



# How to Write a Query Letter to a Publisher or Agent for your BOOK!

## Query letters? Do Publishers and Literary Agents really read them?

Publishers and Agents take queries very seriously, and yes, they really do read them. It's not some universal rumor that publishers and agents have perpetuated because they all have a secret fetish for being bombarded with mail and e-mails. Sure, agents and publishers make it sound like they are digging through the slush pile. Some publishers and agents even relegate the ambivalent task of reading unsolicited queries to an assistant or intern. But the fact of the matter is that most publishers and agents do *read* queries. Even more importantly, publishers and agents actually respond to ones that spark their interest.

So write a professional, intelligent, concise, intriguing query and not only will you entice a publisher or an agent to ask for more, but you'll move yourself one step closer to book sales.

## The Basics

A query letter is a single page cover letter, introducing you and your book. That's it. Nothing more, nothing less. It's not a resume. It's not rambling saga of your life as an aspiring writer. It's not a friendly, "Hey, what's up, buddy. I'm the next John Grisham. Got the next best selling thriller for ya," kind of letter. And for the love of god, it is NOT more than one-page. Trust us on this.

A query letter has three concise paragraphs: the hook, the mini-synopsis, and your writer's biography. Don't stray from this format. You won't catch a publisher's or an agent's attention by inventing a creative new query format. You'll just alienate your chances of being taken seriously as a professional writer. A query letter is meant to elicit an invitation to send sample chapters or even the whole manuscript to the publisher or an agent. It's not meant to show off how cute and snazzy you can be by breaking formatting rules and going against the grain. Keep it simple. Stick to three paragraphs. The goal is to get a publisher or an agent to read your book, not to blow you off because you screwed up the introduction.

**Paragraph One—The Hook:** A hook is a concise, one-sentence tag-line for your book. It's meant to hook your reader's interest, and wind them in. The best way to understand how to write a hook is to read the log-lines of the titles sold by publishers and agents at <http://www.agentquery.com> and its database it is free and searchable [AQ database](#).

**Here are a few examples of hooks for well-known novels:**

### *House of Sand and Fog*

When Massoud Amir Behrani, a former colonel in the Iranian military, sinks his remaining funds into a

house he buys at auction, he unwittingly puts himself and his family on a trajectory to disaster; the house once belonged to Kathy Nicolo, a self-destructive alcoholic, who engages in legal, then personal confrontation to get it back.

### ***Bridges of Madison County***

When Robert Kincaid drives through the heat and dust of an Iowa summer and turns into Francesca Johnson's farm lane looking for directions, the world-class photographer and the Iowa farm wife are joined in an experience that will haunt them forever.

### ***The Corrections***

When family patriarch, Alfred Lambert, enters his final decline, his wife and three adult children must face the failures, secrets, and long-buried hurts that haunt them as a family if they are to make the corrections that each desperately needs.

**The "When" Formula:** As you can see, we're a fan of the *when* formula: "When such and such event happens, your main character—a descriptive adjective, age, professional occupation—must confront further conflict and triumph in his or her own special way. Sure, it's a formula, but it's a formula that works.

However, be warned...everyone and their brother who reads this will try using the "when" formula, so we recommend simply using it as a starting point. Write your basic hook, then try spicing things up as you get more and more into the groove of "hooking." And don't worry, it's legal in every state, not just Nevada.

**\*Check out these examples of very simple, yet very non-"formulatic" fiction hooks:**

### ***The Kite Runner***

An epic tale of fathers and sons, of friendship and betrayal, that takes us from Afghanistan in the final days of the monarchy to the atrocities of the present.

### ***The Da Vinci Code***

A murder in the silent after-hour halls of the Louvre museum reveals a sinister plot to uncover a secret that has been protected by a clandestine society since the days of Christ.

### ***Everything Is Illuminated***

With only a yellowing photograph in hand, Jonathan Safran Foer—both author and meta fictional protagonist—sets out to find the woman who might or might not have saved his grandfather from the Nazis.

**Here are some non-"formulatic" hooks for a few nonfiction books:**

### ***Into Thin Air***

On assignment for *Outside Magazine* to report on the growing commercialization of the mountain, Krakauer, an accomplished climber, went to the Himalayas as a client of Rob Hall, the most respected high-altitude guide in the world, and barely made it back alive from the deadliest season in the history of Everest.

## ***The Perfect Storm***

The true story of the meteorological conditions that created the "Storm of the Century" and the impact the Perfect Storm had on many of the people caught in its path; chiefly, among these are the six crew members of the swordfish boat the Andrea Gail, all of whom were lost 500 miles from home beneath rolling seas.

## ***A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius***

The memoir of Dave Eggers, who at the age of 22, became both an orphan and a "single mother" when his parents died within five months of one another of unrelated cancers, leaving Eggers the appointed unofficial guardian of his 8-year-old brother, Christopher.

### **Other Great Ways to Start Your Hook:**

- **Give era and location:** Three Different Examples:

1. *Set in modern-day Africa...*
2. *During the summer of 1972 in a rural Connecticut town...*
3. *Taking place in turn-of-the-century Upstate...*

- **Set up your main character:** Three Different Examples:

1. *The tale of Una Spencer, wife of Melville's legendary fictional whale harpooner Captain Ahab...*
2. *A chatty cozy mystery starring 50-something college professor Bell Barrett...*
3. *Narrated by Cot Daley, an Irish peasant girl kidnapped from Galway and sent to Barbados...*

- **Variations on the "when" formula:** Three Different Examples:

1. *Following a botched operation...*
2. *While defending a housewife accused of murder....*
3. *After years of mental abuse at the hands of her drug addicted mother and step-father...*

There are literally scores and scores of hooks listed on the web and if you need more information we can point you in the right direction, there are databases out there, there are resources out there for you. We encourage you to read as many as possible, and learn what captures your attention in a single sentence. Then try to emulate a similar hook for your query letter based on the style of successful others.

**Paragraph Two—Mini-synopsis:** This is where you get to distill your entire 300 page novel into one paragraph. Aren't you Lucky? We'd like to offer advice on how to do this, but really, it just takes practice, hard work and lots of patience. Then, like we said before, get your friends to read it and if their heads hurt afterward, go back to the drawing board. We don't envy you. We really don't. Summing up your entire book in an intriguing single paragraph is worse than a trip to the dentist.

So think of it this way. You had trouble writing the gist of your book in one sentence, right? Now, you get a whole paragraph. About 150 extra words. Here's your chance to expand on your hook. Give a little bit more information about your main characters, their problems and conflicts, and the way in which adversity changes their lives. Read the back flaps of your favorite novels and try to copy how the conflict of the book is described in a single, juicy paragraph. You can do this. You really can. You just have to sit down, brainstorm, then spew it all out onto the page. Afterward, cut, paste, trim, revise, and reshape.

**Paragraph Three—Writer’s bio:** This should be the easiest part of your query. After all, it’s about you, the writer. Okay, so it’s a bit daunting, especially if you’ve never been published, never won any awards, hold no degrees from MFA writing schools, and possess no credentials to write your book. No problem. The less you have to say, the more space you have for your mini-synopsis. Always a plus.

If you do choose to construct a writer’s bio (and you should), keep it short and related to writing. Publishers and Agents don’t care what your day job is unless it directly relates to your book. Got a main character who’s a firefighter, and that’s your day job? Be sure to say that. Otherwise, scrap it. Education is helpful because it sounds good, but it’s only really important if you’re offering a nonfiction book about A.D.D. children and you hold a PhD in pediatric behavioral science. If you’ve published a few stories in your local newspaper, or a short story in a few literary magazines, or won any writing awards or contests, now’s the time to list the details. Don’t go hog wild, but don’t be too modest either.

**Your Closing:** Congratulations! You’ve finished your query letter. As a formal closing, be sure to do two things. First, thank the publisher or agent for his/her time and consideration. Second, if it’s nonfiction, tell them that you’ve included an outline, table of contents, and sample chapters for their review. If it’s fiction, alert the publisher or agent that the full manuscript is available upon request. And in case you still don’t believe us, we want to reiterate: **don’t query publishers or agents until you’ve finished your full fiction manuscript unless you are in need of an editor and they can help you with that. Publishers and Agents** will want to read the whole fictional novel before they offer any type of representation to you and your book.

We hope that this information is useful and helpful. Your Success as an Author is our Success as a Publisher. We look forward to your book.

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