

Insider Feature: Get an Agent, Part 2, "How Do I Write a Query Letter?" By Stephanie Gunning, The Publishing Insider News™ (May 6, 2008)

Querying an agent is a lot like writing any kind of business letter where you would introduce yourself to a person you don't know.

You need to explain at the top what your purpose is in writing, which in this case is seeking literary representation and permission to submit your book proposal to the agent for consideration.

How did you come by this particular agent's name? What made you choose to contact this specific individual? One way is by recommendation. If you have a mutual acquaintance, this friend or colleague could drop a line to the agent ahead of your contact to alert the agent that something worth paying attention to is coming. In your letter, you would then remind the agent of this social connection: "I am a friend of/I work with Joe who suggested I write to you."



Another way is by research; another is by admiration. See my earlier article Get an Agent, Part 1: Who Might Be the Right One for You on my Abundant Words blog. Tell the agent: "Although my book is a self-help, it has all the elements of a cookbook and I thought you would understand it's elements because of your work in the field of cuisine." Or: "When I began researching agents, I came across your name in the acknowledgments section of a book by a writer I emulate in my approach." By the way, this does not mean necessarily the agent will like your book and want to take it on. Use this approach only as a lead in to why that makes the agent's background relevant. This is not about Kissing the Bootie, if you catch my drift. Be genuine. Be passionate. Be clear.

The second feature in your letter is to tell the literary agent "What it is." Is it fiction or non-fiction (you'd be amazed at how many people neglect this pertinent fact), for adults, for kids, or for teens? You may not realize how segmented the publishing industry is, but all those types of content are handled by different editors who work in different divisions of publishers. While a literary agent often crosses categories, agents--like in-house acquisitions editors--tend to specialize in subjects that they enjoy reading about. As my pal Stephany Evans, President of Fine Print Literary Management told us on a recent teleseminar, however, don't stretch to absurd lengths to "match" an agent's interests. You are looking for the right fit for your business interests.

So say something simple, like: "It's an historical novel set in the French Revolution about a milkmaid who becomes an opera singer." (I have no idea where *that* idea came from!)

Your third feature should answer: "Who is it for?" and, "Who are they?" which you may hear people in this industry refer to as your target audience or target market. By informing the literary agent of who your potential reader or book buyer might be, the agent can place you better in his or her imagination. For one thing, you could be going up a wrong alley. For another thing, your target readership might be too small or insignificant a group to interest the agent. Since the agent ONLY earns money by commission on clients' royalty advances and sales, the agent has a big decision to make when he or she signs you up. Is this where my income is going to be generated? Does this author have what it takes to please publishers and readers? If you have done sufficient homework on your target audience, this material is not difficult to present with clarity. "My readers are pre-pubescent girls from the Mid-West." "My target audience includes chiropractors, athletes, and physical therapists."

You need to present the facts as accurately as possible to find a suitable business partner: your future agent. If you are confused and need help, I recommend taking that step before shopping your project all over the place. Check out the free informational resources on my website: Resources.

Four: Who are you? Why are you the one to write this book? How does this book fit into your other business plans? Who knows you in this segment of the market?

Five: Make your request. Here's a paraphrase (put this in your own words) "If all of the above interests you, may I send you my book proposal and sample chapters?"

Now for a few wrinkles on this formula. It all needs to be no more than one page long. So you have to work it out and be specific and informative at the same time before the agent starts scanning this opportunity. Be sure to check the agent's website for submission guidelines. Follow the guidelines. Yes, that means you cannot generate a factory-style letter and submit to 1,000 people simultaneously. (Of course, you didn't really want to do that, you wanted to be selective.)

Let me know if there's a way I can be of assistance.

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