

# Keystrokes Magazine



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## 6 Sure-Fire Ways to Improve Your Query Letters by Julie H. Ferguson

Query letters are a writer's ultimate writing showcase and present a daunting prospect to aspiring authors; so much so, that many prefer to write a book than a query to a publisher. This formal request to submit your work takes hard work and research to produce but, most of all, it takes a critical eye that is not your own. Key ingredients are outstanding writing, generation of excitement, and realism: no editor wants to hear about "the next bestseller" from a first time author. Here are some basic ways to improve your query letters so they rise above the fierce competition.

1. **Remove all opportunities for rejection.** Editors and agents receive upwards of 100 queries a week and are intolerant of any unforced errors a writer may make. Today, these may include producing the letter on a dot matrix printer or a typewriter, choosing a fancy font in the hopes your letter stands out, or being too familiar; remember, this is a business letter from a professional. Other signals for instant rejection are sending the query to the wrong editor or the wrong house, writing too long a letter (only 1-2 pages max), or omitting one of the required components. Don't give editors any reason to discard your query before they read it.
2. **Remember to categorize your book.** The editor/agent needs to know what type of book your query letter is about: "I have completed a mainstream novel of 90,000 words called "Down Under...." Categorization refers to the shelf your book will sit on in the

bookstore and it needs to be precisely identified for both fiction and non-fiction queries. Take the time to explore and grasp the nuances of the many categories and sub-categories and endeavour to slot your book into the right one—sometimes books straddle categories and make it difficult. Read some books on how to get published and prowl the shelves of the big bookstores, the smaller independents, and perhaps a specialty bookstore or two. Some writers, who have a good relationship with their local bookstore owner, ask them where they would shelve the book. Get writer colleagues to assist too, especially if they have heard you read regularly at your critique group. An accurately pigeon-holed book can mean the difference between rejection and a request for more material.

3. **Include all the required components.** If you don't know exactly what publishers want in a query letter, find out by reading books on the subject or taking a course. Just like any letter, the query has a lead, a body, and a conclusion. The lead for both fiction and non-fiction can be either business-like with a simple statement describing your book or creative with a compelling hook. Novelists also commonly include their book's theme statement, as well as its period, setting, or milieu in the lead. Non-fiction leads may use a surprising statistic, an anecdote, or a provocative question to lure the editor to read further. The body for fiction contains the three to four paragraph synopsis of your story. For non-fiction, the query's body has more details about your subject, the scope and uniqueness of your book, as well as a discussion about its market and competition. The last paragraph in both bodies briefly covers the author's credentials. The conclusion of any query contains the request to send your manuscript or proposal to the publisher. As sales experts tell us, ask for the sale: "May I send a long synopsis and three sample chapters/the manuscript of "Down Under" for your consideration?" Also let the editor/agent know if the query has been sent to others—this will not adversely influence your chances.
4. **Get rid of the passive voice and other "to be" verbs.** Nothing dooms your query more effectively than sentences like "John was seen at the murder site by his wife" or "It was unfortunate...." If you do nothing else, scour your query for this weakness and replace the offending occurrences with concrete, action verbs. Then give your finely honed letter to some experienced writers and get them to critique and edit it—then rewrite it, several times if necessary, passing it back for comment each time.
5. **Format your query properly.** Anything other than a standard business letter format will invite rejection. Your own, tasteful letterhead on white or ivory bond is fine. Times New Roman, single-spaced, and sized at 12 points is easy to read and always acceptable. Margins should be a minimum of one inch. The synopsis paragraphs should be in the present tense and all others, in the past tense.
6. **Enclosures.** The most useful enclosure for an editor/agent is a table of contents for a non-fiction book. If your author credentials are lengthy and distinctly relevant, you may enclose a bio, having concisely mentioned the most important points in the letter itself. Some writers also attach a longer synopsis and/or a copy of one or two short stories or articles they have written. Indicate any enclosures in the normal way at the end of your

query.

Writers often spend twenty hours or more crafting their letter. If yours yields invitations to submit your work from 25% or more of the recipients, your query has achieved considerable success.

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