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When is your novel ready to submit?

Let's think for a moment about the word submit. What does it mean? It does not mean to pop in the mail. It means to lay down, give up, or surrender.

This is the state of mind the novelist must enter before deciding that his work is ready to show. Not a state of utter confidence--a state of submission. There is no faking this. Don't confuse it with exhaustion, boredom, frustration, or confusion, all of which you will also experience as a novelist. When you submit, you are beyond tired. Those of you with children in their late teens probably know what I'm talking about. It's the same feeling. I love you, but... get out.

If this all sounds rather nebulous, there are certain concrete steps one can take that will help ensure your novel won't end up in the slush pile. The fact is, there is no way to tell for sure when your novel is one hundred percent finished. However, there are many ways you can tell that it probably isn't ready. If you haven't gone through the steps below, chances are you need to sit on it a little longer.

**1. Get the opinion of readers you trust.** It doesn't matter who these people are. Their only qualifications should be that they read a lot of books, and that they will be unstintingly honest in their reactions. Don't tell them ahead of time what your book is about. Just ask them to make a list of things they liked and didn't like. You don't have to follow all their recommendations, but if two or three readers bring up the same issues, you know you have something to work on.

**2. Make sure your novel has a beginning, middle, and an end.** Ridiculously oversimplified, right? Not really. As a sometime professional editor and fiction reviewer, I am astonished at how many manuscripts lack these basic features. A really good novel will break nearly as many rules as it follows, but all books should begin in a way that draws us into the story; the action should continually deepen, never faltering; and the ending should make sense in a way that resonates with your readers on all levels: emotionally, logically, and maybe even spiritually. (And remember, breaking rules by accident is amateurism; breaking them on purpose is style.)

**3. Kill all your darlings.** Faulkner's bloodthirsty exhortation to literary violence has never been more needed than today. What does it mean? Simply put, if you think some particular line, paragraph, or chapter is the best piece of writing you've ever read, let alone written, you may need a reality check. It is far too easy for us to fall in love with our own excellence. Vanity is a shortcoming that must be overcome in writing just as much as in other areas of our lives.

4. **Hit the stage of removing words, not adding them.** If you are anything like me, you will go through a manuscript obsessively, always finding room for one more interesting metaphor, a few more lines of dialogue, or a little more character development. Keep doing this for as long as you must. But eventually you will have to stop putting things in. This is when you need to take at least two or three more passes, promising yourself that this time, you will only remove, not add.

5. **Story comes first.** Perusing the web and reading the manuscripts that cross my desk, I'm often pleasantly surprised at the number of witty phrase-turners I encounter in the wild. What many of these writers don't always know, however, is how to tell a story that works. Storytelling, like conversation, is becoming a lost art. Meanwhile, thanks to the proliferation of blogs and self-publishers, the act of writing itself has never enjoyed higher popularity. But I would much rather read a ripping yarn told in inexpert prose than a half-hearted tale written with an MFA's finely polished style. If you have a great story to tell but worry that you aren't a good enough writer, go for it. You'll get good on the way. If you have the strong urge to write high-minded novels in a beautiful style but have little to say, you will simply join the thundering horde of hopefuls whose hearts are broken every year by the publishing world. The good news is that storytelling, which is both an art and a skill, can be learned. Study the masters. Talk to old pros. And remember--your goal is a simple story, well told, with lots of interesting conflict.