

The Query Letter That Works

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<http://greatstorybook.com/the-query-letter-that-works/>

I don't consider myself to be a query letter expert, but my queries do get results. So many people have asked me about writing a query letter that works, I decided to finally relent and tell you how I do it.

There are a lot of wrong ways to write a query letter.

If you want a literary agent, writing a query letter that works is what you need to do. Here's how.

If you're wondering, I am not currently represented by an agent. I did have one, but it didn't work out because I didn't know then what I know now. ([To find out what all I learned, go HERE.](#))

So I'm back in the saddle, searching for the right agent to represent me. It isn't easy. In fact, it sucks. This is the part of Being a Writer I really don't enjoy. But it has to be done.

When a Writer Needs an Agent

You will need a literary agent if you want a major publishing house to consider your work for publication. Unless you happen to have close personal ties to an [Acquisitions Editor](#), your work will not get any consideration if you don't have an agent. It's that simple.

You can of course pursue smaller publishers, indie presses and self publishing. [No reason you shouldn't.](#)

If you want your books to be available in multiple languages, to be on the shelves of bookstore chains and airport gift shops, to be performed on stage and filmed for the Big Screen, all of that is considerably easier if you have an agent.

[Still not sure what to decide? Check HERE.](#) This explains in more detail what an agent does.

The No Query Method

If you really want to get an agent, you need to be willing to go where they go. You must attend [book events](#) because that is where professionals in the book industry so often are.

[The best way to get an agent is to meet one in person](#) and talk to them about your work.

But that doesn't mean The Query Letter is outmoded entirely. In fact, it really *is* possible to get an agent by sending a query. That's how I landed my first agent. The thing to be aware of though is that if the agent is worth their salt at all, they probably get tons of queries each week.

That means one thing and one thing only... your query has to be amazing.

The Query Method

So you've got to write the most amazing query letter - EVER! How do you do that? Let's first go over every bit of what your query should include, and then down to finer details.

What You'll Get Here:

- 5 things you must do in a query.
- What each paragraph in your query should do.
- How to respond to agent rejections.
- How to respond to an agent's offer.

There are certain things your query has to do, always.

1. Label Clearly

Your subject line is actually very important. Every agent will tell you what their Submissions Guidelines are, and you should absolutely follow their guidelines to the letter.

(Trust me: I've swerved only slightly on a couple of queries, just to see what would happen. Well, nothing happened. So that flopped. Don't swerve, not even a smidge.)

When it comes to how you should label your email in the subject line, how that should be done is almost always explained in the Submissions Guidelines. If they aren't, here's what you should do:

Query: YOUR WORKING TITLE IN ALL CAPS

That's it. By doing this, the agent (or their assistant) knows in a glance that this is a query. It tells them right away that you are looking for their representation.

The reason I bring this up? By labeling your email query so clearly like this, you will not need to spend a sentence or two asking for their representation. They will know what you hope and want. You don't need to spell it out – because you already did that.

2. Personalize

Always know the actual name of the agent, address your email (or letter) to that individual personally and spell their friggin' name right. This last bit about spelling has to be mentioned only because so many writers don't spellcheck proper pronouns.

You've got to double-check the name! To be fair, some writers are probably using an auto-correcting spellcheck program, and it could well be falsely correcting the name (most dictionaries include certain proper pronouns, especially when someone of historical significance has that name).

So be sure about what ends-up in your email greeting.

3. Don't Go Long

Your query should never be longer than a page. Never. If you can't get it done in a page, get an editor to help you.

4. Personalization PROOF

You've got to have a paragraph explaining why you chose that agent in particular. Why not someone else at the same firm, or at another firm? **If you don't know the answer to that question, you must go and find out.**

You really need to know the answer to that question. It's probably the most important question you'll ever ask yourself when you're in the query process.

Otherwise, you are potentially wasting your time, and theirs.

Remember: you only get one literary agent. You can't have more. Not at the same time, at any rate. So be sure to do the hard work of really, seriously researching the agents you're considering BEFORE you draft a query letter to any one of them.

About Multiple Queries: If you really want to shoot yourself in the foot, do that. If you want to get an agent, send one query letter at a time. (Otherwise, how can you possibly address the agent personally?) You can query perhaps 8-10 agents at a time, but NEVER just send out a blast email to the entire list. Take the time to do it right.

5. Jump Right In

When you query an agent, they will know right from the beginning that it is a query *because of your subject line*. (See above: Label Clearly.)

So you get to just jump right in and explain what your story is about. Keep it short. Remember that you should be able to summarize your story (no matter the length) in a sentence or two. In a query letter, you have a smidge more space than that. You get two short paragraphs.

What Each Paragraph Should Do

You only have a page of space, so we're talking about 5-6 paragraphs.

Paragraph 1: the story's hook & protagonist

The first paragraph is about the hook of your story and your protagonist. If you can, do **not** mention the title of the book here. Why? The title doesn't matter to your protagonist at all; it's just the marketing angle. Your first paragraph is about the story. That's what really matters.

You have to remember too that your title might get changed prior to publication. Many great authors don't really know how to come up with solid titles. Agents and editors help with that, and ultimately, it's up to the publisher.

So save the title for the third paragraph of your query. (I'll get to that, below.)

Paragraph 2: the story's challenge

The second paragraph is about the end of your story. If the first paragraph is your hook and introduction to the main character, your second paragraph is about what Important Thing the protagonist has to face.

This is the personal challenge, the fork in the road – and ultimately, the reason we're reading the story.

Note About Names: I recommend only mentioning the name of the protagonist and otherwise describing all other characters by what they are (examples: best friend, pet dolphin, evil twin, etc.).

Paragraph 3: nuts & bolts

This is your nuts and bolts paragraph, and so it's the one where you mention the working title of your book.

NOTE: Only mention the title *once* in the body of your query. You want to use as few words as possible, so that means *no repeating*.

This paragraph is where you list:

- the word count (yes, [you really must know this](#)),
- the title (IN ALL CAPS, and without quotes, underlining or bold print),
- what kind of book it is (example: a [MG novel](#), an [illustrated storybook](#), a [chapter book](#), etc.),
- mention [the genre](#) (example: urban fantasy, fable, etc.),
- and potentially include a single sentence description of the story (sort of like copy).

Paragraph 4: why this agent

This is where I like to explain why I chose to pursue that particular agent. You can place this paragraph right at the beginning of your query if you feel more comfortable with that. It's entirely a matter of taste.

For me, why I get to the story first – I'm a bit shy. I feel like my story is the more interesting thing about my query, so that's what leads. I then take the time to sort of introduce myself in the fourth paragraph,

where I explain why I chose them.

Paragraph 5: parts included

Where you explain what-is-requested because the agent asked for it this way – that’s the type of information you want to write here. It’s seldom more than a sentence or two, simply explaining:

- what you’ve attached (if that’s what they want),
- what you’ve cut-and-pasted below your signature (if that’s what they want),
- and what link you’ve provided so they can view your artwork or download your file (if that’s what they want).

Paragraph 6 (optional): bragging rights

Many writers do this and get results. I don’t like to do it, so I don’t. This is the paragraph where you toot your own horn. You talk about how great you are and why the agent should want you as a client.

I don’t like to do this because it’s my feeling that my query should stand on its own, not on the merits of my past. If my query is sharp enough to get their attention, they’ll read my manuscript or chapter samples. If that’s good enough, they’ll Google me and find out my credentials before phoning me.

That isn’t to say you shouldn’t do it. But if you don’t have any writing credentials to speak of, know right now that it doesn’t matter.

What you should never do is mention how much your reading group loves the story. This will kill your chances of being taken seriously. Death. Actually, more like this: deaththththth.

You can mention awards, but only if the awards you’ve won are somehow related to what you’re sending for consideration. It doesn’t have to be a writing award, just an award that is related to your query materials.

The Closing

You should always close your query with something that sounds like you. I personally hate using “Sincerely,” so I never use it. Why? I’m always sincere; it’s a given.

Whatever you use, make it yours and don’t forget the comma at the end. In English, you must have a comma after your greeting and your closing.

It’s never, “Best regards” or “Best regards.” It has to have a comma, like this: **Best regards,** and then on the next line, your name.

In your signature, you should include your best phone number, your personal address and your email address (it doesn’t matter that they have it, this is a matter of form and formality).

Don't Forget

- Always draft your query in a document. Don't ever draft it directly in your email form.
- Keep track of all your queries. Don't delete any of them and make note of how long you've waited to hear back from an agent. If they ask for 6 weeks, give them 6 weeks to respond.
- If you don't get any response from an agent, then consider that a rejection. But don't feel like you shouldn't send them something else. Don't give up.
- If you get a personal rejection from an agent, that's a good sign. It means your query has warranted a response.
- If you get an offer from an agent (HURRAY!), ask for a couple of weeks to consider.
 - Have a literary or media attorney review your contract before you sign.
 - Also, if you're still waiting to hear back from other agents about the same manuscript, contact them. Let them know you have an offer on the table and that they have a couple of weeks to make a counter-offer.

Keep Going

Writing takes time and energy. Landing an agent takes painful, horrid, tooth-decaying effort. But don't give up. Just keep at it.

Send out a new batch of queries every 3 months. That way, you won't go insane querying too often and you'll also know you've given your latest batch of agents plenty of time to weed through their Inbox.

If you query 8-10 agents about a manuscript and they all turn it down, that means you should look closer at your query letter, but also that you need to reconsider your story. Maybe it isn't ready for the market.

Do your re-writes and try again with a new list.

Can you or should you resubmit the same manuscript to an agent? Well, no. Not the same manuscript, at any rate. If you send a manuscript and they reject it, you should only send that project to them again if you've made some drastic improvements (read: re-writes, not just an edit).

Keep creating, no matter what.
