

The Right Way to Write a Query Letter

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The Truth of the Matter

You've spent weeks, months, maybe even years writing a great novel, and now you're ready to send it out and get a sale. Your hope is to find the perfect agent who will love your book and know just which publisher will want it.

Sounds easy? Unfortunately, acquiring the right agent—sometimes *any* agent—can be just as difficult and time-consuming as writing an entire novel. And often writers, eager to find an agent and *get going* in this publishing journey, don't take enough time to write the kind of query letter that will attract an agent. In fact, many terrific books have gone unnoticed throughout time due to the ineffectiveness of the author's query letter.

This very short, one-page piece of writing, although seemingly simple and unimportant, is probably the most crucial bit of writing an author will ever do. Sometimes writers will just pop off a quick letter thinking the agent will not care—that what they really will focus on is the novel itself, so the query letter doesn't really matter.

But that line of thinking could be the kiss of death for an author. To agents, the query letter is the key to the door. The query letter is like the guard at a threshold, and if it's not catchy, to the point, creative, and impressive, the agent will toss it in the round file and not give you or your project a second thought.

Fair? No—for a letter shouldn't hold the burden of proof that you're the great writer you are. Yet, agents often get upwards of three *hundred* query letters a week, and they have learned by reading just a few lines how to tell whether both an author and her book might have any merit.

The query also shows the agent how well you communicate in a short amount of space and if you know how to talk about your book and writing, and it gives a feel for your personality. If an author is too aggressive, overconfident, or pushy, those things will come across as red flags. One page can tell an agent dozens of things about you as a writer and a person, so what you need is to know how to write a professional letter that an agent will like and respect.

Wow, that's a lot of pressure to put on an author—to make such an impression in a letter that it stands out above hundreds of others. Yet, that's what your query letter has to do. And because we really don't know instinctively how to write a great query, a handy guide such as this is in order!

There have been entire books written on this topic, with diverse advice, but I hope to condense this down to manageable size. In my twenty-five years of querying and contracting agents, as well as helping other writers craft their query letters and acquire agents, I've found some basic, key elements and guidelines that really work. So, instead of groaning, let's jump in

and look at what your query letter should be all about, and resolve to take the time and effort to really write a great letter that has just what an agent is looking for.

First Things First

Query letters need to be sent to the right agent. Not to “To whom it may concern” or “Dear Agent.” The agent wants to know you’ve done your homework, read about them, researched what they are looking for, and taken the time to spell their name right (and if they have an androgynous name to check if they are male or female). You can imagine if you were an agent and had a hundred opened query letters stacked on your desk and most of them started with “To whom it may concern,” those would be the first in the trash.

You want to be sure the agent actually represents books like yours—fiction or nonfiction. Check the titles listed on her website, see which authors she represents. Do your homework. Don’t think about writing a generic one-size-fits-all letter for every agent. Fortunately, now with websites and e-mail, writers can peruse an agent’s website and often submit electronically, saving hundreds of dollars in mailing out letters and submissions, and getting an up-to-date report on what she is currently after. But there are still some agents who require queries by mail. So the first order of business is to check out an agent’s website, titles and authors they handle and represent, and look carefully at the submission requirements.

Although we’re discussing query letters, you want to be sure you follow directions carefully, so if an agent says they want the query letter *not* as an attachment but pasted in the body of the e-mail, along with your synopsis, give her exactly that. The first thing an agent will do after seeing if you spelled their name correctly in the query is check to see if you followed her simple submission directions. Any writer that can’t follow directions gets a big first strike against them. So pay attention to detail.

Just a side note here: this query letter can work for publishers as well (editors at publishing houses), but note that most publishers will not accept queries directly from an author. However, if they do, the same care must be taken to ensure this editor is looking for your type of book.

So, before you dive into writing your query letter, you want to step back and think through these things:

- How can I sum up the plot of my book in 1-2 sentences?
- How can I present myself and my work in a way that comes across fresh, honest, and intriguing?
- What can I say to get an agent to want to read more?
- How can I come across as a professional—not desperate or bragging, but offering a product of which an agent can see the marketing value?

So, the first basic element of the query letter is to pay attention to is the formatting. Since most queries are now done electronically, authors don’t have to type, print, and mail with

concern over the look and feel of their letter. If you are mailing a query, be sure to use nice plain white paper, regular letter size, no scents or cute stickers or anything unprofessional. With all queries, you want to use a simple easy-to-read font—in a point size that is readable but not overly huge. If your e-mail program is set to type with an unattractive font or—worse—types long across the page instead of automatically creating readable paragraphs, you need to change your settings. All e-mail programs allow you to design and layout your e-mail to your taste, so make sure when your e-mail opens on an agent’s computer, it looks neat, is easy to read, and has a professional look.

Since you are aiming for a concise one-page query, don’t put any of your contact info in the letter itself. In a traditional mailed letter, use a letterhead. With e-mail, just put your contact info after your signature (or name) at the end of the letter. The agent will have your e-mail address, so put all other info there. However, at this stage of the game, with electronic queries, the agent really only wants your e-mail address, and if she asks for other materials from you, such as a partial of your manuscript or a synopsis, you can put your contact info on those documents as well.

A word about fonts. Courier (the typewriter look) was the way every letter looked in those long-ago dark ages (when I sent out my first query letters)—because we writers had to type our queries on typewriters! But that font is a little hard to read and a bit old-fashioned. Times Roman 12 pt. really is the most accepted font, but if you do want to vary, don’t stray too far.

Don’t get all wacky with your fonts hoping your letter will stand out. Just the opposite will happen. Wacky goes in the round file. Same with queries with cute emoticons and happy faces. Think *professional*—as if you are applying for a corporate job. *Never* use boldface, italics (except when naming a book title, and that must go in italics, not quotes), or underline. Just as in your manuscript, using boldface, all caps, or underline is a no-no. In the old typewriter days, underline signaled the typesetter that the author wanted something italicized, but since typewriters were incapable of producing italicized text, the writer used underline for that purpose. So, keep it simple.

Letters are written single-spaced. You can either use block paragraphs (no indent and a space between paragraphs) or use traditional paragraphs with a .5” indent beginning each one. The latter style is more preferred, but block paragraphs are business style and very readable. See what looks good to your eye.

Less Really Is More!

I believe this applies in all writing. When I instruct my editing clients, I say this a lot regarding their manuscripts: Say things in less words, with the right words, and what you say will be more powerful. The same is true with your query letter, where space is premium. Not one word should be unnecessary in your letter.

Trim, trim, trim out all the extraneous words, and be clear and concise. That’s your goal. Too many query letters go on for pages about a plot, and then more pages giving the entire autobiography of the author. More is not better (repeat this a few times). Less is more.

Anyone can write a long, rambling letter. Few can write a great short one. I feel similarly about short stories. I can write 150,000-word novels without too much flinching, but writing a

one-page synopsis leaves me sweating and anxious. I admire short story writers for being able to pack so much into a few short pages.

Remember, your query can only be one page, so you want to economize on words and be concise. And as you will learn, the query letter is structured. So work within this structure and you will find it less intimidating. And when you see we are talking about three basic paragraphs, it will help you pull together your thoughts and boil them down succinctly.

Introductory Paragraph

Your first paragraph needs to be short and to the point—one sentence, two at most. Really? *Really?* Yep. This may be the only paragraph the agent reads (gulp). This doesn't mean you want to use a gimmick to get the agent to keep reading like some mysterious line or some veiled threat or a bad joke. Resist the urge to be so different that you sabotage your chances of being taken seriously.

The main objective of your first paragraph is to show the agent you've done your homework and you are presenting her with something she might be interested in. If you've been specifically referred to an agent by one of the agent's clients or peers, you'll want to mention this in the first line (and also in the subject line of the e-mail. For example: "Author Query, referred to by ____"). Of course, do *not* use this line if it's not true. But if you have been referred by another agent or by one of her clients, do mention this in a brief way and then get started.

You want the query to be personal, so by starting out with something that shows you are thinking of *them* and not that you are trying get their attention. A good first line is "I am writing to you because you represent [author's name], and their book [title] is similar to mine." Right away this shows you have done some homework on them. But be sure they do represent that author and that the book you mention really is similar to yours. The only other thing you may want to put in the first paragraph rather than the second is the title, genre, and word count (in parentheses) of the book you are pitching. That's all. Your first paragraph is done.

The Next Paragraph

The next paragraph is your "elevator pitch." You want a short, two-three sentence summary of your plot to give the agent a quick feel for what you've written. It's your job to convey this clearly so the agent can make a quick decision if this book may or may not be what they are currently looking for.

Much of the time agents will reject your query for the reason that they just aren't looking for your type of book right now. And you may get a lot of nice rejection letters stating that fact. That's the nature of the publishing industry. But it's up to you to clearly convey the plot of your story in this short paragraph so that they can determine whether to read any further.

It's a courtesy to the agent to be brief in this paragraph and not take up their time with a lengthy description of your entire book, which will make them have to skim quickly through trying to figure out just what your story is about and whether they'd want it or not.

Don't make them work that hard. They will see your nice short query letter with few sentences and feel grateful to you right off the bat that you have gotten to the point in a professional manner.

Remember, *less is more*. You will impress more agents by your brevity—trust me, it's true. I landed my agents with the briefest of queries, giving them just enough to get them interested and asking for more. That opened the door for me to send complete manuscripts and have my work taken seriously and evaluated with care. But you have to get that door to first open!

Here are some good guidelines for this paragraph:

- Keep your plot description to no more than three sentences (and not super long ones at that!).
- Don't get into character's names—if you feel you need to, only name your protagonist.
- Just cover the main plot, no details, no subplots.
- Be specific, not general. Don't say "This is a love story between John and Mary." Say "Mary, still grieving over the sudden death of her husband, finds unexpected love when she takes a job at a donut shop and meets John, a poet and dreamer who longs to hike across China." (And note that synopses or plot summaries are always in present tense.)
- Be sure to indicate, if not clear by the genre you noted, what time period and locale the book is set in. If helpful, you can also convey the time period covered, such as "a contemporary story spanning forty years from 1971 to present day in Los Angeles."
- Find some good comparison for your novel—either another novel or film. I pitched my Zondervan release *Someone to Blame* as "*Ordinary People* meets *Murder on the Orient Express*." That seemed to tell all. This type of comparison is common in the movie industry and it tells much in few words.
- Don't compare your book or yourself to famous authors by saying things like, "I'm the next J. K. Rowling" or "My novel is just as good as *Harry Potter*, and maybe even better!"

Now, once you write your very short summary, run it by friends and those who have read your book. See what they think, ask for comments and suggestions. Maybe they will help you tweak it to sound better. Often others have a better take on describing your own book.

I am so amazed at the dozens of reviews I read of my own novels and am awed at how much better they describe my own storyline than I ever could! I sometimes copy and paste their reviews to reuse in interviews and other material because they said it better.

People who spend a lot of time reviewing books often have a great gift in being able to encapsulate a huge novel into one snappy paragraph.

The Next Paragraph

This is where you tell a little bit about yourself. No, you don't want to write a full-blown biography, and an agent doesn't really care where you live, what your hobbies are, or even how hard you are going to work to promote your novel when it gets published (agents and publishers assume you will work hard to promote). Unless you have some fantastic connection that will ensure big sales of your novel, don't try to impress an agent with all your great marketing ideas.

A lot of writers don't want to give any biography because, up to now, they really have nothing impressive to speak of. Without any prior publishing credits, just what can you say to get an agent to care that you've written this novel? It's true that many agents will decide whether or not to read your book based on your bio. With a nonfiction book, they are looking for platform, and for influence you have in your field (along with expertise, speaking experience, media exposure to date). But most novelists don't have a platform, and other than having some friends on Facebook and Twitter, don't have much to brag about.

Although this paragraph, too, should be short, if a writer has a list of impressive credits, she will want to list them here. Although, even a writer with numerous awards, publishing credits, and other medals of honor needn't ramble on endlessly about herself. Again, too much self-praise is a red flag, for the letter should be focused more on offering something an agent can use or might be looking for rather than on blowing a writer's horn to show just how great she is.

This instruction can be a little confusing and frustrating, for, on the one hand, you do need to tout your book, your talent, and your accomplishments. On the other hand, you want to come across as professional and not egotistical, arrogant, or desperate. The best advice I've heard is that as a professional, you want to act like a peer. Sure, you are not an agent's peer (in the sense that you are seeking to have them contract you as one of their clients), but if you approach the agent on the same level, acknowledging their professionalism by presenting yourself professionally, then your letter will come across in the right tone.

Admittedly, it's really hard to describe ourselves, and harder still in a short paragraph and in a way that makes us sound like we are just the right person to have written the book we're pitching. Should you list minor credits, such as writing a local newspaper column or having guest blogged on a few writing sites?

No. All that will do is make you seem insignificant. You may think it's better to mention *something* in your bio rather than nothing at all, but these small credits will not score you any points, so leave them out.

Before I got published, I just didn't say much at all about my writing background. I didn't have an English degree, and I didn't have an impressive background. But I had to say something. At the time I didn't have anyone give me good advice on this matter, so I just avoided saying anything at all.

So without getting too personal in your bio, and if you don't have any publishing credits worth speaking of, what should you say? If you've won any awards or received recognition in some way, won a contest, or finished a writing residency, do mention

those. Finishing an MFA program is something worth mentioning; so is winning a scholarship. However you can simply make a case for your excellent writing skills is good.

If you have published authors committed to endorsing you, or other public figures or authorities in the field related to your nonfiction books, those should be mentioned. If you're just *thinking* of asking Stephen King if he'll endorse your thriller, don't imply it's a done deal. You may think he'll drop everything to read your book but chances are . . . like most authors, they aren't even allowed to look at unpublished manuscripts. At least that's what one best-selling author told me in reply to my request—that his lawyer forbid him to do so. Whether that was true or just a polite brush-off, I'm not sure. But I think you get the point here.

Of course, if you do have some expertise in the field you are writing about, you do want to highlight that. Again, you don't want to get too personal, such as explaining in detail the violence you suffered as a child that gives you the insight to write the creepy stalker novel you did.

If you don't have any great credentials to speak of, considering building some in the meantime by writing magazine or ezine articles, becoming a regular blogger on a popular writing site, maybe write and submit short stories to contests and for publication and see if you can start getting sold and getting a real "byline" in print (or online).

One of the best things you can do is attend writers' conferences. Not only will you learn a lot of great skills that will help you be a better writer, you will get to meet and pitch to agents and editors.

Very often, agents find their clients (and editors their next books to publish) by going to these conferences and meeting with writers. Not just I, but pretty much all my author friends have gotten *all* their book contracts through attending conferences and pitching there. Many of my friends got their agents by meeting with them at a conference. Actually, I got one of my agents by rooming with her at a big book fair/retail publishing show. She not only became my agent but is a good friend.

One other benefit to attending a writers' conference is you learn to behave around agents. You can get practice being professional with them, talking to them in a confident manner and pitching your ideas to them. You will learn they are just human like everyone else, want to be treated respectfully and not worshipped, and really don't appreciate being stalked or followed into the restroom (or have manuscripts shoved under the bathroom door for them to look at!).

Enter writing contests (I got my first book contract by winning a huge, prestigious contest that included publication of my novel and a nice advance!), apply for grants and fellowships, and go to writing retreats and intensives. The more agents, authors, and acquisitions editors you meet and get to know, the more your name and face will be recognized. At some point these professionals will start saying, "Didn't we talk at ___ conference? I remember you—how's your writing going and what are you working on now?"

Let them see you don't just have a book in you; you have a *writer* in you, and you are looking at writing as a long-term career and not just trying to whip out one book to get rich. Let them know you understand the writing journey takes time and that you are patient and optimistic, and hard at work.

Last Details

Now your rough draft of your query letter is finished. You'll want to go through and polish it, and make sure there are no spelling or grammatical errors. If you have doubts about your skills in this regard, run it by someone who's a good editor.

One major complaint of agents is that they see egregious mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Will a little thing like a misspelled word really cause them to toss your query? You bet. I've heard agents and editors say that at the first mistake or typo, they stop reading. Maybe that seems pretty harsh, but then again, remember how many hundreds of query letters they are shuffling through each week. If they already spot a mistake in your query letter, they feel they can expect more sloppy, careless writing with your manuscript. And they will probably be right.

Do you just end with you bio? And what about a conclusion and the type of signature sign-off? It's always polite to say something like "thank you for your consideration." You don't need to say "I hope I hear back from you" (that's a given) or "If you're interested in reading my book, let me know" (another given). Or "I'd be happy to send you my synopsis, or sample chapters, or complete manuscript, or my detailed summary, or . . ."

Really, they know what to ask for if they're interested; you don't need to tell them. They assume you're a professional and have a one-page synopsis and polished chapters to send them upon request.

And a note here: *don't query an agent with only a few complete, edited chapters!* You should only be querying an agent when your book is thoroughly done and professionally edited (unless it's nonfiction, and then you can submit a detailed proposal with the completed chapters).

Why? Because if your query letter does catch their attention and your book seems to be just what they're looking for, they will ask to see the whole manuscript *now*.

Which means you send it ASAP.

Not in three months when you finally get it done or edited.

A few other details: if you have more than one book (unless you are pitching a series and they are a package), just pitch one book. If they're not interested in that book but like your writing, you may want to write back and let them know about another book you have.

That happened to me. An agent read the novel I sent and loved my writing but passed on the book. So I queried back asking if she'd like to see another novel I wrote, and she said yes, loved it, and became my agent for six years.

You may think pitching a bunch of books will make you look prolific, but it just muddles the query. Focus on one book, and in the future if the agent asks, you can tell her about all the other books you've written.

As you read over your letter, make sure the tone is professional, positive, and not self-critical in any way. Don't put yourself down by saying things like "I've only been writing a few months . . ." or "I know my story sounds like a lot of books out there but . . ." Also don't sound overly friendly with lines like "I know you're busy and have a lot of queries to read, but I hope you'll find my story interesting . . ." or "I wish I could tell you the whole story from beginning to end because I am sure you'll be enthralled. It's just so exciting I don't know where to start . . ."

Ready, Set, Go

I've heard lots of different suggestions on how to query, how many to send out, how long to wait for a response, etc. I often don't agree with the advice given. Some say you should first just query the one agent you'd really like to have. And then if they reject you, maybe query the next two or three on the top of your list.

I really disagree with this. Unless you've met with an agent at a conference and have talked about your book and they're waiting for you to send it OR you have been specifically recommended to an agent by someone with influence and want to try to get that agent's interest before sending out bulk queries, don't limit yourself.

Again, you don't want to mass mail generic queries; as pointed out at the start, you need to research which agents might like your book, find titles or authors they represent that are similar to you and your book, and tailor the query to that agent. That doesn't mean, though, you send one out, wait weeks or months for a reply, then send the next out.

I believe in the gunshot approach. There are hundreds of agents out there looking for material. If you send out a hundred queries to agents that seem likely to be interested in your work, you have much better odds that you will get a few agents interested in your project than if you send out only five queries.

That's how I've seen it work the last twenty-five years. Each time I needed to get an agent, I did just that. On average, I would get about 10% willing to look at my first three chapters. Out of that bunch maybe a third would ask for a full read. I invariably got at least one offer of representation out of the batch. And this was before I had any publishing credits at all.

You can get comprehensive lists of agents online (make sure they are members of AAR—Association of Authors' Representatives) or in printed guide books like Jeff Herman's Guide. Checking out reviews and other authors' experiences with particular agents at online "water coolers" can also offer some good advice (although sometimes a bit colored and quite subjective).

Some people say you shouldn't mention you've had a previous agent (if that's the case), that it will make you look bad. Those people reason the agent will think you are too difficult to work with and your previous agent dropped you, or you're too difficult to work with and you dropped the agent. However, I have not found that to be true at all. When I've queried an agent and they've asked why I am no longer with my former agent, I tell them why.

Sometimes the agent didn't want to represent my new book (most of the time that was the case, and I ended up with a different agent for every book). It's more likely you will score some points for having had an agent before—implying that someone out there thought your book was good enough to represent. For many years I had two agents at a time because I wrote (primarily) in two very different genres for two different audiences. As unusual as it is (and a lot of agents would never take me on under those conditions, citing they require exclusivity), I have found it a terrific arrangement that both I and my agents prefer and enjoy. The agent that represents my contemporary drama/mysteries has no connections with the YA/fantasy market and so thought it great that I get an agent to handle those books. My agents have always been professional and willing to help the other provide leads or referrals. I truly appreciate them and value their hard work, advice, and expertise.

Programs like Query Tracker are helpful to keep track of all your queries. I have always used an Excel chart. It's important to keep track of the name of the agent, contact e-mail, date you sent your query, what method (e-mail or snail mail), what you sent them, what their response was, and all the follow-up—if they requested material, what you sent, when you sent it, etc.

Don't query more than one agent at an agency. And don't quote anything an agent says to you in a response letter to another agent. Any correspondence between you and an agent should be considered completely confidential (of course, you can share your rejection letter with friends and family, but you certainly don't want to tweet or post a name and comment from an agent publically on your blog or newsletter).

Unless an agent's website or posted submission guidelines states otherwise, do not send or e-mail anything but the query letter. Often you will see an agent request a query letter, synopsis, and three sample chapters. If that's what they want, give them exactly what they ask for.

Again, if they say to paste all this in the body of the e-mail and do not send attachments, do exactly that. Follow directions. They will see you are paying both attention and respect to them and their methods of doing business.

Really—agenting is a business, and you as a writer are trying to sell a product. You are not trying to make friends and buddy up with them. You are not trying to impress them and hard-sell your product. You should have the attitude that you know they are in business to make a living (and hopefully love books and love what they do), and you are presenting them with a book you feel they can sell.

Maybe you don't want to think of your book that way. If you don't and you really are writing just for the artistic experience of it all, then feel free to put your book online as an eBook and market it to your target audience. There's nothing wrong with that. But if you do want an agent to help you sell your book to a publisher so it can sell, then you need to provide a marketable book and demonstrate its marketability by your materials, which includes your query letter.

You Are Not Your Book

A final thought here. You will get rejections. In fact, the longer you stay in this business, the more rejections you will get. And even after you sign with an agent you will get rejections, maybe lots of them. I know I've gotten hundreds, but after a while I threw them out or deleted them. It's part of the process, everyone experiences this, and you just learn to accept it.

But what you need to understand is that *you* are not being rejected. A rejection letter doesn't mean you're an awful person, a terrible writer, or a failure. It may be true your writing needs a lot of improvement, and the best way to really find that out is to hire a professional critiquer who can go over all the major elements in your book, point out your strengths and weaknesses, and give you concrete advice on how to improve your craft.

Good writers have critique partners or readers who are constantly challenging them to write better and improve their craft. I have many readers for each book I write, and I listen to the advice given to me.

However, if you are getting responses back from agents regarding your query that state it is full of errors or demonstrates sloppy writing (I've had clients show me such responses they've gotten), you need to spend more time crafting their query letter, run it by a copyeditor who can help correct it, then take a serious look at your book and see if it, too, might need some serious work.

I can't stress enough that you want to make sure your book is really ready to submit before you send it out to dozens of agents and suffer dozens of rejections. Often a new client comes to me for editing who has done this, completely clueless as to why they're not getting any interest in their book. Upon evaluating it I often see it packed with errors, reveals bad sentence structure, and is usually poorly constructed overall. What this author should have done before going past a first draft is have a full annotated critique done to see if the whole premise and storyline worked.

I encourage my clients to hire me at the outlining stage to work out the plot holes and make the story is strong and compelling before even beginning to write the book. For some, years of life can be spared from waiting, querying, suffering rejections, and getting nowhere. I know this is off topic, but it's something to think about as you get ready for the big project of querying agents about your finished novel. Be sure you've had it professionally edited, and preferably critiqued, and if you haven't, consider doing so. It may save you a lot of frustration and heartache in the long run.

Remember that many times a great book touted in a great query letter may still get many rejections for the simple reason that the agent is just not looking for your type of book at the moment. Often you will get a letter back that says something like "Your work shows promise, but unfortunately we are not acquiring ___ books at this current time." Don't take that personally.

I enjoy a great rejection letter from a queried editor at a publishing house that highly praises my work but says she has to pass because it's not what they're publishing right now. That's a great feeling—to get acknowledged by a major editor like that. They aren't being rude or mean; they're just doing their job, so keep that in perspective and don't get too discouraged. You are competing against hundreds of thousands of other books out there, but if you've written a great book, you will, in time, find an agent and get representation. And in time, you will get published.

I have had many agents tell me over the years—agents who've been in the business many decades—that persistence wins. The author who presses forward, hones her craft, is diligent and hardworking, does her homework, attends conferences and queries agents correctly, will get published down the line. Act like a professional and you will be treated like one. And most importantly, write a great book. That's 95 percent of success right there.

Sure, a lot of terrible books get published, and it amazes us how many best sellers are "out there" that are almost unbearable to read. But if you care about being the best writer you will be, you will write your best work, present it professionally, and keep writing. Don't sit around year after year waiting for an agent to pick up your one book. Write another book, and another. You're a writer—live like one. And as you believe in yourself as a writer and present yourself that way, agents will notice. And so will publishers. They are looking for serious writers who are looking at writing as a career and a way of life. Not a get-rich-quick scheme.

Now That You've Sent Out Your Queries . . .

I mentioned you should keep writing. But on a more immediate and related note, should you follow up with the agents you've queried if you haven't heard back from them in a long time (hmmm . . . define long . . .)? There's nothing wrong with checking back with an agent after a few months if you haven't heard from him. And if an agent has requested you send material and you have, you can always follow up a few weeks later just to briefly confirm they did get your material.

You don't need to send a lengthy e-mail, saying, "Gee, I hope I'm not bothering you, but I was starting to get worried . . ." Just remind them who you are and what you sent and say, "I just want to make sure you got my chapters and synopsis that I sent." They almost always send you a quick friendly note back saying yes or no. Again, keep your correspondence brief and professional, not naggy, whiny, pushy, or apologetic. This is business. You are following through on requested material. They'll let you know in their good time what they think of your book or if they want you to send anything else.

Unless an agent specifically wants an exclusive (and that rarely happens with an unknown author), feel free to keep sending queries out to other agents while they are looking at your book. They understand you are doing multiple submissions. If they ask if anyone else is currently reading your book, tell them. If they feel close to making you an offer, they may ask you to refrain from sending out queries in the meantime, and if you want them to keep considering your project, then by all means, do what they ask. If you do accept representation by an agent, it's polite to contact any other agents now looking at your book and tell them you've signed with an agent. You shouldn't waste their time, and they will appreciate you letting them know.

The process of acquiring an agent can be a long, grueling, and frustrating one, but stick with it. If you've written a great book, you will find an agent to represent you. In the meantime, follow the advice given to build your credentials and meet agents and pitch to them.

And once you find an agent who loves your book and with whom you feel you can have a great professional relationship, you are in for a lot of joy. They will be a support, encouragement, and help to you. Often agents will ask you to do some rewriting, and often they are more savvy about the market and know what they're doing.

I've rewritten many chapters, mostly beginnings and endings, for my agents. In my case, they always helped me make my book better. Be teachable, humble, a good listener, and patient. Sometimes your agent will ask to see your next book and then will take months before she gets back to you. Sometimes she sends out submissions for your book and doesn't hear back from editors for many months. This process is really "hurry up and wait." That is my motto for my publishing life, and my author friends often joke with me about that, sometimes with a bit of irritation or anxiety. Wait, wait, wait. That's the name of this game.

But if you persevere and keep writing the best books you can, and learn to be patient, you will succeed—and stay joyful in the process.

I hope my advice will help you on the road to signing with an agent and getting you closer to your dream of publication!

About Me

I'm a professional copyeditor and writing coach and edit for publishers, literary agents, and individuals. I've written twenty novels, nine of which I contracted with three traditional publishers. The rest I self-published. I've also written and published eight writing craft books. I wrote my first novel more than thirty years ago, which immediately got picked up by a top agent, but then never sold. I finally landed my first contract by entering my sixth novel in a big publisher's novel contest and shortly after that sold the first three novels in a now-seven-book fantasy series with another publisher.

I find my greatest joy in working with writers and helping them polish their books. My websites Critique My Manuscript and Live Write Thrive are geared to help writers on their writing journey—not just to master the craft of writing but to learn how to thrive and enjoy the writing life without despairing or giving up. Consider hiring me to copyedit and critique. Many of my clients have gone on to get agents, acquire publishing contracts, win prestigious awards, land film options, and get excellent reviews on their books.

I also teach workshops and do one-on-one critiques at writers' conferences around the country. If your writers' group would be interested in having me teach a writing workshop or participating in a conference teaching a mentor track or doing critiques, please drop me a line at contact@livewritethrive.com.

Happy writing!