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Tight Lines, Writers!

By Jenna Glatzer

"Tight lines" is a good luck wish among fishermen. When you've hooked a fish, your line tightens up.

I was musing on this expression as my husband critiqued my lousy casting skills on our latest fishing expedition. Anthony's as accurate a caster as they come. He can pinpoint a particular far-away reed and cast an inch in front of it.

We were going for bass, and he explained that bass like to hide out on the perimeters of a lake, under rocks and in between plants. Problem is, I can't pinpoint anything. I aim my pole right and the line somehow flies left. I aim fifty feet away and it somehow shoots straight up in the air and plunks down five feet in front of the boat.

Fishing is part plain luck, but there's a lot of strategizing to it, too. You have to pick the right spot, the right time of day, the right bait, the right rig, the right technique. You could just toss a worm out and hope something hits, but your odds are a lot better if you make the effort to put a tasty-looking treat right in front of the fish's mouth.

Kind of like querying.

Oh, you knew there was a writing reference in here somewhere!

As I aimlessly hurled my plastic worm into the middle of the lake, I got more and more frustrated watching Anthony pull in fish. Smug show-off! But really, he was doing a much better job of appealing to his target than I was.

When you have a great idea, write a query, and toss it out to every editor you can think of, you're the Jenna fisherwoman. You figure that if you just toss that line out there enough, some smart editor is going to come snatch it up. And sometimes you'll get lucky, but more often, you'll come up empty. What you really want is to be the Anthony fisherman.

Tight Lines, Writers!

So let's go over those editor–luring techniques.

The Right Spot:

This is the most important part of the equation. You have to know where your idea will fit. Don't assume that just because your topic is about weddings, it'll be right for every wedding magazine. Pick a magazine genre and get to know it well. Read at least five or six wedding magazines, cover to cover, and jot down the names of the sections and columns. How long are the articles in each section? What is the tone? Is the magazine targeting brides on a budget or no–expense–is–too–silly ones? Which topics seem to come up in every issue? Know exactly where your article would fit within the magazine and be prepared to tell the editor.

The Right Time:

Magazines have long lead times (the time between an article's acceptance and the time when it's published), sometimes a year or more, but typically more like four to six months. Your great Christmas pitch is not going to get accepted in October. Think ahead and pitch ahead. Want to pitch an article about picking a flattering swimsuit or how to choose a summer camp? Do it in the early winter or you might as well wait until the following year.

The Right Bait:

This is your query itself, and it has to be irresistible. A small weed stuck to your lure will tip off the bass that it's fake. Every sentence of your query has to reek of professionalism. Mimic the tone of the article in your query. The first paragraph of the query should read like the first paragraph of your proposed article. Include samples of your research and names of those you plan to interview. Throw in a juicy quotation from one of them if possible.

The Right Rig:

These are your clips. If your query doesn't work, the clips probably won't even be read. But if your query is good, your clips can make or break the deal. Don't blow it by including samples from your blog, Epinions, WriteforCash, your high school newspaper, or an e–zine that runs anything people send in. This will automatically tell the editor that you have no professional experience. Even if that's the case, you don't want to flaunt it. Build up those clips any way you can, preferably in print (community newspapers, regional magazines, and trade magazines are less competitive than national consumer magazines, and all respectable places to earn clips).

Understand that if you've never proven yourself in a particular area of writing (health writing, let's say), you probably won't get a plum feature assignment that requires heavy research. Either write the article on spec to show you can handle it, or start by pitching shorter, front–of–the–book items to prove your chops.

The Right Technique:

Tight Lines, Writers!

Some editors prefer longer queries, some prefer shorter. Some accept reprints, some don't. Some are okay with simultaneous submissions, multiple submissions, e-mail queries, and informal letters of introduction - some aren't. You'll learn some of these things in the writers' guidelines that you find on a magazine's website or in the Writer's Market or the American Directory of Writer's Guidelines. Others, you can find out by networking with writers on message boards like

<http://absolutewrite.com/forums/>

and

www.mediabistro.com/bbs

, or joining groups like

www.freelancesuccess.com

and

www.asja.org

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And some you'll learn along the way through trial and error. There is no one-size-fits-all technique that'll work for all editors. About all they seem to agree on is that they hate it when their names are misspelled!

My biggest mistake as a beginning freelancer was the same as my biggest fishing trouble: I didn't target well. I'd come up with an idea and send it to every editor I could find in the Writer's Market who sounded remotely appropriate for my topic, whether I'd read the magazines or not.

Now I know that it's a sign of respect for my profession and my industry if I take the time to study the detailed guidelines editors provide every month: their magazines. Before I can figure out how to bait my hook, I first need to find out what the fish are biting. And if I'm feeling strapped for cash, I don't even need to buy copies - I can head to the library and spend my afternoon reading and taking notes

there.

Part of the thrill of fishing is that you don't catch a fish every time you throw your line out. It wouldn't feel like an accomplishment if you did. Sometimes, you can do everything right - the perfect cast, the perfect spot - and not even feel a nibble. When this happens with a query, there may be something going on behind the scenes you don't know about: Maybe they've recently assigned an article on your topic, or the section is about to be redesigned, or the editor's budget for freelancers just got slashed.

What matters is that you get that line back in the water fast, and target your next mark just as carefully. Soon, you'll reel in assignments with ease.

Tight lines, writers!

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(pick up a FREE list of agents looking for

new writers!) and the author of 14 books, including MAKE A REAL LIVING AS A FREELANCE WRITER, which comes with a FREE Editors' Cheat Sheet. She's also Celine Dion's authorized biographer. Visit Jenna at

<http://www.jennaglatzer.com>

How to Create a Healthy Plot Line

By Gary R. Hess

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Shaping a story to fit into a neat and easy to read form is something many have problems with. However once you discover it, you never lose it. The most popular story format amongst writers is a climax ridden one.

It contains:

1. Intro
2. Rising Action
3. Climax
4. Declining Action
5. Resolution

The point of doing so is to add interest in the reader, hit them with the climax and then slowly end the story. This theory does not indicate the resolution can not be exciting. However it does suggest the climax should be in the middle and is the most important point within the writing.

Many authors are now experimenting with other forms of plot lines. Nowadays two plots, two climaxes or even ending on a high point occurs. Just because the most popular way, and easiest, is used more than others it does not mean you should not experiment.

Remember, practice makes perfect is not just something we tell athletes. It is also very important for writers to try new things and come up with their own techniques in order to be successful.

Gary is a writer and editor for



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