

Tips for Effective Query Letters

Most established literary agencies receive many queries each month – for example, our agency receives about 100 per week -- and though all do get read, only the most compelling are given serious consideration. Agents do understand how daunting an exercise it is for a writer to condense an entire book into just a few short paragraphs, but a query letter or email remains the most important tool an author has for landing representation for his or her work. Below you'll find 10 general tips on query letters from this agency's perspective:

1. Overall, a query letter or email must be highly polished – typed, no spelling mistakes, typos or grammatical errors. 1 page long, if possible. Give the same careful attention to an emailed query as you would to a typewritten letter.
2. Your query should clearly identify the genre or category the proposed book fits into and also provide some insight on general market positioning: where does it fit in the marketplace and on the shelf? This means an author should do his or her homework before sending out queries – visit a bookstore, read widely, pay attention to the bestseller lists, and become familiar with other works in the genre and available in the marketplace.
3. Your letter should offer a brief overview of the work that is clear, compelling and makes one want to read more – this part should be somewhat reflective of the author's writing style.
4. We always advise against mentioning other unpublished works in a query – the focus should be on the one book the author is trying to sell. Agents don't necessarily want to know that an author has other unpublished manuscripts sitting on the shelf.
5. The author should indicate what material is available to send to the agent for consideration and the manuscript length (i.e. word count). For new fiction authors, a novel is almost always sold on a complete manuscript. We also advise new authors to have a detailed synopsis of the book – 5 pages or so – ready to send, as we usually request to see a synopsis and 3-5 sample chapters before asking to see an entire manuscript. For non-fiction, an author should have a full proposal including at least 3 completed and polished chapters ready to send. We rarely sell non-fiction on manuscript; almost always on proposal. Pay attention to each agency's submission preferences. For example, our agency does not read unsolicited material and we do not open electronic attachments; we ask to see a query letter/email only at first.

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6. If the author is querying several agents, he should indicate that his is a multiple submission. However, note that if we ask to consider your material, we ask for an exclusive – that we are the only agents reviewing your work for a limited period of time. We make exceptions in certain circumstances, however.
The letter should also offer information about the writer: writing and publishing background and credits, associations (i.e. RWA, MWA, etc) or writers groups, awards and prizes, published works (even short stories, articles); academic background, anything notable. This would also include info on the author's PLATFORM. In book publishing, an author's platform is loosely defined as his/her visibility to a book's intended audience and the means by which the author can directly assist a publisher in establishing readership, gaining media exposure, and selling copies of a work.
7. Author's contact information, including email address and phone numbers, should be included.
8. No gimmicks! We have seen our fair share of the bizarre over the years including: a query letter filled with glitter (and little specks of glitter remained on our wood floor for months after...grrr), handwritten queries on scented, colored paper in colored ink, queries containing nude photos, queries on candy bar wrappers, queries accompanied by liquor, queries accompanied by stuffed animals, etc. These letters are memorable, but we did not pursue a single one of the books presented. Creativity is appreciated, but authors should present themselves professionally overall.
9. Author should always enclose an SASE with a mailed query. This agency, for example, does not respond to snail mail queries without return postage.

There is an art to writing a great query, but it is an art that can be mastered. There are several books available that touch upon writing query letters, also a number of author-related websites that provide pointers, as well. When an author is ready to start querying publishers or agents about a book, a review of some of the references mentioned above would be time well spent.

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Resources

Finding an Agent

The Literary Marketplace (aka the LMP)

This is a reference directory available at most libraries. It's essentially the giant phone book of the publishing world in which many agents are listed.

The Writers Market, The Children's Writers & Illustrators Market, Guide to Literary Agents

These are annual directories published every year by Writer's Digest Books and contain agent listings and publisher contact information and submission guidelines.

The Christian Writers' Market Guide

Another annual, compiled by Sally Stuart, but specifically for the Christian market.

Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents: Who They Are! What They Want! How to Win Them Over!

Another annual guide, filled with useful information.

www.aar-online.org

This is the website for the Association of Authors' Representatives, the only organization of literary and dramatic agents in North America. Check out this site if you are looking for an agent. To qualify for membership in the AAR, an agent must meet professional standards specified in the organization's bylaws and agree to subscribe to its Canon of Ethics which, among other things, prohibits agents from charging fees or co-mingling funds. Agents who are members of the AAR are considered to be the most reputable in the industry.

www.publishersmarketplace.com and www.publisherslunch.com

Publishers Lunch is the daily e-mail newsletter, now known as "publishing's essential daily read. Nearly 30,000 people – including most editors – read this. And we all pay close attention to the Weekly Deal Lunch, which includes listings of who sold what to whom – and for how much –within the last week. www.publishersmarketplace.com is a great place to search for info on who is buying what, in order to familiarize yourself with the market. Lots of agents also maintain a listing on www.PublishersMarketplace.com, including their contact information, who they represent, what they've recently sold, what they're looking for and their submission guidelines.

www.anotherrealm.com

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This site is called Preditors & Editors. If you're looking for an agent, look to see if any of the agents you're considering are listed here with negative comments or warnings.

Other Resources

www.authorsguild.org

The Authors Guild, an advocacy organization for writers. Great source of information about the industry, about contractual practices among publishers, and a key place to go if you need legal help.

www.bookreporter.com

This is the home page of The Book Report Network, which is a network of sites that includes www.readinggroupguides.com and www.faithfulreader.com. These sites get incredible traffic – well over 1 million hits per month. Some of the best internet marketing in the industry happens on this site. Also includes www.authorsontheweb.com, which is a website building service for authors.

www.mediabistro.com/galleycat

You have to subscribe to get full access to the content on Media Bistro, but it might be worth it. Includes detailed listings and interviews with many literary agents, job listings, and tons on info on how to pitch. Galleycat is the book industry area and is very good source for publishing news.

www.scbwi.org

Website for the Society of the Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. We do not actively handle children's books, but that doesn't stop many people from querying us about their...children's book. This is where we tell them to go for information about the industry.

www.rwanational.org

Romance Writers of America site.

www.mysterywriters.org

Mystery Writers of America

www.thrillerwriters.org

International Thriller Writers, Inc.

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Association of Authors' Representatives, Inc.

CANON OF ETHICS

1. The members of the Association of Authors' Representatives, Inc. are committed to the highest standard of conduct in the performance of their professional activities. While affirming the necessity and desirability of maintaining their full individuality and freedom of action, the members pledge themselves to loyal service to their clients' business and artistic needs, and will allow no conflicts of interest that would interfere with such service. They pledge their support to the Association itself and to the principles of honorable coexistence, directness, and honesty in their relationships with their co-members. They undertake never to mislead, deceive, dupe, defraud, or victimize their clients, other members of the Association, the general public, or any person with whom they do business as a member of the Association.
2. Members shall take responsible measures to protect the security and integrity of clients' funds. Members must maintain separate bank accounts for money due their clients so that there is no commingling of clients' and members' funds. Members shall deposit funds received on behalf of clients promptly upon receipt, and shall make payments of domestic earnings due clients promptly, but in no event later than ten business days after clearance. Revenues from foreign rights over \$50 shall be paid to clients within ten business days after clearance. Sums under \$50 shall be paid within a reasonable time of clearance. However, on stock and similar rights, statements of royalties and payments shall be made not later than the month following the member's receipt, each statement and payment to cover all royalties received to the 25th day of the previous calendar month. Payments for amateur rights shall be made not less frequently than every six months. A member's books of account must be open to the client at all times with respect to transactions concerning the client. If a member receives in writing a claim to funds otherwise due to a client, the member shall immediately so advise the client in writing. If the member determines that the claim is serious, and that the funds should not be remitted to the client because of the claim, the member shall proceed in accordance with the following: For a period not to exceed ninety days, the member may deposit the funds in question into a segregated interest-bearing account pending possible resolution of the dispute. No later than the expiration of that ninety-day period, if the dispute remains unresolved and the claimants do not otherwise agree with respect to the disposition of the disputed funds, the member shall take such steps as may be necessary to deposit the funds with a court of competent jurisdiction, with appropriate notice to the claimants, so that the claimants will have an opportunity to present to that court their claims to those funds. Upon so depositing the funds, the member will have complied with the member's obligations under this Canon of Ethics.
3. In addition to the compensation for agency services that is agreed upon between a member and a client, a member may, subject to the approval of the client, pass along charges incurred by the member on the client's behalf, such as copyright fees, manuscript retyping, photocopies, copies of books for use in the sale of other rights, long distance calls, special messenger fees, etc. Such charges shall be made only if the client has agreed to reimburse such expenses.
4. A member shall keep each client apprised of matters entrusted to the member and shall promptly furnish such information as the client may reasonably request.
5. Members shall not represent both buyer and seller in the same transaction. Except as provided in the next sentence, a member who represents a client in the grant of rights in any property owned or controlled by the client may not accept any compensation or other payment from the acquirer of such rights, including but not limited to so-called "packaging fees," it being understood that the member's compensation, if any, shall be derived solely from the client. Notwithstanding the

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foregoing, a member may accept (or participate in) a so-called "packaging fee" paid by an acquirer of television rights to a property owned or controlled by a client if the member: a) fully discloses to the client at the earliest practical time the possibility that the member may be offered such a "packaging fee" which the member may choose to accept; b) delivers to the clients at such time a copy of the Association's statement regarding packaging and packaging fees; and c) offers the client at such time the opportunity to arrange for other representation in the transaction. In no event shall the member accept (or participate in) both a packaging fee and compensation from the client with respect to the transaction. For transactions subject to Writers Guild of America (WGA) jurisdiction, the regulations of the WGA shall take precedence over the requirements of this paragraph.

6. Members may not receive a secret profit in connection with any transaction involving a client. If such profit is received, the member must promptly pay over the entire amount to the client. Members may not solicit or accept any payment or other thing of value in connection with their referral of any author to any third party for any purpose, provided that the foregoing does not apply to arrangements made with a third party in connection with the disposition of rights in the work of a client of the member.
7. Members shall treat their clients' financial affairs as private and confidential, except for information customarily disclosed to interested parties as part of the process of placing rights, as required by law, or, if agreed with the client, for other purposes.
8. The AAR believes that the practice of literary agents charging clients or potential clients for reading and evaluating literary works (including outlines, proposals, and partial or complete manuscripts) is subject to serious abuse that reflects adversely on our profession. For that reason, members may not charge clients or potential clients for reading and evaluating literary works and may not benefit, directly or indirectly, from the charging for such services by any other person or entity. The term "charge" in the previous sentence includes any request for payment other than to cover the actual cost of returning materials. Members who participate in conferences or other events where writers are charged separately for individual consultations with agents in which the writer's work is read or evaluated may not provide such consultations. The foregoing shall not prevent members from accepting honoraria and/or reimbursement of expenses for participating in such conferences or other events.

Platforms: What Are They and Why Do I Need One?

What is a platform? In book publishing, an author's platform is loosely defined as his/her visibility to a book's intended audience and the means by which the author can directly assist a publisher in establishing readership, gaining media exposure, and selling copies of a work.

Nonfiction Platforms

Built-In: It's likely that if an author has the knowledge and credentials to write a nonfiction book, she already has somewhat of a platform. In other words, to reach the point where she has enough expertise to produce over 50,000 meaningful words on a subject, she should have already accumulated a substantial degree of relevant experience that will make readers take notice.

Building Up: Regardless of how much she has accomplished, or how much these accomplishments have raised her profile, an author must continue to be active in cultivating her platform if she expects to (a) convince a publisher or literary agent to take an interest in partnering with her, or (b) garner a significant readership once she has a book in the marketplace.

The following are some basic aspects of a platform for nonfiction authors:

Education

- Graduate degrees (M.D., J.D., M.A., etc.)
- Specialized credentials, professional certification, or completion of independent programs

Publication

- Newsletters
- Scholarly Journals
- Magazines/Newspapers
- Books

Speaking engagements and seminar presentations

Professional affiliations, sponsorships, and partnerships

Television/Radio

- Interviews/appearances
- Hosting

Merchandising

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Website

Here are a few sample websites of nonfiction authors (all represented by Browne & Miller):

Rita Emmett (self-help) – <http://www.ritaemmett.com/>

Katie & Gene Hamilton (home improvement) – <http://www.diyornot.com/>

LaReine Chabut (fitness) – <http://www.lareinechabut.com/>

George Ellis (sports humor) – <http://www.theheckler.com/>

Fiction Platforms

Though it's true that publishers are becoming more and more interested in authors' "mediagenic qualities," unlike non-fiction projects where proposals are often sold on the basis of the author's platform, there is no point for fiction authors to cultivate a platform if they do not have a Publishing Contract in hand.

Rule of Thumb: Platform cultivating activities should **never** trump your writing career. However, savvy writers are a gem for agents and publishers, so it's never too early to become involved in writers groups and organizations (RWA, MWA, Thrillers Inc.). Not only can these affiliations help you to better understand the publishing industry, they also host their own contests and winning writing contests can set you apart from other authors in the query pile.

Know your material. When starting to formulate your platform you should consider what you're writing and how best to "label" yourself.

Reviews: Most fiction platforms come out of a positive review history.

Website: Dynamic author website can increase your fan base, which in turn increases sales.

Blogs: More interaction with fans can result in a devoted fan base, but blogging should never get in the way of novel writing.

Contests: Honorable mentions and awards go a long way to setting you apart from other writers.

Other Writing-Related Activities: Do you write a column for a local paper? Volunteer at the library? Use writing in your day job? All these activities can empower your platform.

The Bottom Line: A platform is about marketing and can work in tandem with your publisher's marketing team to get you more sales. Ultimately you are a partner in your novel's success so it's up to you to decide how much time/money/effort you want to contribute.

Some author websites to browse:

William Kent Krueger <http://www.williamkentkrueger.com/>

Sandra Dallas <http://www.sandradallas.com>

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Dan Brown <http://www.danbrown.com>

Francine Rivers <http://www.francinerivers.com>