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The Submitter's Companion

*A Field Guide for Writers Sending Work to
Literary Journals*

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The Submitter's Companion: A Field Guide for Writers Sending Work to Literary Journals

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This guide draws on the author's twenty-five years of submitting work to literary journals, anthologies, and contests. Three short-fiction contest names appear by way of recommendation; all are public venues and no permission is required to identify them.

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Foreword



Submitting work to literary journals is a craft within a craft. The writing is the work. The submission is the second work — smaller, less interesting, more procedural, and the only reason the writing reaches a reader you have not already invited into your house.

This book is the second work. It is short by design. Most of what it contains is what I wish someone had told me at twenty-five, when I was sending poems to Ploughshares and not understanding why none of them came back with an editor's name on the slip.

The book is divided into three parts. First, what to send and where. Second, how to write the cover letter and how to format the manuscript. Third, what to do when something is accepted, and what to do, more often, when it is not.

Part I · What to Send and Where



Before any cover letter, decide three things about each piece you plan to submit. The decisions are easy to skip; they are also the decisions that save the most time downstream.

1. Rights status

Has the piece been published before? Anywhere — a personal blog, a Facebook post, a Substack newsletter, a poetry-society chapbook, a self-published collection? If yes, it is a reprint, and the general reading period of nearly every American literary journal will reject it. Treat reprints as a separate category and send them only to the small number of venues that accept them. (Three good ones for short fiction: The Masters Review Reprint Prize, the Lascaux Prize, and the Tom Howard / John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest.)

2. Genre fit

Is the piece literary fiction, hybrid, formalist poetry, prose poetry, flash, essay, or genre-leaning? The fit between a piece and a journal matters more than the journal's reputation. A literary fiction journal will reject good genre work because they don't

publish genre work; a journal that loves prose poetry will publish the prose poem you have been trying to place at three formalist quarterlies.

3. Match quality

Read three issues of any journal before you submit. Better, read six. The match between your piece and the journal is what an editor is feeling for when they open your file; if you have made yourself feel the same thing while reading their last issue, you will know whether you belong on their pages. If you don't know, send to a different journal.

Where to send: the tiered list

A useful submission plan operates in three tiers, running in parallel.

- Tier 1 — Top venues. Five to ten journals you would be proud to appear in: Ploughshares, AGNI, The Kenyon Review, Poetry, The New Yorker, The Missouri Review, Image, Threepenny Review, Tin House book division, Granta. Each piece can sit at one Tier 1 venue at a time if simultaneous submissions are accepted with notification; otherwise, send to one at a time.
- Tier 2 — Strong literary journals. Twenty to thirty journals with smaller circulation but

excellent editorial taste: Bennington Review, Copper Nickel, Diode, RHINO, Prairie Schooner, Pleiades, Waxwing, Sixth Finch, The Cortland Review, Rattle, Adroit. Send simultaneously where permitted.

- Tier 3 — Discovery venues. Newer or smaller journals where editors read every submission and respond personally: small university quarterlies, regional reviews, online journals associated with MFA programs, themed anthologies open for a single reading period. Send freely.

A standard rotation: one piece sits at one or two Tier 1 venues at a time, three to five Tier 2 venues, and as many Tier 3 venues as the simultaneous-submission policy allows. When the piece is accepted, withdraw it from every other venue the same day.

Part II · The Manuscript and the Cover Letter



Manuscript formatting (poetry)

- One document with all poems combined. Typical journal limit: 3 to 6 poems per submission, total 10 pages.
- 12-point Georgia or Times New Roman, single-spaced for poetry, with one poem per page.
- Title at the top of each poem; no header or footer with your name if the journal reads blind (Bennington Review, Copper Nickel, several others).
- Page numbers in the lower right.
- Contact info on the first page only, top right, unless the journal's guidelines specify otherwise.

Manuscript formatting (fiction)

- One document per story. Typical journal limit: 1 story per submission, 6,000 to 8,000 words depending on the venue.

- 12-point Georgia or Times New Roman, double-spaced, with first-line paragraph indent (1/2 inch).
- Header on every page (left): Last Name / Story Title / Page.
- No fancy fonts, no chapter ornaments, no center-justified text. Plain manuscript convention.

The cover letter

A good cover letter is short, professional, and almost invisible. It tells the editor four things, in this order: who you are, what you have submitted, where the work has appeared previously (if at all), and that the submission is simultaneous where the journal requires that disclosure. It does not interpret your work, defend your work, or quote from your work. The work will speak for itself.

A sample cover letter:

Dear Editors, Please consider the three poems attached — "Threshold," "The Forbidden Couch," and "Halfway" — for publication in The Cortland Review. This is a simultaneous submission; I will notify you immediately if any of the poems are accepted elsewhere. My work has appeared in The Missouri Review, AGNI,

and The Cortland Review (2018). My novel Give Them Unquiet Dreams (2019) was named a Kirkus Best Book of 2019. I teach creative writing in Philadelphia. Thank you for reading. Sincerely, James F. Mulhern

Notice what is absent: no interpretation of the poems, no claim that they are timely or important, no quotation from the work, no name-dropping beyond what an editor would expect from a working writer. Four short paragraphs. Submit and move on.

The reprint cover letter

When a piece has been published before, the cover letter does one extra job: it states the prior publication, the date, and that all rights have reverted. This is straightforward — and it is the reason reprint contests exist as a separate track from general submissions.

Dear Editors, Please consider my short story, "The Crosswalk" (3,400 words), for the Masters Review Reprint Prize. The story first appeared in The Missouri Review in spring 2019; all rights have reverted to me, and I am submitting it as a reprint in accordance with your guidelines.

*Thank you for reading. Sincerely, James F.
Mulhern*

Part III · After You Submit



Tracking submissions

Keep one spreadsheet, with the following columns: piece title, journal, date submitted, fee paid, simultaneous (Y/N), expected response window, status (out / accepted / declined / withdrawn), and date of status change. Update it within twenty-four hours of any change. Submittable shows you some of this; Submission Grinder and Duotrope show you more. The spreadsheet is the canonical record.

When something is accepted

Three things happen the same day, in this order:

- Reply to the accepting editor with your acceptance, and ask about any specific publication or contract questions.
- Withdraw the piece from every other journal you submitted it to. Use the journal's Submittable portal where possible. Where Submittable is not the intake system, send a short, professional withdrawal email.
- Update your tracking spreadsheet, and add the new publication credit to your standing bio.

A clean withdrawal message:

Dear Editors, With thanks for your consideration, I would like to withdraw the poems "Threshold," "The Forbidden Couch," and "Halfway" from your reading. The pieces have been accepted elsewhere. With appreciation, James F. Mulhern

When something is declined

Most submissions are declined. This is normal. The piece is not bad; the fit was not right, or the editor read three hundred poems on the same Tuesday and yours arrived at four in the afternoon, after a long fiction submission they had spent two hours with. Resubmit the piece the same week to another venue from the next tier down. Do not revise reflexively in response to a rejection; revise only when the editor includes a specific note that you find genuinely useful.

Personal rejections — the kind that come with a sentence or two from the editor — are encouragement. They mean the journal is open to your work. Send your next piece there immediately, within a month if you can; the editor remembers your name for that long, and the second submission arrives in a different mental category from the first.

When something is accepted with edits

Editors edit. Good editing makes the piece better. Read the edits, sit with them for twenty-four hours, accept the ones you agree with, push back politely on the ones you don't. The goal is not to win every edit; the goal is to publish a version of the piece you are still proud of in five years.

Templates



Standard bio — 50 words

James F. Mulhern is the author of three novels and three story collections, including Give Them Unquiet Dreams (2019), a Kirkus Best Book. His work has appeared in The Missouri Review, AGNI, and elsewhere. He teaches creative writing in Philadelphia.

Standard bio — 25 words

James F. Mulhern is the author of Give Them Unquiet Dreams (Kirkus Best Book, 2019) and other fiction. He teaches creative writing in Philadelphia.

Simultaneous-submission disclosure (for cover letter)

This is a simultaneous submission. I will notify you immediately if the work is accepted elsewhere.

About the Author



James F. Mulhern is the author of the novels Molly Bonamici and Give Them Unquiet Dreams (a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019), the novella A Prayer for Home (praised by The Missouri Review), and the story collections Assumptions and Other Stories, Mia Bambina and Other Stories, and The Weight of Small Mercies. His work has appeared in literary journals and anthologies for twenty-five years. He teaches creative writing and literature, and writes from Philadelphia. Silver Current Press is his imprint.

