



Questions to Ask an Agent Before Signing a Contract

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One of my favorite experiences is when I get a call from a top literary agent who wants to represent one of my book proposal coaching/editing clients. At times, we hear from several agents around the same time, and the next step is to choose which literary agent they want to represent their book.

These are the questions I suggest my clients ask the literary agents who offer to represent them:

- 1. Why are You Passionate about this Book?** Notice what words and tone the agent uses. Are they conveying passion? Compare the different agents. The ones who sound most passionate will also be most passionate with publishers. Their passion can translate into a bigger commitment from a publisher—which can include a bigger advance.
- 2. Why are You a Great Match for this Book?** I asked this question on behalf of another client once and the agent compared my client's book to several bestsellers she'd sold to publishing houses. This told me that she felt this book had the kind of bestseller potential of her biggest successes—and that she would give this book the kind of attention and energy she gave to her top books. She did and this first time author is about to sign a contract for a 6 figure advance with a major publisher.
- 3. Whom are You Thinking of Pitching?** Okay, some agents may not answer this question, but they may throw out the names of several publishers. It should at least give you a sense of what they're thinking. And sometimes agents will give you more information than you expect. I've had an agent say that she was planning to show a book proposal to senior editors at several specific large publishing houses. To know that she planned to show the book to the high level editors provided information about how high level the book might go and what kind of advance she might be able to get.
- 4. Will You Edit My Sample Chapters or Require I Hire an Editor?** Some agents edit a manuscript and others will suggest an editor or ghostwriter. This is really a matter of individual choice. Some agents don't have the time to edit sample chapters and others, no matter how busy, want their hand in the editing. Either can work fine, but if you need to invest money in an editor, get an estimate ahead of time, ask for samples of the editor's work and get outside references.

One client of mine signed with an agent that a friend of hers recommended, who then sent her to a horrific ghostwriter. The author's chapters were strong and the ghostwriter totally botched them. This cost the author money and even the agent later admitted that the ghostwriter did a horrible job and ended up using the author's original chapters. So, due your due diligence when an agent wants you to hire outside help.

5. What's Your Vision for the Book? Find out what markets the agent sees for the book. Do they expand beyond your initial ideas? Does the agent anticipate an international audience? If so, what is the agent's experience in pitching internationally? Ask agents how they envision selling subsidiary rights (ideally, the agent retains the rights and sells separately).

6. Are There Changes You Want Me to Make to the Proposal? If So, What are They? You want to be sure that you and your agent are on the same page and that you agree with his/her suggestions. If you don't understand the reasons for certain changes, ask.

7. Are There Steps You'll Want Me to Take Before You Pitch the Book? Some authors sign an agreement with a literary agent only to find that the agent wants them to make big changes before pitching the book. The agent may require proposal rewrites, sample chapter revisions, a new website, a video for the website or even large scale platform building. Make sure you understand the specific expectations before you sign. They may be completely appropriate, but you want to know what they are before you sign. If your agent does want you to build your platform more, how involved will the agent be in the process and what does he/she envision?

8. What Percentage is Your Commission and How Often Will You Send my Payment? Your agent collects your royalties from the publisher and then pays you after taking his or her commission. Industry standard is a 15% commission. Some agents will negotiate 10% -12% if you bring them the publisher and they are just negotiating the deal.

9. What is Your Preferred Method of Contact (e-mail/phone) and How Frequent? Some agents prefer phone, others e-mail. Some agents update their clients frequently and others may not contact a client for weeks or months unless they have news. Make sure you are happy with the agent's policies.

It's a good idea to have a lawyer look over the contract for the fine points, including what happens if the agent doesn't sell the book. When does the contract expire? Would you be free to look for another agent if the agent is not successful at selling the book within a specific period of time?

Now, I've assumed you've done a little homework. Here are the questions you should **research** by looking at their website, doing a Google search and/or checking out **Publishers Marketplace**:

1. What **authors/books** does this agent represent?
2. How many **bestsellers** have they represented?
3. How big are the **deals** (in dollars) that they're getting?
4. Does this agent/firm have experience selling **subsidiary rights**, such as film?

Do you have more questions? Post a question on my blog (<https://www.lisatener.com/blog>) and I will answer your questions for free.

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