interview with my agent, Jessica Papin, who discusses whether or not scientist-authors actually need an agent and what the agent’s role is in the publishing process. [youtube.com/watch?v=cLI5zfKMgbk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLI5zfKMgbk)
- The second video is her co-panelist Eric Schwartz, Editorial Director, Columbia University Press who discusses publishing houses, distinguishing between university presses (private vs public) versus trade publishing houses. [youtube.com/watch?v=oi3ZAU-cH\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi3ZAU-cH_I)