**How to Write a Query Letter: Follow No Formulas**

Now that you’ve finished writing your manuscript, have worked with an editor, and made revisions, it’s time to think about the all-important query letter. You’ve probably read online articles and blogs giving you the rules and suggested structure along with advice about how to craft it. There’s a reason so much advice exists. This letter should not be taken lightly; instead, it requires taking any time necessary to get your query letter the best it can be.

But should you use an accepted formula?

**First Things First: What is a query letter and why does it warrant your time and attention?**

Think of a query letter as an introduction to you as an author. At its core, it’s a first look at your writing ability. Along with that, it’s an opportunity to sell your manuscript.

Often editing clients ask me if I’ll craft their queries, and I explain that I’ll give input, but the query serves as an agent’s or acquisitions editor’s first impression of your writing. Therefore, it should be written only by you. It’s a commonly known fact that no two people will write the same thing the same way, even in something as short as a paragraph, so it makes no sense to interest the reader with someone else’s writing and not your own.

The query letter is also a sales letter. You’ll probably end up querying both agents and editors at publishing houses, and your ultimate goal is for your book to go under contract, right? Therefore, it’s your job to entice those who make decisions to request a partial or full manuscript. It helped me a great deal when I learned to look at the letter through the lens of a buyer. Make it so compelling that readers are “hooked”, so to speak, by the words you’ve put in this vital introduction to your book.

**Query Letter Format: Make it Original**

The accepted advice about rules and structure can be helpful, and you do have to include the essential information, such as the word count, genre, and book description, but my feeling overall is that query letters should follow no set-in-stone rules. Therefore, resist the urge to follow the formulas exactly and instead figure out what works best to showcase you as a writer and the book you’ve written.

I give input on query letters all the time, and what I’ve seen is that even a very creative author has adapted sample query letters and simply filled in their own information. Many of them read very similar to all the others. You might be tempted to use a template, too. But people in the publishing world will recognize the template or sample right away. Therefore, read samples if you like. You might run across a structure you can adapt for yourself, but resist the urge to simply paraphrase a query letter to fit your manuscript. Read examples for inspiration but not with an eye to emulate.

**Query Letters Samples: Resist the Urge**

As already said, the query letter is a chance to attract an agent’s or acquisition editor’s interest in your writing. And all the editors and agents I know say that the main things they look for is originality. They are looking for fresh and creative writing. So demonstrate your originality by crafting your letter in a way that isn’t already seen in sample letters that thousands of other authors have likely studied and used as an example. Above all, writing is a creative endeavor, so why use a rigid structure and follow set rules when you could be showing that you and your book are unusual? Go for your own structure, show off your own voice and style, and by all means, highlight your creativity by making your letter one of a kind.

Something you might not know is that, today, many of the larger publishing houses and agencies employ readers, who look at your letter first and then decide if it warrants being passed on to the agent or editor. They receive piles of letters every day, so yours has to rise out of the stacks. Of course you have to describe the book and say something about yourself, but an original approach is at least sure to be noticed.

**The Opening Line**

Now that I’ve cautioned you against following all the advice out there, further suggestions from me might seem contrary to that. But many authors are at a loss when they think about query letters. You might have spent years getting your manuscript in shape. You’re rewritten and revised and perhaps restructured and labored over every aspect, so it can be daunting to boil you and your book down to one letter. I understand this, so I’m going to share some suggestions that might help you start. I hope these ideas will spark others of your own.

Think about starting the letter with a catchy first line. If you’ve written an intriguing/interesting opening line to your manuscript, you might want to use it as the first line in your query letter, too. I might even venture to say that the opening line in your query letter is as important as the opening line in your manuscript.

An example of an amazing first line comes from *After Life* by Rhian Ellis. She starts the novel this way: *First, I had to get his body in the boat*. A line as powerful as this will garner attention at the onset of the letter, too. You can be minimalistic and start with one sentence, simply stated, then go on to say something along the lines of “And so my story begins”. Another option would be to start with your opening paragraph or one you feel demonstrates your skills with the written word. It could come from any part of the book.

Other ways to open include a brief introduction to the time period if your novel is historical, a brief intro to the world you’ve created if your novel is science fiction, or one line of vivid description if you have written an unusual protagonist who drives the novel. Or you can simply set the mood. Here are a few examples of how you might do this:

*Berlin, 1945, three days before the death of Adolf Hitler.*

*Planet D-145-20. An unforgiving stretch of red rocks and rises, the land barren and utterly still.*

*Some say he was the largest baby ever born in Savannah, Tennessee, pushed out into the world at 12 pounds, 11 ounces.*

*Gary Sanderson. 26.8 years old. Tall and lean as a lizard. Hair so red and unruly it looks alive.*

**Book Description**

Next, you’ll probably want to launch into the longer description of your book. First and foremost, avoid anything that resembles a synopsis. A query letter is not a summarization of your story; instead, it should inspire the reader to learn more about it.

Next, make every word count. Don’t blandly describe the plot (e.g. “Lucy finds her way again through the love of a horse”), and choose words and phrases that are more descriptive (e.g. “On the back of a horse flying over fields and farmlands, beautiful and shy Lucy learns what it means to love”).

Make sure each and every line brings an image, tone, or character to life. If possible, do them all. Utilize the setting and time period. If you’ve created a new and/or unusual world, society, historical event, etc., be sure to highlight those in your query letter. Keep away from categorizing your book by saying it’s a classic, it’s futuristic, it’s a love story, etc. If you’ve chosen your words carefully, the reader will get this from your description.

Along the same lines, steer clear of a series of sentences that, in essence, say, *This happens, then that happens.* Instead, sit back and think about what makes your book different. Why would it stand out among others? Why is it special, and why does this story need to be told? What am I trying to say?

Think thematically and utilize brief but powerful descriptions that create visual images in the reader’s mind’s eye. Emphasize the most extraordinary things about your story and leave out the ordinary. Think of the high point(s) and emphasize what happens then. Here are some examples that might inspire you to come up with your own:

*Unlike every other kid in sixth-grade Social Studies, Brett actually enjoys the subject matter, so when he’s offered a journey of discovery through the most remote cultural regions on the planet, he jumps onboard.*

*The Chedester family didn’t set out to reinvent themselves. Instead, they had planned to remain anonymous, no more noticeable than the breath of the wind.*

And finally by all means, never give away the ending. In a synopsis, you almost have to, but a query letter should leave the reader in a state of suspense and anticipation in terms of how the story unfolds. It should not give everything away.

A word about synopses: I find them inherently boring. Detailed summaries are often not memorable, and you’re supposed to include the ending. Therefore, there will be few surprises when the reader opens the book and begins the journey. When I was querying agents and publishers, I rarely included a synopsis, even if one was requested. In this manner, I did break the rules. I considered my query letter as something of a synopsis (although it isn’t) and just left it out. If your query letter is well done, perhaps you can get away with never revealing everything in a synopsis. I never did.

**Other Books**

You’re probably familiar with this device: mentioning a book that either the agent you’re querying has represented or that an editor has published. Often, you’re told to compare your book by calling it a “modern take on *such and such*” or it “explores similar themes as *such and such*.” While these comparisons may resonate with some agents and editors, nothing is as telling as the actual words you’ve written.

I’m not against the comparisons, but if you’re going to mention other books, make sure you’ve read them and know them well. Rest assured that you can discuss the other book in detail if needed. You never know when you might get a phone call and have to explain the comparison, so don’t be caught holding an empty bag.

**Author Bio**

The decision-makers at agencies and publishing houses want to know you somewhat, but again, the book and the writing matter are foremost. If you have a relevant lineage or history, have had an unusual career, or have lived somewhere little-known that relates to the book, however, mention those things. And of course, any publishing credits should be listed.

But the bio should be kept short. No one will be interested in everything you’ve done in your life or schools you’ve attending or positions you’ve held, unless it correlates directly to your novel. Keep your bio straightforward and concise while also including anything that will make you stand out above others.

In addition, resist including commentary from others about your book or praising the work yourself. It’s really all about the writing and how it strikes agents and publishers. It really is.

**Professionalism**

Present you and your book in the most professional manner by following submission requests exactly. Now this *is* a time to follow rules. Agents and editors are exasperated when writers don’t follow their submission guidelines, so always take the approach they prefer.

When querying agents in particular, make sure your information is current. Double check names and email addresses before sending. Agents tend to move around a lot, so go online to find the latest means to contact. And of course, keep accurate records including the agent or publisher, email address, and date when you sent the letter.

Finally, avoid anything gimmicky, such as delivering your manuscript or query letter by a messenger holding pink balloons, for example, for a children’s book aimed at girls. As most query letters are sent by email now, you don’t get a chance to make the mistake of using colored paper or borders with curlicues, but you can still come across as unprofessional if you use a fancy font and/or unusual size font, illustrations (unless it’s a picture book), or reviews/statements from other people.

Bottom line: Impress the people who read your letter with the content, with your talent as an author, and not by an unusual delivery method or presentation.

**How Long Should a Query Letter be?**

When query letters were sent via snail mail, advice was to keep your query letter no longer than one page. I agree that shorter is sweeter, but if your letter prints out as more than one page, don’t stress about it. Trim if you can, but if you need a second page to get what you want across, then ignore the old rule. I wouldn’t go over two to three pages, however.

**Examples**

I’ve advised against following the lead of others’ query letters, so instead of giving you another template or example, I’ll throw out some things that might help you come up with your own unusual approach. At the beginning of my writing career, I spent many hours crafting a query that I hoped would rise above. When I was going for my first children’s book deal with a major publisher, I wanted to highlight the story, because I had few publishing credits at the time. Therefore, I opened the letter this way:

Imagine yourself a child of the sea taken from the ocean shore and relocated to the epitome of desolation: the plains of eastern Colorado. In this strange new environment, you face the moral dilemma of your life, and the decision you make deeply affects yourself and the ones you most love. You’re eleven years old, your name is Laney, and this summer you will learn, love, grow and discover more than ever before. You will uncover a truth: character overcomes adversity.

The prairie of eastern Colorado is the setting for my 20,000-word, middle grade novel, *Call Me the Sea.* Despite Laney’s love of the sea, her family desires a slower, rural lifestyle. From her bedroom window, Laney now peers at an ocean of prairie. While confronting family conflicts and learning to adapt to a new lifestyle, she also makes a most unlikely new friend and begins to find her own identity amidst a herd of gentle, shaggy, humming animals.

When I went in search of an agent for my first adult novel, I decided to open with my publishing credits and awards, because by then, I had credits and I wanted an agent to see my potential as an author of adult novels. My opening paragraphs went as such:

I am an award-winning, young adult novelist seeking representation for my first novel aimed at an adult audience, *Dust of the Butterfly*. In addition to short stories, my publishing credits include a young adult historical novel, *Water at the Blue Earth*, (Roberts Rinehart) winner of the Colorado Book Award, and *A Ceiling of Stars,* (American Girl) winner of the Pleasant T. Rowland Award for Fiction for Girls. A third novel for young adults is under contract now.

*Dust of the Butterfly* is a story of love between a simple man and a complex woman. In 1944, Livvy Dale, a twenty-four-year-old co-ed in graduate study, has plotted the course of her life and despite the war, is marching toward her goals. But a mistake—a single night’s mistake—changes everything. Torn between her dreams and the morality of World War Two America, she agrees to marry a potato farmer and begins a future far different from what she would have chosen. Against the backdrop of eastern Colorado’s farmlands, Livvy’s search for acceptance and love leads her to a friendship outside the traditional community with two Japanese-American women interned at Camp Amache. As their relationship develops, Livvy unknowingly becomes ensnared in the plot to assist in a German POW escape from nearby Camp Trinidad. Inspired by actual events, the escape and its aftermath test Livvy’s strengths, force her to come to terms with her past, and ultimately determine her capacity to love.

These are by no means perfect approaches, but the first letter resulted in a children’s book contract with a major publisher, and the other resulted in representation by a literary agent in New York. Today I would write them differently with more emphasis on the unusual, but at the time, they did the trick for me. By the way, *Call Me the Sea* became *Nowhere, Now Here*, and *Dust of the Butterfly* became *The Magic of Ordinary Days.*

**Conclusion**

I’ll end here with a cliché but one that holds true in this situation.  *You have only one chance to make a first impression.* So, try different approaches and structures, mix things up, rewrite and then rewrite again. Get input from other authors and readers before you submit. Triple check for any errors in spelling and grammar. No manuscripts are perfect, but try to make you query letter perfect. Typos and errors can take away from your writing. Keep at it until you’re satisfied, and don’t rush the process—take the time you need to make your query letter rise above.

I wish you the best of luck with your writing goals. If you need assistance with your manuscript, consider contracting with one of our freelance editors, who will most likely share his or her take on your query letter, too.