

Choosing a Screenwriting Agent: David or Goliath
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<http://www.breakingin.net/choosingagent.htm>

One important decision screenwriters must make as they establish their career is the type of agent representation they want. Wait a minute... You mean some writers actually get to choose their agent? Yes, agents do sometimes pursue writers – writers with hot movie credits or whose pending release has the industry abuzz. Though you're not in this position (not yet anyway) you still need to be discerning about agents so you can choose which agents you plan to pursue.

Two types of talent agencies represent film writers: literary agencies and packaging agencies. If you're an aspiring screenwriter who sends query letters to entice agents to read your original screenplays, it's important to target these queries as effectively as you can.

Literary versus Packaging: What's the Difference?

Literary agencies represent writers. They are sometimes referred to as 'boutique' agencies. Some literary agencies specialize in film and television writers. Others handle all kinds of writers: novelists, screenwriters, playwrights, animation writers, TV writers and nonfiction writers who specialize in biographies and historical books.

The literary agent's job is to promote and sell (or option) the writer's work to publishers or producers, negotiate the contracts for these sales, seek out and negotiate other writing assignments and oversee the marketing of subsidiary rights to these materials.

Some examples of well-known film and television literary agencies are: The Chasin Agency, Mitchel Hamilburg Agency, Shapiro-Lichtman Agency, Susan Smith and Associates.

Packaging agencies handle writers, but they also represent the other talent in the film or television 'package': directors, actors, and producers. They often charge the film or television studio a 'packaging fee' for delivering a production package consisting of script, star, director and possibly producer.

Some examples of major film and television packaging agencies are: Creative Artists Agency (CAA), The Endeavor Agency, The William Morris Agency, International Creative Management (ICM), Broder/Kurland/Webb/Uffner, Writers and Artists Agency and the Artists Management Group (Mike Ovitz).

Which one is better for you?

Writers must answer this question for themselves. Picture it this way: cast the literary agent as David and the packaging agent as Goliath. Which one would you want to put your money on? Some people will always bet on the giant, and many times they will be right. Others will take a chance on the little fella with the slingshot, and that can work out well too. Remember how the Bible story ends? Think of it this way: some people prefer to shop for exactly what they want at an exclusive boutique and others believe they will find exactly what they want by browsing at a shopping mall. There are advantages and drawbacks to each type of agency.

Advantages of packaging agencies:

- These agencies - if they are enthusiastic about you as a storyteller (and not just your project) - can be very helpful. They have access to the first class elements you need to transform your screenplay into a shooting script and then into a movie. These elements are: stars, directors, and hot producers.
- They can package your screenplay within the agency and set it up full-blown at a studio. This sometimes saves time, energy and heartache. Of course you need a packaging agent who is experienced, not some mailroom hotshot who's only been with

the agency for a few weeks.

Advantages of boutique (literary) agencies:

- The script can be the star of the package. They might try a little harder to keep you with the film longer - maybe all the way through shooting to the premiere.
- Literary agencies work harder to build the careers of their writers. It takes a lot of talent and effort to sell an unproduced writer. Some literary agents will even help clients polish their scripts or their story pitches.

Disadvantages of packagers:

- The script is (usually) the least powerful element of most film packages. The four vital elements of a film package are: star, director, producer and writer. The screenwriter provides the lowest prestige element of most film packages anyway, but this is particularly true within the packaging agency. This is not because the writer is less talented of course; it's related to the salary limitations. Harrison Ford made 24 million dollars for 22 days of shooting on his latest movie. Who is going to have his phone call returned first - you or Harrison?
- Packaging agencies have lots of highly paid, very experienced screenwriters already signed with them. Sometimes a studio will buy a film package because they know the agency will get one of their busy hotshot screenwriters to punch up the script. Where does that leave you?
- You might wait around forever in limbo till one of their signed actors or directors is available. They're more concerned with keeping their high rollers busy with back up assignments than with getting your career rolling.

Disadvantages of a boutique agency:

- It takes literary agencies a very long time to package an original script for two reasons. One, because their access to the other elements is not direct. Or, two, because there is a conflict of interest complicating the equation. For example, the literary agent might be pursuing a director who is signed with another agency, a packager like CAA. It's likely that CAA has their own script in-house they would like the director to sign onto.
- Sometimes the literary agents encourage you to sell or option the script to a powerful producer who has a current deal at a studio in order to muster clout. This producer uses his studio resources to package the movie. This can help propel the movie on the fast track, but it usually dilutes your power base as the writer.