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Navigating the Lit Mag Maze

*Are you a poet, essayist, or short story writer looking to get your work out into the world?
Or a novelist or memoir author wanting to build interest in your work?*

Working to get published in a literary magazine may be your ticket.

Here's **WHY**:

- You can submit your work to a lot of outlets at once, with minimal query preparation
- You can submit different pieces to different places to see what sticks
- Publications look great on your CV and in your pitch letters to publishers
- Agents read these journals, and you never know who might be looking for you
- Familiarizing yourself with publications gives you a better feel for the industry
- It's easier than pitching a book, and more likely to be successful
- It's fun and satisfying!

So, the next question is **HOW**:

Almost all literary journals that accept unsolicited material do so through an online platform called Submittable.

If you want to play this game, you need to deal with this platform.

Here's how to get started:

1. Go to submittable.com and set up an account for yourself. It's free and easy.
2. Next, go to the tab that says "Discover." You'll see that all journals with upcoming deadlines are listed, with the most pressing ones up top. THERE ARE TONS, all the time! This should be encouraging...look at all of the outlets!! There's got to be one out there for your piece.
3. If you want to limit your search to say, nonfiction, just type "nonfiction" in the search bar. Or, if you want to limit yourself to one journal, say, *The Nashville Review*, type that into the search bar.
4. Explore! Click on a bunch of journals and read. What do they say they want? What is their length guideline? Are submissions free, or do you need to pay for them?
5. When you decide one seems like a good fit, explore more deeply. Is it a print mag or an online outlet (or both)? Go to the publication's website and read some of what is published, if you can. Do you like what you read (or scan)? Do the pieces there have the

same vibe as yours? Is the presentation professional? Do you recognize the names of anyone who has been published there?

6. Once you decide to submit, follow the submissions directions TO THE LETTER. They'll ask for a title. Most of the time, they'll also ask for a cover letter. I'm a big believer in making that letter super short, unless you want to mention how one of their recently published pieces affected you. Later, when you have gotten replies that say, "We liked your piece, but it wasn't a good fit this time; please send us more," you can reference these encouraging notes in your cover letter. You may be asked for contact info in the letter. And, they may say NOT to put contact info on your story or poem. If so, make sure it's not there! Often, you'll be asked for a short bio. Keep it short—like under 100 words. You'll need to upload your file, of course. Make sure the title of the file is the title of your piece, and that the formatting is correct (see FAQ's below). You may or may not need to pay for your submission. If there's a fee, there will be payment links. (I know, this sounds like a lot of details, and it is; but once you've done it a few times, it gets a lot easier!)
7. Proofread and triple check that you're meeting all of their requirements before you press submit. Then, do it.
8. You'll get a receipt in whatever email inbox is affiliated with the address you used to register for your Submittable account.
9. Your submission will also register in the "Submissions" tab of your Submittable profile. There, you can keep track of which pieces have been "received," which are "under review," which have been "rejected," and which have been "accepted."

Most literary magazines accept simultaneous submissions—meaning, you can send the same essay to ten places at once. The key is that if it is accepted somewhere, and you accept that acceptance, you need to IMMEDIATELY withdraw it from all of the other outlets where it's been submitted. Not doing so risks blacklisting! You can withdraw a piece easily in the "Submissions" tab.

Don't ever re-submit to a journal if you are still awaiting a verdict on another piece. They are likely to automatically reject your work. Wait until you hear back from them about one, then send the next.

I make a habit of trolling the "Discover" tab once every week or two. This enables me to see what potentially interesting deadlines are coming up. It also lets me know if any cool outlets have "themed" issues on the horizon that I might want to write with that theme in mind. I keep track of the journals I'm particularly interested in and watch their deadlines.

*Now, you are probably wondering **WHAT** to submit...*

Deciding what to submit and where is an art. For real.

To do it well, you really need to read—or at least peruse—a lot of lit mags. When I started, I submitted everywhere. A lot of places sent me a copy of their journal after I submitted and paid them some money. I'd read these copies when I got them, and more than half the time, I'd say, "Oops. My traditionally-written essay about butterflies was not a good fit for this journal that only publishes one essay a month and prefers 'experimental' work about identity. That's \$10 down the drain." Or not—I learned something, and I'm pretty sure that every lit mag in the nation needs that \$10 badly. As a result of all these mistakes (and some successes!), I've gotten a LOT better at targeting my writing to specific outlets. You will too.

And, if you don't have the time or don't want to invest the time into this process, there are people out there who already know the landscape well. You can pay them to help you figure it out. I am one of those people.

*Another obvious question is **WHEN** to submit.*

The simple answer is "before their deadline." It doesn't matter if you do it way before the deadline or an hour before; just make sure you make it in.

The other aspect of this question is, "How do I know when my story/poem/essay is ready to be submitted?" This is a much bigger question! I don't submit anything that hasn't sat around marinating for a little while. Everything I submit has had at least one other set of eyes on it (ideally, several), and I have made edits (usually lots) based on the feedback I received. It's always hard to know when a work of art is "done," and we all struggle to figure that out. Get help here. Writing buddies are great for this. This is also a big part of what I do as a paid editor.

FAQ's:

Can I submit excerpts from a novel or memoir?

Yes, but keep in mind that, unless the call is for "the first 50 pages of a book" or something like that, your pieces should stand alone. They can be excerpts from novels or memoirs, but they should have beginnings, middles, and ends. It should not be obvious that they are parts of larger works.

How do contests work?

They work more or less the same way as regular submissions, only the competition is tougher, and they almost always have fees. But if you win, you win big. Money and prestige! Slimmer odds, though. Personally, I only submit to contests for "emerging authors." I don't want to end up in a pool with a writer who's a household name. I also only submit to contests that read submissions blindly. If they can see the name of the author, I don't submit. My name doesn't carry enough weight, and plenty of other people's do.

How should I format my work?

Unless you're doing hybrid or experimental work where funky formatting is part of the piece, keep it boring. Times New Roman, 12 pt. font, 1" margins. Page numbers. Centered title. No spaces between paragraphs (unless they indicate a section break). Indentations at the beginning of each paragraph. Some places will also say to put your name in the header or give other specific instructions. Do what they say, or risk automatic rejection!

How about big name magazines, like The Atlantic or Harper's?

Typically, you need an agent to access these kinds of outlets. Not always, though. They don't use Submittable. Go to their websites and find the "submissions" tab. There will be directions there. Personally, I'd start with more accessible options and build your resume and confidence there.

What are my chances, really?

The more you submit, the better they are! Seriously. The best advice someone gave me was to not get bummed until I'd had a piece rejected at 50 outlets, minimum. My "Submissions" tab is FILLED with rejections. So is the tab of every other writer I know, including several who have multiple commercially published books. Rejection is part of the game!!

My advice: after you press send, forget about it until you get a response. When you get a rejection email, delete it immediately and give it no further thought. The less emotional investment you have in this process, the easier it will be.

What do I do about those "almost but not quite" responses?

These are great! They mean the readers liked it. They are rejecting it because it just doesn't quite fit the theme of the issue, or they just published something with the same theme, or there just wasn't enough space. **SUBMIT TO THIS PLACE AGAIN**—the sooner the better. And, in your cover letter, remind them that they liked a piece of yours. I submitted to one outlet five times and got thoughtful, hand-typed "almost" responses 4 out of 5 times. Last month, they finally took something of mine.

What happens when they say yes?

Celebrate!

Keep in mind that there are two kinds of yesses: the one that accepts the piece as is, and the one that requests changes to the document. You can work with their suggestions or choose not to and say "no, thanks," depending on how you feel about the changes they want. If you do accept your acceptance, they will often follow up with an email that asks for various other things (an updated bio, an address to send copies, a signed contract, etc.). Remember to pull an accepted piece from every other outlet where you submitted it.

And then brag to me and send me a link!

For specific questions about your work and its possible homes, feel free to get in touch. I'm happy to offer personal help in getting started with this process. Like I said, it can be daunting at first, but once you have a system, it can also be rewarding and productive. **GOOD LUCK!**

