

## THE REJECTION BLUES

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### WHY YOU KEEP GETTING REJECTED

Whether it's the first time it happened to you, or if it's happened many times to you in your writing career, it's always frustrating and disappointing to open a letter from an agent, editor, or publisher with their sometimes polite, but typically curt, "No thanks," rejection of your submission. It's rare for any of these letters to actually explain the basis for the rejection, offer any constructive criticism, or give you any clue as to why they won't let you in the game. In fact, most of the time when you send off queries you simply never hear anything back. Months and months go by, and...nothing.

If you're like most writers then you've probably been scratching your head, mystified as to what it is you're doing wrong. You've had many friends or critique group members read your writing, and you've received lots of positive feedback, so you don't think it's because your stuff is no good. You're certain your work is at least as good as a lot of the stuff that makes it to the shelves, and may sincerely believe that if your writing ever made it into print many people would surely enjoy it.

So what's the problem?

**Answer:** You believed a few too many myths about the publishing industry, are probably chronically naïve about how the book business operates and acquisition decisions are made, and don't know the first thing about communicating your market viability—which can be the most important factor that the decision makers use in accepting or rejecting.

No, dear writer, there's no master conspiracy out there to prevent you from achieving your dream of seeing the fruits of your imagination turned into a professionally published work. If your work is commercially viable (which you need to understand exactly what that means, too), then it can find a publisher, assuming you learn how the system works and then work the system.

### MYSTIFYING MYTHS

One of the biggest myths writers have about the acquisition process is the "Quality Myth." The basic assumption here is the belief that all writing can somehow be quantitatively scored—let's say from zero to 100, with 100 being "perfect, absolutely must publish it"—and within publishing houses there are individuals whose job it is to read all submissions from start to finish and objectively assign said score. It is then believed that there exists some magic threshold score, let's say 90, and all material submitted that gets a score of 90 or better automatically get offered a publishing contract. Sorry, it simply doesn't work that way.

From a lot of the poor quality books you see that make it into print, you ought to know first-hand that sheer quality isn't what acceptance decisions ultimately boil down to. In fact, most submissions never even get read. That's right! The vast majority of queries and submissions get "recycled" or deleted before the person reading the cover letter gets past the opening few lines. And the reason for this is because the writer has instantly identified themselves as someone with limited skill as a writer at best, and worse, has absolutely no market viability.

The next biggest myth is the erroneous belief that “Good writing equals commercial viability.” Good writing can enhance commercial viability, as surely as bad writing can hurt it, but they are not synonymous concepts. Commercial viability has everything to do with identifying and quantifying a market segment, more importantly a market segment with a defined need, and then demonstrating that your work is a great solution to meet that need, and is superior to competitive offerings. That’s a tall task in the publishing industry today, but just banking your chances on your writing skills alone just isn’t good enough.

The numbers don’t lie:

- Less than 1% of what’s written ever makes it into print.
- Less than 2% of all books that are published ever sell over 5,000 copies
- The average return rate of books for destruction or remainder is 52%

What those numbers reveal are some startling truths you need to be aware of. First, that from a sheer competition standpoint, for every 99 projects submitted for consideration, maybe one gets chosen, the other get those rejection letters. And this isn’t because only one out of 100 was any good. It was because the publisher is also aware of those other two facts that less than 2% of all projects end up being commercially successful and there a good chance that over half the books he prints will be returned. That’s why just good writing isn’t as relevant as Market Viability.

## MARKET VIABILITY

The simple definition for Market Viability is a product that will sell, i.e. that some critical mass of customers will gladly buy. Far too many writers believe the romanticized myth that books are an art form, where all good art should be valued and appreciated. They fail to recognize that a book is a RETAIL CONSUMER COMMODITY. It’s a product, like soap or soup. Products must be sold, and that has everything to do with the core business process of marketing. This is where 99% of all authors fail the test, opting to view themselves (as well as portraying themselves to others) as “artists” and not as “business professionals.” This is one of the biggest reasons you fail, Grasshopper.

Market Viability in the context of a book directly translates to “audience.” In the publishing business, this is sometimes referred to as your “platform,” but essentially it is talking about how much of an audience (potential customers) you already have on the front end of the project, not how much you hope to have in the future if your book is published and manages to succeed.

This is why so many major publishing houses have all but closed their doors to new voices and new talent—no matter how good it is. This is why so many celebrities, politicians, talking heads, criminals, sports figures, etc. get fantastic book deals so easily—and you don’t. Their value proposition to a publisher is very simple, clear, and effective: they already have an audience who will buy their book simply because their name is on it.

Hey, if 50,000 or 100,000 people will buy a copy of a book just because a famous individual’s name is on it, why wouldn’t a publisher take on that project? As noted, less than 2% of all projects ever sell over 5,000 copies. If you can sell ten or twenty times that with little to no more investment than the production of the book, why wouldn’t you? That’s a no-brainer. And if you think about it, it explains

a lot about what you see in the bookstores as well as that stack of rejection letters you have instead of publishing contracts.

Said bluntly: Your greatest liability standing in your way is the fact that you have no preexisting audience to leverage. If you did, you wouldn't be suffering from the "Rejection Blues."

So you're probably thinking: "Well, how can I develop an audience if I can't get published?" Indeed, a thorny Catch-22. But it's a dilemma you have to solve, and the good news is that it is a problem that *can* be solved. I see it happen every day.

Like most professional careers, the solution begins with education and evolves into a very carefully orchestrated plan of action that then must be executed with persistence and perseverance. It isn't a function of continuing to blast out queries and proposals to agents, editors, and publishers, in hopes that one of them will have a moment of weakness one day and let you in the club. Remember Einstein's definition of insanity: Repeating the same behaviors over and over and expecting a different result. You need *new* behaviors, and those behaviors will be a function of practical knowledge, put into practice, measured, improved, and applied relentlessly until the objective is achieved.

If you really are sick and tired of the Rejection Blues, here's my advice:

1. Make it a priority to learn what a Commercially Viable book project really looks like, what the market needs are at a specific point in time, and craft a professional quality project that effectively meets a genuine need. If you have to, scrap that pet project and start from scratch.
2. Learn everything you can about the inside workings of the publishing industry. "Yeses" come much more readily to projects that have the potential to make a publisher some money, especially when you can clearly communicate that. Said another way – you must learn how to *sell* to the publishing industry, understand their tastes, needs, and methods of doing business.
3. You must position yourself as an author with Market Viability, or at least Market Potential, even if you are trying to get your very first book published. Indeed, your case isn't as strong as someone who is an existing celebrity who can leverage their fame, but you can learn how to develop a strong marketing plan and avail yourself to a variety of online and offline mechanisms to start getting your name out there, as well as leveraging some natural associations you probably already have, but don't realize it. That at least puts you ahead of all those who just mail or email their stuff in and just hope for the best (which is about 99% of them).

As I have told my writing students for years, if all you want to do is enjoy the art of writing, then go do it. No one can stop you. Write till your fingers bleed, but don't frustrate yourself trying to penetrate the publishing industry. If all you want out of writing is to see your name in print, there's an endless number of Vanity Presses out there happy to take your money to produce a non-commercially viable product that resembles a book with your name on it. Again, don't frustrate yourself with the traditional trade publishing industry if that's all you want.

The publishing industry isn't an art society; it's a product manufacturing business. If that's not the business you want to be in, then stop applying for job in it. For that's exactly what you're doing when you send a publisher your work. You're asking them to hire you, via publishing contract, and

turn your work into one of those retail consumer commodities, which hopefully will be sold and people make money, you being one of them.

But if this *is* the business you want to be in, to be a writing professional, then prepare and equip yourself properly. What makes you think you can “do it” just because you sat in front of a keyboard for some length of time pecking out a story? I can assure you, writing a story is but one part of many in the complete process of producing a commercially viable book. And as many a professional author knows, the hardest work often comes *after* the book is released. At least that’s true for all those hard-working writers who didn’t happen to be blessed with a vast preexisting audience, those who were pragmatic enough to realize that they needed to be an integral element in developing and growing that audience, and given a chance to do so—did.

Got the Rejection Blues? There are only two ways to cure it. One, stop applying for a job you don’t really want and aren’t adequately prepared to do. Or, two, make the investment of time, energy, and resources to learn what writing professionally is really all about, and then go do it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Gelinas is the founder, Publisher and Editor-In-Chief of ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated, ([www.archebooks.com](http://www.archebooks.com)), as well as the author of many novels. He is a frequent public speaker and teaches and lectures on writing and publishing.

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