

How to Write  
a Great  
Query Letter

Insider Tips  
& Techniques  
for Success

by Noah Lukeman

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# How to Write a Great Query Letter:

Insider Tips and Secrets for Success

By

Noah Lukeman

also by Noah Lukeman

*The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile*

*The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life*

*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*

*How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent*

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## Introduction

“It is more difficult to get a qualified literary agent than it is to get a publishing contract.”

--John Boswell

Most writers put a tremendous amount of effort into their content, spending months or years with their manuscripts, agonizing over word choice, scene order, character development. Yet when it comes time to write a query letter, they will often write something off the top of their head, sometimes with a mere hour's effort, and let this suffice to represent their work. They rush through the letter process so that the agent can get to the book itself, which they feel will explain everything. They feel that if an agent just sees the writing, nothing else will matter, and that a poor query letter will even be forgiven.

This is faulty thinking. For agents, the query letter is all. If it's not exceptional, agents will not even request to see the writing, and writers will never even get a chance to showcase their talent. For most writers, the

query letter—which they rushed through—becomes the only piece of writing they will ever be judged by, and unfortunately, the only chance they ever had.

Many writers feel upset that their work is evaluated and judged by a one page letter—much less a letter that doesn't even include a sample of the writing. This is understandable. But this is also the nature of the industry, and something we all have to deal with. It is not unlike an actor's being judged by a mere headshot. It won't change. The solution isn't to rail against the industry, but rather to become expert at writing the query—indeed, to make the query an art form in and of itself.

While it may seem as if a query letter is a shallow way to judge an author, I can tell you from an agent's perspective that it is a very effective tool. For the professional eye, a query letter is much more than just a letter: it shows the agent whether you are able to exhibit word economy, whether you have a grasp on the nature of your own work, and whether you have a realistic grasp on your own background and credentials. If you're writing non-fiction, it also demonstrates whether you have a grasp on your market, your competition. A query letter can also serve to warn an agent, to act as a red flag, if for example you are too aggressive, or pitch too many projects at once. The way it physically looks speaks volumes, as does whether you've

sent it to the right person in the right way. A layman looks at a query and sees a one page letter. An agent looks at it and scans it for 100 different criteria. If you know what to look for, this mere page can tell you more about the writer and his work than you can possibly imagine. I will share these secrets with you here, and teach you the perspective and criteria of a publishing professional.

It is not the writer's fault that he does not naturally know how to craft a great query letter. Writing is an artistic endeavor, while a query letter is a marketing endeavor. Artistic and marketing sensibilities rarely co-exist. Many great artists have trouble crafting a good query, while many great marketers can't deliver on their art form. It is the fortunate writer who is born with the talent for both—but for those who are not, marketing is a learned skill. It takes time, patience and humility. I've encountered many writers who frown on the art of marketing, who consider themselves too much of an artist to deign to write a logline or synopsis.

But a good writer should be humble, and willing to learn from any form of writing. If you are willing to listen, there is much that the query letter can teach you about the craft of writing: the art of crafting a query letter makes a writer re-evaluate his own work and might even lead to his revising it. In this way we come to see that writing a great query letter is in

fact more than a mere marketing exercise: it is a medium through which to re-evaluate and perhaps even alter your work. At the very least, it will offer you insights into your work which you may not have had previously.

The query letter is indeed an art form. Books have been devoted to it, and if you go out and read 10 different books on how to write a query, you might walk away with 10 different approaches, even conflicting advice. None of this makes the query letter easier to grasp; it is by no means a science, and you will never find a consensus on how to craft one. Most writers never had a class in writing a query letter, were never given an expert's perspective, so they are left to their own devices, and must struggle to become a marketer. Authors are not to blame for being ignorant of how to craft a query letter—but they are to blame if they don't take seriously the need to rectify this ignorance, and devote time to learning the query's special art form.

The more practical, hands-on experience someone has with queries, the more you might trust his judgment—particularly if this person is an active publishing professional who evaluates query letters for a living. As a literary agent for the last 13 years, I have received thousands of queries a year—every year. That doesn't make me the final authority on query

letters—but it does mean I've had extensive experience, and can offer you a big-picture perspective.

While the numbers against you are staggering, the road is not as bleak as it may seem. If you learn what to do, learn how to avoid the pitfalls that signal an amateur, you can indeed write a great query letter. And with a great query letter, you will be a lot closer than you can imagine to landing an agent, and eventually getting published. While agents tend to be harsh critics and somewhat jaded, they all also secretly hope to discover the next Clancy or Grisham or Faulkner or Hemingway. It's why they entered the business—the thrill of discovery, or of a financial windfall, or of simply being able to help another human being achieve his dreams. Along the way, agents become besieged with queries and they can become jaded, overwhelmed with work, and read queries with an eye to reject. But no matter how jaded they become, they also, deep down, never let go of the desire to discover the next great author. Some flame exists somewhere inside them waiting to react. It is up to you to spark it.

Great query letters do exist. A great query letter makes an agent sit up and want to read more. It stands out from the fold and shakes an agent from his stupor, regardless of how many queries he's read that day. It makes him excited, makes him want to reach for the phone and call the

author immediately, regardless of what time of night it is. It reminds him why he's in the business. There have been many times in my career when I've sat down late at night, poring through hundreds of queries, exhausted, and not expecting to find anything. Yet there it was. A great query letter. A letter that, despite all odds, filled me with energy late at night, sparked in me a feeling of excitement, that made me want to call the author right then. Sometimes these letters offered no publishing credentials whatsoever, had only the barest idea of a plot, had hardly any evidence of the writing. Yet still they worked. Why? I've given this a great deal of thought, and have analyzed the elements that comprise a great query letter. These are the elements I will share with you here.

## Chapter 1:

### Preparation

Robert Penn Warren's first three novels were unanimously rejected by publishers.

A great query letter is useless in the wrong hands. Not only is the literary agency that you choose important, but of equal importance is the particular agent you choose within that agency. "To Whom it May Concern" and "Dear Agent" cannot exist in a good query letter. Queries must be addressed to specific (appropriate) agents at specific (appropriate) agencies. There are thousands of literary agents out there, and targeting the perfect one will mean the difference in your getting published.

Equally important is your taking the time to research other books similar (or competitive) to yours. If you write non-fiction, it is crucial to know the market and competition; and whether your work is fiction or non-fiction, knowing similar books will help lead you to the appropriate agent, and will be crucial in crafting a truly effective query letter. You will need to know the similar books your potential agents represent, and will need to know the books in your genre which were successful, so that you can reference them in your letter.

So before you craft your query letter, first make sure you do the requisite research, so that your query letter will not open with “To Whom It May Concern.” How to do this research is an art form in and of itself, and is beyond the scope of this book (I cover this topic in depth in my book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com))). For our purposes, I will assume you’ve already done it. If you haven’t done it, do so now.

I will also assume you are targeting agents, not editors. The principles of a good query letter also work when querying an editor, so it is not a lost effort. But in nearly every case it is much more beneficial to target an agent first. (Again, why that is the case is beyond the scope of this

book.) Thus in the following pages we will assume you are querying agents, and you will find repeated references to the agent.

Finally, I'd like you to take a step back and ask yourself what the goal is of your query. Many writers hope to, in this one page letter, convey all the nuances of their plot, their characters, to convey everything about who they are, and to, by its end, have an agent commit to represent them. Herein lies the problem. Most writers expect too much of a query letter, and thus approach it with the wrong mentality. This mentality trickles down to the content, and even the writing style itself.

The goal of a query letter is, simply, to get an agent to want to read more. That's all. Realizing this will alone be of tremendous help. It will take the pressure off you to achieve everything, and thus give your letter a more calm, clear and focused tone. It will prevent you from slipping into a desperate style, from using too-strong sales tactics. And since this is a much less ambitious goal—one which even seems achievable—it will give you a boost of confidence. It also gives you a definition of “success,” so you can know if you've indeed crafted a “successful” query letter.

Now that you've done your research, targeted agents, and defined your goal for “success,” let's get down to the business of crafting a great query letter.

## Chapter 2:

### Formatting

“Be persistent. Editors change; editorial tastes change; markets change. Too many beginning writers give up too easily.”

--John Jakes

With a perpetual mound of query letters in front of him, the jaded publishing professional often just wants to get through the pile, and might find himself actively looking for reasons to reject. If so, he will be searching for any red flags that signal an amateur. If certain flags are present, the professional may not even have to read the content of the letter—thus many queries are rejected without even being read. No red flag is as giant as improper formatting.

Formatting errors can alone get you rejected. They are extremely petty—but also extremely visual. If a letter is filled with bold and underlining, if it is written on pink paper, in a cursive script, in a huge font, this will strike the agent first, before he even reads a word. He will already be biased against you, and his decision will be that much easier.

Let's look, one by one, at different formatting issues that can signal an amateur:

## **The 4 Formatting Red Flags**

### **1. Paper**

We begin with the paper itself. It seems innocent, yet there are many issues an agent might consider when it comes to the paper.

**Color.** On the most obvious level, if the paper is an odd color, such as hot pink or lime green, it is a red flag. The paper should be a basic white, or off white.

**Size.** If the paper is off-sized, for example legal sized, or A4, or if the query is written on a notepad or a Post-It (yes, I have received a query on a Post-It), then something is awry. The paper size should only be 8½ x 11.

Texture. If the paper is too thin, such as onion paper, or some other strange texture, it will signal an amateur. (I have received queries on lined notebook paper, torn out of a spiral ringed notebook.) It is acceptable to send in a query on plain, white copying paper, although it might look cheap. I would advise investing in good quality paper.

At the risk of stating the obvious, make sure the paper is not stained, torn or in any way defaced, and that it is not double-sided. (I have received letters like this.) I once received a query letter written on a piece of oak tag, about two feet by four feet. I appreciated the fact that I didn't have to strain my eyes, but otherwise, it didn't convince me. Large stories don't need large paper.

### Letterhead

Many writers waste precious space in the body of their query letter with their contact information. They include sentences like, “If you wish to contact me, you can call me at 222-2222, or email me at [me@me.com](mailto:me@me.com), or write to me at Name, 10 Main Street, Here, NY, 11111.” Contact information should never be put in the body of a letter. Instead, invest in good, personalized stationery, with your contact information neatly tucked away in the header or footer.

## 2. Ink

Believe it or not, something as subtle as ink can signal an amateur.

To begin with, do not use colored ink. I promise you that red or green ink won't make an agent more inclined to represent you.

If your cartridge is dying, don't mail off a letter which is half-readable and half fading away. Buy a new cartridge and print it again.

If you use an old, dot-matrix printer which makes the type hard to read, it is a red flag. More often than not, so is a query letter written on a typewriter. There are some old-school writers who prefer to use a typewriter, so there are exceptions, but in most cases it signals something awry.

If your letter is handwritten, it definitely signals something is off. This should go without saying, but you'd be surprised how many handwritten letters I continue to receive. Sometimes they come from children, who at a young age are hoping to break into print, but most often they come from prisoners.

For a period of about two years I received handwritten letters from a writer determined to gain my representation. He sent them about once a month, each from a different country. His book was a travelogue, and I suppose he wanted to prove how well-traveled he was. I thought this was odd—that is, until I started receiving weekly postcards from another man who claimed to be captain of a ship, filled with 100 adoring women, who he claimed were rowing his vessel across the Atlantic. Oddly enough, his postcards never even said what his book was about. Eventually they stopped.

Getting back to the normal world, I would also advise not using a cheap inkjet printer. Inkjets have evolved phenomenally over the last few years, so new ones (even cheap ones) tend to deliver a quality that can rival a laser printer. But older inkjets tend to offer a quality which looks visibly cheaper than a laser printer. It is acceptable, but at the same time it does not put your best foot forward. I hate advising writers to spend money, but I would advise your investing in either a laser printer or a high quality inkjet. The difference seems subtle, but to the trained eye, it is apparent. A laser printer more likely indicates a professional.

### **3. Fonts**

Fonts can also signal an amateur. Your font should be a standard, simple font, such as Times or Garamond. Some writers use a strange or quirky font, presumably to stand out. This only stigmatizes you. Some fonts, like courier (*example*), simply look cheap, while others, like calligraphy (*example*), resemble a wedding invitation. Either way, don't switch fonts mid-letter, for example, to quote your own writing, or for emphasis. Choose one font and stick to it.

An odd-sized font also signals something awry. Your font should be standard 12-point. If too large, it will look childish; if too small, it will

make it harder for the agent to read. Agents read for a living, and the last thing you want to do is make your letter harder on the eyes. They will put off reading it. Since the 12-point font size can differ for each computer, if you're unsure of the standard size, always err on the side of making your font too large.

Writers tend to be anxious to get their point across in a query, and might try to emphasize text by any means possible. I often receive letters overflowing with bold, underlined and italicized writing. It can be spotted instantly, before an agent even reads a word. It gives off an air of desperation, of a cheap sales letter. If you must emphasize text, do it sparingly, and only use italics. Never use bold or underlining, as this signals an amateur.

#### **4. Spacing**

The professional query letter is pleasing on the eye. With a cursory glance one can spot ample margins in every direction, properly indented paragraphs, and proper spacing in general. Subconsciously, this makes a difference. If something is off, it can signal an amateur.

Your margins should be at least one inch in every direction. I've received numerous letters with tiny margins, allowing the text to stretch all

the way across the page in an effort to get more material in. This only makes it harder for the agent to read.

Justified margins are harder on the agent's eye, and are not standard.

All paragraphs should be indented.

The letter, in general, should be single-spaced, with no line breaks between paragraphs. I've seen letters double or even triple-spaced, with additional line spaces between the paragraphs. This is substandard, and will signal an amateur.

### **Why CAPS Matter**

While we are taught book titles should be italicized, there is a convention in the publishing industry that book titles are set in ALL CAPS. This alone can signal a pro. Someone who really knows the industry will put his book title in ALL CAPS. The titles of other books, though, while they can go either way, are usually put in italics, as are the titles of literary magazines and other publications.

## Chapter 3:

### The 3 Paragraph Rule

“After sixteen rejections, Irving Stone’s *Lust for Life* was finally accepted and published in 1934. It has now sold about twenty five million copies.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

The best secret I can teach you about writing a great query letter is that less is more. Writers feel the need to cram their letters with information, to widen the margins, lengthen the page, even take several pages. They go on about their plot, their biography, they become personal, start up a one way conversation. It is a huge mistake. Mark Twain said, “I don’t have time to write you a short letter, so I’m writing you a long one

instead.” How true this is. Anyone can write an effective long letter. Few people can write an effective short one.

Nothing in a query letter should be wasted. As with a resume, every word choice must be deliberate. I’m always impressed when I receive a query which takes up only half a page or less (which is rare). I understand how hard it is for a writer to achieve this, to fight back the urge to tell more, to condense all he has to say to a mere few sentences. More often than not, I’ll be intrigued. If he can exhibit this kind of discipline in a query letter, it bodes well for what he can do in the actual book.

But most query letters don’t do this. So the first thing you must do is rein in your query. Under no circumstance should a query letter exceed one page. *Ever*. If so, it is a clear red flag, a sign of an amateur. It is just a convention, but it happens to be a good one—not just because it is convenient for the agent, but because it is a fine test of a writer’s skill. Good writing is entirely about economy; good writers don’t use three words when they can use one. Word economy not only indicates that words aren’t wasted, but more importantly that all word choice is deliberate. When deliberate, word choice is more thought-out; when such effort of thought is put into each individual word, an equal amount of effort will often be applied to the whole. Plot choices will be more thought out; character

choices will be, as will choices of setting, direction, pacing, progression, journey and all the other elements that go into a great book.

The word-economy litmus test for a writer is the query letter. Can he say what he needs to in merely one page? Can he condense a 300 page story to three lines? Can he do all of this and still convey his plot, his background, convey why his story is unique and worthy? To do so, he will have to make some amazing word choices, exhibit amazing economy. If he is an inherently economical writer, he will know how to do this. If not, it will show. It is not easy. We in the publishing industry know this.

Yet this is your job. I've received many queries that went on for two or even three pages, the writer claiming he had so much to say that he needed more room. But this is a poor excuse. If a writer can't achieve what he needs to in one page, his writing ability is simply not developed enough. It is nearly certain that his manuscript, too, will be longer than it needs to be. Writing is about discipline, and the first place to exhibit this is in the query letter.

Part of the reason why writers allow their query letters to sprawl is because they don't realize that a query letter must have structure. Without structure, there is license to have an infinite number of paragraphs on any number of topics; without structure, there is no plan on how to begin, how

to progress, and how to end. Without an overall game plan, anything can happen, and if you leave that window open, anything *will* happen. Like an architect, you need a blueprint, exact specifications on how you'll proceed. And the best way to do this is to follow what I call the Three Paragraph Rule.

If you look at most query letters, the first thing you'll notice is a haphazard number of paragraphs. It is quite common to see a plot described over the course of two or even three paragraphs, to see biographies stretching over multiple paragraphs, to have filler in between which is neither pitch nor explanation. Successful query letters should consist of three paragraphs. No more, no less. This principle alone will save you. It will prevent you from adding that fourth paragraph, from adding filler or random sentences. It will give you a structure, game plan and direction.

Of course it is still possible to ruin the content within these paragraphs, to go on too long within this structure. Indeed, each paragraph is an art form in and of itself—it must be, if it is to convey what it needs to in such a finite amount of space. So let's look at each on its own terms and examine its unique demands.

## Chapter 4:

### Your First Paragraph: The Introduction

“I finished my first book seventy-six years ago. I offered it to every publisher on the English-speaking earth I had ever heard of. Their refusals were unanimous: and it did not get into print until, fifty years later, publishers would publish anything that had my name on it...”

--George Bernard Shaw

The first paragraph should consist of a one sentence introduction. This is your chance (perhaps your only chance) to grab the agent, since many agents will be immediately biased—for good or for bad—within a sentence or two. Contrary to popular belief, this doesn’t mean throwing out a hokey line, or a hard sell, or a gimmicky sentence, like “Don’t throw out this letter!” It means *truly* hooking the agent, making him want to pay

attention. And the way to do this is to immediately demonstrate that you're not contacting him haphazardly.

If a writer queries via a referral, he will always begin with, "I am writing to you because your client, John Smith, recommended that I do so." Thus an agent, whether he likes it or not, must take the first sentence of any given letter very seriously, if for no other reason than he risks offending an existing client (or editor, or other business contact) that may have sent him a referral. Thus, you have a great opportunity.

Chances are you won't have a referral, as many writers are not lucky enough to have friends who have great agents and are willing to recommend them. But you can still make up for it. The way to do so is to write something along the lines of, "I am writing to you because you represented TITLE by AUTHOR, and I feel my book is similar." The way to grab the agent is to make it personal, to make it about *him* instead of about you. Referencing one of his titles will help accomplish this.

More importantly, a personal reference will signal to the agent that yours is not a random query letter. It will show that you're approaching him for a specific reason, that you've put a great deal of time and energy into researching the market; it will show that you know who he represents, and the types of books he's sold. It will put a positive association into his mind,

as it will make him think of a book he sold. It will offer a comparison, allowing him to immediately grasp the type of book you're writing and thus help him decide if he wants to represent another like it. It will show that you know the market, that you have an objective grasp of what your own book is about and where it fits within that market. It will indicate that you've put care into your writing, since writers who put so much energy into the right approach generally put an equal amount of care into their writing. You will start the agent off on a positive foot, and make him more inclined to like the rest of your letter. And since this first paragraph will only be one sentence, it will be amply spaced, and thus more likely that an agent will actually read and finish it (as opposed to an opening sentence which heralds a 10 sentence paragraph). In this one sentence, this one paragraph, you will have accomplished 10 different objectives.

All of this assumes, of course, that you've already done the weeks or months of requisite research in order to know precisely which agents represent titles appropriately similar to yours. (How to go about doing this research is beyond the scope of this book, but I discuss it at length in my book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com)) If you bluff, if you don't truly do the research, it will show. I've received many letters which referenced a book I

sold, but when I read the rest of the query, I realized that their book was not at all similar; it was just a gimmick to get me to pay attention. When an agent realizes this, he will just be annoyed. So when referencing a book, make sure it is truly appropriate.

But if you've done the research and query a truly appropriate agent and reference a truly appropriate title, then you are already off to a shining head start. Imagine the advantage you now have over a writer who mails off a letter to a random agent at a random agency and merely begins it with "To Whom it May Concern." Half your battle is already won.

## Chapter 5:

### Your Second Paragraph: The Plot

“Lee Pennington has been published in more than 300 magazines—and rejected so many thousand times that in one six-month period he papered all four walls of a room with rejection slips.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

The second paragraph of your query letter should offer a short description of the plot, and nothing else. I emphasize *short* because one of the biggest mistakes writers make in their queries is allocating too much space to plot summary. Writers don't realize that many agents will make an immediate decision based merely on the genre and the author's credentials. If it is a genre they are actively looking to represent and the author's credentials are great, then they will pay close attention to the plot synopsis. But if it is a genre of fiction (or non-fiction) that they have not had success

with in the past, or are not keen on representing, and/or if the author's credentials are not impressive enough, then the details of the plot will make little (if any) difference. In either case, offering a long plot description is a mistake, since at this early stage, agents only want to consider your query in the broadest possible sense.

As a rule of thumb, limit your plot synopsis to three sentences. It is hard to condense a book to a single paragraph, and even harder to condense this paragraph to a mere few sentences. But it has to be done. Such economy is the mark of good writing, and the overall length of the query letter must be kept in mind.

**Exercise: Create a Logline**

The process of condensing your plot description is similar to what you do when you reduce your plot to a logline. A “logline” is generally considered to be a one sentence plot summary. In fact, condensing your plot to a single sentence is a good exercise: if you can get your plot down to one sentence, imagine what you can do with three. A three sentence plot description will suddenly seem generous. By doing it this way—shrinking more than necessary, then expanding—you get to strip your plot down to its bare bones, then build it back up, and get to see what is truly essential.

**3 Common Mistakes to Avoid in your Plot Paragraph****1. Don't exceed one paragraph**

As explained above, you cannot exceed three sentences, and it should also go without saying that these three sentences should belong to

one paragraph. Do not use two or more paragraphs to convey your plot.

This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many queries I receive which use two, three or even four paragraphs to summarize the plot.

Remember, there will always be time for an extended synopsis (for example, a one page synopsis) at a later stage, which you can send if requested. Now is not that time.

## **2. Don't name names**

When reading a new book, it takes effort for a reader to stop and learn new characters' names. The same holds true with reading a query letter—it expends unnecessary effort on the agent's behalf to stop and absorb a character's name. And almost always it is unnecessary. At this early stage, an agent doesn't need to know your protagonist's name; all he needs to know is “the protagonist” or “the antagonist” or “the main character” or “the narrator.” You never want him to have to slow down or expend any unnecessary energy, and you don't want to include anything not absolutely necessary. Any well-written logline or plot synopsis should be able to exist just fine without a character's name—in fact, if it needs a name in order to work, then it is a sign something is awry.

### **3. Don't mention subplots**

An agent does not need to know subplots at this early stage.

Remember, he will likely make a decision based just on the genre, and if he reads so far as to decide based on the plot, he will only want to know the general concept. He certainly will not need to know subplots. Summarizing your plot in a few sentences is enough of a task—don't try to cram in subplots. Indeed, sometimes writers use subplots as an escape for focusing on the main plot, because the work is lacking a strong plot to begin with.

## **4 Positive Traits to Have in Your Plot Paragraph**

### **1. Specifics**

Strong writing is specific. Instead of writing “There was a string of murders in a small town” you might write “Four people were hacked to death in Wichita, Kansas over a two week period.” Instead of “My novel tells the story of a natural disaster that occurred in the middle of the century,” you might say, “My novel tells the story of the Great Earthquake of 1948 which killed 221 people.” Specific writing not only indicates a strong writer, it also helps the agent immediately get a fix on the plot.

Indeed, sometimes authors write in generalities to avoid getting down to specifics, as there isn't much to say. If you have the facts, use them.

## **2. Time period**

You'll notice in the corrected examples above specific time periods. This is not by accident. Specific writing means a specific period of time. Indeed, time is a tremendous tool, one of the strongest elements you can incorporate in your plot paragraph, as it conveys so much with a single word. 1776. 1812. 1945. These few numbers evoke an entire feeling.

Similarly, time frame is extraordinarily effective. "My novel takes place over three weeks." Two days. A weekend. 24 hours. 10 years. With only a few words, each of these brings so much to mind. It gives an agent an immediate grasp on the structure of your work; it also shows him that your book does indeed have a structure, and that you, the writer, have enough objectivity to be aware of it. Compare:

"My novel takes place over a short period of time."

Or:

"My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842."

A huge difference. The first example tells us nothing: it could be a novel about anything. In the second, though, a tremendous amount is

accomplished. In a mere sentence, without a word about the plot, we can almost picture the book. Only one thing is missing.

### **3. Location**

And that is location. “My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842” gives you an idea, but “My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842 in Biloxi, Mississippi” completes the picture. Fargo, North Dakota. Brooklyn, New York. Los Angeles. Rome. Reykjavik. Location says so much, evokes an atmosphere, a climate, a people, a language, a culture. A novel set in New Orleans will offer a different sensibility than one set in Northern Maine.

Location, like time, is an effective tool in creating a logline, since it conveys so much in so little space. It also, by its nature, demands specificity, another trait of good writing. Location, like time, demands a writer to wrack his brain and ask himself what, precisely, is the main location of his work. Some locations are so big, or so overused (like New York City), that naming them doesn't really evoke much that is unusual—indeed, doesn't even bring to mind a specific location, since anyone who lives in New York City knows that the Lower East Side is a completely different city than the Upper West Side. Thus, if you find yourself stuck

with a rather generic location, try to make it more specific. For example, instead of New York City, you might say Harlem; instead of Los Angeles, you might say West Hollywood. Specificity also helps establish authenticity, especially if your work is set in a place that few people would know about unless they had been there or had researched it heavily.

McMurdo Station, Antarctica. Poznan, Poland. If the writer chooses such a setting, there is a greater likelihood he knows what he's writing about.

Consider also that an unusual climate can sometimes substitute for (and/or complement) a location. For example, "My novel takes place during an unusual warm spell in New York in February, over a three day period of 70 degrees." Or during a cold spell in Los Angeles, or a drought in Texas, or heavy rains in Tennessee, or heavy snow in Marquette, Michigan, or the burning heat of the Arizona desert.

#### **4. Comparison**

Comparing your book to another book (or film) can say it all—and most importantly, do so in just a few words. For example, you could say:

"My book tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who returns from the war and feels alienated. He gets into trouble with the law when antagonized

without reason. He must fight for his survival, and fight the injustice of his own government and people.”

Or:

“My book is in the vein of *First Blood*.”

You see how much space you can save, while also painting a more accurate and precise picture.

Comparing your book to another work accomplishes four tasks: 1) it helps an agent get a fix on the plot immediately; 2) it helps the agent identify the genre immediately; 3) it demonstrates that you know your genre, and know which other books were successful (and that you know what the competition is); and 4) it compares your work to a successful work, thus implanting a positive association.

For some writers, especially high concept writers, finding a comparison will be easy; but others, especially more literary authors, might find themselves stumped. It can force them to ask themselves hard questions, like what genre am I really writing in? What books are truly good comparisons? How exactly is my book different? What is my style? Perhaps your book is a crossover of genres, like a detective story with a supernatural element. In such a case, you might resort to the Hollywood technique of saying something like, “*The Haunting* meets *L.A. Confidential*

in my novel.” If you go this route, though, just don’t take it too far. “My book is a combination of *The Mosquito Coast*, *The Addams Family* and *The Waltons*, with a touch of *Crossing Over with John Edwards* thrown in.” This will only confuse an agent.

Another effective technique is comparing your main character to another memorable character from literature. “My character is Rambo-esque,” or “My novel features an Iago-esque character,” or “he is the next Hannibal Lecter” says it all.

If you can’t think of any books or characters that offer a strong comparison, then at least name the genre itself, and make an effort to at least name your style of writing. For example, you might not be able to summarize your novel but you might be able to say that you’re writing in the tradition of Flannery O’Connor. Be humble and careful when doing this, though, since you don’t want to come off as being megalomaniacal. I’ve seen too many query letters that began, “I am the next Grisham,” or “Stephen King holds nothing next to me,” or “Shakespeare would have been proud.”

If despite your best efforts you can’t identify any books remotely similar to yours, or any writers that are in your tradition, or even identify the genre itself, then this is a red flag. You may lack objectivity, self-

awareness of your own work and style. This can carry through to the writing itself. Many beginning writers might be proud of this, might consider it a stamp of originality. But more often than not this simply indicates someone striving to be original for originality's sake. In such a case, effort is diverted away from developing the characters and plot, and instead directed towards originality. It always shows in the writing. Such writers need to learn that having traditional confines can, paradoxically, allow the most room for originality.

**Exercise: Refining Your Plot Synopsis**

- Take your plot synopsis and share it with five trusted readers. Ask each if they immediately get what the book is about. Ask each for their understanding of what type of book it is, of what genre they think it falls under, of what they think happens. Ask them if they'd be intrigued to read more. Ask them why or why not. Are there any common reactions? Can you make any adjustments based on this?
- Read your plot synopsis aloud. How does it sound when you vocalize it? If you had been given 15 seconds with a top executive and pitched that synopsis aloud, do you think they would have given you a deal based on that? Why or why not? Does it feel different spoken than it does on the page? Can you make any adjustments as a result?

- Pretend a stranger has just asked you the question that all writers dread: “What is your book about?” Can you answer that question quickly and definitively, in 10 seconds or less? If not, why not? The answer to this will be the key to your finding the right synopsis for your plot.
  
- Looking at your plot synopsis on paper, does it capture the essence of your story? Does it feel specific? Unique? If not, is there anything you can do to enhance it?

## Chapter 6:

### Your Third Paragraph: Your Bio

“It seems important to me that beginning writers ponder this—that since 1964, I have never had a book, story, or poem rejected that was not later published. If you know what you are doing, eventually you will run into an editor who knows what he/she is doing. It may take years, but never give up.”

--Joseph Hansen

Your third and final paragraph should be your author biography.

This is the paragraph that causes some writers trepidation—and for good reason. Most query letters are made or broken by the author’s bio, and many agents’ decisions are primarily based on this. Indeed, some agents will scan over the letter and go directly to the bio, deciding whether to even go back and consider the rest of the letter based on this. If they don’t like what they find, your plot synopsis might not even be read.

If your bio shows that you have published in *The New Yorker*, or had a book published with Knopf, nearly every agent will want to read your manuscript, even if they are not enthralled by your plot synopsis. Such is the power of the bio—and of course, of your credentials. If you do not have these things (which most writers don't), then there is a battle ahead of you, and you will need to compensate as best you can. That is what we'll focus on here.

Like a good plot paragraph, a good bio paragraph is short. It gets to the point, says only what it needs to, and concludes. Unlike a plot paragraph, though, a good bio paragraph doesn't *always* need to be short: if you genuinely have enough major credits to support a lengthy bio paragraph, then go for it—in fact, in such a case, a long bio would be a plus. It is rare, though, to encounter the writer who genuinely has so many major publications, credits and awards that he needs several sentences to encapsulate it all. Most of the time bio paragraphs are unnecessarily long—and this, like an unnecessarily long plot paragraph, is a red flag. It is, once again, a sign of wasteful writing. Economy is key, and one must constantly keep in mind the overall length of the query.

As an agent, it is better to encounter a writer who has no credits, and who is aware of this fact and keeps his bio short, than a writer who has no

credits but wastes several sentences or more trying to make up for it with an inflated, irrelevant bio. Not only is he wasting words (which a writer should never do) but it signals he might also be out of touch, might consider all of the irrelevant information to be genuine assets. When you encounter the writer who states, “I drive a tractor all day long, so I have plenty of experience being outdoors, and have the best perspective to write a man-against-nature thriller,” it makes you pause. Indeed, writers are usually their own worst enemies in their bios, listing information which not only doesn’t help them, but actually hurts.

Let’s begin by looking at what you should *not* do in your bio.

#### **4 Common Mistakes to Avoid in Your Author Bio**

##### **1. Don’t list minor credits**

Over the years I have been asked countless times whether one should include minor credits in one’s author bio. This question seems to be a matter of great debate among writers. It shouldn’t be, because the answer is simple: No. Listing minor or amateur publication credits—such as publications in local magazines or newspapers—will not make an agent more likely to take you on. All it will do is associate you with the amateur

publication, and make the agent think of you in an amateur way. This also holds true for the mention of minor awards and of endorsements from minor or unknown authors.

The impulse to mention minor credits is understandable: it is intimidating to face an author biography having nothing of substance to say. Nonetheless, you must fight your impulse; if you have nothing impressive to say, don't say anything. Remember that agents do not impress easily anyway.

If you are a more experienced author, when your publication credits start to accumulate do not forget to shed the mention of old credits as you garner new, more impressive ones. It's like shedding old, more minor information off of your resume. No matter how hard gained those minor credits were, allow them to subside. The higher caliber credits you have, the better it will represent you. More is not better. Better to have only three major magazine credits than to have 3 major credits and 20 minor ones.

## **2. Don't include irrelevant information**

Many writers understand the importance of economy when it comes to the plot synopsis, yet when it comes to the author biography paragraph, many writers tend to lose their discipline. Maybe it's because they're

nervous, or maybe because they feel insecure, or don't feel they have much impressive to say—whatever the reason, they tend to sprawl. They'll talk about a writing class they had in fourth grade, mention how everyone in their office thinks they are a good writer.

Don't allow any information in your author biography paragraph which is not absolutely relevant. Since it might be hard to gain objectivity on such an issue, show it to a few critical readers. Ask them if anything feels extraneous; sometimes you'll be surprised to find that different readers will find information extraneous which you considered important.

### **3. Don't be overly personal**

This demands its own rule, since many writers tend to get (unnecessarily) personal in their author biographies. They might throw in information about their children, their uncles, their grandmother's history; they might talk about their favorite hobbies, how they spend their time, why they decided to retire and write a book. Many beginning writers feel the need to justify why they are writing in the first place, and thus an agent will encounter bios explaining why they feel the need to write, what got them started writing. Being too personal might not turn off an agent—but lack of economy definitely will.

#### **4. Don't forget the visuals**

As discussed, some agents will scan a query letter immediately for the bio and based on the author credits alone make an immediate decision: if there are no publication credits whatsoever, some query letters will be discarded. And the way for an agent to immediately tell if there are publication credits is to look for italics or ALL CAPS, either of which indicate a title. In this way, a discriminating agent can decide on a query letter within about three seconds, without having even read a word.

Some writers do indeed have publication credits, but for whatever reason they forget to italicize them (or put them in caps) in their bios. They risk getting themselves rejected immediately even though, ironically, they have the credits. So if you have book publication credits, make sure they are in all caps, and if you have magazine or newspaper credits, italicize them.

### **8 Positive Elements to Include in Your Author Bio**

#### **1. Publication credits**

This should go without saying. Don't include these if minor, but if at all substantial, then they must be included. This, more than anything, is what separates you from the pack. Prestigious magazine credits will make a difference. Book publication credits will make an even bigger difference, and book publication credits with major houses will make all the difference. Keep in mind, though, that self-published book credits are rarely taken seriously by publishing professionals. Also, if your last book was published in 1972, it won't impress an agent nearly as much as if it had been published one year ago. So if you've published many books, make sure you make a point of including the date, if recent.

## **2. Track record**

It is an unfortunate reality of the book business that most published books don't sell well. If you are one of the lucky few who has had a book published and has had good sales figures (known as a "track record" in the business), for example, over 20,000 copies sold, then be sure to include this fact. This alone can make the difference in helping you land a book deal.

## **3. Subsidiary Rights Sales**

If one of your previously published books was fortunate enough to have had multiple translation rights sales in other countries, or film rights sales to Hollywood, or major book club rights sales, or serialization, or audio sales, then definitely mention this. For example, some authors are so lucky to have had one of their books sell translation rights to 20 countries, totalling several hundred thousand dollars worth of additional income. Other authors have had their books optioned year after year by Hollywood. These alone can make the difference in an agent wanting to represent you.

#### **4. Strong industry connections**

Some authors who are querying will have been previously published by many excellent publishers over a 5 or 10 year period. Some of these authors will have made connections with powerful acquiring editors over the years, who remain fans of their work and who are still active in the industry. If this is the case, do mention it. If an agent sees, for example, that five powerful, active editors are fans of your work and are eager to read anything new you write, this might help convince him.

#### **5. Awards, grants, fellowships or other laurels**

If you are so lucky to have these, and they are substantial, by all means include them. The more the better.

## **6. Writing-related education or prestigious residencies**

If you've gone to the trouble to complete an MFA program, then chances are you won't forget to include it in your bio. But often times I encounter writers who've taken extended workshops with prestigious authors, or who won scholarships to prestigious writing residencies or colonies, and who forget to include this fact. In the craft of creative writing, there is no real formal education; MFA programs come close, but creative writing is by no means a science, and ultimately the MFA doesn't even necessarily mean anything. Thus the more you can make a case for your writing background, education and skills, the better.

## **7. Potential endorsements**

Again, this seems obvious, but many writers don't think of this in advance. If you already have endorsements in hand from well-known authors, now is the time to mention this. It can make a big difference in getting an agent to pay attention. It also demonstrates how well-connected you are, and associates you in the agent's mind with powerful authors.

Alternately, if you are close friends with famous authors and are confident that they will endorse you, mention this.

## **8. Insider knowledge**

I said earlier not to get too personal in your bio, not to include your life history. There is one exception: if your life experience and background are truly relevant to your subject matter, then certainly mention it. It will lend your work authenticity. For example, if you're writing a military thriller and served in the Navy SEALs, this should be mentioned; if you're writing a spy thriller and you worked for the CIA, this counts. But if you're merely an avid reader of spy thrillers, this would not count and should not be mentioned.

Of course, not every author has all of these positive traits at their disposal. But bios can indeed be built: through patience and hard work, these things can be attained. There are specific ways to go about doing this, but this is beyond the scope of this book (I discuss this topic in depth in my book *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent*

([www.landliteraryagent.com](http://www.landliteraryagent.com))

## Chapter 7:

### Fiction Versus Non-Fiction

“Emily Dickinson had only seven of her poems published in her lifetime.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

Many times I'll finish lecturing a room full of writers and someone in the room will inevitably ask about querying for a book of non-fiction.

Does the writer of non-fiction require a different query letter? If so, how?

It is a good question. There are indeed a plethora of issues unique to the writer of non-fiction, elements that must be emphasized, and elements that must be avoided. While general principles, such as word economy, will remain the same, many of the issues we've covered, such as plot,

characters, publication in literary magazines, are geared for the fiction writer only.

Writing a non-fiction query letter is an art in and of itself. Some small detail can make an agent want to read more, while some minor omission can get you rejected. Building on the principles we've already discussed, let's take a close look at the specific rules for a non-fiction query.

### **Length**

The strict length requirements for a fiction query might be loosened a bit for non-fiction. This does not mean you can exceed one page, but it does mean you can afford to go on a bit more about your concept, the market, the competition, the demographic, your platform and credentials. However, you should only expand on these elements (which we'll cover in depth below) if you truly need to; this does not give you license to loosen up on strict word economy, or to allow irrelevant information.

### **The First Paragraph**

The first paragraph remains the same. You still need to contact a specific agent for a specific reason, and to let him know this right away.

The requirements of market research are the same, as is the need to reference a title. The only difference is that it will be easier for you to research titles similar to yours for a perfect comparison.

### **The Second Paragraph**

Here's where the changes begin. You obviously won't be referencing a plot here, or characters, setting, or time period. Instead, you will have to summarize your non-fiction book. You still have to let the agent know what it's about in a pithy, concise way. But your approach will be different.

## **7 Elements to Include When Summarizing Non-Fiction**

### **1. The Genre**

You must be able to immediately and concisely convey the genre. An agent first wants to be able to get a fix on the category before he jumps into a description of a specific idea. Sometimes a single word can do it, such as "parenting" or "popular psychology." This seems obvious, but many times writers will plow ahead, miring an agent in a long, confusing description, without first grounding him in the genre.

## **2. The Hook**

Once you've established the genre, you must differentiate your book within that genre. You must convey your angle or hook immediately. For example, "My book will be the first home improvement book geared for women." Or, "My book will be the first dog training book for how to work with attack dogs." An agent should be able to get the concept within one line or less. When it comes to non-fiction, this hook is one of the most important elements in an agent's decision process.

## **3. Structure**

Successful practical non-fiction books usually have a powerful structure. 30 Days to Becoming Stress Free. 7 Steps to Taking Over Your Company. 12 Principles of a Spiritual Life. 6 Weeks to Losing the Baby Weight. In many of these books, the structure is synonymous with the very concept and content. Hopefully your book will already be conceived with such a structure; if so, mention it here. It is an effective tool, as it conveys much about your book with few words, thus allowing you to keep your query short. (If you don't already have a structure, here is another example

of how the process of crafting a query letter can help you re-evaluate and possibly re-conceive a better book.)

#### **4. Competition**

When it comes to non-fiction, it is absolutely crucial to know your competition and to propose a concept that truly stands out. It is so important that it deserves a mention upfront, in your query letter. Don't devote a lot of space to this here (you can reserve that for the proposal itself), but you do need a line or two which demonstrates that you know what the competition is, and that you have a concept which has never been done before. In the non-fiction world, having a book which stands out from the competition can be synonymous with its very concept. For example, "In the crowded gardening genre, there is not a single book devoted to roses that bloom in winter." Mentioning the competition also helps establish your professionalism, as it shows you have done enough research to know the market before plunging in—which also bodes well for the research you will have done for the content itself.

## **5. Comparison**

While you must establish that there is no other book on the market precisely like your book, you also must be able to offer a comparison to a book which was similar—although not precisely the same—which did well. As explained above, having a successful comparison helps prove a market exists for the book, and that your book has the potential to become a bestseller. Being unique is not enough. “My book is the only book on the market to examine the green grasshopper of East Africa.” This is unique; there won’t be any competition. But the writer also has not proven there is a market. Referencing a bestseller in the genre can make all the difference.

## **6. Establish the Market**

A successful comparison goes a long way, but it is only the first step. A truly effective query letter will use numbers, statistics and demographics to prove the case that a hungry market exists for a book. For example, “28 million people in America alone suffer from acne. My book will be the only book on the market geared just for them.” Don’t assume that an agent or editor will inherently understand the size of your proposed market, or the demand for a book like yours. Always make the case. When doing so, numbers have power. They help the agent make the case to the publisher,

and help the publisher make the case to their sales reps, who in turn make the case to bookstore owners. They also convey a lot of information in a small amount of space, and thus are ideal for a query letter.

## **7. Authenticity**

Finally, it helps if you can validate the authenticity of your idea. Many writers propose, for example, a new program on how to lose weight—yet they never establish that their plan works, or give us reason to believe it does. Sometimes they say they have tried it out on friends and family, or possibly haven't tried it out at all, but have merely pieced it together from research. They expect us to trust them, but this is not enough. Such a writer will have no chance against a writer who has tested a plan for 20 years at Stanford and can provide conclusive, scientific evidence that it works. (This is the competition you're up against.) Anything you can add to help prove that your book is the real deal—for example, new research, or testimonials—will go a long way. Ultimately, a huge factor in this will be you—your background, credentials and credibility.

And for that, we turn back to the author bio.

## **The Third Paragraph**

The third paragraph essentially remains the same, in that it is your author bio. But when querying for a work of non-fiction, certain elements that were crucial for fiction—such as literary magazine credits or endorsements from novelists—will no longer be relevant. Other aspects, which were not an issue for fiction, will be crucial. There are two in particular:

## **2 Crucial Elements of a Non-Fiction Bio**

### **1. Author credibility and expertise**

As discussed, author credibility and expertise is a major part of the equation when querying for non-fiction. Who you are is as important as your concept; in most cases, the two are inextricable. A book on dog training must come from a dog trainer, while a book on hairstyles must come from a stylist. Your personal background doesn't matter in the fiction world, but when it comes to non-fiction, the more credentialed you are, the better your chances of landing a deal. Experience also helps establish credibility: you might not have a Ph.D., but perhaps you have 30 years of

working with animals. Indeed, some book deals are made on author credentials alone, even if the concept is not all that new, and even if it is already a crowded market. If President Obama wants to write a book on diplomacy, for example, he will have no trouble finding a publisher, regardless of what he has to say.

Thus if you have a relevant background or credentials, make sure to play them up here. I've seen authors omit the extent of their expertise or background in their query letters, assuming the agent would know.

## **2. Platform**

In the publishing industry, you will commonly hear the term “platform.” An author’s “platform” means the venues he already has in place to promote his book. For example a TV or radio show, or national column would be considered a platform. Someone who speaks frequently would be considered to have a platform, albeit a smaller one, as would someone with a fan base of 20,000 people. This has a huge impact on a publisher’s decision when it comes to non-fiction.

Thus if you have a substantial platform, the place to mention it is here. This will ideally be your own TV or radio show, a national newspaper or magazine column; regular TV and radio show appearances also work, as

well as being quoted regularly in national newspapers and magazines, a following of readers who read your last book, a substantial number of people you speak to each year, or a major internet presence. You need to prove to agents that you're out there in a substantial and sustained enough way to be able to sell books when the time comes.

Of course, not every author has the great credentials to start with, or has the incredible platform. It can seem daunting to authors to ever attain these things, yet it is possible. Platforms can be built. How to go about doing this is beyond the scope of this book, but I do discuss this topic in depth in my book *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landliteraryagent.com](http://www.landliteraryagent.com))

### **Different Types of Non-Fiction**

“Non-fiction” is a broad category, and can mean many things. While the principles outlined above hold true for all query letters of non-fiction, there are unique issues when dealing with each genre. For example, if you are querying about a cookbook, your approach will be different than if you're querying about a serious work of history.

In general, highly practical and prescriptive categories of non-fiction, such as parenting, psychology, diet, fitness and health, tend to warrant the same marketing approach. Query letters should emphasize how such a book can help the reader, how a reader can easily use and implement the techniques in such a book and possibly emerge a different person. Having a structure or plan will be of great consequence. When querying about serious narrative non-fiction, though, such as works of biography, history and current affairs, there won't be any talk of how such a book can help the reader. Rather, there should be an emphasis on the author's credentials, on his scholarly background, and on his extensive research. And there obviously won't be any mention of a program, steps or a plan.

Memoir falls into a class by itself. It is the only exception to the general rule of non-fiction versus fiction, as it really falls into the category of fiction when it comes to marketing. You will have to emphasize characters, plot, setting—all of the issues pertinent to fiction; likewise, the market and competition won't matter, as it is a unique work. For all intents and purposes, when querying with a memoir, ignore the rules outlined for non-fiction, and follow those for fiction. Incidentally, the rules about non-fiction being easier to sell also disappear when it comes to memoir; it is as hard to sell as fiction.

## Chapter 8:

### Final Issues to Keep in Mind

Stephen King's first four novels were rejected. "This guy from Maine sent in this novel over the transom," said Bill Thompson, his former editor at Doubleday. Mr. Thompson, sensing something there, asked to see subsequent novels, but still rejected the next three. However, King withstood the rejection, and Mr. Thompson finally bought the fifth novel, despite his colleague's lack of enthusiasm, for \$2,500. It was called *Carrie*.

By this point, you have completed your three paragraphs. Your query is now much stronger, solid in every respect of the word. Now we're going to go over small, final issues, to make sure that your query letter is not only good, but *great*.

## **The Final Sentence**

Throughout this book I've been stringent about limiting the letter to three paragraphs. But this begs the question: what about a conclusion to the letter? A closing sentence? Should one just conclude a query abruptly after the author biography?

If you were to end your query letter after your bio, with nothing following, it would be satisfactory. Remember, always err on the side of being too brief.

That said, there is nothing wrong with a final, concluding sentence. Something short and courteous, along the lines of, "Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you." Such a sentence would be indented so that it's given its own paragraph. If you want to call this a fourth paragraph, then you can. But really it's just a concluding sentence, amply spaced.

Finally, as you go back through your letter one last time, remember that small touches can make the difference in your landing an agent, while small mistakes can signal an amateur. As you take one last look, be sure to avoid these seven common mistakes:

## **7 Common Mistakes**

### **1. Don't pitch more than one book**

Some writers think an agent will be more likely to take them on if they pitch several books at a time. They think that if they pitch numerous ideas they will increase their chances of an agent liking one, or that if an agent sees multiple ideas, the agent will realize how prolific they are and will be more likely to take them on. This is not true. When I receive a query letter which says, "Mr. Lukeman, I guarantee you that this will be the beginning of a long relationship. After you represent this book, I will allow you to also represent my romance novel, my science fiction novel, my childrens book and my horror screenplay," I don't think of all the money I'll make. I think that this writer is scattered, and that he will be overwhelming to work with.

It is enough of an accomplishment to get an agent to represent one book. Pitching multiple books not only distracts the agent, but also cheapens each work. If an agent thinks you've taken 10 years to craft one work, it will seem as if you've put great effort into it; if you pitch five novels at once, the agent might assume you just knocked each one off with

a few weeks work, and thus he might be more wary of the quality of the writing.

Additionally, agents tend to focus on particular categories (which is why finding precisely the right one is such an important art). An agent who represents science fiction will probably not want to represent literary fiction, while an agent who represents a cookbook will probably not want to represent current affairs. Choose one book which is important to you, do the research for the appropriate agent, and focus on pitching just that book.

## **2. Don't mention endorsements from family and friends**

“Mr. Lukeman, my brother read my book and said it was the best he'd ever read—and he's been critical of me my whole life, so I know he wouldn't say that unless he meant it.”

“Mr. Lukeman, my writing group is the one of the biggest in Eastern Kansas, and they've given me their endorsement and blessing to sell this manuscript.”

“Mr. Lukeman, I have a circle of trusted readers—including a gentleman who worked briefly in publishing 20 years ago—and they all say without doubt that I've struck gold.”

Endorsements from family, friends and trusted readers don't mean anything to publishing professionals; if anything, it will bias them against you, as it will give them the impression that you take these seriously. If you think this will impress them, then you don't realize the level of your competition. It's great that people enjoyed your work, but at this level—which is world-class—it's just not relevant.

### **3. Don't be self critical**

Job-hunting advice experts often say that the job applicant's worst enemy is himself. Job candidates tend to get nervous, and for whatever reason they become self-critical in their cover letters and end up pointing out their own weaknesses inadvertently. The same holds true for query letters: writers are often their own worst critics. Before their query letters have concluded, they will often point out at least one flaw in their own writing, or their market, or their background and credentials.

There are enough critics out there—don't give them a head start.

Don't include sentences like:

“I know there are many books out there like mine, but I still feel I have something special.”

“I haven't been writing for very long, but ....”

“I have no background in writing. I hope you won’t hold that against me.”

Take one last look over your letter for anything resembling this, and take it out. Be your own champion instead.

#### **4. No small talk**

One of the biggest ways writers waste space in a query letter is to fill it with small talk. For example:

“I know you must be so busy, so I don’t want to waste your time. Let me get right down to it.”

“Forgive me if this letter goes on too long. I have so much to say and don’t know where to begin.”

“I hope you have enjoyed this letter and that it communicated what I wanted to say.”

Go over your letter once again and look for any remnants of small talk. Take them out.

#### **5. No givens**

Another major space waster is givens, that is, information an agent already knew, or would have taken for granted. For example:

“I would love for you to represent me.”

“I’m willing to promote my books.”

“Just say the word and I’ll send you my manuscript.”

You have to understand that the instant an agent opens a query, he implicitly takes for granted many things, including the fact that you want an agent, that you want him to represent you, that you are ready and willing to send your manuscript, etc. Give him some credit, and at the same time do yourself a favor by saving wasted space in your query. It’s like an actor who stands on stage in a room full of casting directors, and begins by saying, “If you like the monologue I am about to give, then I would be happy to let you hire me.” Just get to the point.

## **6. Don’t quote your own writing**

I can’t tell you how many queries I receive where writers quote their own writing, sometimes at length. For example:

Mr. Lukeman, my writing is so great, let me just take a moment to quote some of it to you:  
“The birds sang together. It was a glorious

morning. He knew that this would be the day.  
He felt ready!” Wasn’t that great, Mr.  
Lukeman? Can’t you see why I’m so excited?  
I know you will be too. Let me now quote  
something from Chapter 3....

An agent encounters many variations of this. Writers will sometimes open their letters with a quotation from their text; other times they will conclude with it. Sometimes they’ll quote one line, sometimes an entire page. Needless to say, don’t do it. It is understandable that you are eager for an agent to read your actual work, but quoting your own work in the query letter will only lend it an air of megalomania. There really is no subtle or humble way to do it—and it is, anyway, beside the point at this stage.

## **7. Don’t mention anything else irrelevant**

Given all we’ve covered, it’s hard to say what else might be left. But you’d be surprised—writers can come up with the strangest things. You know what belongs in a query and what doesn’t. If you’re unsure, delete it. Be strict with yourself. If we haven’t covered it here, it doesn’t belong there. A query letter can never (or almost never) be too short.

## Conclusion

“Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Proceed with confidence, generating it, if necessary, by pure willpower. Writing is an act of ego and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going.”

--William Zinsser

Over my last 13 years as a literary agent I think I have seen every type of query under the sun. I've received queries claiming to have the greatest work of the century; queries that offered me any commission I wanted; queries that said “buy now, get one free.” I've received queries that proclaimed I had a 24 hour deadline to respond; queries that, oddly enough, were hate mail; and rambling queries that never pitched any book at all. I've received queries written on elaborate invitation cards, sealed with a bow, and queries handwritten on cardboard. I once received a query that told me I should write an essay on why I think I'm qualified to

represent the author, mail it to him, and then he would consider whether to consider me.

Writers will think of—and try—anything, and for that, I salute them. I salute their creativity, their ingenuity, their energy, and most of all, their optimism. I am a writer myself, so am also in the querying business—not to mention that as an agent I query publishers all day long, and have received more rejections in 10 years than most writers will in a lifetime.

While I admire the urge to stand out, to be different, my final piece of advice is to realize that the goal of a query letter is not to stand out in a cheap way—it is to stand out in a substantial way. This means that the basic structure and form of the query letter needn't—and shouldn't—be different. The *content*, the ideas you express, your biography and background should. If you have a great piece of writing, a great concept, a great background, your query letter will write itself. But a query letter, no matter how well-written, will not make up for these.

Perfect the art of the query letter, use the many techniques I've given you to achieve success—but remember that ultimately it is your writing, your craft, that will land you that agent and get you published. A great query letter will give you the opportunity (which most writers never have) to be considered seriously. It will give you the chance to be read closely by

a top professional, to have your writing considered in its own right. But remember that the way you approach an agent is equally important. A great query letter sent in the wrong way, or to the wrong agent, will get you rejected. For a more in depth discussion of the topic, consider reading my book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landliteraryagent.com](http://www.landliteraryagent.com)), or read any other books on the topic written by publishing professionals. In either case, by having a great query letter, you have a huge head start. Your foot is now in the door, and you are now much closer to going where thousands of other authors cannot.

But you owe it to yourself to be ready when you get there. Perfect the query letter, but perfect your writing too. Continue to strive to make it the very best it can be. Keep reading, keep studying and above all, keep writing. If so, one day, I assure you, you will be published.

And no matter what, don't give up.

## Checklist:

### 30 Mistakes to Avoid in Your Query Letter

Below find a checklist of 30 query letter pitfalls that can get you rejected. Go through the list and check off each one, confirming that you have not made the mistake.

#### **Formatting**

- Letter filled with underlining
- Letter filled with bold
- Letter filled with italics
- Font too small or too big
- Font hard to read or colored
- No letterhead, and cheap quality paper
- Used a cheap printer
- Forgot to add the date
- Contact information in the body of the letter

**Content**

- \_\_\_ No opening reference to a book the agent sold
- \_\_\_ No clear hook or logline of the concept
- \_\_\_ No mention of the genre
- \_\_\_ Plot description over three sentences
- \_\_\_ Mentioned character names
- \_\_\_ Confusing or inappropriate comparison to other books in the genre
- \_\_\_ No comparison at all
- \_\_\_ Mentioned subplots
- \_\_\_ Author bio over five sentences
- \_\_\_ Irrelevant information in author bio
- \_\_\_ Mentioned minor credits in author bio
- \_\_\_ Author bio overly personal
- \_\_\_ Didn't put publication credits in italics or caps
- \_\_\_ Pitched more than one book
- \_\_\_ Letter had more than 3 paragraphs
- \_\_\_ Letter exceeded one page
- \_\_\_ Quoted sample writing
- \_\_\_ Included small talk

\_\_\_ Was self critical

\_\_\_ Mentioned givens

\_\_\_ Mentioned endorsements from family, friends or barely known authors

## About the Author

Noah Lukeman is President of Lukeman Literary Management Ltd, which he founded in 1996. His clients include winners of the Pulitzer Prize, American Book Award, Pushcart Prize and O. Henry Award, finalists for the National Book Award, Edgar Award, and Pacific Rim prize, multiple *New York Times* bestsellers, national journalists, major celebrities, and faculty of universities ranging from Harvard to Stanford. He has also worked in the New York office of a multi-talent management company, where he represented many *New York Times* Bestsellers, and, prior to founding his agency, he also worked for another New York literary agency. Prior to becoming an agent he worked in the editorial departments of several publishers, including William Morrow, Delphinium Books and Farrar, Straus, Giroux, and as editor of a literary magazine. He was creator of PrePub.com, one of the first publishing rights websites, which eventually became the "Booktracker" division of Inside.com. As a literary agent, he has been written up in media ranging from *The New York Times* to *Variety* (Page 1).

Noah Lukeman is also an accomplished author. His best-selling [\*The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile\*](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1999), was a selection of many of Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers and is now part of the curriculum in many universities. His [\*The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life\*](#) (St. Martins Press, 2002) was a National Bestseller, a BookSense 76 Selection,

a *Publishers Weekly* Daily pick, a selection of the Writers Digest Book Club, and a selection of many of Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers. His [\*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation\*](#) (W.W. Norton, 2006 and Oxford University Press in the UK, 2007) was critically-acclaimed, a selection of the Writers Digest Book Club, a selection of the Forbes Book Club and profiled on NPR, and is now part of the curriculum in over 50 universities and writing programs. His e-book *How to Write a Great Query Letter*, which he gives away for free as a way of giving back to the writing community, has been the #1 Bestselling title on Amazon Shorts for many months. To help aspiring authors, he has also made available free chapters from his other books at [www.noahlukeman.com](http://www.noahlukeman.com)

Noah has also worked as a collaborator, and is co-author, with Lieutenant General Michael "Rifle" Delong, USMC, Ret., of *Inside Centcom* (Regnery, 2005), a selection of the Military Book Club. His Op-Eds co-authored with General Delong appeared in the *Sunday New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Dallas Morning News*. He has contributed articles about the publishing industry and the craft of writing to several magazines, including *Poets & Writers*, *Writers Digest*, *The Writer*, the *AWP Chronicle* and the *Writers Market*, and has been anthologized in *The Practical Writer* (Viking, 2004).

Creatively, Noah is author of [\*The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II\*](#), (Pegasus Books, 2008) an original play written in blank verse, which aspires to pick up where Shakespeare's *Macbeth* left off. *Macbeth II* was critically-acclaimed, and featured as recommended reading in *New York Magazine's* 2008 "Fall Preview." He has also written several screenplays, one of which, *Brothers in Arms*, was chosen as one of Hollywood's 100

Best Scripts of the Year on the 2007 Black List and is currently in development at a major studio.

Noah Lukeman has been a guest speaker on the subjects of writing and publishing at numerous forums, including The Juilliard School, the Wallace Stegner writing program at Stanford University, the Writers Digest Panel at Book Expo America, the MFA at Northern Michigan University, the National Society of Newspaper Columnist's annual Boston conference, and Riker's Island Penitentiary. He earned his B.A. with High Honors in English and Creative Writing from Brandeis University, *cum laude*.

Mr. Lukeman has made this book free to help support the writing community.

If you wish, feel free to read and support his other books, including  
*How To Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com))

To ask Mr. Lukeman questions about writing and publishing,

or to join his e-zine, please visit his blog:

[www.askaliteraryagent.com](http://www.askaliteraryagent.com)