

***READY,
SET,
QUERY!***

How to write a
query letter that'll
grab an agent's
attention

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what is a literary agent?

- Like sports agents...but for authors, not athletes. or like real estate agents...for books
- They make a living selling books to publishers. They earn money in commission off of your sales—15% is the universal standard
- They have the industry contacts
- They know how the process works and can hold your hand through it, which is more important than you might think.
- They're often former editors, attorneys, etc

why do you want one?

- Give you a bit of credibility with editors—you've already made it past the first gate-keepers of the industry
- Most publishers will not accept unagented submissions directly from authors *Some smaller publishers will, but the "big 4" traditional houses often won't*
- They'll negotiate the best deal for you
- They provide editorial guidance

how do you get one?

- **Conferences** will often have face-to-face pitching opportunities or workshops
- **Contests & Pitch Events** such as #DVpit, #SFFpit, and others
- **Query Letters** are still the way most writers find their agents

lit·er·ar·y a·gent

(noun)

a professional agent or representative who acts on behalf of an author in dealing with publishers and others involved in promoting the author's work.

***“Hell hath no fury
like a hustler with
a literary agent.”***

- Frank Sinatra

query letter basics

THE HOOK

This should be a few sentences to keep the agent reading.

What's unique about your story?

If you could only tell someone one or two sentences about the premise of your story, what would it be?

If you have relevant personalization to include, do it here.

For example, if you met this agent previously at an event, if you were referred by a current client, or if you're querying them based on a specific Wish List item

THE BOOK

Go further into the story here and explain the main plot. By the end of the first 2-3 paragraphs, you should introduce the following:

Character: who the audience is rooting for

Catalyst: what changes things or sets events in motion for that character

Obstacle: what the character must do to get what they want

Stakes: what happens if they don't get it

Be specific.

THE COOK

Brief 1st person bio. Write a few lines about yourself. Include previous publishing credits, such as short stories or articles. If you don't have any, that's okay! Just stick with the bio.

THE CLOSING

Reiterate all the "business" about the book:

- *Title*
- *Age category*
- *Genre*
- *Word count*
- *2 or 3 realistic comp titles*

this is sometimes referred to as the 'meta-info' of the book

Stick to about 250 words total.

A NOTE ABOUT SUBJECT LINES

Resist the urge to get clever here; you don't want to give agents the impression that you think the rules of etiquette don't apply to you. Stick with something simple and clear in this format:

Query: TITLE OF YOUR MANUSCRIPT (AGE CATEGORY & GENRE)

“Every rejection is incremental payment that in some way will be translated back into your work.”

- James Lee Burke

how to use comp titles

Strong comps can help give an agent an idea of where your project fits into the marketplace and how they can pitch it. If you can include a few words about why each comp works, that's even better.

For example: "...blends the atmospheric magic of SORCERY OF THORNS with the literary prose of HOUSE OF SALT AND SORROWS and the romance and rebellion of GIRLS OF PAPER AND FIRE."

Seeing comps described in this fashion gives an agent a clear mental picture of what to expect from your manuscript—and it shows you have a firm grasp on where it would fit into the current market.

But don't force it! If you can't think of any, that's okay. It's better to leave them out than to guess or use ones that don't make sense.

brainstorming comp titles

What books, published in the last 2-3 years, appealed to the readers who will like your book?

What books, published in the last 2-3 years, are similar in plot or tone to yours?

If you have a comp that's **not** a book, feel free to use it as long as it's relevant. But be sure to pair it with at least one book—don't use all movies or tv shows!

how **not** to use comp titles

- "LORD OF THE RINGS meets GAME OF THRONES meets *Black Panther*"
That is, don't throw out every bestseller/blockbuster you can think of.
- Don't list several books. Stick to 3 comp titles max.

what else **not** to do

- **Do Not Say: "Dear Agent" or "To Whom it May Concern"**
ALWAYS use their name in your greeting
- **Do Not Say: "Written for all genres" or "Defies genre categorization"**
If you can't identify the genre, an agent won't be able to sell it
- **Do Not Say: "My friends and family love it"**
- **Do Not Say: "I once held the door for Stephen King and he was nice"**
Avoid unabashed, irrelevant name-dropping. Only use the name of another writer if you've asked their permission and they've agreed.
- **Do Not Say: "This is the most original book ever written" or "It's unlike any other book on the market"** It's not :)
- **Do Not: Summarize the entire story**
a query should not reveal the ending
- **Do Not: Ask rhetorical questions**
- **Do Not: Write in the POV of your character**
Your query letter is always *you* talking about your book. Don't write about yourself in the third person, either.
- **Do Not: Talk about other books you've written**
unless they've been published and sold well
- **Do Not: Query an entire series at once**
you can mention "with series potential," but don't go further than that

query example

SUBJECT LINE: THE DIVIDE (ADULT SCIENCE FICTION)

Dear [Agent],

At the edge of the universe lies the Divide. Veteran war hero Adequin Rake commands a dreadnaught-turned-watchtower stationed along the invisible boundary. Adequin never thought her decorated career would be rewarded with the opportunity to babysit delinquent soldiers billions of lightyears from civilization. But, here she is.

An even more tiresome challenge presents itself in the form of exiled prince Cavalon Mercer. Forced to enlist after a “familial disagreement” (which may have involved explosives), the disowned royal wants nothing more than to lie low and go unnoticed. But relentless snark and a complete lack of self-preservation instincts quickly land him in the crosshairs of anti-royalist soldiers.

Then the universe starts to collapse.

Stranded without access to faster-than-light travel or functioning comms, this motley crew must find a way to escape the Divide as it closes in on them and — if possible — stop it before the universe collapses completely.

No pressure.

THE DIVIDE is a 121,000-word science fiction adventure told in dual-POV, with series potential. It will appeal to fans seeking the high-stakes adventure of space opera, while maintaining a small scope that focuses on characters. It’s *Battlestar Galactica* meets the *Night’s Watch* at the edge of the universe, and will attract fans of ANCILLARY JUSTICE and LEVIATHAN WAKES.

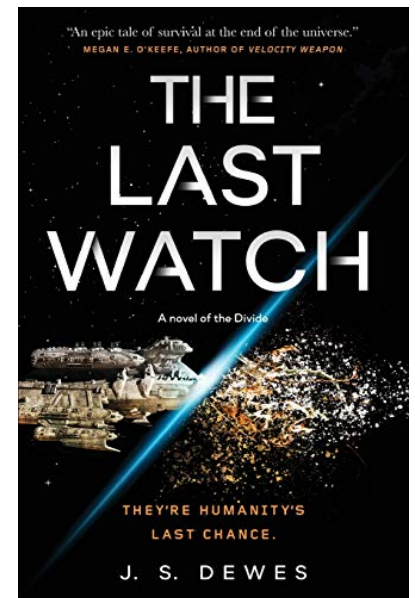
I have a Bachelor of Arts in Film from Columbia College Chicago. I’ve written scripts for award-winning films which have screened at San Diego Comic-Con and dozens of film festivals across the nation.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Best regards,
J.S. Dewes

query letter used with permission from the author

this example is for
J.S. Dewes’s book
that would undergo
a title change before
being published as
THE LAST WATCH



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query letter template

SUBJECT LINE

“THE HOOK”

“THE BOOK”

“THE COOK”

“THE CLOSING”

SIGN-OFF

do your research

Once you've perfected your query letter, it's time to figure out who you're going to send it to! It's important to only query agents who:

- represent your genre
- are open to submissions
- have a good reputation

Ways to get that information:

Publishers Marketplace (\$) - www.publishersmarketplace.com

Writers Market (\$) - www.writersmarket.com

Query Tracker - www.querytracker.net

Writer's Digest - www.writersdigest.com

Manuscript Wish List - www.manuscriptwishlist.com

Twitter - the #MSWL hashtag can be helpful

Blog posts by authors & industry professionals

The acknowledgements sections of books similar to your manuscript

Make sure you keep notes about their submission guidelines (typically easy to find on the agency website), because those, too, are all going to be different.

- “Pages” — length, format
- Method — Query Manager, form on agency website, email
- Response policy — *no* from one is *no* from all, no response means *no*, follow-up timeframe
- The dreaded synopsis

You can't skip this step!

It doesn't matter how good your query letter is if you send it to the wrong agents.

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keep your info straight

It helps to plug in all the info from the previous page into a spreadsheet. Try to avoid querying everyone on your list at the same time, just because you may learn things about your query and/or manuscript from the responses you get, and you may want to make changes. Shoot for small batches of 10 or so at a time.

Feel free to develop your own method, but here's a template you can use as a guide:

NAME/AGENCY	WHERE FOUND	SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS	RESPONSE TIME	METHOD	NOTES	STATUS
Agent Name/Agency	#mswl	first 10 pages	30 days	Query Manager	Can resubmit after 30 days if no response	queried 7/6, requested first 50 pages 7/9
Agent Name/Agency	Represents many authors in the genre	NO sample. Query letter only.	30 days	email per agency website guidelines	Can resubmit after 60 days if no response	queried 7/6
Agent Name/Agency	Represents a friend	1-2 chapters	2 months	email per agency website guidelines		queried 7/6
Agent Name/Agency	Follow on Twitter	first 10 pages	?	submission form on agency website	seeking strong voice, climate fiction	
Agent Name/Agency	Query Tracker	first 5 pages	?	Query Manager	Closed to queries currently?	
Agent Name/Agency		first 20 pages	?	Query Manager	No from one agent is a no from all	
Agent Name/Agency		first chapter	2-4 weeks	email per agency website guidelines		queried 7/6, rejected 7/8

querying etiquette

- Don't email them to follow up before the timeframe indicated in their guidelines
- Don't query multiple agents from the same agency simultaneously
- Don't call or send mail, or visit their offices—ever.
- Don't send a bunch of follow-up emails with revised versions of your manuscript
- Don't respond to rejections to beg them to reconsider (or to argue)
- Don't publicly bad-mouth agents. This should go without saying, but people do it all the time and it's so not constructive

self-care

BE PATIENT.

This could take a while. It's not unheard of for agents to respond 1+ YEARS after you send your query. That's not the norm, but it happens. Don't get discouraged if no one replies to your query for a few weeks.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF.

Rejections are not fun. Accept them and move on. That's easier said than done, but you gotta do it. You could be sending out 10, 20, 50, 100 queries during this process. If you take each one hard and/or personally, you're going to be miserable. It helps to dive into a new project to distract yourself.

“A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit.”

- Richard Bach

decoding agents' responses

CRICKETS

If your inbox is nothing but crickets and tumbleweeds, it's likely that your query needs work.

FORM REJECTION

"This industry is incredibly subjective, and there are many agencies out there with many different tastes. It is for this reason that I strongly encourage you to keep submitting elsewhere in the hopes of finding an agent who will be an enthusiastic champion for you and your work."

It's hard to read much into this, but keep in mind that if a lot of agents request more pages from you but nothing comes of it, your query is probably strong but something in the first bits of your manuscript isn't working.

PERSONALIZED REJECTION

"Your writing is beautiful and flows smoothly from viewpoint to viewpoint. I also enjoyed the narrative voice of the story, and the complexity of the main characters. However, I feel that there needed to be more suspense, twists and tension in the plot to really keep me at the edge of my seat and feeling a sense of urgency to keep turning pages."

A rejection, but this means the agent read your work and liked enough about it to take the time to give you these thoughts. Keep in mind that if you hear the same feedback from a bunch of agents, you may want to re-evaluate your manuscript. But don't leap into editing mode based on every single rejection you get.

PROMISING REJECTION

"I'm so sorry, but I have to pass. I really appreciate that you chose to submit to me and I'm grateful that I got a chance to consider your work. If you don't find the perfect agent for this, I would love to see work from you in the future."

While it's still a rejection, it means that you should definitely query this agent again with a different manuscript—and make sure to mention that you previously queried and they said they'd like to see more from you.

NOT QUITE REJECTION

"I hope you might consider revising this novel with these concerns in mind. If you do, I'd love to see the revision."

This is what's called a R&R in publishing parlance, aka "revise and resubmit." It's special because agents usually don't want to see a rejected manuscript again, so if they're saying they'd like to, it means you're very close.

GET EXCITED

"I would love to speak to you. What's a good time this week for a brief phone call?"

This means one of two things: either a R&R that the agent has A LOT of thoughts about, or they're going to offer to represent you.

“I love my rejection slips.

They show me I try.”

- Sylvia Plath

the Call

Be prepared for your first in-person discussion with a prospective agent! Here are some questions you can ask them. You can ask as many questions as you need to, though try avoiding questions that can be answered on the agency website (such as, “How long has your agency been in business?”)

- **What is your communication style?**
- **How would you describe your dream client?**
- **What is your editorial vision for my work?**
- **What would be your submission strategy if you took this work on?**
- **How many books in my genre have you sold?**
- **What happens if my project doesn't sell?**
- **Are you open to me writing in different genres?**
- **Can I chat with a current client?**
- **What percentage of your clients make their living solely from writing?**
- **How do you handle film rights inquiries?**
-
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need more advice?

[Query Shark](http://www.queryshark.blogspot.com) www.queryshark.blogspot.com

[Agent Query](http://www.agentquery.com) www.agentquery.com

[Pub\(lishing\) Crawl](http://www.publishingcrawl.com/tag/query-tips/) www.publishingcrawl.com/tag/query-tips/

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This querying guide was written and designed by Kristen Lepionka, author of the award-winning Roxane Weary mystery series. **To learn more about Kristen and her books, visit kristenlepcionka.com.**

