

***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 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 5"/ traditional houses 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** such as Pitch Wars, #pitmad, #dvpit
- **Query Letter**

lit·er·ar·y
a·gent

/ˈlɪdəˌrerē ˈājənt/

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 two 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*

REALISTIC comparison ("comp") titles, if you have them.

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

A strong comp can help give an agent an idea of where your project fits into the marketplace and how they can pitch it. **You don't NEED to use comparisons, so don't force it.**

Brainstorming comp titles

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

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

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

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

If you have a comp title that isn't a book, go ahead and use it—if it's really relevant.

how **not** to use comp titles

- “*Lord of the Rings* meets *Game of Thrones* meets *Black Panther* meets N.K. Jemisin”
That is, don't throw out every bestseller/blockbuster you can think of.
- Stick to 3 comp titles max.

what else **not** to do

- **“Dear Agent”**
ALWAYS use their name
- **“Will appeal to readers of all genres” or “Defies genre categorization”**
If you can't identify the genre, an agent won't be able to sell it
- **“My friends and family love it”**
- **“I once held the door for Chuck Wendig and he said thank you”**
Avoid unabashed, irrelevant name-dropping. Only use the name of another writer if you've asked them for their permission and they agreed.
- **“This is the most original book ever written”**
It's not :)
- **Summarize the entire story**
a query should not reveal the ending
- **Ask rhetorical questions**
- **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.
- **Talk about other books you've written**, unless they've been published and sold well
- If you're querying the first in a series, you can mention “with series potential,” but don't go further than that

example

Subject line --

Query: JUSTICE OF TOREN (Adult Sci-Fi Space Opera)

Dear [Agent]:

Once Breq had hundreds of bodies, her artificial intelligence animating a ship and thousands of ancillary units in the service of the Radch, the colonialist empire that built her.

That's all gone. Destroyed. Now she has only a single, limited human body. And she has only one goal—to revenge herself on Anaander Mianaai, many-bodied, near-immortal, ruler of the Radch.

A long time ago, Seivarden had been a lieutenant on Justice of Toren, the ship Breq used to be. Now Seivarden is lying in the street on an icy backwater planet, naked and unconscious, battered into insensibility from months of too many drugs and too little food. Breq knows she should leave Seivarden to rot where she found her. Breq isn't responsible for Seivarden, not anymore. Besides, Seivarden was never one of Breq's favorite people.

But Breq can't walk away, can't abandon a former officer. Even though she knows that it's a possibly fatal distraction from her one, true aim. Even though she knows that in the complex politics of the Radch, Seivarden would side with the faction that Breq implacably opposes. The faction that has already destroyed her once.

JUSTICE OF TOREN is a Cherryh-flavored space opera complete at 101,000 words.

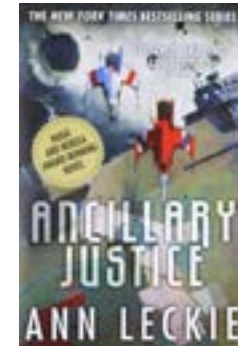
I am a graduate of Clarion West. My short fiction has appeared in Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Subterranean Magazine, and three volumes of Rich Horton's best of the year anthologies. I am also the editor of the webzine GigaNotoSaurus.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time, and your attention,

Ann Leckie

[contact information]

this example is for
Ann Leckie's book
that would undergo
a title change before
going on to win
the Hugo Award as
ANCILLARY JUSTICE.



Credit: Ann Leckie's blog at www.annleckie.com/2015/08/12/my-query-letter-for-ancillary-justice/

query letter template

SUBJECT LINE
PARAGRAPH 1
"THE HOOK"

PARAGRAPH 2
"THE BOOK"

PARAGRAPH 3
"THE COOK"

PARAGRAPH 4
"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

Random blog posts

The acknowledgements section 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

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

You can't skip this step!

READY, SET, QUERY!

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 screenshot you can use as a guide:

NAME	WHERE FOUND	SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS	RESPONSE TIME	METHOD	NOTES	STATUS
Agent Name	#mswl	first 10 pages	30 days	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines	Can resubmit after 30 days if no response	queried 7/6; request for larger font 7/7
Agent Name	Represents many authors in the genre	NO sample. Query letter only.	30 days	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines	Can resubmit after 30 days if no response	queried 7/6
Agent Name	Represents a friend	1-2 chapters	2 months	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines		queried 7/6
Agent Name	Follow on Twitter	first 10 pages	?	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines	seeking strong voice, upmarket	
Agent Name		first 5 pages	?	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines	Closed to queries currently?	
Agent Name		first 20 pages	?	www.agencywebsite.com/guidelines	No from one agent is a no from all	
Agent Name		first chapter	2-4 weeks	www.agencywebsite.com/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 your submission strategy for this work be if you took it 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?**
- **What is the average length of the contract negotiation period?**
- **How do you handle film rights inquiries?**
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need more advice?

[Query Shark](#)

www.queryshark.blogspot.com

[Agent Query](#)

www.agentquery.com

[Pub\(lishing\) Crawl](#)

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.**

