



# Mastering Nonfiction

Tips & Techniques from the Mentors and Faculty  
of the King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction

## Introduction

How do you recreate a nonfiction scene that is factually accurate? How do you craft a memoir when your memory is imperfect? How do you avoid common writing errors and tics? How do you find a publisher?

These are just a few of the questions writers grapple with as they embark on nonfiction writing projects, the kinds of questions students in the King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction work through with their mentors and faculty members as they complete their books over the course of our two-year limited-residency program. Naturally, there are dozens of other questions too, and whether students are working on a narrative nonfiction book, a collection of essays, a biography or memoir, we work with them to answer those questions, to turn their idea into a publishable manuscript and to navigate the business side of publishing as well.

In the next pages, we're happy to share insights with you on those first four questions. Perhaps this advice will help you on a project you're tackling now—or inspire you to explore a topic you've dreamed about writing.

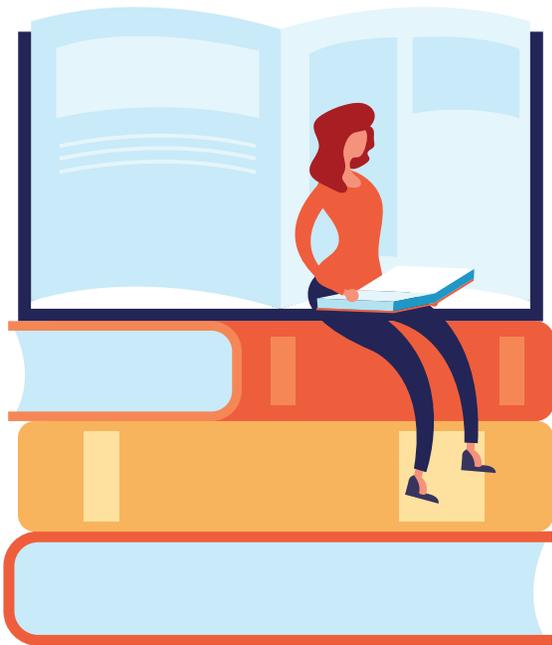
Looking for answers to other nonfiction writing, researching and publishing questions? If you'd like to subscribe to our program e-newsletter, send your request to [stephen.kimber@ukings.ca](mailto:stephen.kimber@ukings.ca) with the subject line "Subscribe to MFA newsletter." And if you have a book in you? Read on for full details on our program on page 4 in "About the King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction."

We'd love to help you make your book a reality.



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## About the King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction

Whether you're a mid-career professional with expertise to share, a journalist or an aspiring author, King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction is designed for you. Bring us your idea for a narrative nonfiction book, a collection of essays, or a biography or memoir and we can help you turn it into a manuscript that's on the road to publication.

We'll help you learn the craft and practice of being an author as you hone your skills under the mentorship of award-winning nonfiction writers and editors. With the additional help of top publishing professionals in Canada and the United States, you'll do all this and more in just two years. The bonus, of course, is that you earn a prestigious MFA degree along the way.

The MFA is a two-year limited-residency program consisting of two June residencies in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and two January residencies that alternate between New York and Toronto. In the June residency, students solidify their book proposals, learn structure and research skills through lectures and mentorships, and work with mentors and other students to fine-tune their prose. During the January residencies in Toronto and New York, you'll meet with agents and editors, acquire the tools to be a professional writer, and learn about the business of writing.

Students work long-distance with their mentors in between these residencies in order to move their manuscript to the next stage. This low-residency feature, and the exclusive focus on creative nonfiction, make the King's MFA the only program of its kind in Canada.

It's also one of the premier degree programs in North America for authors writing in this genre. [Kim Pittaway](#), the Executive Director of the King's MFA, has a 30-year career as a writer, editor and educator. Her teaching colleagues at King's — [Stephen Kimber](#) and [Dean Jobb](#) — along with the stellar group of writing mentors, are all published authors, award-winning journalists, and highly successful writing instructors. Together they have written or edited more than fifty books and been nominated for at least a hundred national magazine or newspaper awards. So far, almost 30 graduates of the program [have published or are under contract to publish nonfiction books](#), and our alumni have been finalists for and winners of numerous nonfiction book awards, including the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction, the Margaret and John Savage First Book Award (Non-Fiction), the Pottersfield Creative Nonfiction Contest, the \$30,000 RBC Taylor Prize and more.



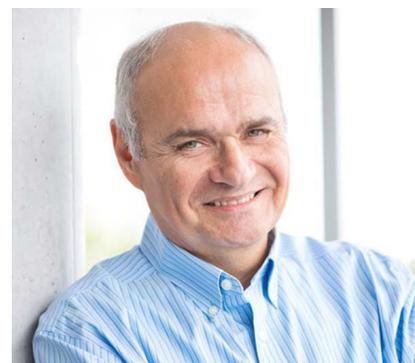
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of a Master Swindler Who Seduced a  
City and Captivated a Nation*

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We invite you to take the challenge.  
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winning faculty and mentors and turn your  
great idea into an equally great book!

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## MFA Writing Mentors



**Charlotte Gill** is the author of *Eating Dirt*, a tree-planting memoir that won the 2012 BC National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction. Her work has appeared in *Best Canadian Stories*, *The Journey Prize Stories* and newspapers and magazines across Canada.



**Lorri Neilsen Glenn** is the author of *Following the River: Traces of Red River Women* and eight other collections of creative nonfiction and poetry, and contributing editor of five. She is an award-winning writer, teacher and researcher.



**David Hayes** is the author of four works of creative nonfiction and the winner of numerous national magazine awards. He has also ghost-written nonfiction books with several famous Canadians. David has taught at Ryerson University for nearly thirty years.



**Lori A. May** is a freelance editor and guest speaker, and the recent author of *The Write Crowd*, published by Bloomsbury Academic. Her journalism work has appeared in *The Atlantic* and *Writer's Digest*.



**Ken McGoogan** recently published *Flight of the Highlanders*, his ninth work of creative nonfiction. He has won the Pierre Berton Award, the UBC Medal, and an American Christopher Award for artistic excellence.



**Jane Silcott's** debut collection of essays, *Everything Rustles*, published by Anvil Press, was shortlisted for the 2014 Hubert Evans Nonfiction award in the BC Book Prizes.



**Harry Thurston** is the author of more than twenty-five books and has won numerous national and regional awards for his creative nonfiction. He has taught at four universities in Atlantic Canada and contributed to more than thirty magazines.



**Ayelet Tsabari** is the author of the memoir in essays *The Art of Leaving* and the fiction collection *The Best Place on Earth*, which won the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature and the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish Fiction.



**Gillian Turnbull** is the author of *Sonic Booms: Making Music in an Oil Town*. She holds a PhD in ethnomusicology and is the former editor of *Canadian Folk Music* magazine.



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# Reconstructions

## *Bringing the past to life*

By David Hayes

### **About reconstructions**

Readers love feeling as though they are a “fly on the wall” — standing beside an investigator at a crime scene; crouched in the corner of a corporate boardroom watching an important meeting; eavesdropping on a discussion between an athlete and a coach at the eleventh hour of a key game. This kind of story comes alive when skillful reporters and writers get wonderful access to their subjects. But what about important stories that happened in the past — a few weeks, months, decades, or even centuries ago, when the writer wasn’t present?

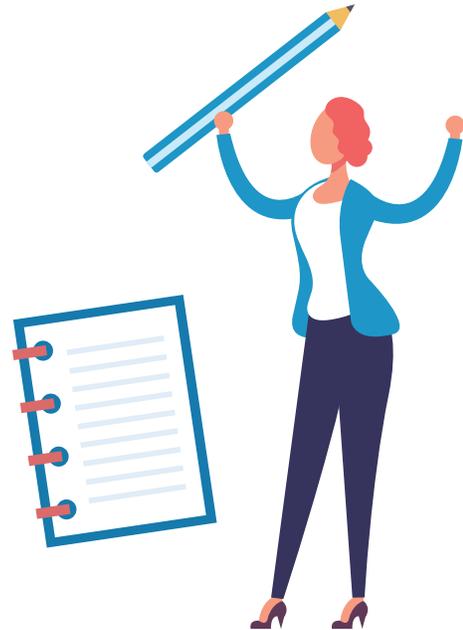
With reconstructions, writers make events that happened long ago read as vividly as if they had been there themselves. A few classic, book-length examples are John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, Laura Hillenbrand’s *Seabiscuit*, Mark Bowden’s *Black Hawk Down*, Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm* and all of bestselling author Erik Larson’s books (for example, *The Devil in the White City*, *Thunderstruck*, and *Dead Wake*) or those of Charlotte Gray (for example, *The Massey*

*Murder and Reluctant Genius*). Junger, writing in a foreword about the difficulties of reconstructing an event that took place several years earlier and one in which the six main characters perished, articulated the dilemma he faced: “On the one hand I wanted to write a completely factual book that would stand on its own as a piece of journalism. On the other hand, I didn’t want the narrative to asphyxiate under a mass of technical detail and conjecture. I toyed with the idea of fictionalizing minor parts of the story — conversations, personal thoughts, day-to-day routines — to make it more readable, but that risked diminishing the value of whatever facts I was able to determine.”

Casual readers — including some of my journalist colleagues working in daily journalism — question how writers can get such specific, often intimate, details about events they didn’t witness. It’s neither magical nor romantic, but like all great creative nonfiction, it’s labour-intensive, involving painstakingly methodical and persistent researching and interviewing.

## Researching/reporting techniques for reconstructions

- **Revisit the scene:** Since the best reconstructed scenes read as though the author was present at the event, you must try to “see” as much of the event as you can. If possible, try to visit the location where the events took place. With luck, this may be the location where your interview(s) take place. If an important meeting was held in a corporate boardroom or a hotel suite, you can often ask someone to take you there. If you’re writing about a hospital procedure, walk around the empty operating theatre to get a sense of its size and where things are located. But don’t forget to ask whether anything has been changed — new furniture? paint job? renovations? — in the months or years since the event took place. Sometimes, visiting a bar, restaurant, sports arena or neighborhood is less to collect data than to soak up a sense of the environment.
- **Look for a second set of eyes:** Although you’ll be asking your interview subjects for descriptions of places, it’s best to corroborate these anecdotal reports. Ask anyone who may have witnessed the event, or to whom your subject may have confided. Depending on the event, news outlets may have a visual record (videos, still photos). One or more of your sources may have taken photos or video footage. (Always ask.) In truly historical cases, look for descriptions of places in published accounts (books, newspapers, reports), diaries, letters, etc. Sometimes, floor plans or architectural blueprints can be helpful. Since this process adds another level of research and reporting to your story, which translates into more time, it’s important to determine whether a scene is significant enough to warrant all that work. Focus on the most dramatic moments in your narrative.
- **Was the first Tuesday of August 1967 sunny or cloudy?** Some of this material may be in the sources mentioned above. But you can also consult a perpetual calendar to accurately establish dates from years gone by, and weather reports in local papers or online sites to establish the weather. Use this information to “fact-check” your subjects’ recollections or help jump-start their memories. Draw up a timeline to help you figure out the chronology of events.



## Interviewing tips for reconstructing scenes

- **Explain your intentions:** Your goal is to write a detailed narrative about a scene you didn't witness, so you need lots of rich details. Explain this to your subjects, so they'll understand why you're asking them about seemingly irrelevant minutiae. People are often flattered when you say: "I would like to write about this important event in a way that will make readers feel as though they were present with you when it happened."
- **Let your subject tell their story:** In your enthusiasm to gather details for your reconstruction, it's easy to forget that your interview subjects usually need to tell you their stories without being constantly interrupted by questions about the color of their suit or where they sat in a room or who-said-what-when. Listen first, then guide your subjects back over the story to ask about all the specific details.
- **Ask for specific details:** Great narrative writing includes specific details — ranging from the exact color and material of a woman's Hermes Kelly bag or the music on a bike courier's smartphone to where each individual sat around a corporate boardroom table (and was that table walnut or mahogany?). A successful reconstruction must gather material like this long afterwards. That's why interviews often include questions such as:

"What time did you arrive at the apartment?"  
... "Who were you with when you arrived?"  
... "Who else was present in the apartment at that time?" ... "What were you wearing?" ...  
"Could you describe the room in which the meeting took place? ... "Where did everyone sit?" ... "What food or beverages were served, if any?" ... "Who led off the discussions?" ...  
"What role did each of the people present during the discussions take on?" ... "What were you thinking about at the time?" ...  
etc ...

- **Don't say you understand if you don't:** This general rule of interviewing is even more vital when reconstructing scenes, because you're trying to understand the complex dynamics of a scene you didn't witness. Don't feel stupid asking for clarification ("what do you mean?").
- **Use silence:** A natural response, especially to tough or perplexing questions, is a pause. This is especially true when you're asking people to recall seemingly insignificant details about past events. (Many people can instantly recall what they said and the tone of the conversation at a dramatic event, even if it was months earlier. But they may have to think for a minute or two about what they were wearing that day.) Don't be afraid of dead air; let your subjects fill it.

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# Remember when?

## *Writing from memory and researching our own lives*

By Ayelet Tsabari

Writing from memory can be challenging. We all know memory is tricky and unreliable; it changes with time, with our perception, and as we retell/write it. And frankly, we don't all have such great memories. At times, we may remember the events in broad strokes but we need the sensory details to make the writing more vivid.

So how do we trigger some of our memories and summon some of these details?

**1) Writing.** Starting to write with the intention of remembering can help unleash memories. As Bill Roorbach said, "One of the curious things about the act of writing is the way it can give access to the subconscious mind."

**2) Do your research!** (Yes, you can research your own life.)

- Read old **journals** and **letters** if you have them.
- **Google Earth and Google Maps:** Google Earth is a great tool, especially when you write about places you can't visit easily. Find the street you grew up on, your old school, your first love's house, or the park where you used to hang

out. You can even take a virtual walk through your old neighbourhood and collect details. Seeing the place will help you describe it more accurately — it may help stimulate more memories.

- **You Tube:** When I was writing about my time in India, I looked for travellers' videos on YouTube so I could "revisit" places and be reminded of the details. I also watched videos of the Mediterranean to try and capture the way it sounded and felt.
- Search **Wikipedia** for the year in which your story is set and see what happened. Any big events? Natural disasters? Political occurrences? Things that shaped the course of the year? Remembering those events may help you recall more details about your life. (Maybe you watched the elections with your parents, or heard about the earthquake while at your girlfriend's, etc.)
- **Movies:** What movies were released that year? I once learned that *Dirty Dancing* was released the year I was writing about and suddenly remembered exactly what boy I liked and who was my best friend that year (because we went to the movie together).

- **Search archives for daily newspapers from that time** to get a feel for the fashion, the culture, the preoccupations, the gossip, the slang.
- **Talk to people!** Your family and friends may have a different version of the events and may remember things you don't. It is amazing how much we learn when we ask questions.
- **Old photos:** Take your time and really study them. Ask yourself questions such as:
  - ▶ Why am I wearing that?
  - ▶ How do I feel in that moment?
  - ▶ Who is in the picture? What are they doing? Why are they there?
  - ▶ How do I feel about the person I'm photographed with?
  - ▶ What did I do before the photo was taken?
  - ▶ What am I thinking at that moment?
  - ▶ Where is the light coming from?
  - ▶ What time of day is it? What is the season, the weather?
  - ▶ What does the air smell like?
  - ▶ What sounds can I hear?
- **Objects:** If you have any objects from that time — memorabilia, items of clothing, travel souvenirs, old jewelry — spend some time with them. Touch them, smell them. See what happens.
- 3) **Music:** Studies have demonstrated that music enhances the memory of Alzheimer's and dementia patients. Pete Hamill, who wrote *A Drinking Life* said he couldn't remember the years of his drinking very well (for obvious reasons), so he listened to music from those times and found that memories came flooding back. I sometimes find it helpful to listen to music from the period I write about *while* I write to help get me in the mood.

## And if you can't remember?

**If you don't remember something significant, ponder why,** comment on that failure, because that's also significant. Say "I wish I remembered my father's laughter. People tell me it was contagious and thunderous." Or, "I don't know why I walked away from her, or how it felt at that moment... but I imagine that...." These are good ways to write around the limitations of our memory.

**If it's not essential to the story then don't write a scene.** Just tell us what happened in broad strokes.

**If you figure out inconsistencies between your memory and research, ask why.** That inquiry may end up in your work. Why did I not want to remember? Why did I change it in my head?

**Try using tag lines** such as, "I'd like to think that I..." or, "I imagine that...", or, "I don't remember exactly... ", or, "Perhaps my mother was mad at me not eating my greens..." You can also write something like, "This is how Shabbat dinners usually happened in our house." Tag lines are a good way to set the term of the discussion, and give the reader an indication that your memory may have failed you, and that this is your best guess.

*Ayelet Tsabari is a mentor in the King's MFA in Creative Nonfiction. She was born in Israel to a large family of Yemeni descent. She is the author of the memoir in essays The Art of Leaving, finalist for the Hilary Weston Writer's Trust Award for Nonfiction and winner of the Canadian Jewish Literary Award for memoir. Essays from the book have won several awards including a National Magazine Award and a Western Magazine Award. Her first book, The Best Place on Earth, won the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature and the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish Fiction, and was long listed for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. The book was also a New York Times Book Review Editors' Pick, a Kirkus Reviews' Best Debut Fiction of 2016, and has been published internationally. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Globe and Mail, Foreign Policy, The Forward, and The National Post. She also teaches creative writing at Tel Aviv University. [www.ayelettsabari.com](http://www.ayelettsabari.com)*

# Line by line

## A quick 10-point tic-check

By Lorri Neilson Glenn

Congratulations on finishing a draft! Before you submit it, however, put it away for several days, then return to it not as a writer, but an editor. We all have writing tics — one of mine is the overuse of em dashes — and, like any habit, we often need someone else to point it out. *You slurp when you eat soup. No, I don't. Yes, you do.* Tics can distract a reader and drain energy from your writing.

A good copy editor will fix these common tics, but if you catch them early, you'll save everyone time and money and teach yourself editing in the process. I've adapted the suggestions below from work I've recently edited, including my own.



- 1. Ditch that.** Do a search; you'll be surprised how few are necessary. *The time that it took to filet the fish = The time it took to filet the fish.*
- 2. Try not to back into a sentence with there is/there are.** *There are seven crows that were perched in the larch tree = Seven crows perched in the larch tree.*
- 3. Avoid frail verbs** such as *got, was/were, is/am/are, go/went*. Obviously, they're useful, but three or four *gots* in a row can grate (three or four of anything can grate, unless the uses are intentional). *I got the car from the mechanic, went to pick up groceries and got out of town.*
- 4. Consider the point of each sentence.** Craft its syntax intentionally for effect. Are you revealing too early? Losing an opportunity to give the statement oomph? *Dina jumped and screamed when she heard movement behind the door = lost opportunity to create suspense.*
- 5. Construct your sentence so the referent of a pronoun is clear.** *I cleaned the kitchen floor last because I knew that filthy creature would track in mud. It only takes five minutes to scrub it.* (what does it refer to — creature? mud? floor?).

- 6. Consider cadence.** Think of how an actor delivers lines, the beats between phrases — or how a standup comic paces delivery for emphasis. Try single-sentence (or single-word) paragraphs, varied sentence length and other techniques to add rhythm and momentum to your writing. Read your work aloud. Does it lift, move, pause where it should? Rhythm and white space (see #7) aren't merely cosmetic add-ons; they're another way to communicate meaning in writing.
- 7. Use white space with intention** (Related to cadence, above). Long paragraphs of description or lengthy dialogue (a character speaks a paragraph, for example) slow down reading, and in most cases, the material includes subtle shifts in thought or action that warrant a new paragraph.
- 8. Use adverbs with caution.** Stephen King is right: adverbs are not your friend. *She said huffily = she huffed.* (You can find more of his advice in his book *On Writing*.) And speaking of adverbs, watch for ones not tethered to a person or action (interestingly, thankfully) and empty ones (actually, really, very).
- 9. Watch for statements that mete out information a bit at a time.** *Nala drove to the grocery store to pick up some groceries she needed before going to the hospital to see her mother.* OR *Chinua Achebe is a writer from Nigeria and he wrote an excellent book called Things Fall Apart.* Tuck information inside action — and spice up the description too. Try: *Nala picked up a vegetable tray and yogurt on her way to St. Anthony's Infirmary to see her mother.* Try: *I consider Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart his best work.*
- 10. Avoid stage directions** (related to #9, above) unnecessary to the action in the scene. *Amal and his friends stood up from the table, put their coats back on, stopped to pay at the cash register and walked back to the apartment in the cold.* Anything we tell the reader must move the action along or tell us something about the character. Think of cuts in a film: unless you have a good reason to include all that detail (important dialogue as they put their coats on and paid, for example), simply cut to the next scene.

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# How do I find a publisher for my nonfiction book?

*Big may be beautiful, but small and medium might also be just right*

By Kim Pittaway

When it comes to publishers, it's tempting to think it's best to go big or go home. And while Canada's three major houses — Penguin Random House Canada, HarperCollins Canada and Simon & Schuster Canada — publish some of this country's top authors and bestselling books, they aren't the only option when it comes to finding a publisher for your nonfiction book. There are regional and smaller publishers across Canada and beyond who might be an excellent fit for your project. So how do you figure out who's best for you and what steps can you take to get your manuscript into

the hands of an editor or publisher at the house you dream of publishing with? If you're working with an agent, they will offer their insights to help you identify and reach publishers and editors, but even then, it's helpful for you to do some homework on which publishers are a good fit for your book. Agents aren't essential to finding the right publisher, but they can be valuable partners in your efforts, especially if you hope to publish with one of the country's major publishers.

**1) Know what you're selling.** It sounds obvious, but if you aren't clear on what your book is about, including its genre and subject category, you're going to have a hard time figuring out which publisher is right for you — and a tougher time selling to them. Publishers specialize, and you don't want to waste your time sending a pitch for your historical nonfiction manuscript to a publisher focused on prescriptive how-to.

**Genre:** Nonfiction falls into two broad genres: prescriptive nonfiction (how-to, informational or educational) and narrative nonfiction (books that use scene, character and dialogue to tell the story).

**Subject categories:** Within these two broad genres are a wide range of subject categories. BookNet Canada lists the following as nonfiction categories:

- Antiques & Collectibles
- Architecture
- Art
- Bibles
- Biography & Autobiography
- Body, Mind & Spirit
- Business & Economics
- Comics & Graphic Novels
- Computers
- Cooking
- Drama
- Education
- Family & Relationships
- Foreign Language Study
- Games
- Gardening
- Health & Fitness
- History
- House & Home
- Humour
- Language Arts & Disciplines
- Law
- Literary Collections
- Literary Criticism
- Mathematics
- Medical
- Music
- Nature
- Performing Arts
- Pets
- Philosophy
- Photography
- Poetry
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Reference
- Religion
- Science
- Self-Help
- Social Science
- Sports & Recreation
- Study Aids
- Technology & Engineering
- Transportation
- Travel
- True Crime

**Write it down:** What is your one-sentence description of your book? What genre is it? What subject category (or categories) does it fit within?

**2) Know who's buying.** OK, so you're clear on what you're selling. But how do you know who is buying? Go to a big box bookstore — an Indigo, for instance — and identify the subject section (not the front of store tables or bestsellers shelves, but the actually subject shelves) where your book would be shelved. Look at the other books in your section. Who publishes them? That's one way to identify who is publishing books in your particular subject area.

One important distinction to be aware of: many publishers have multiple imprints. So, for instance, publisher Penguin Random House Canada lists 18 Canadian imprints, while its parent company, Penguin Random House, has 250 imprints and brands on five continents. Each imprint has specific criteria and publishing specialties. (This level of consolidation has its challenges: while you may submit your book proposal or manuscript to more than one imprint of one of Canada's three major publishers — Penguin Random House Canada, HarperCollins Canada and Simon & Schuster Canada — the imprints owned by any one publisher will not bid against each other for your book.)

Still, even by scanning the shelves, you may not identify all of the Canadian publishers who might be potential publishers for your book. Where else can you look?

- The Association of Canadian Publishers offers a searchable [database of member publishers](#). You can search by company name, province or subject area, and the database will provide mailing address, phone number, email, website and company description.
- The Writers' Union of Canada has a [searchable database](#) of Canadian publishers currently accepting unsolicited manuscripts. A one-year subscription costs \$10.

- [QuillAndQuire.com](http://QuillAndQuire.com) publishes the Canadian book industry's essential industry news, insights and book reviews, and provides a good overview of who is publishing what.

If you're casting your net further afield, and searching for publishers in the United States or beyond, you might also check out:

- [WritersMarket.com](http://WritersMarket.com), which provides a subscription-based directory of publishers. (You can also purchase the print edition of the annual Writers Market from your bookseller for about \$20.)
- [PublishersMarketplace.com](http://PublishersMarketplace.com), which provides the latest details on publishing deals and contact information for publishers, editors and agents.
- [PublishersWeekly.com](http://PublishersWeekly.com), which highlights industry trends and news, including book deals and sales data (mostly US-focused, but with some Canadian and international content).

**Tip:** Want to know who the top-selling publishers in your subject area are? BookNet Canada's *The Canadian Book Market*, published annually, provides sales data on the top 10 hardcover and paperback books in each of its subject areas, as well as listing the market share for the top 14 publishers by sales in each subject area. The guide is pricy (\$109.99), but may be available through your university or public library.

**3) Are you in the right company?** Once you've identified some possible publishers for your manuscript, check out their websites and catalogues. Are they publishing books that align well with yours? For instance, some publishers may favour books with an academic tone. Will your chatty exploration of your subject fit well there? Some small publishers develop deep knowledge and understanding of niche markets, making it likely that they can find the audience for your book if you occupy that niche as well — and perhaps do a better job of it than a larger publisher might.

**4) Start pitching.** If you are working with an agent, your agent will handle this part of the process for you. If you are on your own, check the publisher website for direction on submissions and follow the instructions precisely. No submission guidelines? Check the online sources above to see what you can find. Still nothing? For nonfiction books, you may opt to send a query letter or a query plus proposal and sample chapters. (Jane Friedman offers great guidance on this on her website [janefriedman.com](http://janefriedman.com) and in her book *The Business of Being a Writer*.)

**Tip:** Do you know someone who knows someone? Check your network to see if you can find someone who has a contact at any of the publishers you're interested in pitching. Ask for their insights: who might be a good editor to work with? Is there a contact name or email they would be willing to share, or an introduction they'd be willing to make? Publishers and editors — especially at smaller publishers — also take part in public events such as Word on the Street, reading festivals and writing conferences. Check out line-ups to see who might be participating, and see if there is an opportunity to make a contact, swap a business card, participate in a pitch session or ask about how to submit.

**5) Yup. It's a waiting game.** Publishers rarely respond quickly, so be patient. If you get a form letter rejection, move on. But if you get a personal note that contains specific feedback about your manuscript, try to read it with an open mind. Yes, this can be tough. And you're right — they might be absolutely wrong in their feedback. But try to step back and see if the feedback you're getting can help you improve your pitch or your project — especially if you get similar feedback from more than one publisher.

**6) Woohoo! Someone said yes!** Don't be too quick to sign on the dotted line. First, have a conversation with the publisher or editor about your book. What will the editing process be like? What is the editor or publisher's vision for your book? How will you work together? And then there are the nitty-gritty details of the contract. A publishing agreement is a business contract, and some negotiation is expected. If you don't have an agent, and aren't comfortable negotiating your contract yourself, you can hire an agent or other publishing professional on a flat-fee basis to negotiate the contract for you. Don't rely on your cousin Fred the real estate lawyer: publishing contracts contain terms and phrases specific to publishing and you need to understand exactly what you are agreeing to before you sign the deal. Determined to negotiate your contract yourself? Buy a copy of *Negotiating a Book Contract: A Guide for Authors, Agents and Lawyers* by Mark L. Levine.



## **A note on the pros and cons of the bigs and the not-so-bigs**

Landing a deal with a big publisher is a dream come true for most writers. And there's lots to be happy about: big publishers bring clout, reach and money to the table. Your advance will likely be bigger than with a smaller publisher, your book's print run will likely be bigger too and your publisher will have a well-developed marketing and sales infrastructure in place to get your book out into the world. But none of that guarantees success, and great books can get overlooked by their own publishers when resources are focused on blockbusters and big-name authors. Small and mid-sized publishers can also do a good job of getting your book to market, and in some cases — for regional books, for instance — can even do a better job of getting books in front of the right buyers than a national publisher can. The quality of editing can be comparable at publishers big and small, and many authors favour smaller publishers because they feel they get more focused editing attention and promotion as part of a smaller list of books being published each season. All to say: getting a deal with one of the big three is challenging, as they focus their attention on books they predict will have significant sales. But that doesn't mean your book won't find a home — and audience — with a regional or smaller publisher.

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