Query Letter Craft Sheet
A guide to crafting an effective query letter.

A query letter is like a piece of clothing. It's going to fit some and not fit others. Some people won't like the color while others will love it. But even with all this subjectivity, there are always "best practices." For example, you don't want a pair of jeans that fall apart at the seams within the first day of wearing them, and you don't want your query to fall apart at the first sentence.

MEET THE EDITOR

Both before and after starting MadHope Editorial, I have been in and out of the querying trenches to help writers improve their craft and (hopefully!) improve their request rate. While there is no true magic formula in such a subjective business, I've compiled my knowledge to help give you the best chance at standing out in an agent's inbox.

Sample Query
Below is an example query. It is not based off a real book or meant to imitate any existing story. It is for educational purposes only.

Dear (AGENT),

FLIGHT INTERRUPTED is a 70k-word adult science fiction novel that combines the space-related humor of THE MARTIAN with the dramatic tension of ALIEN.

Mary Sue is an astronaut who is terrified of flying.

When she finally passes her flight exam and is able to take her first mission on Flight Crew 12 to Mars, Mary is determined to fight past her fear in order to make sure her name goes down in history. But when a foreign ship freezes her and her crew in their tracks, Mary has a lot more to worry about than the media.

Extraterrestrials board the ship, demanding that she and her crew hand over the valuable engine core—coveted by these space pirates and crucial for getting back home. Trapped in a tense hostage situation, Mary must fight her fear of plummeting to Earth or else she'll be stuck in the vast darkness of space forever.

I am a freelance editor, writer and member of EFA with over seven years of experience. I have seen the moon landing first-hand and spent a summer at astronaut camp.

Breaking Down the Sample

This query is by no means fantastic, but it offers basic examples of what to do and what not to do. Let's break it down piece by piece.

METADATA

FLIGHT INTERRUPTED is a 70k-word adult science fiction novel that combines the space-related humor of THE MARTIAN with the dramatic tension of ALIEN.

At first glance, this paragraph has all the metadata we need: the book title, the word count, age group, genre, and comparison titles. We even have direct reasons that we're using those comp titles. But they could be better. We have one book (The Martian) and one movie. Using one movie is fine as long as it's a really strong comp. Alien is a bit dated and there are definitely other choices that could be stronger. When in doubt, it's better to use a book in your genre to show that you know your potential audience.

QUERY BODY

Mary Sue is an astronaut who is terrified of space.

When she finally passes her flight exam and is able to take her first mission on Flight Crew 12 to Mars, Mary is determined to fight past her fear in order to make sure her name goes down in history. But when a foreign ship freezes her and her crew in their tracks, Mary has a lot more to worry about than the media.
Extraterrestrials board the ship demanding that she and her crew hand over the valuable engine core—coveted by these space pirates and crucial for getting back home. Trapped in a tense hostage situation, Mary must fight her fear of plummeting to Earth or else she'll be stuck in the vast darkness of space forever.

This section, which is the body of your query or the long pitch, is where you have the most freedom. So let's take a look at this one I whipped up in a few minutes. We have Mary Sue's motivation: to overcome her fear and go down in history. This is a pretty basic goal that isn't inherently bad, but we don't know much about Mary Sue as a character.

As far as stakes go, we definitely have those. A foreign spaceship traps her and her crew. Obviously, she and her crew could be killed or starve to death in space. Stakes! Are they enough to catch someone's attention? Maybe. What we're missing here are more personal stakes, in my opinion. Aside from Mary Sue being terrified of space, we don't know much about her.

This bio is fine. It's short and sweet. The only thing wrong with it? It's not true. I haven't seen a single moon landing or been to astronaut camp. I'm not even sure astronaut camp is a real thing. Probably, right? Anyway, never lie in your bio. Just make it personable and true.

Writing Your Query

Now let's break it down to make your own query.

1. ## Metadata
   Your metadata can be included at the beginning of your query or at the end. It should always come before the bio unless you are writing non-fiction.

Exercise:

Fill out information about your book:

     a. Word Count (rounded up to the nearest thousand): _____

     b. Genre: _____

     c. Age Group: _____

Now introduce this information in a sentence!

Example: (BOOK TITLE) is a (WORD COUNT)-word (AGE GROUP) (GENRE) novel.

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2. ## Pitch
   You will always benefit from having a go-to one-sentence pitch for your book that you can expand on for your query.

Exercise:

Open the front cover (or flip to the back) of your three favorite books. Summarize the plot in one sentence.

     a. _____

     b. _____

     c. _____

Repeat this process with your own book until you're able to boil down your plot into a single sentence. From there, you can expand into the meat of the query. Below, write your pitch.

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3. Query Body

Return to the summaries of your three favorite books and observe how they frame their pitch. Make note of both external stakes and internal stakes.

Write the body of your query below. Don't worry if you write too much or too little. You can always edit later.

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4. Author Bio

Don't worry too much about your author bio if you're writing fiction. Just make it personable and true. If you have credentials related to the topic of the book or writing in general, great! Feature them! If not, don't panic. If you need extra help, look at those books again and read the author bios at the back of the book. It'll help frame the type of information you may want to include.

Write your author bio below. And remember to be brief and authentic!

Now put it all together in a single document. The whole thing should be around 300-500 words. When submitting, be sure to personalize it for the agent you're sending it to.

How'd You Do?

Just like that, you have a query draft on your hands! If you're still not sure about it or need an extra pair of experienced eyes on your query, feel free to reach out through the form on MadHope Editorial's website!

https://madheditorial.com/contact