Query Letter Essentials

But how do you "sell" an editor on your article when you have no more than a page to explain your concept and display your writing skill? The answer is: By including everything the editor needs to know about your article -- and about you. A successful query letter generally includes these five basic components:

- The hook
- The pitch
- The body
- The credentials
- The close

The Hook

Your very first line should grab an editor's attention. It must demonstrate that you can write effectively, and that you understand your market.

There are several ways to approach the "hook," including:

**The problem/solution hook.** This defines a problem or situation common to the publication's audience, then proposes an article that can help solve that problem. Here's an example:

The pet magazine market is an ideal place for newer writers to "break in". However, it is constantly flooded with inappropriate submissions. To break in, one must understand what these magazines want, and what they won't accept. ("Writing for Pet Magazines," sold to *Byline*.)

**The Informative Hook.** This usually presents two or three lines of useful information (e.g., facts, statistics), followed by an explanation of how this applies to the target audience. For example:

Thanks to a translation glitch, Microsoft was forced to pull its entire Chinese edition of Windows 95 from the marketplace. Microsoft recovered -- but that's the sort of mistake few small businesses can afford! ("How to Localize Your Website," sold to *Entrepreneur's Home Office* -- see Sample.)

**The Question.** Often, this is a problem/solution or informative hook posed as a question, such as:

Did you know...?
What would you do if...?
Have you ever wondered...?
The personal experience/anecdote. Many writers like to take a personal approach, as it immediately establishes the credential of "experience." Be sure, however, that your market uses more personal articles, or first-person accounts, before attempting a hook like this:

Forget-me-nots. I love their wistful name. I love their tiny blue flowers. And yes, I love that growing them is as simple as pie. ("Forget-me-nots: Simply Unforgettable Spring Flowers," by Mary R., sold to Fine Gardening.)

The attention-grabber. The goal of this type of hook is to make the reader sit up and take notice -- hopefully long enough to read the rest of the story. This might be a good "hook" for a query about parachuting in Yosemite:

As I fell from the top of Yosemite's El Capitan, I wondered if my life would truly flash before my eyes -- or if I would stop screaming long enough to notice.

Hooks to Avoid

Certain hooks scream "amateur" and are guaranteed to speed a query to the rejection pile, including:

- **The personal introduction.** Never start with a line like "Hi, my name is John, and I'd like to send you an article about..." Don't offer irrelevant information, such as "I'm a housewife and mother of three lovely children. Recently I decided to pursue my lifelong dream of writing..."

- **The "suck-up" hook.** Yes, editors want to know that you've read their publication, but they also want you to prove it by offering an appropriate query -- **not** by saying, "I've been a subscriber for 20 years and just love your magazine..." (This is even less effective if your query goes on to prove that you've never actually read the magazine!)

- **The "bid for sympathy".** Don't tell an editor that you've never been published before, or that you need to sell this piece or your children will starve.

- **The "I'm perfect for you" hook.** Never sing your own praises: "I am a highly experienced professional and will be an asset to your magazine". Don't inform the editor that your article is "perfect" for his readers. Never declare that your article is "wonderful" or "fascinating." Prove it -- with a good query.

- **The "I'm an amateur" hook.** Never announce that you have never been published before, or that you've tried to sell the same article to 20 other magazines, or that your writing teacher (or mother or spouse) suggested that you send this to a magazine. Even if you haven't sold anything before, you can still act like a professional.
The Pitch

Once you have an editor's attention, move on to the pitch. Usually, this is your second paragraph, and its purpose is to explain exactly what you're offering. For example, the pitch that followed the "localization" hook, above, went like this:

I'd like to offer you a 1,500-word article titled "Internationalizing Your Online Market." The article would discuss how small businesses can take advantage of "localizing" agents to tailor their products and market strategies to the international marketplace. ("How to Localize Your Website.")

If possible, your pitch should include a working title for your article (titles help editors "visualize" what you're proposing), a word-count (make sure you've checked the publication's guidelines!), and a brief summary of what the article will cover.

The Body

This is where you really start to "sell." The body of your query will usually be from two to four paragraphs, and presents the details of your article. Remember that an editor wants to know exactly what the article will cover, so by this time you should have a working outline of the piece in your own mind.

A good way to present an overview of your topic is to break it into logical subtopics -- e.g., the sections that would be likely to appear under subheads in the finished piece. The longer the article, the more subtopics you can include (though it's usually not advisable to have more than four or five). For example, a 700-word article on cancer in pets might only cover "The ten warning signs of cancer," while a 2000-word article on the same topic might cover "common types of cancer, warning signs, and current treatment options." A good way to determine whether you have the right number of subtopics is to divide your word-count by the number of topics -- e.g., a 2,000 word article with five subtopics gives you a budget of 400 words per topic.

Here's how I described the content of an article on quilt care:

The article covers techniques of hand-cleaning delicate quilts to avoid damaging fragile fabrics and prevent fading and staining. It discusses ways to remove spot stains (including blood spots and rust stains from needles and other metal contact). It also discusses ways to mend damaged quilts without destroying the integrity of an heirloom piece. Finally, it discusses the best ways to store or display quilts in order to preserve and protect them. ("Caring for Heirloom Quilts," sold to DownUnder Quilts.)

Some writers like to use block paragraphs; others like to use bullets. There's no rule on the best style; choose a style that makes your query visually appealing and easy to read.
The Credentials

Editors want to know why you are the best person to write the article you've proposed. This is where your credentials come in. Don't assume, however, that these must include writing credits. While a list of previous articles on relevant topics is nice, you may also be able to prove your qualifications with credentials such as:

- Professional experience (some publications accept material *only* from qualified experts)
- Academic degrees or training
- Teaching experience in the subject area
- Personal experience (especially if the article relates to personal issues/problems)
- Writing experience
- Interviews with experts (a way to demonstrate that even if you don't have the credentials, you'll be able to get information from those who *do*)

Credentials are usually listed in the last or next-to-last paragraph. Here's an example:

As Webmaster of www.musicphotographer.com, it has been my job to connect music writers and photographers with the markets that need their work. This is the only site devoted to music journalism on the Web. I'm also writing the first guide on the topic. Reviews for my last book, The Van Halen Encyclopedia, are available at Amazon.com. (C. Chilver's successful pitch to Inkspot for "How to Write for the Music Market.")

The Close

Use the final paragraph of your article to thank the editor for reviewing your proposal -- and to offer one last "nudge" to encourage the editor to respond. I usually include a time-estimate in this paragraph -- e.g., "If you are interested in this article, I can have it on your desk within XX days." Here's a typical closing paragraph:

I hope this topic interests you, and look forward to your response. If you would like to see the article, I can have it on your desk within two weeks of receiving your go-ahead. Thank you for your time!

Format

The presentation of your letter can be as important as your content. A traditional (paper) query should include the following elements:

- **A decent letterhead.** At the very least, your name and address and other contact information should be printed at the top of your letter (*not* at the bottom or under your signature) in an attractive font. You can have an inexpensive letterhead designed and typeset at your local printing shop, or online through iPrint.com. Or, design your own on your computer.
• **A business-style body.** If you aren't familiar with terms like "block" or "modified block," see [Sample](#). Always include a blank line between paragraphs, and don't indent more than five spaces (if at all).

• **A formal salutation.** Don't address the editor by first name unless you know him/her personally.

• **Clean, proofread copy.** Don't rely on your spellchecker; review your query yourself before mailing it out.

• **Quality paper.** Use at least 20-lb. bond paper for queries. Some writers like to use fancier papers -- parchment, linen, etc. -- on the theory that a nicer paper with a professional tint will stand out amidst all the white paper on an editor's desk. Don't go to "colors" however -- pink paper and blue type scream for rejection.

• **A SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope).** Don't use "insert" envelopes; fold a full-size business envelope (#10) in thirds and use that. Be sure it has adequate postage. If you are submitting a query from another country, be sure that your SASE has the correct postage for the target country -- or else include an appropriate number if IRCs (international reply coupons).

These guidelines are for traditional "paper" queries. Needless to say, not all of these "rules" are possible when sending an e-mail query; for more details on e-mail queries, see [Preparing E-mail Queries](#).

**Clips**

Many editors ask for clips so that they can review a sample of your writing style. Clips are simply copies of previously published materials. Never send copies of unpublished works! Don't send clips of work you've self-published or posted on your own website. And remember, bad clips are worse than no clips at all.

It's best to send clips that are relevant to the proposal, if you have them. If you don't, send samples from your most prestigious publications. If most of your published works are electronic, print out copies from your website; don't just ask the editor to "visit" unless you are sending an e-mail query.

If you have no clips, don't despair. Most editors consider the merits of a query first and the clips second. (To be honest, many editors don't even have time to read clips, even though they request them.) If your query is strong enough, the absence of clips shouldn't be enough to trigger a rejection, unless the publication works *only* with published writers.

**Following Up**

How long should you wait for a response? Usually, you should wait at least as long as the publication's guidelines suggest (e.g., 4 to 6 weeks) -- and then add another two weeks "grace period." Then, send a polite follow-up. Attach a copy of your original query, so
that the editor won't have to search the files for it. If you still hear nothing after another 3-4 weeks, consider a polite phone call. (No, it won't cause your article to be rejected.) If you still can't get an answer, and you would like to withdraw the query, send a final letter informing the editor that, as you have received no response, you are officially withdrawing the query from consideration. This protects you from charges of "simultaneous submissions" if the first editor finally decides to reply after you've already sent the query on to someone else.

The ability to write a good query is one of the most important skills in a writer's toolbox. A good query shows an editor that you can write and that you are a professional -- qualities that may result in an assignment even if the editor can't use your original proposal. Think of your query as a letter of introduction, your first and only opportunity to get your foot through that particular door. If you make a good impression, you're likely to be invited back (even if your original pitch is rejected). If you make a bad impression, you may find that door forever closed.

Adapted from Moira Allen. Writing-World.com

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