

## *The Query Letter*

Ah, the query letter. The very words send shivers or dread through many a freelancer, and for good reason. They know the importance of this letter. Granted, in a perfect world you could dress in your best suit, hop a plane and have a face to face meeting with the editor of your choice to pitch your idea. In such a meeting you could pour on your charm and show your enthusiasm for the subject you wish to write about, and probably walk away with an assignment.

However, such a scenario is not only unrealistic but very expensive. Editors don't have the time or the inclination to meet with every writer who has an idea for their magazine. They're not trying to be rude. It's just a fact of life. Instead, you send your query letter as your representative to the editor and it should be of high quality mechanically and contain particular elements.

### *The Mechanics*

I know I shouldn't have to mention it, but this letter should be crisp, and neat, and clean, and free from all typographical errors, just as you would appear in person with a freshly laundered and pressed outfit, free of dust and stains. Use good quality 25% cotton paper. You may use white or any other attractive light color such as light gray, blue or ivory. Avoid bright fluorescent colors or hand written notes. I remember an editor showing a room full of conference participants a query letter that got noticed, but also got no reply. Its silver letters glittered on the bright pink paper!

You may also use any attractive, easy-to-read font. Before the days of word processors, writers could only use their typewriter font, the ever-popular Courier 12. These days, however, you may use Times New Roman, Helvetica or other such fonts in a 12 point size. Avoid fancy Old English or other hard-to-read fonts. They may look lovely on Christmas cards, but they do little to endear you to an editor's heart.

The format, as you will see from sample queries in upcoming pages is the simple block format that you'd use with any business letter. Always, use single spaces within a paragraph and double spaces between paragraphs. Also, you may justify your margins as this is only a single page and won't tax an editor's eyesight. Remember, your mission as a freelancer is to make your editor's life easier.

### *Content*

Having addressed mechanics, let's talk about content. Each one page query letter, (and you should limit it to one page) should have five elements: hook, idea, development, benefits, and credentials. The hook needs to be the first thing the editors sees. After that, you can place the information in any order you feel most effective. However, I have found the following order to work best for me. It also seems the most logical, so let's begin with the hook.

### *The Hook*

The first sentence of your query letter must read like a headline, containing enough punch and excitement to make the editor want to read more. Bear in mind, editors have so many manuscripts to read, they don't have the time to dawdle on unpromising material. You have maybe three to five seconds to hook the editor into wanting to read more. The editor must find your first words concise and exciting. If it's rambling and dull, your letter will summarily be thrown into the dreaded "File 13" or put into your return envelope with or without a polite "Thank you but no thank you."

### ***The Idea***

The second necessary ingredient of your query letter, is a brief statement of your idea, the focus of your article. You should state that idea in one complete and concise sentence. If you can't, then you don't have a firm grasp of it yourself. Work on it, and once you can present your idea in a succinct manner, do it as eloquently as possible. If you've captured the editor's attention with the hook thus far, you want to keep it when you present the idea.

### ***The Development***

The third element of a good query letter is to give a brief explanation or description of the points you would like to develop in the piece. Obviously, the longer the article, the more points you'll be able to write about. In an article of about 1,000 words, you'll probably want to develop three or four key points. A longer article will allow you to develop more. Be sure to delineate to the editor the slant the article will have. Somewhere in this section, mention the word count of the article and be sure to use the phrase "as per your guidelines." (*Example: "Nothing About Elephants, an article of about 1,000 words as per your guidelines, will discuss. . . ."*) Such a phrase indicates to the editor that you have done your research—marking you as a professional.

### ***The Benefits***

Every editor wants to know that the material they publish will attract their target audience. One of the ways to attract readers is to provide them with articles that will benefit them in some way. In this section of your query letter, point out the benefits their readers may gain. The best writing educates, motivates and entertains all at the same time. Emphasize how your article will accomplish that for their readers.

### ***The Credentials***

Editors also want to know that they are dealing with a professional. End your letter by stating your credentials for writing this particular piece. If you've never been published before, don't say that. Instead, focus on why you are qualified to write this. If it's about taking sick children to the doctor, you don't have to be a nurse or health care professional. Perhaps you're the mother of three children and you have based this article on your experiences with your children and facts you learned from your pediatrician.

Also, don't ask the editor for an opinion of your work. That marks you as a rank amateur and editors don't want to deal with amateurs. If you have a limited number of credits, list them all. If you've been extensively published, then list those credits that pertain. In any case, always be positive, polished and professional.

When you close your letter, be sure to keep it short and professional. "Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope to hear from you soon," is sufficient. Sign it "Sincerely" or with some other business-like closing. Avoid such things as "Love" or "Hugs and Kisses."

Always, always, always include an SASE with any correspondence to any editor, publisher or agent. Otherwise, you may never see your manuscript again, or worse yet, the editor will refuse to work with such an “amateur.” On the following pages, you will find examples of some query letters that have sold articles for me. I have changed the names of the publications and editors. Again, these are not the be all and end all of query letters, but they have worked. Take from them what you need to work for you.

Now that you have your query in the mail, go back to your idea list and pick another topic. Start over, because as a freelancer, you can’t afford to sit idly by as you wait for a reply.