

WRITING AN IRRESISTIBLE QUERY

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Jennifer D. Foster

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Crafting a query with the perfect mix of clarity, impact, and intrigue—so desired by agents, editors, and publishers—to showcase your novel or short story may seem like an intimidating, insurmountable task. Sigh not. Eight expert insider tips and success techniques from these agents, authors, editors, educators, and publishers will have you writing your best query yet.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Visit a bricks-and-mortar book shop to see what’s selling. “Your idea shouldn’t copy what’s already out there, but going to a bookstore will help you determine what is working and whether or not your manuscript is marketable,” says Jennifer MacKinnon, an editor at Scholastic Canada Ltd. in Toronto. Read up on how to write queries, take a workshop, and research—ad nauseum—to qualify the right agents, editors, or publishers for you.

“You should know the deal history of the agents you approach, and why you want to work with a particular person,” imparts Sam Hiyate, a Toronto literary agent and founder of The Rights Factory. “Finding an agent is like dating; you want someone with the right chemistry.” Check out books’ acknowledgment pages, then target specific editors or agents who’ve worked on books similar to yours, to make an educated submission and “greatly reduce your rejection rate,” emphasizes Helen Zimmermann, president of Zimmermann Literary in New York. According to Crissy Boylan, managing editor at Toronto’s ECW Press, “The author-publisher relationship is so much about making a perfect match, and the query letter is your chance to make a great first impression.” And, adds Zimmermann, “always pay particular attention to each agent’s submission guidelines and follow them to a T.”

OWN YOUR QUERY, BUT ... Your query is *the* opportunity to impress and cover all the bases. “It’s the very first introduction to your writing style, so it’s pretty important to put your best

words and style out there from the beginning,” emphasizes Tonya Martin, publisher and editor-in-chief of McKellar & Martin Publishing Group, Ltd. in Vancouver. Inherent in a great query is “a well-crafted prose style and a sense of the writer’s ambition, discipline, and personality,” says Hiyate. Gráinne Fox, a literary agent with Fletcher & Company in New York, agrees: “Who you are should come across in how you write about your book.” But, she warns, “please don’t tell me it’s brilliant and will be a surefire bestseller. Part of the real trick of a writing life is not only to have confidence in what you are doing creatively, but also to practice humility.” Boylan concurs: “While it’s great to be confident in describing your work, saying a book is the ‘best ever’ or unlike anything ever before written in the history of mankind makes the reader wary you’re making grand claims you won’t be able to live up to.”

Kevin Smoker, San Francisco-based blogger and author of *Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven’t Touched Since High School*, adds: “Don’t praise yourself. It’s juvenile and sends the message you don’t trust the judgment of the person you’re querying.” Taking ownership also means that “you need to convince the reader why you’re *the* person, why no one else in the world could possibly write this book,” says Lynn Wiese Sneyd, owner of LWS Literary Services in Tuscon, Arizona, and author of *Holistic Parenting and Healthy Solutions*.

COME OUT SWINGING. “Always begin with your biggest strength. If it’s your characters, tell me about them. If it’s the plot, start there. If your bio stands out, start by talking about yourself,” says Zimmermann. Best-selling New Jersey-based author Lisa Collier Cool calls this the “powerhouse lead paragraph.” Collier Cool, who’s authored *How to Write Irresistible Query Letters* and co-authored *Beat the Heart Attack Gene*, stresses effective queries have a “tantalizing summary of the book and a compelling reason why readers will want to read about the topic, such as telling the query reader something she doesn’t already know.” And that’s what Wiese Sneyd refers to as the “great hook: the first sentence and paragraph that stand out and convince the agent or editor to continue reading.”

“The most important part of the letter is describing your book effectively,” ensures Cynthia Good, director of the Creative Book Publishing program at Toronto’s Humber College and former president of Penguin Canada. Katharine Sands, a literary agent with the New York-based Sarah Jane Freymann Literary Agency and author of *Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch a Literary Agent’s Eye*, expands on this: “If the writing is capable yet safe, intelligent yet stilted, I simply say, ‘I’m *outta here*.’ I have to be.” Sands is “hoping to have an *aha* moment of discovery. The hook can be the writing itself and it can be one sentence or one moment. I love to see a ‘rope-trick.’ A writer shows me writing chops with a sentence that jumps out at me. It could be that the use of language is lovely or bold, unexpected in some way.

Or there might be a well-constructed moment of observation, humor, or conflict. But one moment, one well-wrought sentence speaks volumes. And it makes me want to see more.”

And, says Wiese Sneyd, “a good title also helps.” While it may not be the final one, a title that connects to the book’s content shows you’re serious. Wiese Sneyd also says, “Delineating the market for the book is important.” Why? Because, while reading your query, “some of the first questions a publisher, agent, or editor will ask are, ‘Who is going to read this book? And how is it going to be positioned in the marketplace?’” Adds MacKinnon: “Tell me why you think your book is right for us, and why it will sell. However, be succinct. We look at these very quickly, so I want to see the highlights, not an in-depth analysis of the market.”

INCLUDE COMPARABLES. Comparing your novel or short story to another author’s work helps the query reader gain an immediate understanding of its genre. “It helps me think we share the same sensibility,” clarifies Fox. Hiyate agrees: “I recently used the example of ‘*Twilight* meets Murakami’ to pitch something myself. If someone else had used such comps, I would have asked to see the manuscript.” Zimmermann also applauds the use of comps. “Be familiar with other books in your genre and compare your project to others, as appropriate. That’s a great way to really nail your audience.”

But, cautions Fox, “don’t get wrapped up in ludicrous comparisons, such as *Sophie’s Choice* meets *Twilight* meets *Gone Girl*. There’s a fine line between the author using comparable titles that can be illuminating and just going off on a tangent, trying to be all things to all people.” Adds Martin: “Inadvertently compare yourself to a literary genius when *genius* may not *yet* describe your work, and the outcome probably won’t be great.”

ENSURE ERROR-FREE COPY. Sloppy, error-laden text spells probable disaster. The query must be unhindered by grammatical and spelling errors for it to stand a chance. Be sure to “have people whose opinions you trust read and critique it” before submitting, recommends Boylan. And having a professional (copy) editor eyeball the final version is wise, but only after “you’ve polished it and tested it out through several revisions,” recommends Hiyate. Translation? “You should feel like you’re Don Draper trying out a pitch, and present it to qualified agents only when it’s perfect,” he urges.

MacKinnon agrees, advising to “be professional and think of this as a cover letter for a job. You wouldn’t send a letter off to a prospective employer without having it carefully proofread, and you wouldn’t give out personal details, either.” Stresses MacKinnon: “The editor/agent wants to know you take this seriously.” Personalizing your query is an additional way to ensure blunder-free text. It’s no secret agents and editors abhor “feeling that the query might be spam sent to a zillion people,” states Hiyate. “Don’t start with ‘Dear Agent,’” warns Zimmermann. This form of misaddressing is what Sands refers to as a “querial killer.” However, stresses Good, don’t confuse personalizing with “attempting to be overly familiar with the query reader.” Finding a balance between a professional and personal tone is key.

SECURE A PLATFORM. Clarifying who are you and how you can help market your work is crucial. “Make sure you don’t ignore your qualifications,” stresses Good, “whether it’s writing credits or your connection to the material. And it’s important to have some kind of marketing hook, some reason your book would sell or some audience you know you could target.” But “ditch the hard sell,” warns Martin. Demanding, “You have to publish this book! It will make you money and be a super-bestseller!” is an absolute no-no, she stresses, as is “predicting your sales volume.”

So, what’s a platform, exactly? People with whom the author already has a connection. “Maybe it’s through Facebook or blog followers, or maybe the author is already giving talks or doing radio shows or has a newspaper column,” states Wiese Sneyd. “Having a good platform is like having a ready-made audience when your book comes out.” Boylan explains further: “It’s important to see an author is committed to working past the publication date by being involved in promotional efforts. Are you involved in the community [that is] connected to your book’s topic or genre? Do you have an online presence? As much as a publisher can and will work with the author to find the audience for his or her book, the author, as expert, is almost always the best point of contact for a community of readers, and when we see in a pitch letter that the writer understands his/her role in this process, it’s very encouraging.” Yet, while publishers often prefer to work with authors with established platforms or a publishing history,” if you haven’t had much experience, that’s okay, too. Just be honest. It gives a true sense of the writer if I know you’ve been working a night-time security job, but writing a crime novel in the daylight hours,” says Fox.

EMBRACE BREVITY. Tell the reader what the book’s about. As Sands says, “Ask yourself: ‘Have you taken me in, introduced a character, and shown me why I want to spend time in this world?’”). But keep the query brief. How brief? “It’s not easy to reduce the entire contents of your book into two sentences, but it’s necessary,” says Boylan. “Try out your short pitch on friends or relatives; if they get it instantly, the editor/agent receiving your query probably will, too.”

Martin agrees: “The first sentence of a query letter is usually the time you have to make your case. Not unlike the first sentence of your manuscript.” Fox believes, “If you have to explain it too much or fill in your note with caveats, then you’ll need to redraft it.” The rest of your query must include why you’re *the* person to write it, who the audience is, and how you’re going to market it (think platform). And Zimmerman advises to do it all in just three paragraphs. Why? “Since we’re reading so very many, seeing a L-O-N-G query is just daunting.” Good says a single-spaced page is best, as does Martin. Her reason? “We’re often reading information on our phones these days, and this fact should become a careful consideration when submitting.” And never send one query for multiple projects.

PERSEVERE. If the first—or fifteenth—agent or editor rejects your novel or short story, don't give up. "If an agent just simply doesn't *get* your book, that's okay. She or he isn't the right person for you, so move on," says Fox. "If your query is rejected, dust yourself off and send it out again the same day. Keep trying until you've either made a sale, exhausted every possible market, or your topic has become outdated," encourages Collier Cool. Martin advises to "love what you do. *Know*, intrinsically, that you love what you do. This love and knowledge of the craft will be apparent in your letter and your manuscript." Strengthen your perseverance by joining a writers' group or professional writer's organization. "The insight and connections from your peers can be very helpful," says MacKinnon. She also proposes "following a few authors, agents, and reviewers you admire; they often give great tips on writing and getting published." And don't discount the many good book publishing blogs and digital magazines that allow you to stay current for free.

Still struggling with your query? Perhaps the most succinct advice for avoiding the dreaded slush pile belongs to Sands: "Show, don't tell. You want to use the pitch to deliver enough of the flavor of the book to whet the reader's appetite for more." As she says in *Making the Perfect Pitch*, "Publishing begins with a pitch. ... [Pitching with aplomb is] about finding the right words and the right people to read them."

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Jennifer D. Foster is a freelance writer, editor, and aspiring novelist, and her company is Planet Word. She lives in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, with her husband and their tween son. She's been freelancing since 2003 and has been "in the biz" for seventeen years. Her clients are from the book publishing, magazine, newspaper, corporate communication, and arts and culture fields and include the Art Gallery of Ontario, The Globe and Mail, James Lorimer & Company, Ltd., Quill & Quire, and Canadian House & Home. Jennifer has two university degrees, including a bachelor of applied arts in journalism from Ryerson University. She is an adult English literacy tutor and an avid traveler and gardener who loves dogs, Japan, pumpkin pie, Scrabble, and boules. She is a longtime member of the Professional Writers Association of Canada and the Editors' Association of Canada and can be reached via her website, lifeonplanetword.wordpress.com or her LinkedIn profile.
