

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 22: What Happens to a Query?

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I helped a writer from the Henderson Writer's Group work on his query letter this week. In fact, I did a mini workshop regarding query conversations, and ten second impressions we all leave, on Monday evening. A very detailed query article, (from our own archives), served as some of the handout materials. Reading the member's query, I was able to sit with the point of view of an editor or agent. This gave first hand experience to all I've been taught at conferences, by mentors, and in books promoting literature efforts.

A query is the only impression you leave with an agency, so it needs to be the best of all of your work. It needs to sound like the work you are hoping to sell. It needs to demonstrate your abilities as a wordsmith, and it needs to be as clearly written as possible.

<http://vegasquills.com/articles.html> Lesson 8: Query on Queries)

Again, meeting an agent one on one requires similar discipline. You must present yourself dressed as you want to be perceived. If you are seeking an agent who is highly cultured, and quite prim, then you need to reflect that thought process in your own manner of dress. If you are writing novels about biker gangs, and criminals, then by all means, wear thug togs. How you dress will present to the agent exactly who you are, and what you write. It provides a cover for the book of you.

When you send a query, you don't have that same opportunity. Rather than offering physical appearances, you have only what you choose to place on paper. Here's the hard part to swallow: You present a mental

If I write: “Heya, Thanks for reading this. I know you and I are going to be terrific together. Let’s talk some more.” I can expect one thing. My note will visit a circular file pronto. Every word I select reflects not only my work, but who I am as a writer. Agents and Editors want to read queries that provide them enough information to understand not only the project you propose, but also the dedication you have to it.

One of my friends writes full-time for television shows produced by Paramount Pictures. When you see “Screenplay by” listing just one name, know that it’s generally a team of writers who work on a script. She got her job by comparing her work to that of others who already had fulltime jobs at Paramount.

“I let the secretary, assigned to letter-reading know that I had done my homework. I impressed her with my knowledge of the company history and she sent me a request for sample materials within days.”

You may have written the best query letter—a text book example of perfection. But, months pass, and you find that not a single positive response has arrived. It may be that your letter perfect query doesn’t reflect the type of work you want read.

The late-great, Robert Ludlum, had a story about writing queries to detective magazines. He wrote the letter that every agent wants to read. It listed the agency history. It mentioned their authors’ works. It was charming, and sweet, and short enough to keep one’s attention. But, it didn’t give an inkling to how he crafted his story. “I let them know I was a nice guy, with a good typewriter, but I never once mentioned Nazis, love scenes or international espionage. I didn’t because Ian Fleming had done

exasperated with my never-ending begging, called me to ask what it was I actually wrote about. When I told him about a short story, he asked me, 'Was it so hard to tell me that?' I said, 'No', and then he reminded me that none of my query letters said a word about the stories. I only told him that I wrote mystery novels, and had some chapters I'd like published. He responded, 'Who doesn't?'. That was a good lesson in telling an editor who I am."

Look at this book idea three different ways.

- "My story is about a dog, a boy, and a life in the growing west."
- "The dog was the boy's only friend, and losing him through a family act, involving grief filled gun shots, meant losing his childhood, his innocence, and his dependency on those in the world around him"
- "There's a dog in the story that comes in and out as a reminder that the boy needs to accomplish specific goals."

The book is "Old Yeller". All three sentences describe the book. But, what does each say about the writer? The first is a rushed scribble, hardly giving any idea to the editor. The second is full of purpose, and the idea that the boy is as important to the writer as the symbolism brought by the animal. The third, a blend of the two, doesn't really give the editor or agent an idea of why the story is written, or what the voice sounds like.

The language in each sentence is very telling. The first and third are almost apologetic. If you are apologizing for your words, then the agent

her time. For most people, the apologetic letters are catalysts to lacking interest. If you don't write in the voice of the work you want represented or published, you also will find your note in a slush pile rather than on a publisher's lawyer's desk.

Look at these:

"Dave fought the pain, gripping his own arm, staring at his own pocketknife."

"Mary and Doughy Kitten followed along, sloshing milk and doling out doughnuts."

"It's not like blood you see in the movies. No. Instead it's the blood you feel in your nightmares."

Three entirely different projects all by the same writer read entirely different in these letters. She worked first on the idea of the horror behind the possible self-mutilation that a hiker experienced when trapped. In her children's book, she wanted the language to come across as light and free-spirited. The final story is dark, and convoluted. Her descriptions read as if the character in her book said them.

A query letter arrives, and an assistant, or a secretary is often the first stop. She opens it, and sees if it is in the exact format the submission guidelines provide. If it is, then she will likely read the first paragraph. If that first paragraph interests her, she will place it in the 'read' file. If not, she'll toss it into the slush, or the 'sorry response' pile. It isn't a hard and fast rule, but it's generally true that if you receive a response quickly it is

In the query, remember, you need an intro sentence or two about your book/article, an intro about you, and a reason why you've selected that particular editor or agent. If you didn't make the effort to follow submission guidelines, or if you did, but the agency isn't taking on any clients, the self-addressed stamped envelope, (SASE), you enclosed will arrive in a matter of days, if not a few short weeks.

About that envelope? Here's a trick that I have used to help keep track of whom I sent what. I use a program called My Database, but you could easily use any database or spread sheet program available to you. I track

- the agent's name
- the address
- the submission guidelines
- the name of the item(s) I sent to that office
- the date I sent it
- the date response arrived

On the enclosed SASE, I make a note on the back left corner, the name of the agency, and the item I sent to it. Very often responses do not have stamped/stickered return labels or any other indicators. By giving myself a note I aid in keeping track of my own submissions. You could also place a return address on your SASE, but I find agencies and editors carrying their own stamp get a little annoyed if there isn't a place for them to put their own marketing—a return label with a company logo.

If your letter gets past the "We already have someone like you", or "Submission guidelines met, but..." stages, then your query gets into a company roundtable, or at least into an agent's agenda. When she reads through it, she will offer you one of three responses:

1. I like this, but it's not really grabbing me, sorry.
2. We're not really looking for this genre/style at the moment.
3. By all means, keep submitting to another agency, but we cannot assist you at this time.

This is a form of "yellow light" discussed in lesson eight. As said before, this means that you're being encouraged to keep trying, but maybe it isn't the right fit at this agency, at this time.

Next week, I'm away, so we will have a guest writer post a lesson.

Listings of Some Writers Promoting Writing Opportunities:

Anthologies Online

http://www.anthologiesonline.com/Storefront/free_publicity.htm

Sun Oasis

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

Freelance Writer

<http://www.freelancewriting.com/careercenter.php>

The Write Job

<http://www.thewritejob.com>