

Do's and Don'ts of Query letters (Report #111 from Bobbie Christmas)

When you want to sell your novel or article, you will have to write a query letter. What to put into a 200-word letter can stump even those of us who write 95,000-word novels.

Don'ts

Don't be unprofessional. Remember you are writing a business letter to a business professional, be it an agent or a publisher. If you were writing to the president of a large firm asking for a job, would you begin with something like this: "I just decided I wanted to be an accountant, so would you like to hire me?" That's what you're saying when you start your query letter, "I just finished my first novel, and I'm looking for a major publisher." Don't do anything to remind your future publisher that you are a novice.

Don't say your book is entitled something-or-other. People are entitled; books are titled.

Don't meander. Stick to business in the query letter, without getting personal. Don't say you live in the mountains with your two dogs and your wife.

Don't state the obvious. When you write to an agent, you don't have to say you are looking for an agent. The same goes for a publisher.

Don't waste your time and everyone else's by querying about a novel you have not finished.

Don't call it a fictional novel. The term is redundant. The word "novel" means a long story of fictional prose.

Unless the publisher's guidelines say so, don't send a query letter on a nonfiction book without sending a full book proposal. Book proposals are another subject completely. Buy a book on how to write a book proposal and follow it to a T. Many books are available on the subject.

Do's

Do research and follow guidelines. Some agents or publishers want only a query letter. Others want sample chapters and a synopsis with a query letter. With the Internet we can research guidelines easily. Take a few extra minutes to find the guidelines for your intended target, and you increase your chances of success.

Do be professional rather than playful.

Do state the title of your book or novel. (See the comment on entitled/titled, above)

Do give the length or the projected length in the number of words, not in number of pages.

Do give a short one-paragraph summary. Here's a magazine query example: "When I went to Ireland I became fascinated with holy wells, which pagans founded, but Christians later incorporated into their beliefs, to assist in converting the pagans. My article on the origins, uses and evolution of holy wells in Ireland is about 3,000 words long and fits into your magazine theme of unique sites for hikers in Europe." Agent query example: "In my 72,000-word novel titled *Fall Down the Well*, Renato Fall's obsession with writing magazine and newspaper articles about Ireland's holy wells gets him in deep water when he raises the ire of a splinter religious sect. He must dig his way out of the mire to save his life, and in the process, he gains a new perspective on the subject that interests him most."

Do include a full synopsis of any novel, if the guidelines say to do so. The one-paragraph summary in the letter is a teaser. The full synopsis is a separate document that tells the whole plot, from beginning to resolution. It does not include hype, such as "This is the next bestseller" or "This book will appeal to everyone," but it does include the ending. It does not leave the story hanging the way a summary does.

Do, always, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE). It is rude to leave it out, and you could get valuable feedback or further guidelines in writing that you would not get otherwise.

Do give all your contact information. Many publishers call if they are interested, but few will call or e-mail if they are not. Always give your home phone number, your work phone number, your cell phone number, your e-mail address and your mailing address, even if it appears on your SASE.

Do state the title and genre (if fiction), and if it is not for adults, state the age range intended for the book. Study and follow the typical age breaks for children's books.

Do use a good-quality stationary, but it does not have to have graphics or color on it. For the letter only, choose 24-pound paper over 20-pound. The difference is subtle but professional.

If asked to send any portion of the manuscript with the query letter, do print the manuscript on 20-pound white bond paper.

Do be sure that any copies you send are of high quality.

Do limit your query letter to one page. Make it as short and as tight as possible, but be sure you include all the information mentioned above.

Do all these things, and you'll be way ahead of the unprofessional writers who don't know or don't follow these rules.

Do you have questions for Book Doctor Bobbie Christmas? E-mail them to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com or visit her Web site at www.zebraeditor.com.

