

# The Writers' Checklist: Is Your Literary Fiction Submission-Ready?

*A practical guide from Peg Alford Pursell & WTAW Press*

Submitting work often comes late in a long, interior process. This checklist reflects questions editors commonly return to when reading manuscripts, as a way of testing whether a book has arrived at the clearest, most alive version of itself.

## The Polish (The Art)

### Opening pages

Do the first five pages establish a discernible voice, a lived-in sense of place, and a reason for the book to exist *on its own terms*? At this stage, editors are interested in whether the work knows what kind of book it is becoming.

### Reading for sound

Have you read the manuscript aloud? Prose often reveals its strengths—and its strain—through rhythm. Sentences that resist the voice usually ask to be rethought, not merely corrected.

### Attending to excess language

Look closely at words that weaken or generalize experience (*just, suddenly, seemed, felt*). These often signal moments where the writing could move closer to the physical, emotional, or perceptual reality the scene is reaching toward.

### The cooling period

Have you stepped away from the manuscript for a while (three weeks or more)? Time away isn't a break from the work; it's part of seeing what the book is actually doing, rather than what you remember intending.

## The Sell (The Business)

### Contemporary lineage

Can you name three literary titles from the past three years that feel in conversation with your book? This isn't about market positioning so much as situating the work within a living literary moment.

### Two-sentence distillation

Can you describe the emotional core and central tension of the book in two sentences, without summarizing the plot? Many writers find this exercise clarifies what the manuscript is ultimately trying to say—to readers *and* to itself.

### Literary citizenship

Publishing is relational. Editors and publishers tend to value writers who are meaningfully engaged with the literary community—as readers, supporters of other writers, and participants in the broader ecosystem that sustains the work.

### The anonymous read

If an editor knew nothing about the author beyond the pages in front of them, would the opening pages be sufficient to sustain attention and trust?