

The do's and don'ts of AGENT QUERIES

A representative of a big New York literary agency offers some helpful tips from the trenches

By Maya Rock

AROUND 100 queries a week land in my in-box at the Writers House literary agency in New York City. To accommodate this onslaught, I've developed a finely tuned, instinctual judging system based on this philosophy: *Clear out as many as you can as fast as you can, so that you can get to the good ones.* Although this attitude may seem ruthless, its aim is to help me find the books I love. Unfortunately, it's inevitable that I have to break a few hearts in the process of finding good matches.

Over the years, I've observed a basic similarity between the kinds of queries that pique my interest and those that earn quick dismissals: They stand out. Some of the compelling queries, of course, appeal to my own personal tastes, but others simply do a great job of selling the work.

Here are a few easy ways to ensure that your query letter stands out in the *right* way from the rest. The guidelines apply to both fiction and nonfiction projects.

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FIVE DON'TS

1 Don't be gimmicky. Too many authors try to make themselves stand apart by doing something they think is quirky and fun but comes across as unprofessional, desperate and confusing. Slipping cookies or other goodies into the envelope is one extreme. Another common ploy is writing the letter in the voice of your main character. Stepping out of the traditional form of the query letter may get you noticed—but not in the right way. It distracts from the quality of your work and makes the agent doubt your professionalism, and sometimes even your sanity.

2 Don't be sloppy. Have someone you trust read your letter for punctuation and grammar mistakes. Make sure the agency's address is correct on both the letter and envelope. Make sure you spell the agent's name correctly. Type your letter, and format it consistently. Make sure everything is in the same font so it isn't so obvious that you're copy-pasting the body of the letter and personalizing the address line and first two sentences. Just make it look nice. Making mistakes is human, and I've received enough letters addressed to

“Mr. Rock” or “Myra Rock” to know they don't necessarily reflect the quality of the work itself. But carefulness about such things helps build an image of the author as someone who is responsible and reliable and treats herself and her work with respect.

3 Don't sell yourself; sell your work. A good rule of thumb when approaching your letter—and indeed, something to keep in mind throughout the whole publishing process—is that you are selling your book, not yourself. Many authors try to appeal to me by sharing their own personal life stories or making jokes as if we're at a dinner party and they need to ingratiate themselves. The focus of the letter should be on getting the agent to fall in love with your book, not you. Don't make the tone of your letter too personal. To some extent, the rules are different when you're selling a nonfiction book. Then, your personality and your platform are paramount in publicizing the book.

4 Don't send the agent anything that is not a query unless you're asked to do so. Often I receive e-mails asking

about my submission guidelines or for permission to send a query. Or a complicated question about the publishing business. One person asked me to mediate in a deal gone bad between himself and an online literary magazine. If I were that person's agent, it would be my job to answer—but I wasn't. People also often send me attachments when I have not requested them—I delete those with little guilt. I also often receive quick e-mails from authors I've rejected thanking

me for considering queries or even asking me to refer them to other agents. I usually don't respond to these people either, as it just slows down my progress getting to e-mails I need to respond to.

5 Don't tell us more than we need to know. Dense paragraphs are a bane to eyes that must read scores of pages every day. Resist the temptation to report every detail of your plot. And be care-

ful how you handle your credits. While a certain amount of self-puffery and biographical information are to be expected, don't go overboard with it. For instance, a colleague of mine recently received a query from a convicted pedophile who had no problem saying so. I have gotten many queries from authors who proudly announce that they have written three unpublished manuscripts—but all this signals to me is, why couldn't they get an agent before?

FIVE DO'S

1 Do keep it to one page. I've never rejected anyone for writing a two-page query letter. Three pages is pushing it. But really, one page is enough, and obeying this rule will prevent you from rambling off in unnecessary directions—such as providing an overly detailed plot synopsis or telling me too much about your pet chihuahuas. A one-page query shows an agent an author can edit himself, a very attractive skill.

2 Do have a hook. Summing up your book in a few powerful sentences will make you stand out from the crowd and entice the agent to delve further into your letter. Remember, no matter how unique your book sounds to you and your friends, to an agent who has read thousands of queries it will probably sound a little familiar. By distilling your book's uniqueness into a hook sentence or sentences placed near the top of the letter, you'll get the agent more excited about your work. My client Bethany Griffin roped me in with these lines:

Coming down from the most sexually charged moment of your life to face humiliation, unfulfilled lust, and the boredom of indefinite grounding is tough. Sixteen-year-old Parker Prescott alternates her punishment time between sneaking out to see her would-be lover and playing Internet pranks. One of these activities will lead to an unflattering mug shot, but both will land her in handcuffs.

3 Do pay attention to which agent you're targeting. Do the research to make sure you're querying an agent who is interested in your type of material. I always recommend that writers check the acknowledgments pages of books they like, where authors will often thank their agents. The Web is also invaluable (try AgentQuery.com and PublishersMarketplace.com), and so are such popular reference books as *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents* and *Literary Market Place*. You'll increase your chances of getting a positive response if your book fits the agent's interests. My eyes glaze over as soon as I see the word "thriller"—I never request thrillers since I never read them.

4 Do follow the traditional format. This format, which we all learned in grade school, is: intro paragraph, body, conclusion. Your intro paragraph is your opportunity to put the hook in—the wonderful grabber that'll keep agents reading. If you have outstanding national credits, however, or a personal referral to the agent, I'd put that vital info on top rather than the hook. The important thing is that you capture the agent's attention and make her want to read more. You might also want to say in this section why you are writing to this particular agent. Have you read something online that indicates the agent would like your book?

The middle section should include a simple description of the book—such as the descriptions on book backs or jackets. Sometimes, too many proper names can be hard to keep track of—keep it clean and simple, and let us know what's going to happen, but don't tell everything. Most agents request a separate synopsis where you can go into more detail, but the synopsis in your letter should primarily aim to entice.

The third section should include a little biographical information. Include your previous writing experience and perhaps any life experience that is relevant to your book.

5 Do develop a thick skin. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of developing a thick skin as you go about sending your query letters. You'll probably have to be patient. You'll probably get your fair share of form rejections. Try not to take any of these personally or let them get you down. If you receive consistent criticism from multiple agents, do consider that, but don't fret too much over vague, generic criticisms ("the characterization is poor").

In the end, agents and writers want the same thing: to see books they love get published. Unfortunately, as in many matters of love, events do not run as smoothly and harmoniously as we'd like them to. Be patient, keep the faith, and try your best to let go of the anger, sadness and frustration that are sometimes part of the query process.