Get Published in Literary Magazines

Allison K Williams

Coriander Press

GET PUBLISHED IN LITERARY MAGAZINES

Coriander Press
1305 W Maple St
Kalamazoo MI 49008
www.idowords.net

Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above. Portions of this work originally appeared in the *Brevity* blog.

Printed in the United States of America

Williams, Allison K

Get Published in Literary Magazines / Allison K Williams.

1. Writing—How-to—Manuals. 2. Literary Magazines.
3. Careers in Publishing

ISBN: 978-1-945736-00-1

Second Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Coriander Press

Kalamazoo ✦ Saint Petersburg ✦ Dubai

GET PUBLISHED IN LITERARY MAGAZINES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With grateful thanks
for the assistance and input of
Dinty W. Moore, Jocelyn Bartkevicius,
Alpha Pomells, Kathryn Rose and
Jay R. Ashworth

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Hi! I'm Allison, and you are an awesome writer who's going to get published. No, really—no matter what your level is or how talented you are, someone, somewhere, wants your work.

Perhaps you're an experienced writer, but you'd like to be published more, or you're having a hard time getting into your dream markets. What's not working in your submission process, and how can you fix it?

Perhaps you're a total beginner, getting ready to send out your first finished and revised work. Where do you start? How do you even know which journals to submit to?

Maybe you're going to write new work to send out. Maybe you already have polished stories, essays or poetry that are ready to find a home. Maybe you'll get ideas for more things to write during this process.

Getting published isn't a lottery or a slim chance—it's

the result of a submission process. In five steps, you'll increase your publish-ability and start your own submission process.

- Identify your goals—what do you want out of publishing your work?
- Learn to evaluate your own level. How good is your work, and what markets should you explore?
- Find literary (and some commercial!) magazines that are appropriate for your genre, topics, and skill level.
- Draft a sleek and simple cover letter that will engage editors with your work, and learn professional format for your writing.
- Send out your first ten submissions.

This symbol indicates an exercise: a specific step you can take to move forward in the submission process.

You'll learn to make an easy spreadsheet to track your work, how to get ideas for new pieces to write, and a simple process for figuring out how and what to submit to where for maximum publishing success.

Along the way, we'll take a look at dealing with rejection, working to improve your level, and what editors think when they look at the submission pile. By the time you've finished the steps in this book, you should have a submission process that you feel con-

fident about, a plan for dealing with rejections, and maybe even a couple of acceptance letters.

Ready?

1. Getting Started vs. Self-Doubt

Are you talented? Does it matter?

Your actual level of talent is only fifty percent of the publishing equation. The other half is persistence, willingness to learn from experience and bravery in equal measure. Many writers struggle with feeling fraudulent—like they aren't entitled to be "a writer," or as if they're waiting for a fairy godmother to show up in a cloud of sparkles, wave her wand and announce, "Now, you may publish!" For some of us, our favorite (or most-feared) professor looms in the back of our head, and we're awaiting symbolic permission from our mentor to move forward.

You're not alone. Most writers spend significant time worrying about whether their work is good or not, whether they can find a home for their poems, essays or stories, whether they should just write for fun, or for a small niche, or let it go entirely. In any artistic

field, it's normal to struggle with conflicting emotions:

1) **I AM SO AWESOME AND AMAZING MY WORK IS THE SHIT AND ONLY PHILISTINES FAIL TO APPRECIATE IT!**

and

2) **Boy. That sucked. Maybe I'll never make anything good again. Maybe I never actually made anything good to start with, and all those people who said they liked it were just lying to make me feel better.**

(the above should be read as if it is in a very small, grey font)

On the inside of our heads, those are very special feelings that isolate us from the world and make us completely unique and different from anyone else who has ever made art. In fact, every artist struggles with those feelings, and they are almost boring in their sameness to all the people who are not currently us experiencing them right now.

How can we deal with the tug-of-war between "I'M GREAT!" and "i suck" that can be paralyzing in terms of moving forward with our work?

First, remember you're not alone. Unless we are ignoring everyone else around us while we whine about our own lives, we should be catching on that we're not the only person having these feelings. In fact, we're not even the only person having these feel-

ings right now. If you're in a coffee shop right now, or a library, or a classroom, look left and right—at least two of the people in your field of vision are having a paralyzing moment of self-doubt. We can embrace the validity and commonality of our artist feelings. We can recognize that self-doubt goes hand in hand with artistic achievement, and in fact, self-doubt is necessary in order for us to be ready to learn new things about our own work and how we do it. If we already thought our work was perfect, it would be difficult to learn.

If you're not experiencing self-doubt, congratulations! Enjoy the feeling, and try to remember it later. If you never experience self-doubt, if everything you create is just wonderful, you may not be as good as you think you are. Get a second opinion.

Where we can feel most powerless as artists is in the range of choice available to us. Because every writer's career path is different, we can't point to a corner office and a key to the executive washroom and say, "Great! I made it!" It can be frightening how responsible we must be for our own feelings and our own process. It can be terrifying to realize that no-one else is going to tell us how to begin—we must be brave, we must be persistent, we must give ourselves permission to do the work we want to do, and validate ourselves for significant achievements.

One of the slayers of self-doubt is planning. In the next chapter, you'll start thinking seriously about what you want from your work, and set some specific goals. Sadly, there is no teacher any more to hand out

grades and shiny stickers. We have to decide for ourselves: What am I doing here? How will I know when I get it right?

I want to write a piece that receives comments from people who feel like their own situation has been illuminated. My satisfaction will be the comments themselves.

I want to self-publish a book. I'll know I did it because I'll hold it in my hand.

I want to send out five query letters each month. Rejections are the proof I did my job.

I want to write four non-fiction essays this year. I want to be happy with one, have two worth revising, and one that was practice and goes in a drawer.

I want to improve my characterization. I'll know I've done this because when I read work by other writers who I admire, I'll recognize similar techniques to those I'm using.

Wallowing in self-doubt is allowed. It's OK to feel shitty about our craft, our work or our publication record. But we have to recognize that the freedom to wallow (there's no Writer Boss to say, "break's over!") also means the freedom to pull up our big-girl pants and move forward with what we've decided we want to do, when we want to do it.

Let's go.

2. What Do You Want?

When I first started submitting work to magazines, I just wanted to have something—anything—that showed my mom I hadn't wasted my time in college.

Later, I was teaching college myself and I needed publication credits for my resume.

Now? I want to get paid.

What do you want to achieve by sending out your work? For the big picture, think about the Three P's:

Publication.

It's rewarding to see your work in print. You want recognition and the satisfaction of sharing your work with readers. It may not matter if the magazine is online-only or hard copy. You want copies on your

shelf, or links you can post to social media.

Payment.

You want to make money from writing. You're more likely to pick a venue based on a per-word or per-piece rate. You may focus more on commercial/mass-market magazines and websites rather than strictly literary journals.[1]

Prestige.

You want your work to appear in places whose names will look good on your resume, either to propel you towards more publication, or to build an academic career that requires publication. You value being "taken seriously" as a writer.

Are you an emerging writer who wants to break into literary magazines? Do you want to find out if getting published is even possible? Your goal may be Publication. You'll want to focus on finding the best fit by matching your level to the magazine's level without shooting too high at first, then raising your level as you gain publication credits.

Maybe you already have some publications in smaller magazines or local indie journals, but you'd like to have bigger names on your resume. It would be

1. We won't cover the "pitch" process in this book, but when submitting already-written work, the process is the same. If your focus is mass-market, the MediaBistro website is a good place to start finding out more.

a dream come true to open your favorite literary journal and see your work, maybe even in the same issue as a writer who's influenced you. Seek out Prestige. Start by thinking about magazines you've heard great things about, or that you admire and love to read.

If you've had some publication successes already, maybe you'd like writing to be your part-time or even full-time job. Pay close attention to which magazines pay in cash, and send your submissions to those markets first. You want Payment, but it's important to balance cash flow with increasing prominence, so your acceptances gradually become more important and profitable.

Freewrite or think about what you want. What does success look like to you? Is your mom proudly showing copies of a magazine to her friends? Do you have a small, steady income from writing? Are you building credits for a teaching resume or future grant/residency applications?

Thinking about your ultimate, big-picture goal helps you choose where to submit. For example, I want to make money from writing, teaching and public speak-

Working for Free

Throughout this book you'll hear me harp on about money money money. It's one of my primary considerations as a writer, and as a professional artist I want to be paid for my work. That said, it can be a very good choice to trade payment for prestige, even if you are otherwise focused on selling your work.

One of the credits I'm most pleased with is the *New York Times*, and I've been in there several times. The first time, though, was a blog entry responding to a call for stories about spending the holidays abroad, and it was published without payment.

What made it worthwhile?

- I already had the essay written. It was easy to polish it for an hour and hit send.
- It's a big name publication. Exposure might actually mean something in a media outlet of that size (most of the time, "good exposure" just means "work for free"). It looks good on my resume.
- It's a publication I admire, respect and read. I felt honored to be included. It felt like a foot in the door.
- It was when I had few publications on my resume and needed the credit.

Similarly, I have several writer friends who blog for the *Huffington Post*, a notorious non-payer. Those writers find it worthwhile to write regularly for an audience larger than they could command on their own. It's a chance to build a body of work that they can later use as clips when they approach other media outlets. And I've submitted to some big name literary magazines without knowing or caring if they pay—I'd just like to be among their excellent authors.

When you have an opportunity that's not in line with your primary goal (payment, prestige, publication), weigh it carefully—it might still be a good deal.

9. Rejection Is Good. Really.

As a writer, there is only one way to avoid rejection: don't submit your work. As successful and rejection-free as Emily Dickinson's career was, most of us would like to achieve the bulk of our publication prior to death.

Rejection sucks. It sucks every time, whether it's a big suck or a little suck. But it's part of the process. It's part of being a writer. It's a badge that says "I'm serious about this and I'm sending out my work." Think about, say, gymnasts, and how many times they hit the mat hard, face-first, before getting a new skill. Or car salesmen, and how many customers they talk to before a single closing. Or chefs, who offer a whole menu, but you only eat one thing. Writing is not the only job full of "trying."

From the editors' perspective, think about how many times you've walked into a car dealership and

turned down a salesman—you didn't hate him, but he didn't have what you were looking for. You needed a blue minivan and all he had was a red convertible. It doesn't make the convertible a lousy car—but it's not what you needed that day. Think about how many dishes you've looked at on menus and not ordered. That's what reading the submission pile is like. *I had that yesterday…Love that, but I always order it…I'm not hungry enough for pasta…* If we see pistachio ice cream and pick chocolate instead, the chef in the back is not moaning, "My pistachio must be terrible." Nor is he coming out with a cleaver, shouting "How dare you not like pistachio!" He accepts that different diners have different tastes.

What we can do as writers to deal with rejection is twofold:

1) Accept that it's part of the job.

It's not a personal hate, it's not mean, it's not the establishment failing to appreciate your talent. You just didn't have the piece they needed today. Tomorrow that might change. Either you'll find a home for the piece somewhere else, or you'll find another piece for this publication, or you'll write another piece. Or all of the above.

10. Literary Citizenship

Many new writers worry that the literary world is closed... a hotbed of nepotism, mutual back-scratching, and willful avoidance of anything or anyone from over the transom. And in a way it is–no matter what our level, whether our work is in the local coffee-house's literary journal or a respected national publication, writers read our friends, we read the people our friends told us to read, we read people with whom we have something in common, and then–if there's time–we read everyone else.

This can be deeply frustrating when a writer is starting out. At Literary Hub, writer/teacher/Instagrammer Jeff Sharlet wrote an open letter[4] to a stranger convinced his work is being overlooked, about how Sharlet sets priorities for his limited reading time:

4 "When a Self-Described Genius Asks You To Read His Masterpiece" http://lithub.com/when-a-self-declared-genius-asks-you-to-read-his-masterpiece/

You seem indignant that I've not read your work; you don't mention whether or not you've read mine; and you can't imagine that there might be work by those besides you—besides me!—worth reading.

For instance, work by young writers, students, for whom I'm often the only reader. You could say, "Sure, but those kids are privileged, they can afford college." Fair enough. But reading their work is the job that allows me to afford groceries. It has the added benefit of being deeply pleasurable, in part because so few students presume their own genius. They tend to be grateful for a single reader, even one who's slow, sometimes, because he procrastinates by answering crank emails from strangers.

Another category of writer worth reading: Friends. "Oh, great," you might say, "a chummy clique of established writers." That's true. But then, there's the fact that we weren't always "established," and the reality that for all but the most famous or most self-satisfied writers, being "established"—published and sometimes paid—doesn't mean you don't depend on friends to ping back like sonar when you drop some new work into the abyss of public words.

Sharlet discusses the circumstances that create communities of mutual readers, and how literary

citizenship arises inextricably from personal connection–but also, how that "personal" connection isn't something that springs into being fully formed. Personal connections and literary "friends" are cultivated and maintained, largely through mutual interest in each other's words and subject matter.

Are you reading your friends' work? Are you reading the places you want to be published, and having small interactions in person or in email or on social media? Are you looking for places to meet other writers online or in person, in workshops, classes, forums and interest groups? Are you reading widely in the subjects or genres you care about most, and letting those authors know you exist and you appreciate their work? Those are the first steps. And what we're all heading for is not tumbling down the walls of the literary Jericho we stand outside in supplication, but creating a new world of our own. One holding the citizens we most admire, encompassing the writers who came up with us and ourselves.

Some actions you can take as a literary citizen:

EASY: Set up a Twitter account, and follow literary magazines and writers whose work you like. If you're already active on Twitter, set up a List of these accounts so you have them all in one place, rather than having to hunt through your whole feed. Once

12. Disinformation

Some closing thoughts.

What nobody tells you as an artist is that every project starts at the beginning. Not just the blank page, the empty stage, but that you have to re-establish your credentials and your quality every time. You can coast on reputation a little, but it doesn't last long if you don't deliver.

What nobody tells you is that praise—a standing ovation, a good review, your teacher's approval—makes you feel good for a day, but one line of internet criticism from a stranger reverberates in your skull forever.

"Frankly, I don't see what all the fuss is about."

(I tried to feel bad when that critic killed himself the next year, but I didn't.)

What nobody tells your husband is that writing 3000 words in a calm, soothing, supportive environment

still leaves you too tired to call home at the end of the day. So does doing three twenty-minute shows.

And then feeling guilty about it. But not guilty enough to call.

What nobody tells you, the artist, the writer, is that spending an entire day being paid to do something you love is not the same as fun. It's often better than fun, but it's not fun. What nobody tells you is that spending an entire day being paid to do something you love is sometimes a lot less fun than spending an entire day doing something you love for free.

What nobody tells you is that selling out is strangely comforting. That once you've decided to package your product and suck a little corporate dick for the chance to show most of what you like to do but structured as a James Bond theme and wearing black and yellow because it goes with the logo, the large check that ensues will feel earned. That paying rent with your art money feels like finally growing up. That you probably can come up with five hundred words about margarine and even feel proud of making it sound like something people would eat. (Please don't.)

What nobody tells you is that if you believe in yourself and dream big dreams you will still come in second to someone who worked hard. Or to a talentless hack related to the producer. Or to someone sleeping with the editor. Or to your best friend whom you will have to congratulate as sincerely as possible. Or to someone no better than you and there will be no reason at all.

About the Author

Guerrilla memoirist, essay writer, playwright and travel journalist, Allison Williams has written about race, culture and comedy for National Public Radio, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the *New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Kenyon Review Online* and *Travelers' Tales*. She currently serves as Social Media Editor for *Brevity*.

Her fiction has appeared in *Crossed Genres, Smokelong Quarterly, Deep South* and *The Drum*; her plays include the Heidemann Award finalist *Miss Kentucky,* scripts for NPR's All Ears Theatre, and the London Fringe Best Of Fringe winner, *TRUE STORY*.

She received her MFA from Western Michigan University and has been a teaching fellow at the Prague Summer Program and the Kenyon Writers Workshop (with Dinty W. Moore), and an Associate Artist at the Atlantic Center for the Arts with Rick Moody, Dani

Shapiro and David Shields.

As a storyteller, Allison has performed at London's Theatre Royal and Rich Mix, Filocafe in Mumbai and The Kautilya Society in Varanasi, India, and is a two-time winner of The Moth StorySLAM. As an aerialist and acrobat, she performed in 23 countries.

Home base is currently Dubai, where "The Pork Shop" is a separate, dimly-lit room at the back of the supermarket. It's like buying meat porn.

Find her at www.idowords.net.