

Writing a Pitch Perfect Query Letter

by Shelley Adina

Once you've completed your manuscript, gone out to a celebratory dinner, told all your writing friends, and bought a new handbag (oops, sorry, that was me) ... it's time to get down to the serious business of finding a home for your work. And unless you've wowed an editor or agent at a personal meeting (regional conferences are great for this), often the first step toward your goal of publication is writing a query letter.

The query is an art form. It's an intro, a first look at you and your work. It may be the only time you get a busy professional's attention—for a few seconds. So it has to do a lot of work in those seconds. Here's how you do it.

A query letter has four parts:

1. The intro
2. The story (i.e., the back-cover blurb)
3. Your credentials
4. Call to action

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well, here's the truth—it is! You're going to talk about the two things you know more about than anyone else in the universe: yourself and your book. You already know everything that has to go into the query. All you need is some structure. So let's get started.

The Intro

Here's where you jump right in and tell the agent or editor who you are and what you have to offer. If you've met the person or enjoyed a workshop they've presented, that's a good way to start. If you read their blog, even better. And if you're a fan of the books their house publishes and it's been a lifelong dream to write for them, well, that's good too. Just don't gush. Write the query in your natural voice—which happens to reflect the voice of your manuscript. Your voice is your brand, so even a business letter or email should reflect it.

Dear Ms. Editor,

I've been a longtime reader of the big, five-hankie romances Contemporary House publishes, especially the recent Mothers in Jeopardy series. I have completed an 80,000-word manuscript entitled *Grounds to Believe* that I believe will be a good fit for your program.

Simple, easy to remember. This also shows you've done your research, read their guidelines, and know how long a book Contemporary House is looking for.

The story

Here's where you condense your 80,000-word manuscript into a short, grabby paragraph or two. I know—it's like stuffing a galaxy into a black hole. But it has to be done. Agent Kristin Nelson has good advice for writing this part: Focus on the characters, the conflict, and the incident that gets the whole story rolling.

Julia McNeill has grown up in a strict, right-wing religious sect where she has been taught that the world is evil, everyone but her church is deceived, and the only safety is found inside the rigid boundaries of her community. She believes ... until the children begin to die. After the third victim is found, local police call in state investigator Ross Malcolm, who works undercover to infiltrate cultic groups to find evidence of crime. Ross targets the unsuspecting Julia as his informant. He must unmask the evil living in this supposedly safe community and stop it before another child becomes a victim—and before his unexpected passion for Julia endangers them both.

Forbidden love, endangered children, a cop hero ... what's not to like? Okay, now that you've done the heavy lifting, the next paragraph is easy.

“The query letter is an art form.” — Shelley Adina

Your credentials

Now you get to talk about ... you! What were your credentials for writing your story? Are you an ER doc and it's set in a big-city hospital? Are you a marketing manager writing with an own-voices flair? Do you have a math degree and your heroine teaches college algebra? Put that in this paragraph.

But wait, you say. I'm a stay-at-home mom in Nanaimo writing about a globetrotting, stiletto-wearing, single-mom spy! I do all my research on the net in my pajamas and would have to be forced into high heels at gunpoint! What then? Well, are you a member of RWA? Do you read five books a week while the kids are napping? Do you post reviews of those books on Amazon? Uh-huh. See, you can put that kind of thing in this paragraph, too. What about the two contest wins your manuscript bagged last fall? Absolutely. In they go.

I spent eight years working for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, so my “insider knowledge” brings realistic investigative detail to the suspense of the story. I have an MFA in fiction, and am published in short fiction. *Grounds to Believe* won the grand prize in the Lagniappe for Literacy national fiction contest, and also took first place in the San Francisco Area Romance Writers of America® “Heart to Heart” contest.

Call to action

One more paragraph to go. In the final paragraph of your query, all you want is a graceful close and a call to action.

I'm convinced *Grounds to Believe* is a good fit for your program because, while Julia is a believer, she is blind to the real meaning of love. Her learning process is entwined with the romance as she comes to love the forbidden outsider who shows her what can be possible if she has the courage. I look forward to hearing from you, and hope you will be interested in reading the manuscript.

Okay, confession time: The sample query I've been using is a real one, except for the first paragraph. The editor responded in six days flat asking for the complete manuscript. She bought it eight weeks later. [Grounds to Believe](#) went on to win the RITA Award for Best Inspirational Romance.

It all began with four little paragraphs. A good query letter is worth its weight in advance cheques. All it takes is some thought, some structure, and an editor or agent who is looking for exactly what you have to offer. It could be the start of something big.



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