

Query Letters: how to make them rock

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/query-letters-how-to-make-them-rock/>

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As I prepare for Book Fairs coming this year, I've been getting ready to send out a couple of queries. Stretching these particular writing muscles has reminded me just how difficult it is. In fact, it's much harder than writing a book. (Read: it hurts my eyes!)

First, a quick, "Hello!" to Barbara Farr Renner and her Arizona students. I hope you find this article helpful.

Getting query letters just right is only half the battle. You've got to know - *really know* - who should be getting them. Here's the scoop.

Artwork by Jonny Lindner.

This is what a strong query should do:

1. Address the agent by name.

Always. Find out [who should be seeing your query](#) at the company. This boils down to doing your homework. Don't query your fairytale to the agent or editor who is only interested in post-apocalyptic drama. *How* do you actually do that though? *It's easier than you might at first think, but it is time consuming.*

Hunt for The Right One

You hunt down an agency or publisher that you feel matches your interests. You read their website content and peruse the page About Us and/or Who We Are. These are the pages where you'll be able to find out who is actually working on that team.

If the website doesn't offer that kind of information at all, then chances are pretty good that you should pass. This usually happens when the company is too large and wouldn't be interested in someone who doesn't already have an established writing career.

Most companies are approachable and do let you know who they actually are. Those are the ones you want to approach... the approachable ones.

Most people who love to read and are in the publishing business in some way are happy to share what sorts of books they love. They actually TELL us what they like! It's great. If you have a fantasy novel to pitch but the agent is into "urban fantasy, not high fantasy," then this tells you right away whether you should send them your query - or not.

Most agents today ([here's my current working list for you](#)) have Twitter accounts and some even build a Wish List of books they'd love to get from writers. They post their list on Twitter. This is incredibly valuable information for writers! Use it.

Make sure you spell their name correctly! *Triple-check* it. You'd be downright amazed at how often people make mistakes with name spellings.

2. Get to the good stuff. Right away.

Don't start with an introduction of who you are and why you're writing and how nice you are. That's what you do when you meet someone in person - but not how to query.

Unless your query is a follow-up to having spoken with the person, you should most likely start with a

hook. Think about a great movie poster. There's always a tagline on it. You could start with that. (NOTE: Do not use a tagline generator program. While playing with these can be fun, they will not churn-out a usable tagline.)

3. Write Copy.

Think about what you typically find on the back cover of a book. I love reading copy (that's what you call the back cover pitch). It's a snappy, to-the-bones description of what the book is about. Write about your story in these terms. Short and sweet, just like the backside of a book.

Make sure your copy captures these four things:

- The tone of your story.
- The best possible explanation of the story set-up without giving away the ending.
- Express what sort of feelings the reader will get from this. You can get that from the copy of a book – your query has to do the exact same thing.
- Make it irresistible. Take care of [word choice](#) (be picky and specific and match the tone of your story, and also have perfect spelling and grammar).

4. Express why you've chosen that person to query.

There are several ways to do this, but one way is to mention the titles they've brought to the market and how they compare to your project. This shows the agent/editor that you're interested in what they do and that you're familiar with the market. If they haven't dealt with anything like your book (not even close?), then you might be querying the wrong person.

Did you see the agent or editor give a presentation or teach a webinar? You should mention that for sure. If you actually met them in person, don't keep that a secret!

5. Sell You.

There are a few ways you can briefly pitch your ability to make this book a success. This isn't where you brag about how fabulous your story is or explain how sure you are that it will be a big hit. **So how do you sell you? Try these things:**

- It's about Platforms, and I don't mean heels. If you don't have an active Blog or Twitter account, don't worry. Just skip this part. But if you *do* have a following, this translates to you being able to draw an audience; that makes you more attractive as a potential client. This can only be good for you.
- Any *active* membership you have with a writing organization or guild gives a sense of your dedication.
- If you've won awards for your writing, *only* mention that if it's for the *same kind of writing* you're currently pitching. But if you're pitching a [chapter book](#) about a teenaged werewolf detective, your first prize for best poetry has no relevance. Don't write about that.
- Do not mention your age, weight or how much your kids/mom/friends love the story. **DO NOT**

DO THIS.

6. Study successful query letters.

Just like any other kind of writing, you should learn from the best. It's easy enough to search online for successful query letters. Do that and study what recently published writers have done. Don't copy what they do; but study what they do and emulate that.

7. Study their Submissions Guidelines. Don't read them. *Study.*

Whether you're [contacting publishers directly](#) or approaching agents first, there are needs these people have and we as writers really need to respect that.

Some agents require a full manuscript with a query, especially for an illustrated storybook. There are many who want a writing sample with a query. However, some just want a basic query and nothing else.

Find out exactly what they want, and [then give them that](#).

Still not sure?

I've written more about the blow-by-blow structure of query letters I personally like to use. This has worked for me in the past, when I won my first agent. [To get the details of what I generally write, one paragraph at a time, go HERE.](#)

Having a difficult time with this? Let me know where your problems are. Write below, let me know - or, as ever, send me an email. I love getting those!

Keep creating, no matter what.

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