

I've written a practically wordless children's picture book manuscript that I want to submit to publishers. Since I cannot illustrate the few words of text it contains, can you please tell me the professionally appropriate way to submit my manuscript?

Q: I've (written – if that's the correct term) a practically wordless children's picture book manuscript that I want to submit to publishers. Since I cannot illustrate the few words of text it contains, can you please tell me the professionally appropriate way to submit my manuscript?

Generally, for guidelines on preparing a query letter and for the format for submitting manuscript text, you should request a copy of SCBWI's free guide to submitting manuscripts. For this particular query, I think your pitch letter would have to make a strong case for your concept, and you should probably include a detailed description with thumbnail sketches, or a book dummy to show how it might be illustrated.

If I understand correctly what you're proposing, which I think would be a "concept" book (little or no story line with ideas conveyed by pictorial art, or with interactive components like pop-ups, "touch-and-feel" pages, etc.), it sounds as though this would be a very tough sell. I spoke with an agent (who concurred), and we had the following reasons: 1) Unless you are a very well-established author (and even then), it is hard to sell a publisher simply on a concept; 2) Most concept books are either art-driven, or they originate with the publisher or a book packager; 3) The publisher has little reason to commit to you as an author when the book's success would depend more on the artistic treatment, than on whether the original idea was good; and 4) These concept books usually work best as part of a larger series.

Be aware that because there's so much competition, publishers need compelling reasons to publish a new book, and they have many good ones to choose from. Picture books are expensive to produce and, when the author is not also an illustrator, the publisher has to pay two royalties to get the book done. The most compelling reasons for committing to an author are: 1) A text has been submitted and the publisher likes the author's writing and feels the book is marketable; 2) The author has an established reputation and the editor wants to have that author as a part of her list. I think the second instance is when it would be more likely for an editor to consider working with an author based on a concept, or sometimes the editor will propose ideas for a book to see if there's mutual interest in working together.

So, if you are not a name brand author at this point, and you still think the concept is strong enough to try to sell, you might want to consider proposing the idea as part of a larger series.

You can also consider presenting it to both publishers and to book packagers (see “Literary Market Place” for a listing of children’s book packagers) to try to sell it. 3-4:02