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Don't Fall Into the Query Letter Quandary

By Shery Ma Belle Arrieta

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He wrote the book on how to write killer query letters. In this interview, author John Wood shares his knowledge based on 17 years of working as an editor. More than 30,000 query letters have landed on his desk. Wood lets us in on the things that make or break query letters, and how you, the writer, can get past the editor's desk and be published.

A Query Letter That Stands Out

Because most queries look and read the same, your query letter must stand out.

"Devise a scintillating title and subtitle for your idea in the style of the magazine you're pitching," says Wood. "Center it and boldface it right up front after your initial introductory paragraph. Use bullets, numbered lists, indented paragraphs, italics or even boxes to set off important elements. Don't go overboard, but do something to make your letter stand out from the pack.

"My former editor demanded that I do this whenever I proposed an idea to him because with a head and deck at the top of the page, he could envision instantly what it would look like in the magazine," Wood explains. "I have used this technique ever since when approaching editors and agents, and have been told by more than one agent that my queries were the best they have ever seen."

Your query letter should be no more than a page or a page and a half, and should contain a brief introduction as to why you're writing that specific magazine. Mention your expertise or interest in your proposed topic, and include one or two ideas, presented in decks and heads. In your closing paragraph, briefly mention who you are, your publication credits and how you can be reached.

Include one or two clips of your writing, but only if your clips are similar to your proposed topic. There's no point in sending a cooking article clip if you're querying a travel article!

Most Common and Crucial Mistakes Writers Make When Writing and Submitting Queries

"Of all the ones that I rejected, I found that the writers were making the same simple mistakes or omissions," Wood reveals. "Unfortunately, reject letters never tell you what you did wrong, so most writers just continue to make the same mistakes."

According to Wood, there are 4 common mistakes writers commit when writing and submitting query letters:

Mistake # 1. Sending your query to the wrong editor

"This is crucial," says Wood. "Call the magazine, ask for 'Editorial,' and ask which editor handles the subject you're submitting."

"If you're sending a query for a health article, ask which editor handles health features. If you're sending a pitch for the New Products department, ask which editor oversees the New Products department, and so on," he advises. "If the receptionist gives you the editor-in-chief's name or says, 'Just send it in,' do not accept this. Demand a specific name for your specific topic. If she can't or won't, ask to speak to her supervisor."

When Wood was editor, writers who took their time to do their homework, learn that he was the right editor for their proposed story and then approach him directly by query letter always got top priority.

"Unfortunately, less than 5–10 percent of all submissions arrive to me—or any editor—that way. Writers who act in this manner

earn my respect and I will assume they are professionals and treat them accordingly," Wood says.

And those who don't? Their queries don't garner much interest and go straight to the slush pile.

Mistake # 2. Failing to narrow your story angle

"Don't send a query about horseback riding," Wood warns. "Send one about horseback riding for blind black women lesbians along the Malibu coast during Kwanzaa. I'm exaggerating, but I guarantee you that a query like the first example will go nowhere; one focused to the degree of the second example will find a market somewhere."

Mistake # 3. Not studying the magazine thoroughly before querying

Take time to know what a magazine wants and doesn't want. Know its readers and style the articles are written in. Do these things and you will be able to write a query letter that will catch any editor's eye.

Mistake # 4. Forgetting to include a self-addressed stamped envelope or SASE with the query

5 Things You Should Never Do When Writing A Query Letter

1. Don't be presumptuous. Avoid even an appearance of cockiness or arrogance.
2. Don't be sketchy. Outline your idea in sufficient depth to give the editor a clear picture of your idea and what you intend to do.
3. Don't offer an article on spec.
4. Never apologize or give a lame reason for wanting to write your article.
5. Don't even think about querying by phone.

And If You're An Amateur, Don't Give Yourself Away!

If you've never been published before, Wood warns you shouldn't mention it in your query letter.

"You must never give the appearance that you are a beginner or an amateur," he says. "If you present yourself in a professional manner, the editor can only assume you're a pro and will treat you like one.

"I have given many assignments over the years to writers who I thought were seasoned pros and then found out later that they were just starting out," he continues. "That's fine. But once you let the cat out of the bag and make a slip of the pen ('This is my first query to a magazine'), it's an automatic rejection. Few editors will knowingly work with beginners.

"If you have been published before, but only to small newsletters or church flyers or local newspapers, do not mention this or attach such clips," he adds.

The Query-able Stuff

You don't need to query every idea you think is publishable.

"The only articles that do not and should not require a query are humor, essays, poems, short fiction, and puzzles/games. These particular types of pieces are subjective and cannot be assigned; you simply have to write them and send them in," Wood says.

Shotgun Querying and the Waiting Game

So, is it acceptable to send multiple queries on the same subject? Wood says yes.

"Shotgun the sucker to as many editors as you can. You're the writer; you're the one who has to pay your bills while waiting (sometimes for months) to hear back from each publication," Wood explains. "Editors are notorious for not replying at all—even if you include an SASE. The obvious exception would be an idea that is focused to a particular magazine; in that case you should only send it to that place. But that doesn't mean you couldn't rewrite it and refocus the same general idea to several different similar magazines and send them all out at the same time.

"One lesson I've learned: Do not mention that your query is a simultaneous submission," John advises. He once thought it was necessary until one editor got offended and rejected his query. That editor, according to Wood, only wanted articles "specifically tailored to my magazine."

"My idea was a unique travel idea that was certainly appropriate to his publication, but to many others as well," Wood explains.

After shotgunning your idea to as many editors as possible, it's time for you to wait it out.

"Wait about a month, then follow-up by e-mail," he advises. "Never phone unless you've worked with the editor before. If still no response, assume it's a reject and move on."

10 Specific Advice to Help You Get Your Query Letter Accepted (and Make You a Published Author Eventually)

Wood sums it up:

1. Be professional. Make sure every letter is error-free, is addressed to the right editor, and includes a SASE.
2. Be new. Offer a fresh idea and set it off with a centered, boldfaced head and subhead.
3. Be provocative. Pull the reader in with a stunning lead.
4. Be creative. Lay out your letter in a unique way and show your writing style. Don't write formally! Write the way you talk, write in your own voice. You have only one chance to impress the editor. If you go down, go down in flames, baby.
5. Be focused. Narrow your story angle as much as you can.
6. Be customized. Slant your idea to each individual publication as much as you can.
7. Be multifaceted. Give each editor more than one reason to say yes: Offer more than one place for your article, more than one thing to peg it to,

more than one way to structure it, and more than one element to accompany it.

8. Be realistic. Instill confidence that you're reliable and your project is doable.

9. Be qualified. Include appropriate clips, credits, and qualifications.

10. Be passionate. Show enthusiasm for your project.

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In April/May 2000, Shery established The e–Writer's Place, a comprehensive site for writers of all ages & levels. This May, this multi–awarded Web site enters its third year on the Web. Visit <http://ewritersplace.com/anniversariesale.html> for a 2–for–1 sale on e–books and special reports for writers.

Multiplying Sales As A Writer

By L. C. Peterson

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Often, time is an enemy of writers. Sales seem slow and checks too small. How does one make the most of their effort? Here are some tips that will multiply your sales.

1. Companies accepting manuscripts from freelancers offer copies of their writing guidelines and sample copies. Assume there's a reason for them. Study them. Study their web sites as well. What do they tell you about the publication's readers? The Internet will save you much postage and time from when I started.

2. Think ahead. Lead times for publication are rarely short. Writers' guidelines often teach Christmas is in July. Lead times can be shorter for the Internet. Learn what they are. Submit accordingly.

3. Take advantage of your research. Write more than one manuscript for the same effort. This adds to your productivity. Interviewing a camp director? Write a

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feature article on how to select a camp for more than one market. Write a filler article. Write an article on finding work at a camp.

4. Resell the same manuscript multiple times. My record for off-line for publication with one manuscript is seventeen reprints. It is easy to surpass this on the web.

5. Resell to editors. Once you sell to a company, send another query or manuscript to its editor. Some companies may buy from you for each issue, others will buy only once every so many months. Learn what they want before you submit. Learn this from studying their publication before you query. If they like what you do, keep them happy.

6. Use query letters whenever possible. When an editor has OK'd a query letter first you usually succeed at selling the manuscript. This saves valuable time! Kill fees are more often offered if

article results from a query letter as well.

7. Take a look at your sales. What has worked for you? How can you multiply your sales?

L. C. Peterson is a freelance writer with over 400 manuscripts published. A free email tutorial on Freelance Writing is at Writers and the Web at <http://www.salesandtales.com>. E-mail requests to requests@lcpeterson.com.

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