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How to Write
a Great
Query Letter

Insider Tips
& Techniques
for Success

by Noah Lukeman

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Introduction

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 will 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 your query—to make the query an art form in and of itself.

While it might seem as if a query letter is a shallow way to judge a writer, 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 writing, and whether you have a realistic grasp on your own background and credentials. If you're writing non-fiction, it also demonstrates whether you can write good marketing copy. 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 how to look and 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, and the 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 tagline or synopsis.

But there is nothing wrong with marketing—indeed, 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 that 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. The mistake writers make is not being ignorant of how to craft a query—but believing they do not need to rectify this ignorance, do not need to spend time 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 10 years, I have received, on average, about 10,000 queries a year. That makes almost 100,000 queries received over the last 10 years. Over the years I have shared advice with writers around

the world and have heard back from many that the advice I offered was directly responsible for their finally, after years of struggling, being able to land an agent. This is the advice that I will share with you here.

While the numbers against you are staggering, the road is not as bleak as it may seem. If you learn what to do, and 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 writer. 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 writer 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, pouring 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, have analyzed the elements that comprise a great query letter. These are the elements I will share with you here.

Chapter 1: Preparation

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

--John Boswell

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” can not 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 could mean the difference in your getting published.

Equally important is that you take 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 books your potential agents represented which are similar to yours, 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. This could mean taking weeks, even months. How to specifically go about doing this research is beyond the scope of this book, but when discussing the query letter, I will assume you've already done it. If you haven't done it, do it now.

I will also assume you are targeting agents, not editors. The principles of a good query letter that I will teach you here would also work to query an editor—so it is not effort lost. Nonetheless, in nearly every case it is much more beneficial to you to target an agent first. Indeed, one of the biggest mistakes authors make is targeting editors instead of agents. First of all, the majority of major publishers won't even read a query letter unless it comes from an agent; you will likely wait only to get a slip back in the mail, requesting that you submit through an agent. Second, even if by some chance you are able to find an editor at a major publisher willing to consider your work, he will read it with a biased eye, as it does not come from an agent. Third, even if by some miracle he makes an offer, he will offer you a much worse deal since he knows you don't have an agent, and will offer worse terms in every respect in the contract—terms which you won't know how to negotiate. More importantly, if one editor likes your book enough to make an offer, there is a good chance that others would have too; but since you don't know the industry, you won't be able to have your manuscript with 20 other appropriate editors at the same time. This means you can't conduct a bidding war and maximize your

deal. You might end up taking a \$15,000 offer when there could have been a \$50,000 offer waiting elsewhere.

Finally, if you make a deal without an agent, all the way through to the publication of your book you will be at the bottom of your editor's priority list. When an editor has 30 titles to edit, publish and fight for, he must make priorities, and those that have powerful agents behind them—especially agents who have other titles with that editor—have more leverage. Decisions have to be made, and most often, the unagented writers will fall to the bottom of the priority stack for publicity, advertising, galley, publication dates, timing, and a myriad other factors. And if your book publishes and doesn't do well, you will have a bad track record, which means the editor won't want to buy your second book, and which also means that no agent will want to represent you at that point. If you had had an agent to begin with, at least you already have a loyal agent in your corner who can be with you through the tough time and who will have a vested interest in helping you to try to find another publisher.

There are a few exceptions when you might want to query an editor or publisher directly. If your book is intended for a local or regional audience, then you will need to find a smaller, regional publisher, and many agents won't deal with these. If for some reason you believe your book is best suited for a very small press, or if you wish to only be published by one, then again, agents will rarely deal with these, and they are also more open to direct submissions from authors. (Don't assume, though, that some very fine smaller publishers—like Graywolf Press—are necessarily easier to submit to directly. This is not the case. I am only talking about *truly* small publishers here.) If your book is

a technical one, or geared for a specific, niche audience, then you might be better suited with a smaller or niche publisher, which you could also query directly. The same holds true if your book is a collection of poetry.

Otherwise, don't query a publisher directly. Not only will it be a useless endeavor, but it can also hurt your chances in eventually finding an agent. For example, if your book has already been rejected by every editor in town, there will be nowhere left for that agent to submit.

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, prevent you 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 tiny 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.

Other. 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. This sounds obvious, but 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 the 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, 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. But this only stigmatizes you. Some fonts, like courier (example), simply look cheap, while others, like calligraphy (example), resemble a wedding invitation. No matter what you do, don't switch fonts during the letter, for example, to quote your own writing, or for emphasis. Choose one font and stick to it.

More importantly, an odd-sized font 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 the letter. Agents read for a living, and the last thing you want to do is make your letter harder on their 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. Years ago 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 a 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. Most query letters tend to sprawl (which is ironic, since they are limited to such finite space). 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 no excuse. If a writer can't achieve what he needs to in one page, his writing is simply not where it needs to be. 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 can be 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:

The First Paragraph

“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 one sentence. 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 query 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 accomplish this.

More importantly, a personal reference will signal to the agent that this 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 which was a success. It will offer a comparison, allowing him to immediately grasp the type of book you're writing and thus to be able to 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 at least an equal amount of energy 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. 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 and merely begins it with "To Whom it May Concern." Half your battle is already won.

Chapter 5:

The Second Paragraph

“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 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 for them, then the plot itself will make little difference (if any). In either case, offering a long plot description is a mistake, since even if they pay close attention to it, they are considering

your query in the broadest possible sense at this point, and will only want a general sense of what the plot is about.

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. You may think you help your plot by allowing a long description—but in reality you're hurting the letter.

Exercise: Create a Tagline

Condensing your plot description is similar to what you do when you reduce your plot to a tagline. A “tagline” is generally considered to be a one sentence plot summary. 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. Your three sentence paragraph will suddenly seem to have extra room. 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) later, which you can send if requested. Now is not that time.

2. Don't name names

When reading a book it takes effort for a reader to 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 tagline 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 will read 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 overload it with cramming in your 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 writers write in generalities to avoid getting down to the specifics of the plot, 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 the novel; 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.”

This is 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 tagline, 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 (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 save by doing so, 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 also assumedly 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 the style of writing your work is in the vein of. 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:

The Third Paragraph

“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 letters are made or broken by the 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 in front 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; indeed, 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 genuinely needs several sentences to encapsulate it all. Instead, 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 always 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 it is to encounter 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 to his bio. 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 name 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. The answer is simple: No. Listing minor or amateur publication credits—such as publications in a small or 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 tend to bloat the paragraph with the most irrelevant information you could imagine. They'll talk about a writing class they had in fourth grade, mention how everyone in their office thinks they are a good writer. It's as if they discovered that the bio paragraph is the perfect place to dump irrelevant information.

It seems like an obvious principle, but it is overlooked: 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. A query letter is not a classified ad. Being too personal might not turn off an agent—but not being economical with your writing 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.

6 Positive Traits to Have 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. Awards, grants, fellowships or other laurels

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

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

8 Steps to Building Your Bio

Most writers agonize over their lack of author credentials, and for good reason. The publishing industry is brutally competitive, and if you think that lacking a strong author bio means you won't get paid serious attention to, in most cases, unfortunately, you're right.

But don't despair. If you're staring at a blank space on the bio section of your query letter, contrary to popular belief, there are steps you can take to rectify this. You will need strong willpower, persistence, perseverance, tough skin for rejection, and patience. Patience is probably the most important of all these traits—this alone can make the difference in your getting to where you want to be. By this I mean that most writers dig in for a 6 month battle when approaching the industry. If they are not successful by then, they give up. Dig in for a 10 year battle instead. Or better, 20 years. If you love the craft of writing and are truly in it for the passion of it, then 20 years should not seem like a long time—indeed, if you have a true love for it, you will want to write for your entire life. 20 years will give you ample time to do all of the things you need to do to become expert at your writing, learn the industry like a pro, make the connections, garner

the publications, awards, laurels and all the other ammunition you'll need to break down the doors. Indeed, by then agents will probably come calling to you, and you won't even need to break down doors.

Here are 8 steps to help get you there:

1. If you are writing (or have written) short stories, get them all out of the drawer and start submitting them to prestigious magazines. Not just to two or five magazines, but to 40 or 50 magazines each. Stay with it until you land some nice credits.
2. If you are writing novels, take some time out to try your hand at a short story, so you can submit it to magazines. Alternately, take a self-encapsulated chapter of your novel and submit it to magazines.
3. If you have the time and desire, enroll in an MFA or masters program. I would not advise this, though, if you cannot easily afford it. Most MFA programs are costly and will put a writer in debt, doing more harm than good. Thus I only recommend this route if you have money to spare, or if you land a scholarship.
4. Visit good writing conferences. At good writing conferences you can often take workshops with famous writers. You can add that to your bio, you can ask them if they'd be willing to read and endorse your work, and you can ask them if they'd be willing to refer you to their agent. It's a long shot, but you never know. You might just end up

with a referral to an agent from the experience, if your work is good enough. Many of these writing conferences host publishing professionals, too, some of whom offer workshops and critiques. Again, it's a long shot, but you might just end up landing an agent this way.

5. Apply to writers colonies and residencies. If you get in to one of the good ones, you can add it to your bio. You'll also likely be in an elite crowd, a place filled with established writers who, if you develop relationships, might just endorse your work, or recommend you to their agents. Unlikely, but you never know.

6. Take a course online, if you can find one being administered by a well-known author or publishing professional. For example, I teach a course online at Writers University which gives writers unprecedented access to me for 4 continuous weeks. You never know what might come out of it.

7. Apply for as many awards, grants and fellowships as you can.

8. Think hard of people you know. Most writers don't stop to think about who they know at the query letter stage; rather, they assume this will be dealt with at publication time. The time is now. If you have any connections, tap them. Before you write your letter, think of the famous writing teachers you've studied with over the years and consider whether they'd be willing to endorse you. It might be worth sending them a

letter. If you haven't studied with anybody famous, then wrack your brain for anybody you know who might know someone. This is your shot, and now is not the time to be bashful.

Incidentally, all of this hard work builds. Right now it seems like it is all being done just for the sake of the query letter, just for the sake of breaking through, but it's not. Having endorsements, having a strong bio, will end up being a huge asset when it comes time to market your book, for your catalogue and flap copy. It will help your agent market you, and help your publisher market you.

Remember, think long term.

Your Competition

I routinely receive query letters from writers who have already published several books with major publishers. Some of these are critically acclaimed, some even bestsellers. Even these people are still looking for agents. I don't say this to depress you, but to make you aware. Knowledge is the first step in crafting the right approach. If you had never boxed a day in your life, you wouldn't enter the ring with professional boxers. You wouldn't even enter the ring with amateurs. Yet when you mail off a query, you are competing with many world-class writers. Keep in mind the level of your competition, and don't get discouraged if it takes time.

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 a lecture to 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. These can't apply for the writer of non-fiction.

Writing a non-fiction query letter is an art into 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.

Congratulations

First of all, congratulations. If you are writing a book of non-fiction, your chances of landing an agent—and subsequently a book deal—are at least ten times greater. 90% of all query letters that arrive on my desk are for fiction; indeed, the vast majority of queries out there are for fiction, while there are fewer available slots for fiction in bookstores. This makes the competition much more intense. It is fairly unusual to receive a non-fiction query letter. It stands out immediately, just by virtue of being non-fiction.

Additionally, it will be easier for the agent to immediately get a fix on it, since in most cases he can easily identify the genre. This will make it easier for the agent, in turn, to market it to publishers, easier for publishers to market it to bookstores, and easier for bookstores to sell it to customers. It will also be easier for you to research your genre, to know your precise competition, and to know where your book falls within the marketplace. Not to mention it will be easier for you to research an agent, and to know exactly which agents sell books similar to yours. Additionally, when an agent requests your manuscript, you need only send him a 30 page proposal, instead of a 300 page manuscript. Non-fiction is easier in every sense of the word. You are already one step ahead of the game.

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 will be the same, as will 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 periods. 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 critical 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 we 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 just 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 a huge number of 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 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 and what your background is 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 Colin Powell 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, for some reason just assuming the agent would know. Such authors risk not ending up with a deal.

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. 50,000 plus new books are published each year, and it's hard for publishers to grab attention and publicity from other books. The chances of a reader browsing in a superstore and coming across your title are slim. The way books are predominantly sold is due to a book buyer hearing about them and deliberately seeking them out—but not because they are stumbled across in a store. And the way people hear about books is through publicity—via TV and radio shows, from newspapers and magazines. If an author has a platform, he will have access to this media, which in turn will mean book sales. For example, if an author speaks to 500,000 people a year, then he will be virtually guaranteed a book deal, provided he can come up with a credible subject; there will be much less pressure on his concept or credentials. If Howard Stern or Oprah, who have millions of viewers and listeners, want to write a book, they will have a deal waiting for them. No one will ask them for their credentials, and frankly, no one will be tough on the concept or even content of the book. In this case, it is all about the platform.

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; what would also work is regular TV and radio show appearances, 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.

How to Build Your Non-Fiction Bio

There's not much you can do about not being Colin Powell, but believe it or not there is much you can do to build your bio. The two facets which are most important for a non-fiction bio are credibility and platform, and thus it comes as no surprise that building your bio should focus on these two areas. At first glance, they may seem to be un-buildable areas: either you have the credentials and the platform, or you don't. But this is far from the case. It does take time and patience, but both of these areas can be developed.

Credibility can be built. It takes a great deal of time and effort, but if you dig in for the long haul, it becomes possible. You can first build your credentials by pursuing higher education or a specialized degree. You can also work towards increasing your experience, the number of years you spend working in a field, which will lend more credibility. You can begin backing up your concept with facts and figures, with tests that validate its worth. You can slowly begin to garner testimonials and endorsements from clients or other experts. And eventually you can establish yourself as an expert, build a press kit, and start sending it out to the media.

Which brings us to your platform. Media connections and experience also take time to build. By sending out your press kit, by constantly querying and pursuing media—whether it's local newspapers, magazines, radio, television or the internet—your publicity will eventually begin to build. Every time you land media, you can add it to your press kit, and before you know it, you will have media experience, and it will be

easier to garner more. Eventually hiring a publicist can take you to a whole new level, help you get regional and national attention (although I wouldn't always necessarily advise this, as publicists can be costly and not always effective).

You can build your own web site, submit it to search engines, and work the web. You can create your own e-zine, and build up its membership. You can start a blog. There is, in fact, a tremendous amount you can do online.

You can work towards building up your speaking platform. You can start talking locally, to smaller audiences, and try to build it up and get speaking gigs around the country. Eventually you might even find a speaker's agent who can book you to bigger audiences.

None of this is easy and there is no assurance that even if you achieve all of this it will have a significant impact on a publisher or agent's decision. Agents are hard to impress, and when it comes to PR and platform, they will usually only be impressed by sustained, national PR, like someone who is frequently on CNN, or frequently quoted in the *New York Times*. That said, every little bit helps, and it can only help to build in that direction.

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 equally 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*.

At this point, you've completed your three paragraphs. Your query is much stronger. It is a good query letter, solid in every respect of the word. Now we're going to go over small, final issues, 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 it’s 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 and make your hard work for nothing. 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 might be more wary of the quality of the writing.

Additionally, agents tend to be extremely segmented (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; an agent who represents a cookbook will probably not want to represent current affairs. Choose one book which is important for 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 really the world-class level—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, 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 it out.

5. No givens

Another major space waster is givens, that is, information an agent knew already, 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, "I am here to deliver a monologue for you," or "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 yourself what they are. You know what belongs in a query and what doesn't. If it doesn't, take it out. If you're not sure, take it out. 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.

Rejection doesn't mean anything

As an agent, I've received on average 10 rejections a day, every day, for the last 10 years. A day doesn't go by without rejections pouring in. The reason is because I perpetually have many books on submission, and editors reject them constantly. Despite this, I've managed to consummate over 200 book deals in the last 10 years. And nearly every book I've sold has first been rejected by at least 20 or 30 publishers, sometimes as many as 50. Many of these books have gone on to become bestsellers and win prestigious awards. If I'd given up after 29 rejections, or even 49, these books would never have been published. I don't take it personally when I receive rejections; I understand that no matter how appropriate an editor may seem, editors have different needs at different times. The same should hold true for your landing an agent.

Chapter 9:

The Approach

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

Although the promised subject of this book is merely how to write a great query letter, I'm going to go a step further and give you bonus material, teach you what to do with your great query now that it's written.

We discussed at length why you should approach an agent first. If you skipped over that, read it now, and if you read it already, read it again. This is crucial.

We also discussed that you will need to spend weeks, if not months, doing serious market research in order to find the precisely appropriate agents to query. As I mentioned, this is a subject matter in and of itself, and beyond the scope of this book. Don't overlook this, or take it lightly. This will make all the difference.

OK. I am assuming you are querying agents first, and have chosen the appropriate ones. Now, let's begin.

4 Things Not to do When Submitting

1. Don't Wait

I can't tell you how many writers I've encountered who send off a query, then wait months—even years—to hear back. They put their careers on hold for absolutely no reason (especially since they are also often querying the wrong agents to begin with, and querying them in the wrong way). When sending a query letter, you should wait 2-4 weeks to hear back. If you haven't heard back by then, query another agent.

Additionally, send off many at once, to further decrease your waiting time. Instead of sending 1 or 2 at a time, send 5 or 10, whichever makes you most comfortable. If you haven't heard back within 4 weeks, send it to 5 or 10 more. At this rate, you can go through 50 agents in 5 months. It will not only give you the quicker response that you deserve, but it also will take off the pressure, as it won't put so much at stake on any one agent. When a writer thinks he knows his dream agent and sends a query, and sits there waiting for months and finally gets a rejection, he can be devastated. He's built this one agent up in his mind, and pinned all his hopes (and waiting time) on him. But when he's queried 50 agents—all equally desirable—it should barely phase him if he receives any one rejection. Also this way his career won't be put on hold: if he's not going to land an agent, he'll know within 6 months, not 6 years.

When sending off rounds, be sure to send it to your most desirable agents first (another reason why the proper research is necessary up front). Otherwise, you could end

up in an awkward situation, if, for example, a lesser agent immediately wants to represent you while a better agent needs more time to make a decision.

2. Don't include sample pages with your query

Some writers decide that sending a query letter is not good enough; they can't stand the fact that they will be judged solely based upon a letter, and they figure that if an agent just has a chance to see their actual writing, it will change everything. Thus they send in sample pages from their writing with their query. It could be just one page, or it could be 40 or 300 pages. I receive unsolicited packages via mail all the time, even though I request that queries be limited to one page (and sent via e-mail). A writer's temptation is even greater to do this via e-mail, since all they need to do is copy and paste their writing into the body of an e-mail, or simply attach a file.

Do not do this. We have not agonized to get your query letter down to one page just so that you can tack on a 50 page package. If an agent specifically requests that writers query with sample pages, or something longer than a mere query, then by all means do so. Otherwise, keep it to one page. When a query arrives which is a bulky package, it is immediately suspect. The writer is already going against the agent's wishes. Furthermore, agents are bombarded with material to read all day long. If a one page letter sits on their desk, there is a greater likelihood they will actually read it. If a 300 page manuscript sits before them, it more likely will be put off. Additionally, the longer it's put off, the longer it's sitting there, which psychologically makes the agent think less and less of it.

3. Don't call or drop it off

Some writers will call an agent instead of mailing a query letter, or will call first and then send a query. Sometimes they'll call the day after their query letter arrives to ask if I received it. I've even received phone calls from writers' assistants or secretaries, leaving me a message that I should call this writer, since he's too busy to call me himself. That's just about the worst thing you could do. When considering a new writer, an agent's biggest concern is whether he will be overly aggressive with his time, by calling, emailing, faxing. All an agent has is his time, and if one writer indicates that he consumes it more than others, it is a red flag. It is an even bigger red flag that this writer is already violating the agent's wishes by calling instead of writing.

It is also a futile task: what are you going to say to the agent once you have him on the phone? That you are mailing him a query letter? What does that accomplish? He won't be looking for it any more as a result of the call. Sometimes writers call me and start pitching their query immediately over the phone, as if reading the synopsis aloud. They go on about their characters and plots before I even have a chance to speak. I've even had calls where the writer, once finished pitching, asked me to commit to representing him right then and there. Needless to say, this doesn't work. You are not a telephone salesman. You are a writer. Stick to the printed page.

The only thing worse than calling is showing up at an agent's door and dropping off your query letter by hand. This has happened to me many times over the years. Sometimes when I open the door the writer demands to enter my office, sit down, and

have a meeting with me right then and there about his query letter. Some writers drive all the way from other states to do so. Needless to say, they won't be obliged. An agent will consider this too aggressive. Let the postman do your work for you.

In general, when in doubt regarding interacting with an agent, always err on the least aggressive path.

4. Don't include gifts or gimmicks

I've received many queries over the years that had strange objects included with the query. Sometimes writers will mail in food, or candy, or a free pen, or some object that fits in with the theme of the book—like a rose for a book about gardening, or a model spaceship for a science fiction novel. I've received many queries tied with ribbon. I've even received cash in the mail—a few times, a dollar bill, and once a five dollar bill. Needless to say, I sent them back. These won't help you stand out—they will just make you be perceived as gimmicky, and overly desperate. Let your writing speak for itself.

3 Musts of Submitting

1. Prepare for a bigger war

The reason most writers fail to land an agent is simply because they don't realize how many appropriate agents are out there waiting for them, and they allow themselves to become easily discouraged by a few rejections. They take these few agents' reactions (usually inappropriate agents anyway) as gospel, and don't realize that opinions are just

that—opinions. The publishing world is incredibly subjective, and agents are wrong all the time. Landing an agent—like landing a job—is simply a numbers game. I will say it again: *it is simply a numbers game.*

If a few agents don't like it, don't allow yourself to be discouraged. It doesn't mean anything. Don't take it personally, or put any weight in their responses. Instead, query more. You will eventually find the right one. The person who mails out 200 resumes has a huge advantage over the person who mails out 5. The same holds true with landing an agent. This number alone can make the difference in your landing an agent.

So to begin with, plan on querying at least 50 agents. This may impact your time and method of research, so be sure to allot time accordingly.

2. Include an SASE

There have been many times when I've received a query letter with no SASE (Self Addressed Stamped Envelope) included, and thus I had no way of responding to the author. When this happens I pay for the stamp and envelope myself, so that the author can have a reply. But most agents won't. They receive thousands of queries a year, and they specifically request an SASE be included, and it is industry etiquette that it be done; thus if a writer breaks the rules, they don't feel obliged to reply. (It would also become very costly for them to reply to thousands of letters a year without an SASE.) So if you forget one, you might not get a response, and that can make all the difference. In some agencies, letters without them are simply thrown out.

I have been in some situations over the years where there was no SASE and where the writer also forgot to include his contact information in the letter. I liked his query, but had literally no way of contacting him. And he never followed up. So what might have been a book deal never happened. Don't let something so minor get in your way. Include your SASE and don't forget your contact info.

3. Fed-Ex

I hate to advise writers to spend money, but this is one area where I do advise it. If you can afford it, query via Fed-Ex. First of all, the extra expense will make you think twice before sending your query to a particular agent, and will force you to do thorough research. Secondly, and more importantly, it will make your query stand out from the crowd. Agents receive dozens of queries via regular mail each day. When most agents receive mail, they look at the return address; if it's a name they don't recognize, it goes on a pile, where it can sit for weeks or months without even being opened. Agents receive only a few Fed-Exes a day, though. Fed-Exes have to be signed for, they have to be paid attention to, and are usually opened immediately. When an agent discovers it's only a query letter he might get annoyed, might throw it onto a pile, and it might wait with the others.

But then again, it might just get read right away. An agent just might take it more seriously, as he sees that you've gone to great effort and expense. The fact that it comes via Fed-Ex might give him the impression that it's timely, and the fact that you offer such a meticulous presentation might suggest your manuscript will also have meticulous

presentation and effort. And because Fed-Exes are so expensive, it might make the agent think that he's one of few people receiving the query, which might make him want to take it more seriously. It just might give you an advantage. You have nothing to lose. The worst case scenario is that it gets thrown onto a pile with the others, where it would end up otherwise anyway.

To save money, you could send your query via 2 or even 3 day Fed-Ex. The extra days are not important—what's important is that it arrives via some sort of guaranteed signature delivery. It needn't even need to be Fed-Ex: UPS, DHL, US Mail or any other guaranteed signature delivery service will suffice.

To E-Mail or not to E-Mail?

What about e-mail? Is it acceptable to query via e-mail? If so, do the rules change? How?

Some agents and agencies accept queries via e-mail, some do not; some welcome it, while others specifically ask that you not e-mail. Some agencies as a rule will ask you not to e-mail, but sometimes there will be specific agents within the agency who want a query via e-mail. It all depends on the agent and agency. If an agent welcomes queries via e-mail, then respect his wishes. If he doesn't, respect his wishes. If he doesn't specify, then to be safe, query via regular mail.

In general, even if an agent allows queries via e-mail, I would recommend querying via regular mail. (Unless, of course, he specifically requests queries via e-mail.) There is something about e-mail, and the electronic medium in general, which can make

it easier for a query to be considered with less import. Agents are also flooded with email all day long, so your query might not stand out as much as it would if it had come via regular mail. The experience of reading a query on the screen also somehow enables the process to go a bit more quickly, and thus might lead to queries being glanced over more quickly. There is something about reading a real piece of paper which gives a query more weight. Additionally, the standard font used in the body of an email is Arial 10 point, which is rather un-elegant and smaller than the standard 12 point font on printed paper. It makes it harder for the agent to read.

Additionally, when you query via e-mail, you can't have control over how the formatting will appear in the agent's inbox. It might shrink or change the font, or drop the other formatting you instituted. It's too risky. The only way to ensure that your formatting stays as is is to send your query as a file attachment, for example, as a Microsoft Word file. But then you open a whole new can of worms: many agents don't want to open attachments at all, for fear of getting a virus.

If you decide to query via e-mail instead of regular mail, some of these issues won't apply—for instance, the SASE and the Fed-Ex. But other guidelines outlined here will—sending to multiple agents at once, querying in rounds, the waiting time. Querying via e-mail will certainly save you a lot of time, effort and money. But, again, only do so if an agent specifically requests this (as I do). And if you do so, keep in mind the following:

6 Crucial Issues When Querying Via E-Mail

1. E-Mail address

First, make sure that you query to the proper e-mail address. If an agency specifies an email address for queries, then query to that address—for example, if they request that queries be directed to queries@agency.com, then email to queries@agency.com. Don't break the rules and query directly to an agent's personal inbox if they ask you not to. If no such rules are specified, though, then you should indeed query directly to the appropriate agent's inbox. You don't want your query going to info@agency.com when it should go to agent@agency.com; if so, it might never get read.

2. Formality

The query you send via e-mail should be the same query you would have sent via regular mail. It should carry the same weight, preparation and formality. Just because you are querying via e-mail doesn't give you license to write a more personal, relaxed note to an agent. I see it all the time: because the medium is electronic, some writers feel license to transform their query to a query/e-mail/personal note. E-mail is a casual, informal medium and can allow you to lower your guard. Keep in mind that a query letter is the farthest thing from casual, and must be kept that way.

3. Attachments

Essentially the only way to assure proper formatting of a query letter is to send it as an attachment, for example as a Microsoft Word file. The problem with this, though, as we said above, is that most agents won't want to open attachments. Even if an agent is willing to open an attachment, emails that have attachments can get delayed being opened and considered by virtue of the fact that it takes slightly more work to launch an attachment than merely to scroll through the body of an already-opened email. With attachments you also take the risk of program or computer incompatibility—if, for example, your file is in a newer version of Word and the agent is using an older version, or if you're using Works and he's using Word and you saved the file in a way which makes it impossible to open. Problems can also arise between Macs and PCs. The last thing you want is for the agent to actually go to the effort to open a file attachment only to be unable to open it because of technical difficulty. Then he will really put it off. Worse, you might force him into a premature correspondence with you over resolving the problems with different files and formats.

4. Body of the E-Mail

Additionally, attaching a file raises another issue: what about the body of the email? When you attach, should you also write a letter in the body of the email? If so, the attached letter might seem redundant. Not to mention that you force the agent to read twice as much. The alternative, though, is also awkward, which is to merely send a blank email with an attachment. If you must attach, the best solution is probably to have merely one sentence in the body of the email, something along the lines of, "Attached

please find my query letter.” Don’t make the mistake of writing a long email in addition to an attachment.

5. Length

Which brings us to the issue of email length. Another reason it is preferable to query with real paper is that it forces you to limit your query to one page (which we’ll discuss at length later in the book). Real paper has margins, ample spacing around the text, and of course a page break. With emails, though, there are no page breaks. This makes it all too easy to allow your query to ramble on—I find that email queries are, on average, longer than paper queries. Writers who would never break the one page rule with paper for some reason feel free to do so electronically. Not having proper margins or page breaks especially makes this deceptive. Don’t allow yourself to fall into this trap. Too long is still too long. If you must query via e-mail, keep the body of the email to what would be the equivalent of one page on paper. If you’re unsure, simply cut and paste the body into a word document and see if it exceeds one page. You might think that scrolling a bit is no big deal for an agent—but trust me, they can tell the difference.

6. Website

Some writers query with an e-mail which merely tells the agent to visit a website to learn more about him and his work. This is a mistake. Most agents won’t want to launch websites of unsolicited writers, especially at the querying stage. It takes much longer than merely reading the body of an email, since it takes added time to launch, and added time to navigate the site. Visiting a site can also potentially cause an agent

browser problems. Such a query will get put off, and perhaps not opened at all. Down the road, if the agent is interested in your work, there is nothing wrong with giving him a link to your site.

Write another book

Don't stop writing just because you've started querying. Immediately write another book. It will help take your mind off of waiting to hear back from your query submissions, and it will keep you doing what you should be doing—writing. It could take 6 months to finish the querying process, and by then if you end up with 50 rejections and no agent, you could be upset. But if you've been writing all the while, by then you may have a new novel—or at least be far along the path of one—and thus it won't matter so much if your previous book was rejected. It will also make you that much closer to having another book ready to start the querying process all over again.

Chapter 10: The Art of Follow Up

“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

You're 90% there. By this point, you have a great query letter, and you've submitted it the proper way. You have a tremendous advantage over other writers, and are closer than you've ever been towards landing an agent. There's just one step left: follow up.

The art of follow up is what makes closing the deal possible. It is incredibly important, yet often overlooked. It is a shame, since writers will put so much effort into every other stage, yet assume that once their foot is in the door, they can afford to be careless. This couldn't be more wrong. Now is the time to be more careful than ever.

Indeed, many writers have failed to land an agent only because they didn't handle this final stage well.

We talked previously about querying at least 50 agents, in rounds of 5 or 10. Doing so will prevent you from keeping your career on hold while waiting to hear. The downside, though, is that this can potentially lead to a confusing situation. What if several agents ask to see your manuscript at once? What if one asks for an exclusive reading time? What if you end up with several offers?

If one or more agents request sample pages, do send them, but never stop querying other agents. You don't want to slow down your process for anybody. It is your career, and there is no reason you should wait. If an agent requests exclusivity—that he be given an exclusive time period to consider your manuscript—then you have to realize it would put your querying on hold, and you need to decide if it's worth it. Whether it's worth it will depend on the seriousness of the agent's interest, the quality of the agent or agency, and the amount of exclusive reading time requested. In general, I would advise you to indeed give the exclusivity, but to limit it to a certain period of time (for instance, 6 or 8 weeks for a 250 page manuscript), and to advise the agent of this. If you don't hear back in the given time period, keep querying.

Still, publishing is not a science and awkward situations can easily arise. Every situation will be different. In general, the best thing to do is to be up front with everyone, to honor your word when you give it, and to be very careful when deciding who to commit to. No matter how awkward all of this might potentially become, it is still far

better than the alternative, which is waiting for several months or years while agents consider your query one at a time.

4 Keys to Successful Follow Up

1. Don't wait to send your manuscript

There have been times when I've requested to see, say, 30 pages based on a query, and yet these pages didn't arrive until weeks or months later. Hundreds of queries and manuscripts will have passed through my hands during those months, and I'll have little or no recollection of who sent these 30 pages. When I do recall, chances are I'll be annoyed: the fact that he waited weeks or months to send them could only mean that he had been waiting to hear back from other agents first. It makes me feel like a second choice, like a backup plan. I would already be biased against the pages, as would any other agent. So if an agent requests pages, be prepared to send them right away.

2. Send your manuscript via Fed-Ex

Which brings us back to Fed-Ex. The best way to get those pages to the agent right away is to, obviously, use a fast delivery service. If you wait, not only do you risk agents suspecting you of waiting to hear back from other agents, but you also risk their forgetting about your query altogether. Agents get overwhelmed by queries and manuscripts every single day. Within days they can be on to other projects, and forget

yours. The sooner your requested manuscript arrives on their desk, the better your chances of its still being fresh in their mind.

Additionally, Fed-Ex makes for a nicer presentation, for a package to be taken more seriously, than regular mail. Just because you've reached the manuscript stage doesn't mean you can stop caring about presentation—on the contrary, now you should care even more so. You must also realize that your manuscript, even if requested, still stands a chance of landing in the slush pile by accident: often times interns or assistants open the regular mail, and they might not realize your manuscript was requested. It could accidentally end up in the wrong pile and sit there for months. If it comes via Fed-Ex, there is much less chance of this happening.

3. Include a copy of the original query letter

Which brings us to the copy of the agent's request. To prevent the confusion we just mentioned, always make a photocopy of an agent's request to see your manuscript and put it on top. Also make a copy of your original query letter, and include them both when sending in your manuscript. This way, an intern or assistant can make no mistake. Additionally, this will help remind the agent of who you are and what he requested. If he receives your manuscript with no reminder of your original query, he might forget, and might put off reading it. It also validates your submission. There have been times when I've received a manuscript from a writer who said in his letter "as you requested," when in fact I had never requested it. It's an old trick to grab an agent's attention—but agents are aware of this, and it can backfire. When you include a copy of the agent's letter,

though, he will remember your original submission and know for sure that he, indeed, requested it.

4. Send exactly what was asked for

If an agent requests 10 pages, send 10 pages; if he requests 23, send 23. Many times I'll ask for 50 pages and receive 250 pages, with a note saying "You just had to see what happened on page 248!" This is the first red flag. Respect an agent's wishes. Agents don't need many pages to make a decision, or to decide if the style of writing is what they're looking for; sending 50 pages instead of 30 won't make them any more inclined to represent you, especially if they only asked for 30. You just need to have faith in your own writing ability, faith that page 1 or page 6 can represent you as well as page 59 or page 112. If that's not the case, then you must reevaluate your own writing. Don't compensate by sending additional pages.

From an agent's perspective, it's not such a huge deal to receive 70 pages instead of 30—the problem, though, is what this indicates: a writer who is not respecting one's wishes. If an agent takes on a writer, he will be entering into a multi-year relationship, and thus he looks for any warning signs that this person may be difficult to work with. Something as small as this, then, could make the difference.

Be ready

Keep in mind that all agents have different wishes, needs and requirements. Some will want to see 50 pages, others 20; some will want an extended synopsis, others

will want to see the entire manuscript, others will only want a chapter outline. You don't want to be in a situation where an agent requests to see some specific material from you—like a chapter outline—and you don't have it prepared. Thus make sure that you have at least the following three tools ready at your disposal:

3 Tools to Have at Your Disposal

1. One page synopsis

This is fairly universal, and most agents will ask for this. To be safe, you might want to have two versions ready, one single-spaced, the other double-spaced.

2. An extended synopsis

This could be anywhere from 2 to 5 pages. This is where you, finally, have leeway to say everything you ever wanted to about your plot, characters, subplot, setting and whatever else you want to convey.

3. Chapter outline

Many agents will ask for a chapter outline so that they can get a feeling for how the book will progress, chapter by chapter. This usually consists of a one or two

paragraph description for each chapter. By its nature it is dry, but do your best to keep it lively. This is an especially critical tool when querying with non-fiction.

And of course it goes without saying that you will need to have your manuscript ready. The time to get that into final shape is before the querying process—again, you don't want to hold up an agent once you start querying.

To revise or not to revise?

If an agent asks to see a revised version of the work, and his comments are specific for what he'd like to see revised, and you agree with those comments, then I would say go for it. However, don't assume a nice or long rejection letter detailing problems with the work is an invitation to revise and resubmit—only assume so if the agent specifically requests to see another version. In most cases, if an agent rejects a work and does not specifically ask to see a revision, the agent will be biased against it if it comes back revised. You don't want to fall into the trap of following false leads and revising a manuscript endlessly.

Conclusion

Over my last 10 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 recently 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 cannot substitute for these.

Perfect the art of the query letter, use the many techniques I've outlined here to find and 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 at least be considered seriously. It will give your writing the chance to be read closely by a top professional, considered in its own right, which is all most writers want. Your foot is now in the door. With these techniques, you will now be able to go where tens of thousands of other writers 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. I've written three books to help in this regard: [*The First Five Pages*](#), [*The Plot Thickens*](#) and [*A Dash of Style*](#). There are many other fine books on writing out there, too. Keep reading, keep studying and above all, keep writing. One day, I assure you, you will be published.

And no matter what, don't give up.

Checklist:

50 Mistakes to Avoid in Your Query Letter

Below find a checklist of 50 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 underlined and bolded fonts
- Used a cheap printer
- Font too small or too big
- Font hard to read or colored
- No letterhead, and cheap quality paper
- 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 tagline 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
- Didn't put publication credits in italics or caps
- Author bio overly personal
- 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

When Submitting

- Didn't send via Fed-Ex or other guaranteed signature delivery
- Approached too few agents

- Approached the wrong agents (bad research)
- Didn't send it in rounds
- Waited more than 4 weeks to hear back before querying other agents
- Didn't include an SASE
- Included a gift or gimmick with the letter
- Called the agent before or after sending the letter
- Dropped off the letter in person

If Querying via E-Mail

- Sent the query as a file attachment
- Pasted sample writing into the body of the email
- Length of the e-mail exceeded one page
- Did not send to a specific e-mail address for queries
- Sent via e-mail even though agent requests queries to come via regular mail
- Sent a link to a website and requested that the agent read the work there

Follow Up

- Didn't include a copy of the original query letter
- Didn't include a copy of the agent's request
- Waited too long to send the requested manuscript
- Didn't send the manuscript via Fed-Ex (or other guaranteed signature delivery)
- Sent more or less pages than requested

- ___ Didn't have the chapter outline or synopsis ready to send right away
- ___ Gave up

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 finalists, 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 worked as a Manager in the New York office of Artists Management Group, Michael Ovitz' multi-talent management company, and has worked for another New York literary agency. Prior to becoming an agent he worked on the editorial side 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.

Noah Lukeman is author of the bestselling [The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1999), which was a selection of multiple Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers and is now part of the curriculum in many universities. He is author of the bestselling [The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life](#) (St. Martins Press, 2002), 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. He is also author of

the forthcoming [*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*](#), published by WW Norton in the U.S. and by Oxford University Press in the UK in 2006 and in 2007. He has contributed to *Poets & Writers*, *Writers Digest*, *The Writer* and to the *Writers Market*, and has been anthologized in *The Practical Writer* (Viking, 2004).

Noah Lukeman has been a guest speaker on the subjects of writing and publishing at numerous forums, including the Wallace Stegner writing program at Stanford University, the Writers Digest Panel at Book Expo America, and Riker's Island Penitentiary. He currently teaches a course on www.writersuniversity.com. 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 support his other books: *The First Five Pages*, *The Plot Thickens* and *A Dash of Style*. To learn more, visit:

www.adashofstyle.com