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Bridget's Guide to Query Letters

You've written a thing. You've spent months, years—maybe even decades—pouring blood, sweat, and tears into this thing. You've edited it. You've run it by buddies and beta readers. And now, you think this thing is ready to go out into the world. What's next?

It's time to write a query letter!

Whether you're pitching agents, small publishing houses, hybrid presses, or magazines, you will need to write a query letter. Its purpose is to get the reader intrigued enough about your project to read the sample pages you sent along or request a copy of your work.

A Few General Guidelines...

1. This is a sales letter. Let me say that again: THIS IS A SALES LETTER. IT IS NOT A PIECE OF LITERATURE! The more you embrace this idea, the more successful you will be. I have heard agents say that, since you are going to have to go on the road to sell your book, they want to see from the get-go—in this letter, in other words—that you can do the sales thing.
2. As I mentioned above, your job is to hook the reader and make them want to read more. That is the ONLY purpose of this letter. Don't try to accomplish anything else!
3. With that in mind, you need to be efficient and grabby in your language. And, you need to somehow capture your unique voice and writing style in the limited space you have.
4. I have heard more than one agent say they read queries on their Apple Watches. If you were thinking about writing an extra-long letter or including a lot of complicated formatting, think again. Your query letter should be one page (250-300 words) MAX.
5. Follow the directions below. Let me say that again: FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS. I recently attended an agent panel where all four folks on stage repeatedly expressed their annoyance with authors who thought they were “special” and “thought they could do their own thing” in a query letter. In their words, “Publishing is a system. We want to know you can work within that system. We will not even look at letters that circumvent conventions.”

The take home here is: Feel free to be creative and express your wild and crazy self—WITHIN the confines of the recipe!

So, What's the Recipe?

A super catchy phrase that I've heard at a lot of conferences is:
HOOK, BOOK, and COOK.

I think that needs a little more explanation, however, so I like to express it this way:
HOOK, BOOK, WHY THEM, WHY YOU, CLOSING.

(My "WHY YOU" section is the same as the "COOK" section above.)

That gives you 5 short paragraphs. Let's look at each one individually.

The Hook

"If it's a great hook, I'll remember it years later," said one agent.

The hook is one to three sentences that grab the reader. They do this by creating suspense or a sense of urgency around the central conflict of the work.

You will write and rewrite your hook until your eyes blur, so, if you're starting out, don't worry too much about those initial attempts! Just start playing. Brainstorm words and phrases you might want to include. Then, start arranging those words and phrases in combination, gradually building a sentence or two that creates intrigue (fiction and memoir) or makes a claim about the impact of the ideas put forth in the book (nonfiction).

Examples:

(N.B.: These are examples from pitch letters I have helped folks with. I can't rightfully draw from other authors' pitch letters, but if you Google "query letters" or "book hooks" or something similar, you'll find tons of other examples!)

When I decided on a whim to walk every single road, street, alleyway, and trail in my home county of Santa Cruz, California, I had no idea that I was embarking upon a seven-year reassembly of my fragmented childhood.

"So, will you be wanting to do a reconstruction of your breast or not?" This is the daunting question (NARRATOR) faced when she learned that treating her cancer would require a mastectomy..

“Is that our Melissa?” Patrice Keet cries when she recognizes the woman on the speaker’s podium. It is their Melissa—the foster child Patrice and her husband, Bob, haven’t seen since she ran away from their comfortable home at the age of eleven.

The Book

This is essentially an extension of the hook. Once you have grabbed them with an opening sentence or two, follow up with a little more information about the plot or thematic content of your work. Be sure to clearly indicate what genre it belongs in and how long it is (word count).

THIS IS NOT A PLOT SUMMARY. You don’t have the time or space for that! This is a 2-4 sentence blurb—similar to what would go on the back cover of a book—that tells the reader what kind of adventure they will go on if they dive into your work. How will the conflict unfold? What will they learn? What will the ride be like, and how will they feel at the end of it?

A lot of folks like to add what’s called “soft comps” to this section—books that their work resembles. In fact, a very common strategy is to say something like *“Eat, Pray, Love meets Where the Crawdads Sing in this 84,000-word novel.”* I’ve heard some agents say they like these comparisons; I’ve heard others say they don’t. I find this technique a bit challenging because I can’t always imagine book combinations (What the heck would *Eat, Pray, Love* meets *Where the Crawdads Sing* be like—other than a story aimed at female readers?). In addition, I have repeatedly heard agents discourage writers from using very popular books (such as the examples above) in these comparisons. But, at the same time, you need the books to be popular enough that they have read or heard about them. For me, that’s too challenging a tightrope to walk. If you do use comps in your pitch letter, make sure they are from within the last five years.

Examples:

Melissa Come Back, an 82,000-word true story, is told alternately from the perspectives of Patrice and Melissa, two strong-willed women working to make peace with their pasts. When they’re finally reunited after twenty years, Melissa and her pre-teen daughters are facing eviction, presenting Patrice and Bob with the opportunity to make Melissa part of their family once again. The women’s intertwined narratives shed light on the cycles of poverty, abuse, and addiction that plague our nation while telling a compelling and poignant story of recovery and redemption.

(TITLE) provides practical and ideological “recipes”—often through humorous real-life stories—intended to guide both novices and professionals through the creation of more sustainable interactions with outdoor spaces. In a lively and irreverent voice, my text examines topics such as mining the urban waste stream, sustainable water use, homemade fertilizers, edible landscapes, resilient communities, carbon sequestration, and green business. I hope to empower

readers with both the perspective shift and the practical techniques needed to unpave the way towards greener, more harmonious relationships with the ecosystems they inhabit.

Why Them?

This is the section where you explain to the agent or publisher why you are pitching them specifically, rather than any of the hundreds of other agents and publishers out there.

This section is often overlooked—probably because it can be the hardest to write. It is much easier to blast out a hundred query letters to a hundred agents if you skip this paragraph! However, I have repeatedly heard that your letter will not be seriously considered unless you forge some kind of connection between your work and their interests.

To do this, you're going to have to do some research. You need to know what books the agents have represented and what books the presses have published. You'll need to be familiar enough with a couple of these to be able to explain how they are, in some way, similar to your book. That similarity might be the nature of the protagonist, the issues explored, the tone, the genre or subgenre, the writing style—it doesn't matter what the parallel is as long as you can make a good case for it.

If you find yourself struggling to create a connection between your work and this particular agent or publisher, stop! They probably aren't a good fit, so don't waste your time or theirs. Go back to your research and find folks with whom your work is better aligned.

How to research agents and publishers is another topic entirely, which I promise to cover in another resource sheet.

Examples:

(TITLE) belongs at a California-based press—especially one with a serious commitment to environmentally-focused literature. While the events in my narrative take place in a number of states, the soul of the story is anchored in Santa Cruz, and a number of the profiled animal species are based in coastal California. My text straddles two of your interest areas, memoir and nature, and it presents an opportunity for you to satisfy your readership in a new, genre-bridging way.

I have been following Red Hen Press since my editor introduced me to Elissa Washuta's work. Your memoirs are clearly curated for both their writing quality and their ability to illuminate big-picture social issues through individual stories. With its exploration of income inequality and complex family dynamics, (TITLE) fills a hole between Let's Talk About Wealth and American Bastard while carrying the emotional impact of When Rain Hurts. In short, I think my work and I fit right in at Red Hen.

I have been impressed by your track record of publishing unusual and innovative books. I particularly enjoyed Circle Under Berry, which prompted me to think you'd be interested in another book that endeavors to make language accessible and fun. I also appreciate your eye for tasteful artwork and would love to work with a publisher whose aesthetics I resonate with.

Why You?

Keep this short and relevant! While agents' biggest complaint about queries revolves around the letters that don't follow the rules, their second biggest complaint is about "TMI letters"—those that include too much personal information (authors' hobbies, for example).

"Relevant" has two dimensions:

1. *Literary.* If you've published another book, a short story, a handful of essays, poems, etc., mention those. Include the press they were published with. Literary awards are also worth mentioning.
2. *Subject matter.* If you're pitching a book about whales, and you have a PhD in marine biology, that's relevant and worth mentioning. Or, if you're pitching a book about how to eliminate clutter from your life and you have an Instagram feed devoted to this topic (especially if it has a lot of followers!), tell them.

If you are a first-time author and your novel/essay collection/poetry chapbook is unrelated to your work or your social media life, no problem! Don't feel bad; just keep this section really short. Tell them what you do from 9 to 5 and state that this is your first book—then stop. You can let your awesome hook and book speak for themselves!

Examples:

I own a cybersecurity business that services over 150 clients per year. The weekly blogposts I write for our company's website—some of which have provided the basis for the tips detailed in this book—have a daily reach of 5000-7000 readers.

I am a high school English teacher in San Rafael, CA. This is my first novel.

I have lived off-the-grid in southern Utah for twenty years. My daily wanderings in our local redrock canyons serve as the inspiration for my work—including the poems in this collection.

Closing

This is the easy part! You learned to write the closing of a "professional letter" in middle school. Choose your favorite version of this, and call it done.

Don't tell them how to contact you; just make sure your phone number is somewhere in the heading or sign-off. They've got your email address. If they like what they see, trust me, they will figure out how to get a hold of you.

Examples:

Thanks for your consideration. I look forward to talking to you about my project.

Thank you for your time. Feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions about this book.

I'd be happy to send you my completed manuscript. Thanks for your time and for your commitment to books about sustainable living.

Help! This sounds hard...

As I mentioned above, this is a sales job. Writing good query letters taps into a different skill set than the one necessary for writing good books, so don't feel bad at all if you find this task daunting. They do get easier the more you read and write them.

I frequently work on these, so feel free to reach out to me for assistance. Believe it or not, I actually love writing them...

Good luck and keep me posted!