

## Professional Etiquette for Mystery Writers: Part I by Eona Calli

**Y**ou've spent months, maybe years, and, in reality, a lifetime crafting your mystery. And then you type "The End."

Here's the publishing paradox: if you want your world to become anyone else's, you need other people to make that happen—even if you choose to go the indie route. Books may be a calling, but they're also a business, and it's one founded on relationships.

Professional etiquette is an effective means to establish solid and harmonious relationships and circumvent or navigate any potential issues that may arise. Emily Post's warning in 1922 that "bad manners" are "bad business policy" remains valid, as does her observation that "etiquette, remember, is merely a collection of forms by which all personal contacts in life are made smooth" (*Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*).

*First Draft's* two-part series on etiquette will focus on the author-agent and author-editor partnerships in Part I and the author-reader and author-author connections at fan conventions in Part II.

### Our agent experts

If a writer wishes to pursue a publishing career with large traditional presses, an agent is a must. Yet an agent isn't simply a talent scout and salesperson: they are a writer's advocate, their first line of career advice and defense, a key role that's become even more essential during this rocky period in publishing.

*First Draft* spoke with three of the top agents representing mystery authors today: former Harlequin editor [Melissa Jeglinski](#) (The Knight Agency, since 2008); lawyer and former editor [Jill Marsal](#) (The Marsal Lyon Literary Agency, since 2001); and mystery author and former editor [Evan Marshall](#) (The Evan Marshall Agency, since 1987).

All three are refreshingly enthusiastic about their jobs. Evan says, "What I love about being a literary agent is that I can help writers develop and sell their ideas. I also get involved in foreign sales, film/TV sales, subright sales, and so on. It's fun and extremely rewarding."

Jill agrees, adding, "I enjoy the submission process and finding a great editor for the manuscript. I like being part of the process that brings readers books which can impact their lives: entertain and inspire."

And like her colleagues, Melissa thinks the sweetest aspect is "getting to share happy news with my clients—whether it is a new deal or a fabulous cover or a great review—having good news is so welcome right now."



**Melissa Jeglinski of The Knight Agency**



**Evan Marshall of The Evan Marshall Agency**



**Jill Marsal of The Marsal Lyon Literary Agency**

### Query etiquette

Excellent advice on how to land one of these agent gems abounds, including *First Draft's* "Agent Insight" column. There are murky etiquette areas in the query arena, though, that repeatedly pop up on writers' listservs. Our experts kindly supplied us with the protocol in these situations.

Let's begin with a heaven and hell scenario: an agent requests a partial or full manuscript. You jump for joy. Then you hit the Send button, simultaneously crossing your fingers or whatever you do to channel good luck your way and—wait for it—don't receive a receipt. Panic sets in (naturally). Has the server misdirected your

opus into the Spam folder? You know that etiquette doesn't require agents to acknowledge cold queries, simply because their vast numbers render such courtesy impossible.

But that's not the case here. Evan says, "If a writer sends an agent material but doesn't receive an acknowledgement within a few business days, I think it's a good idea to politely email to verify receipt." A more conservative wait time, Melissa says, is two weeks. To avoid this problem altogether, she suggests including a receipt request in your email with the pages.

*Continued on next page*



Eona Calli writes mysteries about rough endings and glorious new beginnings. The latest features a Greek protagonist, like her. Eona is also Canadian and has been known to apologize to inanimate objects after bumping into them. Find her Greekish desserts and more at <http://eonacalli.com>

## Etiquette, continued

If the agent doesn't state their turnaround time in their receipt or on their website, when is it acceptable for a writer to inquire about their submission's status? The agents indicate waiting three to four weeks on a partial and four to six weeks for a full. Melissa suggests allowing more time during major holiday interruptions to the workweek. Keep in mind, this doesn't mean a busy agent will have completed reading your pages within this period, just that it's okay to ask.

In your communication, Jill advises forwarding the original email from the agent and reattaching the requested submission material. Evan says to keep your message polite and brief, something like "Thank you again for asking to see my mystery \_\_\_\_\_. I was wondering if you had an opportunity to review it yet, or, if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing your response. Thank you again for your consideration."

Should an agent request your pages and ultimately pass, do you follow up with a thank you? Jill says, "Most authors don't typically send a thank you, but it is certainly nice to receive a courteous email." Emily Post counsels "a pleasant and friendly impression" is "good business." You may cross paths with this agent again in the future, so why not show a little gratitude?

And finally, you receive an offer of representation. Congratulations! You could accept immediately. Alternatively, Melissa says, "You alert agents whom you've queried. It's acceptable to tell the interested agent you'd like two weeks to consider their offer. This provides other agents with enough time to ask for and review your materials. If you provide less time, agents will generally pass as they simply may not be able to drop everything to read your work."

Here's another lovely query conundrum: you're presented with multiple offers. Do you divulge the agents' identities, one to another? Melissa says, "No, it is not professional to do so at this time. If an agent pushes, this could be a red flag. You can say 'I'm not comfortable divulging this information.' After you've signed with an agent, if other interested agents would like to know with whom you signed, then it's okay to tell them if you wish to do so."

### Relationship etiquette

Now that you've met your agent match, how can you keep this relationship happy and productive? The agents stress the importance of setting up communication etiquette at the onset and abiding by these guidelines (a writer may choose to renegotiate these later).

Jill says, "Discuss how both of you like to communicate—do you prefer calls, emails, or both? I would also recommend clarifying with your agent whether they are okay with you just calling when you have questions or if they prefer you to first set up a time and schedule the call."

And when you have a question, Melissa says, "Give your representative adequate time to respond. Keep in mind it may take time if an agent needs to look for an answer or there's a chain of

people at a publisher that need to be consulted."

Melissa suggests you also specify how much information you want when your manuscript is out on submission: "Let your agent know what's helpful for you."

Evan adds, "There's nothing wrong with saying you would appreciate it if the agent forwarded editors' emails, or a list of where the project has been submitted."

At last, you sign a book deal! Even then, an agent's job doesn't end. Melissa says, "It's important to communicate any difficulties you are having with the agent. For instance, if you can't make a deadline, let them know so they can intervene. Don't let the agent hear from the editor that you're three months past the deadline."

On rare occasions, a writer may disagree with some of their editor's suggestions. What should they do? First, try to work out these creative differences with your editor. But you shouldn't do that alone. Jill says, "Authors want to keep their relationship with their editors as smooth as possible so it is a good idea to work with your agent and your agent can help you navigate through those challenges."

### Relationship etiquette during turbulent times

What if communication breaks down and the agent even stops responding to your messages? Jill suggests emailing and "tell the agent you feel there hasn't been much communication and you wanted to check in and see where things are."

If the agent ignores your email, Evan recommends emailing again, saying something like "You have not responded to my emails or calls in XX months, and I'm wondering where our relationship stands. I sincerely hope you are not ill. If that is the case, I hope you will let me know so that I can understand the long silence. Otherwise, I can only assume you are no longer interested in working with me. If I do not hear from you within the next week, I will assume that is the case."

Should the agent still not respond or if you can't resolve the issues, Evan says "a polite email stating that [you] wish to terminate the relationship, along with the reasons why, is the courteous and professional way to proceed." Check your agency agreement and make sure you're adhering to its clauses. Melissa adds, "If you've had a good relationship but feel it isn't working anymore, you can call them [too]."

Must you disclose this prior professional relationship when querying new agents? Jill says yes: "I would suggest just saying I had previous representation and am looking for a new agent. And if you are leaving on amicable terms, I would add that also."

But, Evan cautions, "she owes it to the prospective agent to disclose if the project has been previously submitted. If I were to read the material, offer representation, and then find out half the editors in New York have rejected it, I would feel I'd been tricked and had my time wasted."

*Continued on next page*

## Etiquette, continued

If you parted less than amicably with your prior representative, how much should you share with an interested agent? Melissa says, “It’s appropriate to discuss why you parted ways with your prior agent. For example, you may have been unhappy with the level of communication. So it’s okay to point out issues you want to avoid in this potential partnership. If possible, avoid being overtly negative about the prior agent and concentrate on this newly formed relationship.”

### Miscellaneous etiquette

When a writer has successfully submitted to a small press, is it acceptable to approach an agent to negotiate contractual terms? Jill notes, “Some agencies will do this, others are not open to it, but you can certainly send a query asking.”

Melissa says, “You should query [according to the agency’s guidelines] and put ‘Offer on the Table’ in the Subject line.” Some agents may negotiate only this contract, but others, like Melissa, often take the author on as part of their permanent client list.

Lastly, if an author self-negotiates a contract with a small press but retains the film or other subrights, can they approach a literary agent to handle these? Jill says, “It really varies from agency to agency. Some agents will represent just subrights (like film, television, audio, or foreign). Other agencies sometimes will only represent subrights when they have sold the underlying book. You can always send a query letting the agent know up front that you have sold the book rights and are looking for someone to handle specific subrights and see if they are open to that.”

### Thank you etiquette

How can you thank your hardworking agent? It’s always appropriate to express gratitude in the acknowledgement section of your book. Evan says, “Some of my clients send a holiday gift, which is lovely and thoughtful but really not necessary. For me a good old ‘thank you’ is enough!” Jill echoes this sentiment: “Sending a short email or note saying thank you when you appreciate something your agent has done is a nice way to acknowledge the agent’s work.”

### Our editor experts

If an agent is your publishing advocate, an editor is your ally in the creative process. For an author, it’s the most important and intimate professional relationship they’ll experience, one that can, at the very least, polish their work, and (hands to heaven) lift it to another level. And yet it’s also a partnership that is potentially fraught with tension, given that its success relies upon an author’s ability to receive criticism and negotiate any differences of



Nicole Brebner, above, editorial director of MIRA, and freelance editor Sue Toth, below.



Terri Bischoff, senior editor at Crooked Lane.

opinion with their editor. And that’s where our experts’ advice on etiquette can help you.

*First Draft* spoke with three leading editors from three different publishing settings. [Nicole Brebner](#) is the editorial director of [MIRA](#), an established imprint under the Harlequin Trade Publishing program (since 1994) with titles encompassing suspense and thrillers. She men-

tors debut and senior authors routinely onto the coveted bestsellers lists. [Terri Bischoff](#) is a senior editor at Crooked Lane, a newer independent press (since 2014) specializing in crime fiction. Her authors often garner award nominations and awards. In-demand freelancer [Sue Toth](#) (Sue Toth Writing and Editing Services) steers indie authors to success and also teaches editing at colleges.

Beyond their impressive track records, what also unites them is passion for their craft. Editing for over 20 years, Nicole says, “It’s really gratifying to provide guidance as an author progresses from submitting an idea all the way to the celebration of publication day,” adding, “There is nothing more exciting than seeing an author succeed.”

Terri has been an acquiring editor for 12 years and shares, “I love being able to offer someone a contract. That is pretty amazing, especially when it’s a debut or someone I know,” and also finds satisfaction when books she’s selected achieve honors.

Twelve-year editing veteran Sue appreciates “seeing a great story develop. And when we get it just right, it’s such a great feeling!” She even enjoys “working with authors on the little things—sometimes I’ll chat on the phone with an author for half an hour or more about one word or phrase.”

*Continued on next page*

## Etiquette, continued

### Relationship etiquette: the foundation

You need this relationship with your creative partner to begin and continue on a solid footing. And if you've never worked with an editor before, this can be nerve-racking. Here again, we turn to Emily Post for guidance: "Good manners are, after all, nothing but courteous consideration of other people's interests and feelings." And for writers, that means keeping in mind your busy editor is simultaneously editing multiple manuscripts, reading submissions to find more talent, and dealing with many other publishing players.

Your relationship starting point? Nicole advises, "Do take the time to get to know your editor. Let your editor know what does and doesn't work for you." (See more of her insightful etiquette dos and don'ts for writers in the sidebar.)

Terri says, "Editors often play the role of psychologist with their authors. One of the biggest challenges I have is figuring out the writer—do I need to handhold and guide every step or can I just throw my ideas at them and they do their thing? You will find that working with an editor is the same thing. We are all a little different, so your job is to figure out how they work. Once you know that, you can manage your relationship."

Preventative etiquette is useful and easy. Set up communication mores with your editor as you did with your agent (if you have one). And these will vary according to the editor and writer's preferences, as well as the publisher. For instance, Terri says, "What I tell my authors is that if they have any questions or concerns, to email me right away because sooner is always better than later."

But Sue cautions, "Don't rush your editor. Sometimes they have to step away from a manuscript for a little while to gain perspective, just as you have to do while you're writing it." And so, the editor "may need time to respond to you."

### Deadline etiquette

Nicole's list of essential etiquette musts includes: "Don't be rude or unprofessional and don't accept rude or unprofessional behavior from your editor." And one type of unprofessional conduct is to conceal problems you have in meeting a deadline. Nicole explains, "The workflow of publishing a book is complex and doesn't allow for a lot of flexibility," so "let your editor know [about deadline issues]. It's better to have time to resolve a situation than to have to pull a book from the schedule at the last minute because the author couldn't deliver and wasn't forthcoming with information."

This also holds true for freelance editors, who have slotted clients in their calendars and calculated incomes accordingly. Sue says, "When you've booked time with an editor, make sure your manuscript is in their hands on the day you promised it. Of course, life happens. If you're going to be late with your manuscript, let the editor know as soon as you possibly can so that they can book another job."

### Nicole Brebner's Dos and Don'ts for Writers

**Do** remember that publishing is a business and everyone should behave as a professional at all times.

**Do** take the time to get to know your editor. You will be partners in your publishing journey. Let your editor know what does and doesn't work for you.

**Do** remember that while your book is the most important book in *your* world, your editor is working on many books simultaneously and may need time to respond to you.

**Do** keep in mind that deadlines are extremely important. The workflow of publishing a book is complex and doesn't allow a lot of flexibility.

**Do** be honest with your editor. If you are having trouble meeting a deadline let your editor know. It's better to have time to resolve a situation than to have to pull a book from the schedule at the last minute because the author couldn't deliver and wasn't forthcoming with information.

**Do** be open-minded when discussing your manuscript with your editor. It's difficult but try to put your ego aside when receiving editing notes.

**Do** ask questions.

**Do** remember your editor has your best interests and the best interests of the publisher in mind.

**Don't** be afraid to disagree. It is reasonable for you to choose to disregard an editor's suggestion if you have a valid reason to do so.

**Don't** view your editor as your boss. Your editor is your partner.

**Don't** forget that your story belongs to you and any praise or criticism from readers or reviewers belongs to you.

**Don't** be rude or unprofessional and don't accept rude or unprofessional behavior from your editor.

**Don't** be afraid to ask your editor for help or advice if you need it.

**Don't** forget to enjoy the ride!

### Partnering with grace

You're thrilled to have your very own expert on call. Still, the hardest thing in the world for an author is hearing criticism of their work, mainly because a writer's identity is bound up with their creation. Yet this is precisely an editor's job—they aren't pulling their weight if they don't point out ways to improve your story. Not to be melodramatic, but your partnership can bear fruit or wither on the vine and much of the outcome is in your hands.

*Continued on next page*

## Etiquette, continued

What helps? Maintaining perspective throughout. Nicole says, “It’s really important to remember your editor is on your side and is making suggestions they believe will strengthen your work.” Terri advises, “Keep in mind—your editor acquired your book because they loved it. We don’t work on books we hate and we aren’t trying to sabotage you.” And from Sue: “Don’t treat your editor as an adversary. Trust that your editor is making the right decisions that will help you sell more books.”

So what should you do when that editorial letter and manuscript comments land in your email inbox? Nicole says, “You have to take the emotion out of reading your editor’s note and consider why they are making their suggestions.” To this end, Terri recommends “reading [the feedback], getting mad and throwing a fit, then walk away from it for a day or two. Think about the requested edits. Then read it again. Usually by this time you are feeling less emotional and can hear what the editor is saying.”

And Sue reminds us: “Expect your editor to challenge you. Especially in the developmental editing stage, your editor may have a lot of questions about plot, characters, and setting. A good editor will understand that you are very close to your story, sometimes too close. You won’t always see things that need to be changed. Your editor wants you to succeed, but sometimes that may mean making some fairly hefty changes.”

What should you do if you don’t quite understand what the editor wants or don’t agree every change is necessary? The latter scenario, in particular, strikes terror into the heart of a debut author. Terri says, “You don’t necessarily have to make every change the editor asks for. And you will likely have several disagreements that come up with each book, from editorial to cover art, to back cover copy.” The corrective, Sue says, is to “talk!”

Begin the process by asking questions. First, of yourself: “If you disagree with an editor’s suggestions, ask yourself why?” Nicole advises. The next stage, Terri says, is politely “asking the editor **why** they want that change. ‘Can you help me understand what you want?’ That is the key. Because if you know why, you can find other ways to address the problem. Talk over ideas of how to fix it with the editor.”

Nicole adds, “Be sure there isn’t a miscommunication. [For example] if you are asked to cut large portions of your manuscript, you should be given a reason. Is the manuscript too long, is the information written in multiple points of view or in narrative and dialogue—slowing the pacing and becoming repetitive to the reader? It’s important to ask for clarification if you need it.”

At this point, “If your editor knows you’ve considered their notes, and you have a valid reason for not agreeing, that is perfectly fine—and very common,” Nicole says, noting “Ultimately, the work is yours and your editor should be open to a discussion about anything you don’t want to change.”

Terry advises you explain your position to the editor and “Keep the conversation collaborative. If you can make the case of why

you want something, your editor will work with you.”

For those interested in engaging a freelance editor, to avert partnership problems Sue advises making sure you are a good fit beforehand: “Ask for a sample. Ask for recommendations from fellow authors. Make sure the editor works in your genre. Do your homework to find the right person for you, and you can find that it will become a long-lasting, rewarding relationship.”

On rare occasions, a creative stalemate may emerge with your in-house editor. Nicole says, “If your editor makes a reasonable suggestion and you are not open to any changes, there will be problems.”

And Terri cautions, “If you come to the table with a willingness to work through the issue, your editor will work with you. If you stubbornly refuse something [reasonable], you will earn the label as a problem author and you won’t likely get another contract in the future.”

### Intervention the etiquette way—your agent

Nicole says, “If the conversation doesn’t resolve things, you may want to bring your agent into the discussion and that is fine. Your agent is your advocate and should help you resolve any disagreements.” And Terri concurs: “I have had authors include their agent on everything or they asked the agent to intervene before having a conversation with the editor. Usually you can work out most things directly with the editor. I generally consider going to an agent only if the communication between author and editor has broken down.”

### How to thank your hardworking editor

Authors show their gratitude in several ways. They usually thank their editor in the book’s acknowledgement section. And if you run into each other at a conference, Terri says, “It is totally okay to offer an editor a drink,” but advises, “don’t stalk them, online or in person. That is a bit creepy, and we do notice when you suddenly start liking every Facebook post or tweet.”

There’s also the sweet tradition of sending your in-house editor a gift at signing and Christmas. Editors stress it isn’t required yet much appreciated. Nicole says, “Like any gesture of appreciation, it is truly the thought that counts.”

What types of presents are customary? Some authors select items they know their editors would like or find meaningful. Alternatively, popular generic choices include gift cards to a favorite restaurant or coffee shop or bookstore, flowers, alcohol, chocolates, and cookies. If you’re sending perishables, do check that the office will be open on the package’s arrival date.

Your freelance editor also relishes seeing their name in your book’s acknowledgments. On-time payments are another way to show gratefulness, Sue says, adding “The best thank-you of all, though, is referrals. If you love your editor, tell fellow authors you know.”