

Querying Executives 101

Every screenwriter dreams of the day their script gets optioned or sold. In order for that to happen, you need to master the art of querying.

What is a Query Letter?

A query letter is usually a one page letter or email that you send out to agents, managers, and producers, etc. to try and entice them to read your script.

What is a Logline?

A logline is usually the first thing in a query letter and is the most vital piece of the message. It is usually 1 or 2 sentences long.

In today's world of technology, are query letters still relevant?

It's important to first understand this aspect of the process in order to better write the query, and better your chances of a response. And as with everything else, it all depends on who you're sending it to, and what your goal is.

First, are they still relevant and do people still read them? Absolutely. If you send them to the right types of people. Let me give you an example: if you email a query letter to a Steven Spielberg, it's more than likely not getting past the assistant or intern, who upon seeing the email, will more than likely delete it without reading. High-powered industry players get thousands upon thousands of these emails every year, and if they stopped to read any of them, they wouldn't be able to do the actual work that makes them the megabucks. So while we won't say "don't bother sending it to high-powered industry players," just know that it's an incredibly tiny chance they'll even read it. For every story about Brett Ratner mailing a letter to Steven Spielberg to help finance his student film, there are thousands of other stories of people who never even got their mail/email read. Remember this snail mail trick for later though - we're going to get into that in a bit.

Who do I send my query letters to?

It's important to target these specific groups with your first wave of queries (in order of importance):

- 1. Literary Managers** - In general, literary managers are always looking for the Next Big Screenwriter. While high-powered managers have their plates full with clients and producing projects, you can bet the assistants and interns reading their mail/email are still reading at least a few of those query letters coming in.

2. Targeted Players - If you wrote a stoner comedy, would you bother sending it to Lars Von Trier? No, you'd send it to David Gordon Green, or John Jacobs, or you might try sending it to Adam Sandler's shingle Happy Madison (but to one of the execs there, rather than Sandler himself). Again, target your queries to the producers, executives at production companies, and actor's shingles who would respond to the material you've written. It's important to do your research by googling the production companies and people to be sure they are the right fit for your project.

3. Agents Who Handle Screenwriters - We put them last on the list because they are far less likely to open your emails, BUT, they might open a snail-mailed query letter. It's still not likely, but if they aren't too high up on the food chain, it's worth a shot. While you're researching your screenwriting reps, you'll probably see more than one agent. They usually put them in teams, so figure out which one is the LEAST senior of the two, and send it to them.

How do I find the contact information for the people I want to query?

There are several ways to find contact information, short of stalking everyone in Hollywood:

1. IMDb Pro: An online service with a monthly fee for industry contact information.
2. Google: Easy to access and free, but not always accurate, so be extra thorough in your research.

If you're emailing out your query, it only costs time to add more names to the list - so if you have it, why not shoot for the stars and email as many people as you can. Sometimes, it's the "throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks" method that wins the day. You never know who will end up being your script's champion (even an assistant or intern can be enough at first).

When do I know I'm ready to query?

If your script is in rough shape, or isn't the Absolute Best Version of itself that it can be, all the time you spend writing and sending your query letter will be for nothing. So make sure your script is ready (with one caveat we'll get into later) before sending those query letters out.

Secret #1: Make sure the first 5 pages of your screenplay are absolutely stellar and attention grabbing – even if it's just how brilliant you write on a technical level. Those 5 pages make or break whether anyone reads any further than that.

Before you ever consider submitting your work to an executive, get feedback from your

fellow screenwriters, preferably ones you think are of a high caliber, and/or advice from a professional consultant. You have one shot at a first impression – don't blow it.

Once you have your list of readers' notes, analyze them, deciding which ones you want to implement to improve your story and dive into a rewrite.

Then get more notes, and on and on, until you finally feel your story is representative of the one you set out to tell. Once a producer is interested in your script, they'll have even more notes, but accepting and welcoming the process of getting feedback is essential to the success of your career. No one wants to work with someone who isn't able to collaborate.

How do I write a query letter that will grab their attention?

Most books tell you to write a one-page query letter that includes a one to three sentence logline, a short synopsis, and a bio of yourself.

Secret #2: The most important of all is the logline. You will need it for more people, in more situations, and it will be the most read or heard thing about your story – far more so than your actual script.

Think of your logline as a five to ten second pitch. Whether it's a sentence or two in a letter or email, or whether you just bumped into a producer at a Starbucks, it's the one or two sentences that boil your story down into a great hook with lots of opportunity for conflict, and a potential of being a powerful read.

Quick Tip #1: Never write about how great you or your script is. This makes you sound desperate and amateurish. Your script stands on it's own two feet - so let it.

Professionals don't have time to waste reading long query letters. Since all they care about is the logline, get right down to it, cutting all the fluff. Give them a professional greeting, [a fantastic logline \(with a great hook\)](#), and a professional exit. Let the logline speak for itself.

Our only caveat with not including any bio information is if you've won any prestigious screenwriting competitions, or if your occupation has anything to do with the story at hand. For instance, if your day job is as a detective and you wrote a murder mystery, it lends an air of credibility and is the only time it's worth writing a short bio.

Secret #3: The only other time to have bio information in the query is if someone from the industry (of note) has ever bought or optioned one of your scripts. Someone may not be enthusiastic about your logline, but this might entice them to ask to read anyway.

What if I want to query more than one script?

If you have more than one script, only include one (maybe two) loglines into your query letter. Instead of cluttering up the page with logline after logline, have a website with your full list of loglines and link to it in the letter/email. They will click to read more if they are interested.

There's always an exception to every rule.

Remember how we said there was one exception to making sure your script is ready to go before sending out a query letter? Well, for those of you with multiple ideas and don't know which one to write next (or which one to focus on polishing/rewriting), there's a great blog written by a former development executive by the name of Alex Epstein. He wrote something on his blog for those of you in that particular situation:

“As a development executive, you might think I'd be peeved if people used me for free market research, but actually, I wish they would. Then I'd be more likely to find a screenplay that I could do something with.

“If you send out two hundred query letters and get back two responses, you may not want to waste your time writing the script. If you get back ten, you might want to write the script. If you get twenty, stop sleeping and write the damn screenplay already.”

Pretty genius way to figure out what to focus on, right?

Do I need a treatment and a synopsis?

Most execs never ask to read a synopsis or treatment. Nobody in the industry has any time, and if someone can't write a good query letter or logline, they assume they can't write a script. It takes more time to read a synopsis than it does to read the first few pages of a script, and seasoned pros can tell if you're a good writer from just a few pages.

Having said that, you should still have a 2-page synopsis of your script ready just in case. If someone does ask for a treatment, it should be five pages, max.

Query Don'ts:

1. Do not mention any names for actors that should be in the movie, or directors of the script, etc. Again, it makes you sound amateurish. Even if you wrote in to an actor's shingle, don't say, "You would be perfect for this role." Just give them a professional greeting, a great logline with a hook, and exit stage right. Less is more.
2. Research, research, research. Do not query companies and people who are the wrong fit for your project. If you have taken the time to research them, they will be impressed.
3. Do not write a long letter or e-mail boring them to death about your personal life or the

minute details of your story. Instead, wet their appetite, show them your personality and unique writer's voice and make them have to say 'yes' to reading your script.

Snail mail vs. E-mail:

Nowadays, more and more people are e-mailing query letters. It's cheaper, takes less time, and the industry (sometimes) reads them. However, since there's more and more email and less and less snail mail, if you want to stand out from the crowd, you could mail in a query letter and *possibly* have a higher probability of it getting read. Some screenwriters have also found success in faxing the query in. When the dusty fax rings in an exec's office, they take notice.

Because it costs more time and more money to send snail mail, you have to be even more selective and targeted with who you send it to. And something to keep in mind is this - is it worth it to you to spend about 50 dollars and a lot of time sending out snail-mail query letters, to *maybe* increase your odds by 2 or 3 extra requests for your script than you would have gotten if you just stuck to email? If the answer is yes, and you have a very specific and targeted list, then read on. If the answer is no, then you can skip the next paragraph.

Once you have your targeted list of who makes the kind of material you've written, call and talk to the assistant. Be polite and courteous when you ask if they accept submissions. If they do, get the assistant's full name, verify the address and thank them. If they don't, ask politely if the assistant would be interested in reading your query letter. If they do, do the dance outlined above. If not, thank them for their time, wish them a good day, and cross that one off your list. Now you have your envelope addressed to the assistant, make sure the letter's heading addresses the assistant by name (and not your targeted producer, etc.). It's a nice touch, and they will appreciate it. Every little bit helps, especially since the assistant will have to stick their neck out for you later if they like and read your script when they tell their boss about it. Lastly, include an email address or phone number to call back rather than a SASE. It saves you money, and it saves them time.

Quick Tip #4: If you're sending out an e-mail query, don't attach the query letter to the email. Just make the query the body of your email, period.

So, that's everything you ever wanted to know about Query Letters...or maybe a lot more than you ever wanted to know, depending on your mood. Hopefully you will use all of these tools to get your screenplay read by agents, managers, and producers. As always, I wish you great success.

Sample Queries:

Julie Gray shared with ScriptMag's readers a fun, sample query to make her point of how simple it should be.

Dear Producer/Agent/Manager (*whom I totally looked up and know who you are*),

My name is Juliette LaWriter and I am a big fan of x-movie-client-project of yours! I particularly enjoyed ABC movie! (*I am politely and authentically bonding with you right now! I am demonstrating why I chose to query you, specifically! This is not a form letter!*)

I am an award-winning screenwriter (*or a paramedic, or a crime novelist – or name your area of expertise here*) and have written a script that I think might interest you. It is a (genre here) script called AWESOME SCRIPT and here is the logline:

SIMPLE, SHORT, 50-75 WORD LOG LINE HERE. LOGLINE INDICATES MAIN CHARACTER, CENTRAL CONFLICT, ANTAGONIST AND CLIMATIC CHOICE OR SACRIFICE.

If you would like to read the script, please do let me know and I am happy to send a PDF or hard copy to your offices. Thank you very much for your time. (*I am being considerate and acknowledging your time constraints, and I really appreciate the fact that you read this query at all!*)

All the best,

Juliette LaWriter

email address

website

phone number

That pretty much says it all.

Here's a query letter template to help.

Reminder: This is only a guideline. There are no hard and fast rules, and above all, you need to find a style for querying that matches your own unique writer's voice.

Name

Address
Phone Number

Date

Agent Name
Address

Re: Screenwriter seeking representation

To Whom It May Concern:

Write a few lines here about yourself and what you have written. A bio if it shows accomplishments or a specific talent you have that makes you the perfect writer for this story's topic, if you have any work produced. Show your passion, personality and writing ability to grab their attention.

Title: The Movie

Genre:

Logline: Your short logline here, no more than one to three sentences.

Pitch: Action and visuals mixed with the emotion and character development to show this film will put as many seats as possible in the theater and make the executive money and earn respect of his/her peers.

If this has piqued your interest, I would be more than happy to send a copy of this feature-length screenplay for your consideration. I can be contacted by any way I have provided at your earliest convenience.

Yours Creatively,

Name
Address
Phone
Email

I've queried, now what?

Wait. Wait. Wait. Hollywood is famous for the waiting game.

But the harsh reality is, if you haven't heard back, it's a pass. Just move on and query another.

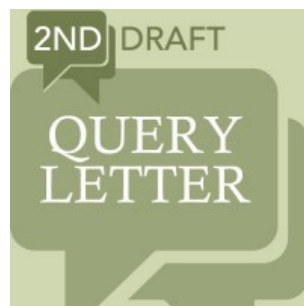
Remember, after you've sent your first batch of query letters out, congratulate yourself. Writing that script wasn't easy, and launching your baby into the world, isn't easy either.

Bravo!

Query Letter Critiques

You'll Love This Critique Service If:

- You have a completed screenplay or manuscript ready
- Your query letter needs improvement but you're unsure how to revise
- You want professional and specific feedback



Get Your
Query Letter Critiques
Today and Start
Querying Executives!