

Why You Aren't Getting Published

I have mentored literally thousands of fledgling writers in universities and writing conferences, both in this country and abroad. I have also served as fiction editor of a literary journal that received about a thousand submissions per reading period, but could publish only about seven or eight stories per issue. What all of this has afforded me is perspective about the common problems that stories have.

What prevents most writers from getting published? Is it their ideas? Is it their characters? No! In fact, one of the aspects of my work that I most cherish is that I get to see the variety and depth of the human imagination. It often awes me that human creativity and innovation seem to be boundless. No matter how many years pass, I still regularly read manuscripts that have fresh ideas in them, things I've never seen before.

Instead, the problem most story drafts have can be summed up in one word: pacing.

Almost every writer with whom I have worked starts out thinking that a good idea for a story equals a good story. Writers (wrongly) assume that if their ideas are unique and their characters are quirky this will propel the reader and keep her turning pages. To compound things, they often also believe that withholding information is how one creates suspense.

The result? Nothing much happens on the first page, the second page, even the seventh page.

In those crucial opening pages, the writer has not addressed this question: *Why is today the day of the story? Why are we watching this day and not a different*

day in this character's life? Why not yesterday? Why not tomorrow? What's special about today? What's happening right now, at this moment (not five minutes ago or five minutes from now), that will, over the course of the story, force the character to face the ongoing problems he or she had before we, the readers, entered the person's life? What is happening today that the character cannot ignore? And what will the character do in response to it?

A plot is ultimately comprised of decisions a character makes. Each decision has consequences. The character must decide how to handle those. Further consequences ensue. What will the character do then? This cause and effect sequencing creates rising tension, creates suspense. So, as an editor, if I didn't know by the end of the first page why today was the day of the story, I moved on to the next story in the queue of submissions.

University students and other new writers are often shocked to learn this. What do you mean? You didn't read the whole story?

Heck no, I didn't read the whole story. There were hundreds more stories for me to read. What's more, I knew that readers who might consider buying our literary journal would flip through it and make very quick decisions, in much the same way as I was doing. There are so many things to read out there. We writers only have a short time to make an impression.

As a writer myself, I've learned this lesson again and again. Just like my students, I, too, have composed stories in which the crucial first pages are comprised of backstory or exposition. Without fail, these are the stories that have been rejected. I might have been so focused on character development, which is my

favorite aspect of writing, that I forgot to think as much as I should have about the plot. Knowing I have this tendency, I take a hard look at a story that's been rejected a number of times. When I fix the plot pacing – setting up the *Why today?* on the first page and then making the character's decisions clearer throughout – I tend to find publishing success with a piece that was, in its previous incarnation, too slow.

Not only does good pacing ensure that a story will get attention from editors, but it also helps after publication. When I'm invited to give public readings from my recently published collection of short stories, *Get a Grip*, I'm typically asked to read for 10-15 minutes, not long enough to read a whole story. The beginning of the story I choose has to be interesting enough to make people want to purchase the book and see how things turn out. When I finish my allotted time and an audience is under the spell, letting out murmurs of disappointment that I've stopped, I feel grateful to my past self for working hard on my openings.

Recently, when I was speaking to a group of university students, my two fellow panelists – also writers, mentors, and editors – gasped when I said that, as an editor, I had never read more than a page, maybe two. “A whole *page?*” they both said.

“I only read a paragraph,” said one of them.

“I give it a sentence or two,” said the other.

Now the students were the ones gasping. A paragraph? A page? They elbowed each other in the ribs, made wide eyes at each other. Could this be true? Later, in private conversations, some of them would confide that they found this

information depressing. This is also something I hear a lot. It can certainly be sobering to grasp just how long the odds are of getting published.

“But listen,” I tell them. “This is good news because pacing is something you can fix in your stories. It’s much harder to fix a poor imagination.”

I spend much of my time in my office, sitting one-to-one with students, urging them to get to the *Why today?* sooner. “Oh, I’m going to make that clear later,” the student often says. She flips forward eight pages. “Like, maybe here? After Johnny thinks about the summer camp where he went as a kid.”

“What’s going to happen in this story?” I say.

“Well, he’s going to be sad.”

“Is that a plot?”

The student sighs. Writing this piece, I can tell, has been agonizing so far. She started out feeling excited about writing fiction, but now she doubts she can do it. That’s why she’s here, sitting with me, when she has so many other things to get done.

“Look,” I say, “Your character is starting to develop. Plus, you have terrific insight into the human condition. That’s a great start.”

She brightens, sits a little taller. “Thanks.”

Then, I take the papers she’s clutching, and I put them aside. “Let’s just talk,” I say. I start asking her questions. I tell her, “Just say the first thing that comes into your head. Don’t think too much. Rely on your gut.”

She looks scared. She doesn’t believe she has any answers about this story.

“What new thing is happening for Johnny today? What does Johnny want more than anything in the world and what is he willing to do about it?”

The student shifts, sits forward, starts to speak, but then stops herself.

“Just say it. Stop thinking.”

“He wants his dad to love him.” She pauses, looks up at the ceiling, then back at me. “But his dad is dying.”

“Is he hurrying home? Has he gotten a bad phone call or something?”

“Yes. And his sister won’t let him in the front door.”

“That’s powerful,” I say. I slide the papers back to the student. “I think you found your opening scene.”

New writers often ask about the secrets to success, but it can be hard for them to process the answers. It just takes practice.

Set up the *Why Today?* early and make sure each subsequent scene has a purpose, that we’re watching it for a reason. If you do, the story will be spring-loaded. Neither you, nor the editor, nor your reader will be able to resist it.