

17. WRITING A QUERY LETTER ABOUT YOUR NOVEL

The query can be a quick way to tell whether your novel might be of interest to a particular publisher – without having to wait until some editor finds your manuscript deep within her slush pile.

The query should give the editor an idea of your story (and a sense of the way you're handling it) that's clear enough to help her decide if it's worth considering. If the idea sounds good, you know the complete manuscript (or sample chapters) will enjoy a prompt and careful reading. If the idea doesn't sound right for her, she may tell you why, and perhaps suggest either a new approach or another publisher.

Some queries are very short, and others are long indeed – novel outlines masquerading as letters. Consider the following suggestions as guidelines, not ironclad laws:

1. Supply a short description of what the book is about: a desperate attempt to escape a narcotics bust, an unexpected journey that leads to romance and danger in 1930s China, an aging gunfighter's attempt to prove himself again in the Mexican Revolution.
2. If not obvious from your plot outline, identify the audience your book is aimed at: hardcore space-opera fans, teenage girls, Regency-romance readers.
3. Be able to tell the editor what makes this novel different from others in the genre: a twist in the plot, a new angle on the hero, an unusual setting.
4. Your credentials may be helpful, if only as a dedicated and knowledgeable reader in the genre, or as an observant resident of the city you've set your novel in. These are not trivial qualifications: If you don't know and love the genre you're writing in, it will show. And if you don't know the history and folklore of your setting, the story will lack depth.
5. Display in your query some of the excitement and energy you want to bring to your story – show how and why this story matters to you, and it'll matter to your editor.

The Letter Itself:

Ideally, your query letter ought to run to a page or a little more, organized something like this:

First paragraph: Tell us what kind of novel you've written, or are now writing. How long is it, when and where is it set? Describe the hero and heroine, and perhaps one or two other major characters. What's their predicament? How are they proposing to get out of it? And why should we care – that is, what's at stake?

Second paragraph: Describe what happens in the middle of the novel – how your characters interact, what conflicts arise among them.

Third paragraph: The resolution of the novel – the climax and its outcome, and tying up loose ends.

Fourth paragraph: Why this story interests you, what your qualifications are for writing it, and some questions for the editor: If this story interests you, would you like the whole ms., or an outline and sample chapters? Do you have any specific ms. requirements I should be aware of?

Obviously this pattern will vary depending on the nature of the query: If you've included an outline and sample chapters, the plot summary will be very brief or nonexistent, and the query will focus on your background and your questions for the editor. If the book is completed, the plot summary will be easier to supply than if you have only a rough idea of where the book is going.

The query letter is a blurb for your novel, and like any blurb it needs to pique the reader's interest and make the reader wonder: "How is *that* going to turn out?" The quality of writing in the query had better be first-rate, especially if you haven't included an elegantly written chapter or two. If your query is clumsy or riddled with English errors, the editor will be less than eager to see more of your prose.

Because the query requires little time to read and respond to, it can help you quickly identify potential markets and definite non-markets. But it can't pre-sell your novel; at best, it can only create a cautiously welcoming attitude in an editor.

Will your query reveal such a knockout story idea that the publisher will steal it – turn you down, pass on your idea to one of their hack writers, and publish it for their own profit? This may be the single most common anxiety of novices, but the sad truth is that your idea probably isn't worth stealing. In fact, the editor may wearily see it as the umpteenth variation on some ancient plot, one she's seen a dozen times just this week.

This is not to say your idea should be positively weird; most story ideas in genre fiction are indeed variations on ancient plots. The trick is to make the variations appear to be fresh, surprising, and full of potential storytelling power.

For what it's worth, here is the letter I wrote proposing *Greenmagic* to Lester Del Rey. I could rely on his familiarity with my science-fiction novels, but even a pro in a new genre can be just another novice—especially when the editor himself has been a highly successful pro longer than the author has been alive! (I should also point out that the eventual novel departed in many ways from the outline given here. As long as your departures work, the editor shouldn't mind.)

March 21, 1988

Dear Mr. Del Rey,

Owen Lock recently suggested that I consider doing a fantasy novel, and followed up by sending a number of recent Del Rey fantasy titles. The idea interested me from the start. After nine SF novels a change of genre sounded like fun, and I've always enjoyed fantasy.

So I've been reading some of the books Owen sent, and thinking about fantasy in general and Del Rey's requirements in particular. Here's the germ of an idea you might find worth considering.

One of the conventions of the form seems to be that political power must be gained and kept through magic, but that magicians rarely exercise power directly. This has always seemed a little strange to me—like Lee Iacocca acting as a "consultant" to some nebbish who happens to be a descendant of the original Chrysler. In Tolkien I can accept that Gandalf's job is indeed that of an advisor: we have an organization here in Canada that ships retired executives overseas to supply administrative wisdom to Third World companies, and Gandalf is doing something very similar in Middle Earth.

Some writers—including your own Barbara Hambly—suggest that the practice of magic is so fascinating and obsessive that magicians have no interest in the tedium of running a kingdom. When they do seek political power, their efforts are destructive and have to be undone by a hero who may be helped by some other magician.

The message in fantasy is always a pretty conservative one: We have come to a pretty pass, and drastic action is needed to put matters back as they once were in some ideal past. That ideal past is usually some form of feudalism; its modern forms don't look very pretty in Latin America, and it probably wasn't all that satisfying in medieval Europe.

The medieval European feudalists, however, had terrific media relations (apart from guys like Cervantes)—so good that people still get a bang out of knight-errantry, dragonslaying and sorcery.

Well, I'm thinking about a story in which the knights are low-tech Hell's Angels, their tame magicians are amoral neurotics, and there are no good old days to restore. If Earthsea's mages had to maintain a Balance, in my world it's a balance of terror: no magician gets a chance to become too powerful, because his jealous colleagues will gang up to destroy him. It's a world of black magic serving political causes, white magic serving personal desires—and green magic to combat oppression.

My story is called GREENMAGIC. It takes place in a world much like ours, but in which human tribes contend for a place with other races and beings. Magic works here, and it does indeed lock its practitioners into a trance-like state. To gain resources magicians work for warlords, who battle endlessly with one another and use magic as a convenient supplement to swords and catapults.

Some centuries before the story begins, the warlords' ancestors swept into a broad land of plains and mountains, conquering the simple farming tribes who had inhabited the land for millennia. Broken and enslaved, the natives are now a class of serfs. They support the warlords, as well as magicians, artisans, and merchants, in a mosaic of city-states.

Some of the serfs have escaped into the mountains, where they live precariously: the warlords' sons make forays into the mountaineer villages as a form of combat training. They also take slaves from the mountaineers, usually women.

One such mountaineer slave woman is pregnant. She bears her son on the manor of a warlord, names him Mory, and rears him in her traditions—including mountaineer magic, which he has a talent for. As he grows older, Mory's abilities attract the attention of a magician who takes him as an apprentice. The magician serves an ambitious warlord who dreams of building an empire, but foreign magicians use an unusual spell that drives Mory's master into a state of "lucid insanity": he sees the futility and misery of magic-supported warrior states, and refuses to follow his warlord's commands.

The warlord executes his magician, and nearly does the same to Mory. But the young apprentice escapes, taking with him his master's lorebooks and apparatus—including the staff of Askeron, a powerful weapon in both physical and magical conflict, which other magicians would very much like to possess.

Hunted by his warlord and by enemy magicians, Mory escapes with the help of a serf girl and the Burrowers—ancient relatives of the serfs who have hidden from the warlords in vast networks of caves and tunnels. Some of his old master's lucid insanity has invaded Mory's mind; he begins to dream of overthrowing the whole warlord society.

To do so, however, he must learn a great deal more magic, and to risk death not only from the warlords and magicians, but from the supernatural forces they are tampering with. In the process he gains an understanding of what he begins to call "greenmagic," a force that adds to the order and harmony in the world rather than lessening them.

By the end of the tale, Mory has gathered a force of human and inhuman allies against the warlords. In a climactic battle, greenmagic faces its harshest test and Mory is tempted to abandon it for the black magic of his enemies. In the end greenmagic triumphs and the warlords yield to Mory. His allies want to make him emperor, but he refuses: they must build their own society and run it themselves.

Obviously the success of a story like this will depend upon the vividness and believability of the fantasy world, and upon the characters and incidents. My almost-fantasy, *Eyas*, ought to give you some idea of how well I can do in this field. If you think the idea merits a more detailed outline, I'd be glad to develop one for you. Presumably the story would run about 100,000 words. My current novel, *Gryphon*, should be finished about the end of this summer, and if we made *Greenmagic* the next project it could be in your hands by the summer of '89. I look forward to your response.

Postscript: As it turned out, I couldn't finish *Greenmagic* until the spring of 1990—which was too late for prompt publication. So it had to wait until the spring of 1992, four years after I first proposed it. The moral is that you should never promise a complete manuscript for an earlier date than you can realistically manage.

Assignment:

Dig out the letter you wrote to pitch yourself about the novel you were thinking of writing. It may have the key elements you need for a query letter. Pay attention to your own feelings in that letter: Do you sound eager and excited about the story and the characters? Have you identified some unique aspect of the story that sets it apart from others in the genre?

If so, develop these elements of the letter. If not, build them into the letter from the ground up. If you're not excited about your own story, don't expect your editor to be excited either.

Before you submit the query, check on the agent's or publisher's website to see if a particular format or approach is expected. Obey the requirements.

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