

The background of the image is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a vintage typewriter. The keyboard is the primary focus, showing keys for letters like 'J', 'I', 'O', 'K', 'L', 'M', and symbols like '%', '1/2', and a 'SHIFT KEY'. To the right, a document with handwritten text in cursive is visible, mentioning terms like 'hiving box', 'springs, plates', 'steel types', 'The Carriage', 'blue pelvis', 'The Cushions etc', 'tuffed & quilted', 'rubber', 'superior lamp', 'light but power', 'll to be of the be', and 'Inclusive price'.

*How To*

**WRITE  
A  
QUERY  
LETTER**

[WWW.ARACHNEPROJECT.COM](http://WWW.ARACHNEPROJECT.COM)



*You did it!*  
*You finished your final draft!*

You probably wondered a few times if you would ever get to this point, and now you're ready to start trying to get your novel published! This is such a moment of excitement and achievement. You deserve a high five. So many would-be authors never get to this point, and you have done it.

But now a new phase of work begins. You need to prepare your submissions package. And while you might be feeling pretty great about your opening pages right now, you know that you have to grab an agent or editor's attention with a query letter before they will even look at your actual story.

If you're new to the submissions process and you're just learning about query letters, if you have heard of them but never written one, or if you're in need of a refresher, you're in the right place.

**In this guide, I'm going to talk about what a query letter is. I'll walk you through the parts of a query letter. Then I'll share some Dos and Don'ts with you.**



# *What Is a Query Letter?*

A query letter is a piece of business correspondence that is intended to persuade an agent or editor to request and read your manuscript.

That's it. Sounds simple enough, right? It actually is pretty simple. But that doesn't mean there isn't a learning curve. And it doesn't mean the learning curve isn't a little steep.

The good news is that there is no single "perfect" query letter. An agent or editor could show you a bunch of query letters that worked and they would all be somewhat unique and yet still meet all the requirements.

The bad news is that there are requirements. And you don't want to try to rebel against them to be creative or to stand out. Not including the required information will generally result in an auto-rejection. That said, there are still ways to stand out, and I'll be touching on them through this guide.

Additionally, each agency and publisher will have what are called "submission guidelines" on their website. These guidelines will tell you precisely how to send them a query, what they are interested in, and if there are any disqualifiers. Not following their guidelines is also grounds for auto-rejection. This means they won't even read what you sent them if you did not follow their guidelines.

A query letter should fit on one standard single-spaced page, even if you're pasting it into the body of an email. This is NOT much space, but that's by design. It's business. It's a sales pitch. Agencies and editors receive tons of queries per week. You need to grab their attention quickly and hold it. So focus on the requirements first and foremost because that's the information they NEED to decide if this story might work for them.





# *Parts of a Query Letter*

## SALUTATION

Address your letter to a specific person whenever possible. Do your homework about who that person would be. For instance, if you've written a YA Romance, check the agency list for who would be interested in a YA Romance and address the query to that person. Double-check the name spelling. Use preferred titles wherever possible. Checking their social media is not a bad idea. Agents and editors are people, and people really appreciate when you use their name correctly and do your homework about their preferences.

## TAILORED OPENING

This part gives some people headaches. And for good reason. It's a lot of pressure to feel like you have to say something unique and personal to each agent you query. So let me start by saying that you do NOT have to tailor every single query. I think it's a mistake to try to make each query sound special if you're just submitting to slush. That said, you might have a special reason for wanting to work with them, and if so, you should let them know.

If you're trying to imagine what a tailored query looks like, following are some ways you might do that.

If you met your agent at a conference, like I did, or if they requested material through an online event, you can remind them of that in the opening of your letter. I was introduced to my agent by one of her clients, and we all had a fun time. She invited me to send her some sample pages. You'd better believe I mentioned that meeting when I reached out to



her. In the end, she politely declined that manuscript but invited me to resubmit my next project. So the next time I queried her, I again reminded her of how much I enjoyed our meeting. She signed me for that project. Building connections over time can be very helpful, so use this opportunity to do so.

Likewise, if you received a very kind, very personal rejection letter, and you were invited to submit your next project, then definitely DO that!

Suppose a writer who knows your writing suggested you query their agent and invited you to mention they sent you. This is like having a referral, and while it doesn't guarantee special attention, it never hurts to have references, right? Just make sure the client really is happy to vouch for you and your writing. This would be embarrassing if the agent asked their client if they knew you and they said WHO? Be very mindful not to abuse the privilege of name dropping.

And just so we're clear, you do NOT have to know someone to find representation. People DO get picked out of slush. You can increase your chances of being noticed by having a quality query letter and writing sample.

You can also open your query letter with any reason why you want to work with them specifically. Think of it as breaking the ice or building rapport. Do you connect with their work? Did they state on social media that they were looking for a project exactly like yours? Do they represent a favorite author in your genre?

A tailored query letter never hurts, but as I said, if that feels forced, I think it's perfectly okay to dive straight into the pitch. It's more important that you come across as authentic, confident, and professional.



## PRODUCT INFO

It's important to remember that your beloved story is a product now and to treat it as such during the query process.

State up front the name of the project, word count, and genre. You can also name comp titles here. Comp titles are books that are similar to yours in some ways. These help the agent or editor place your book in the marketplace. Comp titles are usually recent and fairly well-known. You don't want to pick something obscure that not many people have heard of (unless the agent/editor was asking for that) and you also don't want to pick something over the top famous. You might very well be the next best-selling author, but don't set the bar so high that they subconsciously won't think you can deliver.

You can say something like:

“[BOOK TITLE] is a 70,000 word Romantic Suspense for fans of [COMP TITLE].”

Or if your book feels like a bit of a mash-up or twist on a popular theme, try this way:

“[BOOK TITLE] is a Contemporary YA novel, complete at 80,000 words. It's [COMP TITLE] meets [COMP TITLE].”

Don't fall into the trap of trying to capture every element or sub-genre. This is not about maximizing possibilities. It's about helping the agent or editor picture the book in the current market. Confusion and overwhelm doesn't help sell your book. Pick the major category and move on.





## THE PITCH ITSELF

The pitch is not just the heart of your query, it's the heart of your story.

This part is usually one paragraph. (Two at most.)

I occasionally do query coaching because I enjoy playing with a pitch. Writers can really struggle with length in this part of the query. They usually try to summarize the entire story. They want to include all the characters and all the subplots and all the details because they are so close to the story that every little thing feels important to them. When I ask them to pare down, they become a little unsure about what the heart of the story is.

This is where a little distance comes in handy. Letting your manuscript “rest” a little bit before writing your query may help you step back from it and look at it from a higher perspective.

Remember that a pitch is not a synopsis. You're just trying to tease out a snapshot of the central character and their central conflict or question. This is the story boiled down to most essential components. You're not trying to recount every single detail and plot point. You're tempting a busy agent or editor to say “yes, I'd like to read more of that” so that you can let your actual writing do the talking for you.

So what is essential?

**Introduce your main character.** Most characters have ONE (or two) main characters. And even if there are other supporting POV characters, they are usually the leads of a subplot rather than the most important plot.



**Show what this main character wants the most (what's really driving them) and what's in their way that's stopping them from getting it.** These things drive the actions of the story forward, so they are essential.

**Include a sense of what's at stake for them.** What does this character stand to lose? Why does it matter that they overcome this problem? What will change for them when they get what they want? Life or death stakes are popular, but not every plot is that urgent. A relationship could be at stake. Or someone's livelihood. It needs to be something the reader of your genre will care about.

**Is there a twist that makes a trope super interesting again?** That goes here as well.

**You can include a secondary character if they are truly central.** This could be a love interest that moves the plot forward or a villain who has their own compelling stakes. Leave secondary characters out unless they are somehow critical to the main character's growth.

If you don't know what your story is about at its heart, writing this paragraph will test you. And this is an OKAY kind of test that we have to be open to as writers. Because if we can't explain what our story is about, an agent probably won't be able to explain it to an editor, and an editor won't be able to explain it to the marketing department...and so on. This is a necessary skill.

If you want to get better at this really fast, I would recommend writing practice pitches for a bunch of your favorite books. You could get together with a writing friend and do a bunch of these together. Write several drafts of your own pitch and have a critique partner look at them. Write pitches for movies you like. Continue to play with pitches. You will never be done pitching.





## SHORT BIO

A short bio is where you share about yourself.

Skip the fun one you might share on social media. Instead, craft a short, professional bio that focuses on your credentials. This bio will not go to waste. You'll use it again if you keep writing. You can share writing credentials such as degrees or certificates, research you've done or other relevant experience that relates to the book, previous publications, or what makes YOU the right person to tell this story. (OWN voices? That goes here.) You can also include memberships in professional writing organizations as these demonstrate commitment to writing as a profession.

Don't stress this part though. You can be a great writer with absolutely no credentials or writing background. That writer with a fancy bio once had NO bio at all. We all start somewhere.

## CLOSING

Before you sign off your letter, ask clearly for what you want.

When you're applying for a job, you use your cover letter to describe how you can be an asset to the company. And in the closing, you explicitly ask for an interview. In your query letter, you have told this agent or editor how your book could be an asset to them. In the closing, you want to ask if you can send them your manuscript. Don't beat around the bush.

If you're querying via email or submissions portal, as most people are, I would note here if



I'm attaching something as part of submissions guidelines. (This might seem redundant, but clarity will always be professional. In a normal business letter, enclosures would be noted below the signature.) You can say something like:

*"Please enjoy the sample pages I've attached per your guidelines. Let me know if I can send you the complete manuscript. I'm looking forward to hearing back from you."*

Make it sound like you would say it.

## SIGNATURE

Select a professional closing like "Sincerely" or "Warm Regards" or a simple "Thank you."

Again, I would include my full name, even if using a form or portal. Writing professionals are very busy people who see a lot of material each day. If someone is busy and it takes several repetitions for them to connect to your name, wouldn't you want to help them remember you?



## FINISH STRONG

Here's a checklist of some Dos and Don'ts for when you're wrapping things up and getting ready to hit send.

### DO:

- Follow submission guidelines.
- Personalize your query when appropriate.
- Be professional about the entire process.
- Present your most authentic and polished self.
- Inject a little of your narrative voice into the query. Your letter can sound professional, without coming across as stiff or overly formal.
- Practice writing pitches for the sake of writing pitches.
- Ask for help or feedback from writers who are a little more experienced than you.
- Learn to graciously work with criticism. (You don't have to utilize advice if it sits with you poorly. Just allow it to be as you process what really speaks to you.)
- Carry yourself with confidence and grace when you receive rejections or do not hear back from agents/editors. Rejection and not hearing back are parts of the experience.

*DO be patient with yourself.  
You're learning.*





## DON'T:

- Ignore submission guidelines.
- Be too casual. Being yourself is cool, but be your professional self.
- Force anything that feels weird or inauthentic in the query letter. It's okay to not personalize every single letter. And it's okay to not have an impressive bio.
- Get carried away and say that your story is a cross between five genres. It will only make you look less sure of yourself. Pick a subgenre if needed and stick to that.
- Try to stand out by leaving out key parts of the query or adding extra stuff to dress it up. You will stand out if you write a great pitch and follow the guidelines.
- Overreact to any criticism or take anything personally. Take time to breathe and process before responding or changing your query or story.
- Overanalyze rejections. A form rejection or lack of response is a simple no. Personalized rejections might include a bit of appreciation or criticism. Accept these as you would any critique and keep submitting.

Querying can be a very exciting and stressful experience. I hope that by breaking the query letter into parts, you are able to find clarity so it's not so overwhelming to look at the whole thing.

Remember that querying is one part of your journey as a writer. It's not a race or a contest. No one is going to beat you to the finish line. The only writer you are competing with is the writer you were yesterday. So challenge yourself by leaning into the resistance you feel about writing the perfect query letter. It doesn't have to be perfect. Start with a draft. You can edit a bad pitch. You can build a better bio. And you can refine a wordy paragraph. Allow yourself the time and space to be right where you are and fully experience this part of your journey as a writer.