

HOW TO WRITE A GREAT QUERY LETTER

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Chapter I

Essential Elements of Query Letters

Query letters are the usual ways people get editors, publishers and agents to consider looking at or buying non-fiction books. Writing query letters is sometimes more challenging than writing your book. As in Pascal's note to a friend, "I am sorry for the length of my letter. I had not the time to write a short one," it can be difficult to boil your 250-page book and your credentials for writing it down to one page or so. And brief is better than long even if you fear you are leaving out some of the nuances of your project. Agents and editors are usually very busy and the longer your "pitch," the less likely it will be read (or read quickly) by these busy folks.

Even if you have some personal connection with or have been solicited by an agent or editor, it might still be worthwhile to come up with a query letter, since your editor or agent can use a

brief summary of your project to sell it to others. The more you can pre-think this condensed summary, the easier it will be for you to describe it to people later on when you publicize it (and perhaps it will even help you write it since you have a much clearer idea of the focus and essence of the book before you write it.

So, even though this query letter will be short, you may spend a long time planning, preparing and writing it, going over it to edit it for clarity and brevity.

What follows is a brief structure or formula for the elements to be included in your query letter. Obviously, you will imbue the letter with your own style, but make sure you have included these important elements in it or your book may be rejected for reasons not having to do with the quality or content of the book.

The 6 Ps to a Powerful Query Letter

In coaching people to get their books written and published, I have come up with a succinct formula for what should be covered in your query letter. I call it the *6 P Method*. Here are those 6 Ps, as succinctly as I can put them.

Particular agent/publisher: Why are you contacting this particular agent or editor with this project? Did another of their author's recommend them? Have they done books that are similar to yours? Are you looking for representation on just this project or do you have more projects in mind for the future?

Acquaint yourself with the agent or editors work before you write this section. This moves the letter from a more generic letter to a more personal one. Obviously, use the agent's or editor's name rather than addressing it to: *Dear Agent* or *Dear Editor* or *To Whom It May Concern*. It is fairly easy these days to find good information about agents and editors on the Internet these days. Or visit your local library or bookstore and look the agent or editor up in one of the reference books (my favorite is Jeff Herman's *Guide to Literary Agents, Editors and Publishers*-it's updated every year and contains lots of personal information about agents and editors tastes and other books they have repre-

mented or published). In any case, however you do it, do your homework.

Position: How does this book occupy a unique position in the market (i.e., it fills an unfilled niche; it's angle or slant is unique). Also, why are you the right person for the project due to your credentials and your expertise?

Your job here is to convince the agent or the editor (and later the publishing committee) that this book is absolutely unique and fills a hole in the market. If you can't make this case, you might want to rethink the focus or the book before sending the query letter.

Uniqueness derives from several ingredients: a particular population of readers different from the specific population for other books on this subject; your unique slant or approach to the topic; and your unique qualifications or expertise (or fame) that makes you the right person to write this book at this time; the time is ripe for this book (be careful with this one, since it will likely be several years before the book comes out).

Population: Who, specifically, would be the likely readers of this book? It's not everybody. If the book can be more narrowly targeted to a certain definable audience, who is that (e.g., fans of John Gray; middle aged women; people on the verge of divorce), getting it more narrowly defined helps sell the book and makes it more easily marketable.

This element was mentioned in the section on *Position*, but it is so important, let's discuss it a bit more in detail here. Many books fail to get the attention of an agent or an editor because the author hasn't pre-thought this aspect. I tell people that the entry way to first getting published (until you establish a track record of success) is through the narrow gate. Once you're Deepak Chopra, you can write about most anything and it will get published. But you're not Deepak, so narrow it down. The more specific the audience, the easier it is to market the book to readers and the easier it is to sell it to publishers (unless it is excessively narrow, of course-it's got to be more than hundreds of people).

Person: Who are you? Why are you passionate about and committed to this book? How did you come to know that it should be written? Why are you the right person to write it?

It may be hard to communicate your passion and style in a few paragraphs, but I've seen query letter that accomplish it. I sometimes tell a brief "origin story," about how and why the book was conceived and why it is so important to me to write it. So, again, spend some time getting your unique sensibility and voice to come through in the letter. After all, you are applying for the position of book author and you can show some of your qualifications if the writing is compelling and engaging.

Platform: This is a combination of three elements:

Portfolio: What work have you done that gives you credibility and will impress others, especially agents and editors?

You are going to send supporting materials with your proposal, but here just give a quick summary of your literary or other accomplishments that are relevant to writing the book or being an expert in the topic area.

Prestige: How well known are you? How motivated are your fans to buy your work? Would famous people be willing to endorse you or give you blurbs?

Have you won awards in your field of expertise? Do you already have blurbs or endorsement from well-known people? Mention these in your letter and anything else that shows your prestige. Don't be arrogant and braggy, but don't hide your light under a bushel basket either.

Promotional abilities and channels: How many people can you inform about the book in the shortest time or over time? Do you have a newsletter, a popular blog, podcasts, a website with a lot of unique visitors per month, or an e-mail list? Do you have a radio or TV show? Do you have access to mass media on a regular basis? Are you an enthusiastic, media-savvy person who can promote your book? Do you have media training? Can you speak in sound bites? Do bookstore owners like your work based on your previous writing? Do you regularly do public speaking? Get bog audiences for those talks?

I know I have given quite a long list above, so you may have to pick and choose, because again you are trying to keep this letter to one page. Choose the most impressive or potentially biggest publicity channels or abilities and highlight those.

Project: What genre is this book (e.g., nonfiction self-help; chick lit; suspense; financial how-to)? What is the most succinct summary you can give of the project? This should be a summary of all the information above.

Again, this is sort of an “elevator pitch” (Hollywood jargon for the kind of short focused pitch one might give on a short elevator ride to the person who has the ability to “greenlight” the project and is short on time). So think five floors of an elevator ride. Could your letter be read and absorbed in this time period? If not, keep working on it. Delete anything that is unnecessary or unclear. Keep it short, sweet and densely packed with relevant information. You’ll get a chance to stretch out and add details and nuance in the proposal, but resist the invitation to say everything about it in this letter. This is the preview of coming attractions for your book and your proposal. It’s an sample of the savory meal to come, not the meal.

Query Letter Don'ts

Don't have any typos in your query letter. These folks work with words all the time and this will stand out like a sore thumb, practically shouting: *I'm not a professional. I couldn't even spell-check my one page letter. Wait until you see my proposal or manuscript. It'll be even worse.*

Don't make excessive claims for your book. Don't tell them it is destined to be a bestseller or Oprah will want to feature it on her show, guaranteed. Don't tell them they are passing up the opportunity of a lifetime if they don't acquire or represent your book. Be confident but not obnoxious.

Don't use any weird fonts or paper or ink colors. Treat this letter as a piece of business correspondence. White paper. Times New Roman typeface unless there is a compelling reason to deviate from this norm.

Bill O'Hanlon has written 35 books and has been published by W.W. Norton, Penguin, HarperCollins, John Wiley and Sons, Writer's Digest Books, and other publishers. He appeared on Oprah with his book *Do One Thing Different*. He offers online training, teleclasses and audio and video instruction on getting your books written and published. For details visit [Bill's writing and publishing website](#).

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