

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 21: Query and Conference Connections?

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You've heard so many writers talking about that one query letter that put their work in the hands of the right publishers. You have heard some of these writers have been asked by an agent to submit because of a meeting at a conference. Chances are, you've attempted query letters, in desperate hope that someone somewhere will find your work inviting, interesting, and magical. How can you get an invitation to query? How do you write a query letter? Is a query necessary? Does it improve your chances if you met in advance at a conference?

Conferences are probably the best networking available to writers. We are solitary creatures, with very little opportunity to see other members of our profession. When you decide to go to a writer's conference, you are electing to give up the hermit life for a little while, and mingle with people who may just push you lovingly into the right direction.

Going to one is like walking into a schoolyard for the first time. There are workshops, which are classroom-like get-togethers, offering a more interactive approach than lectures. Lectures teach the skills, or offer advice on how to excel in our fields. But, the most useful part of any writer's conference are the times we spend either one-on-one with an agent, and the times we spend outside of the structured environments.

A majority of the writer's conferences listed on Shaw Guides allow writers to not only register for the event itself, but also submit materials, set up time for critiques, and have one-on-one meetings with agents and editors. Just looking through the new Writer's Market books, I've found dozens of editors listed as "not accepting new clients". However, these

same agents, when visiting conferences, become peers, allies, and even ask for submissions. This doesn't mean, "send the entire manuscript, pronto", as some may surmise. It means, in nearly all instances, you are welcome to submit a query, a proposal, or both.

Get the agent's card! There are hundreds upon thousands of stories from writers who had opened a cemented shut door, only to discover the lapse in judgment in losing the business card. Give the agent your card. But don't just hand it randomly around. Write a note on the back of it, telling her where she met you, and what you had discussed. On the card she gives you, do the same.

It's okay to talk to agents as people. The agents and editors at conferences don't just attend so they can triumphantly tout their own achievements. They want you to talk to them, and they want to talk to you. It's not a great idea to run at them, interrupt conversations, or slip a manuscript under the bathroom door. But, it is all right to ask what she wants to see in a query letter, or if she can recommend an agent suited to your writing style.

The query is not only a request to have your book read, it's a request from the agent, publisher, or editor, to see how well you communicate. In a previous lesson, I broke down what a query should read like, but knowing why you need to put in specific information may further improve your chances of being considered.

In three or four paragraphs, you not only have to sell a book, but you have to prove that you are the right fit for the agency. If you have met an agent beforehand, selling yourself becomes a little easier. Rather than writing a paragraph listing your accomplishments, and lifelong resume, you can refresh the agent's memory by mentioning a comment, or event,

or simply reminding her that you and she shared a muffin in a coffee shop. You want to remind her you aren't one of the hundreds of people sending unsolicited materials. You want to tell her, "Hey, you liked me; here's that letter I promised."

Example: I want to thank you again for the great chat over coffee at StirBux, that rainy morning at the San Diego Writer's Conference. I'm glad you liked my humor. I never met anyone with a killer rabbit story before. I wanted to take you up on the offer of reading my query for the book, *Dogs Are Swimming*.

It's a bit of a business casual approach rather than a full on, "HEY, I NEED YOU" method of communication. Keep the language conversational in the introduction paragraph when writing to someone with whom you've been acquainted. If she gave you a name of another more suitable agent, you need to keep the language fully business-like.

Example: Dear Ms. Anglewhite

At the San Diego Writer's Conference, 2006, Jenny Smith, from Smith and Davison, advised me to bring my work to your attention. *Dogs Are Swimming* is a non-fiction, family friendly story of an assistance animal and her puppies. Ms. Smith said you had been searching for a story such as this.

In the second example, the author is introducing herself by including the reference. The publishing world is VERY small, no matter how many thousands of writers there are. It doesn't take much to burn a bridge so deeply that wherever you go, people smell soot and see char marks. Make sure you've done all of your homework before you send your letter.

Suppose Ms. Anglewhite is no longer working as an agent. She now works as a book doctor. How do you know? If you've subscribed to Writer's Market database, a simple mouse click will provide you with the updated information. Or, maybe Ms. Anglewhite has hired a new assistant. Publisher's Lunch newsletter listed that information a few weeks ago. Always, always, always, always verify a contact before you send a query. Always.

If you can't say in one sentence what your story is about, then you need to figure out how to tell someone, in that same amount of time, why they should read it. Think about your day. How many times has a kid said, "Mommy, when do we eat?" or "Honey, I can't find the socks." An agent or editor hears, "read my story?" just as often. Sell your story as if it was the gateway to a billion dollars.

You can cut out "my story", or "this book". Instead, just get to the point; because they KNOW it's a piece of literature. "Gerry loved everyone, because he didn't know anyone for more than ten minutes at a time." Do you want to know where that sentence leads? Are you curious? The idea is to pull the agent into your story as quickly as possible.

"You can't murder eleven children in broad daylight and get away with it,-- unless you are the son of a world leader." The first sentence is intriguing and alluring. Phrase it as a question, "Where do you go when all of the law in your town works for the other side?" Tease the agent with flirtation and you'll get farther than most. You want to let the agent know you're willing to take her inside your confidence, and tell her the best secret she's ever heard. Or, maybe you want to read as if you were saying "You're like family to me, so I'm sharing something near to my heart". Keep in mind, agents don't want to spend all day trying to figure out what you're going to say next, so get right to the point.

“Barry’s Got Guts tells a tale of a young politician’s son, who would rather see a woman in half, than attend a cotillion. Only Secret Service agent Dave Bobson knows the secret. Follow the pair playing cat and mouse until Dave gets the ultimate revenge—leaving Barry without a father, a home, or ability to harm anyone else.”

Hiding the story isn’t going to help you. You aren’t writing a book jacket. You’re telling the agent, “This book tells a dirty little secret.” Rather than letting her guess the bad guy from the good, fill her in. This works for any type of book, not just mystery or suspense novels. If it’s a non-fiction piece, explain in a sentence or two what the topic is, and why this explanation stands out from any others. For everything you write, that offers information about your work, start with a tease and lure, fill the paragraph with meaty information, in as few words as possible, and finally, punch it up with the intended result. (“Mary Jones will know the identity of her daughter.”; “Dave Bobson not only slays the president’s son, but changes history when he destroys every resident of the White House.”; “Dogs protect owners and their own as much and as well as we do.”)

Conference attendance isn’t mandated for writers. It’s a great idea, though. Most are set up to offer information to authors of many levels of skill and expertise. If you have a chance to attend one, bring a notepad, or a recording device, and take the time to learn the craft. The greatest resources available at the conferences are other attendees. Read some of their query letters, or book proposals. If you find someone writing in the same genre, talk to her about the steps she has taken towards publishing.

Query means “to request”. You are requesting additional time from someone. Sharing a memory allows you more time than someone who

has sent cold-call letters to agents found in databases. Conferences allow you the opportunity to put faces behind field names. In turn, the agent's don't view you as a complete stranger, unworthy of her attention.

I recommend two writer's conferences in Nevada very highly. Juniper Creek's conference starts in July. The Las Vegas Writer's Conference starts at the end of March. If you're willing to go to a conference with a feminine twist, I recommend the International Women's Writing Guild's Early Spring in California Conference during St. Patrick's Day Weekend, in Santa Cruz.

Listings of Conferences:

Shaw Guides

<http://www.shawguides.com/writing/>

The Las Vegas Writer's Conference, (Special Discount Applies, see registration form for details.)

<http://www.lasvegaswritersconference.com/>

Juniper Creek Writer's Conference

<http://www.junipercreekpubs.com/events>

International Women's Writer's Guild Conference:

<http://www.iwwg.org>