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TIPS FOR WRITING QUERY LETTERS THAT SELL

WHAT IS A QUERY LETTER?

Sometimes it's called a pitch or a proposal, but what matters is that if you want to sell an idea to an editor, this is the most common way to do it. Whether you're a newbie or a veteran, editors will usually ask to see something in writing. A query outlines what your story idea is about and why it's right for the intended publication. So it's not a document that should be dashed off. Thinking that you'll do the really hard work once you're commissioned to write the story will increase your chances of not winning that assignment.

Think of a query as a mini-story. It should have a beginning, middle and an end – a miniature narrative arc – and it should be well researched and written. Remember, editors are judging four things:

1. Your grasp of the story
2. Whether you have an interesting and/or distinctive point of view
3. Whether the idea is appropriate for their market (read back issues)
4. Your writing style (especially if you're not known to the editor).

WHY NOT SEND A SHORT, INFORMAL PARAGRAPH OR TWO?

For longer, more ambitious features, I believe that a detailed, one-to-two page, single-spaced query letter is an advantage – especially for writers early in their careers who may not have impressive clips, or for any writers approaching a market for the first time. It shows off your writing and researching skills and you can develop your idea more fully and effectively. Besides, editors receive so many bad pitches that a very strong, well-written and thoughtful one will stand out. That said, some editors prefer concise, paragraph-long pitches. (Especially at magazines that publish mainly short, service-oriented features and, true, it doesn't make sense to send a 1,700-word query for a 300-word brief.) Once you have

relationships with editors, you can often send short, informal pitches to see if they're interested in having you develop the idea further. But I believe that if you're not absolutely certain, err on the side of being longer and more comprehensive.

ANATOMY OF A QUERY LETTER

Opening: The opening sentence(s), like any lede, must capture an editor's attention. The use of an anecdote or colourful scene is effective and showcases your writing skills. But quickly present the focus of your proposed story. Overworked editors – is there any other kind today? – have notoriously short attention spans.

Focus: The second block should elaborate on your opening, detailing the theme of the story. At this point, an editor should not be still wondering what the query is all about.

Nuts-and-Bolts: By the third block you should indicate that the story is not of minor significance, a one-time phenomenon. If you've proposed an individual as a potential profile subject, you'd better have a good rationale for why that person is significant and of interest to the magazine's readers and why the timing makes sense. A conflict between a boss and his/her underlings is quite common and not very significant. But it is significant if the boss is a much-touted rookie MP halfway through her first year on the job and the underlings are veteran civil servants in a politically sensitive department. Similarly, it's interesting if you know of people in their 30s opting out of fast-track jobs that guarantee big salaries in favour of less ambitious careers that allow for more leisure and family time. But if that's your story, you'd better not be basing the idea on a friend of a friend of your brother-in-law and a rumour you heard in a bar. By the nuts-and-bolts block you'd better have presented evidence that it's a quantifiable socio-cultural trend and that you'll be presenting a number of case studies to support the trend. (In this example, you might present evidence that the trend has been recognized by social policy experts, academics, employee relations officials at big companies, etc.)

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Who's Who & What's What: It often makes sense to explain to an editor how you plan to approach the research and reporting. But does that mean you should say that you intend to review past stories from major media outlets? (No. That goes without saying.) Does it mean you should say you'll find an individual who represents the issue? (No. For a feature, you'd be expected to find multiple individuals and choose one or more who best illustrate the story's themes. You may even identify one in your preliminary research and include him or her in the opening of your query. It's often smart to mention a few of the kinds of people you intend to interview (for example: identify one or two specific experts or key players in a story, if they're not self-evident). It indicates you've done your homework and have a grasp of the issues. Anticipate any obvious questions an editor might have.

Pushing the Hot Button: In the advertising industry, "hot buttons" are key areas of self-interest to which consumers are supposed to respond. You can activate an editor's "hot button" by saying: My story will address the specific concerns of your readers. But don't make the mistake of saying: "This story on teenagers addicted to prescription drugs is right for your magazine because it's a serious problem facing Canada today." First of all, that's self-evident. Secondly, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's the right kind of story for every publication. That's why you must read back issues and get a sense of who the publication's readers are, what kind of stories are presented, and how those stories are approached. Here's a hypothetical example of pitching a prescription drug-addicted teens story, aimed at a women's magazine that sometimes publishes articles about social issues and whose target readers are 34-49 years old: This idea is right for your magazine because a great many of your readers are career women with tweens and teenagers who are concerned about the issues facing adolescents.

Look At Me: Don't be shy about telling an editor that you are unusually well-suited to execute the story. If you have special knowledge or a background in the subject, or have written about it before and know some of the key players, say so. Editors are keen to learn that a writer will bring an insider's perspective to a story, or that they have a passion for the subject.

THE LAST WORD

The beauty – and sometimes the frustration – of journalism is that, despite MA and PhD programs, night courses, workshops, panels and myriad books purporting to teach you how to do it, there is no manual. Every rule can be, and is, broken by journalists, often with great success. So be smart, but flexible, about applying every set of tips you're given (including this one).

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