

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 8: Questions of Queries

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First, thanks to all of you who have written to me for specific information regarding the subjects I've covered in the past. I also want to thank those of you who had suggestions for further articles. But, mostly, I wanted to thank those of you who are encouraging me to continue in helping YOU get your projects going. That means the most to me. In response to the greatest number of requests, I'm jumping ahead a few subjects, and going directly into QUERY issues.

"I have a great book, and it's going to change the way people think." That's great, I hope that those who choose to think with their feet enjoy it. "This story is something no one has ever told before." As much as I'd like to agree with you, it's not going to happen. "It has to be good. I wrote it in less than a week because it had me so excited." All ten pages took less than a week to get on paper? Impressive.

A query letter is the knock on the door of your literary future. Next week, the lesson is "WHO GETS THESE?." Before you even begin searching for the right fit for your work, whether through periodicals, publishers, agencies, or even Literary Journals, you need to formulate a smart introduction. The introduction is not only a commercial for your efforts, but it also serves as an introduction to your personality and style.

I write over thirty queries on any given week. Being published doesn't mean that everyone knows who I am. As an essayist, as well as a nonfiction writer, each query has to be specific to the message I'm putting out there. I don't have standard letter, but I do use a standard outline.

The first part of my query is a get-to-the-point one or two sentence introduction of why I am writing.

“Dear [Editor’s Name],

I’m CJ Jones, nonfiction freelance writer, with an article available on Animal Care Center Software Options.”

A big mistake we make when writing queries is stating the obvious. Saying, “I’m a writer and I want to put an article in your paper” tells the editor that you aren’t sure of what you need from him. He knows you want to put an article in his paper, or have him consider you as a client for his agency, or be published by his company. Writers contact editors for consideration.

If you are keeping up with Writers’ Market, or Media Bistro, or Publishers Lunch, you’re doing homework to ensure that the right name appears after “Dear”. You should know the sex of the editor. One of my first big doozies came when I referred to an editor named Dana as “She”, when in fact Dana was a man who resembled Ernest Borgnine. Can you guess how many times he published my work?

In my example, I tell the editor my name, my title, and without any description other than the title, the article I’d like to bring to him. After this sentence, I start a new paragraph. Several books will tell you to start with a question relating to your research. “Do you know that nearly 11,800 veterinary practices exist in the United States?” If I had done my homework, I’d know that this publication, DVM, is for subscribed Doctors of Veterinary Medicine, and this fact is not only known, but may have even been collected by staff researchers. By asking questions that

are elementary to the market, I'm showing ignorance. The editor will not read past this.

You do **NOT** have to start with a factoid. You can start the next paragraph with a breakdown of the work. However, if you are writing a book, or are seeking an agent, then the "Inquisitive" comment may work well. The decision should be based on what you are trying to tell the editor. Are you saying to him: "Hey, I have information you haven't covered in any of your other publications." Or, are you saying: "These questions are for my targeted audience, and this is why I'm putting them out there for you to read." In my example, my editor is knowledgeable in the needs of veterinary practices, so it's best for me to candidly state the information my article provides.

"Software Options is broken down into three subdivisions, which may, if necessary, stand on their own. I cover freeware, shareware, and standard software licenses available, at time of this submission. in packages that are used for Human Resources, Medical Record Keeping, and Billing. Several systems are all-inclusive, so I explain the pros and cons of using these, along with the return on investment. Surprisingly, several freeware options prove to be of greater use to the average veterinary practice, and even uphold stronger security. The article, as is, is 3000 words, but can be segmented to three 1000 word compositions."

The editor has a clear idea of what the article includes, and the word count. This paragraph also is a clue to my writing style. The editor wonders if I can succinctly state the point, and do so with compelling dialogue. Obviously, a dry topic hardly leaves room for uplifting or engaging phraseology. It is my duty, as the one hoping to sell the work,

to make my query as gripping as possible. I want the editor to know this theme is worth his time.

The third paragraph aids in self-promotion, and further advertise my writing style. Those who know me as a comedienne expect me to write a giddy little piece. An editor has no idea if I've shoveled cement my entire life, or was a child star, or served jury duty fifteen times in one year. Using appropriate language is a must. Even if I work with the same editor after this initial query, no letter sent to him regarding the business of publishing should exist as incongruous from any other business correspondence. Every message sent shows my professionalism. "Business Casual" must not exist in a query, but the language doesn't have to be stiff.

"I have read your publication for nearly the entire ten years you have served as editor. For several years, I served as an animal trainer on motion pictures and in television, most recently for CSI, and Animal Planet. I trained for my DVM at UC Davis, but a disability prevented me from finishing my studies. My work with animals continues, and I received my Veterinary Technician license in three states. Your magazine did a feature on the rescue organization I run, RatzenMauzers, in Las Vegas. As [Writer's Name] stated in that article, I have taught several veterinary practices in Nevada how to streamline their businesses. I also hold a MA in Computer Sciences, with a specialty in software for the disabled."

In a previous lesson, I pointed out how the biography works best when it is specific to the piece. In the example above, my credentials for veterinary practice are discussed. I include the educational background specific to this particular article. To further sell myself, I point out an

interesting bit of information regarding the work I've done in the entertainment industry. This ONLY includes the employment that describes an animal care professional. I want the editor to remember an article that describes my work in detail, which happened to appear in his own magazine. Finally, I added a related bit of information that serves to augment my credentials. There is no doubt I have a history of animal care, but I wanted to let the editor know I'm familiar with computer software.

There is room to cut this down. The paragraph about the piece can have more information, and the self-description could be shorter. I could rewrite this letter, and remove the sentence about the entertainment industry. It isn't directly related to the article, and the editor may have this information from the previous feature piece. However, I'm pushing the editor to set me apart from other writers, and to see me as someone with a diverse background.

The most difficult part of the query letter for many is the final paragraph. Here lies the summary of the request. The problem comes from trying to word it so it's not a complete repeat of the first sentence, nor should it come across as an abbreviated version of the description paragraph. Just tell the editor, plainly, what you wish from him. Cordially thank him here. Without question, TELL the editor if you are seeking publication from anyone else. Give the editor time to respond. Turnaround times for a periodical query averages 30-45 days. A book may not get any response for at least six months.

“Let me know if this article would be of interest to you. I have not submitted it to any other periodical, giving you exclusive option. If I do not hear back within six weeks, I will assume I may send it out to another editor. Thank you for your consideration.”

One thing most forgotten by even seasoned writers is contact information. Provide the editor with three methods of contact: Phone, Address, and Email Address. Don't tell him "Please don't call between 8pm and 8am", or "I am unavailable to take calls while All My Children is on". He can tell from your address what time zone you live in, and really could not care less about the television schedules.

Do you have QUERIES about QUERY letters? There are several terrific books on this, including Writer's Market, The Writers' Handbook, Writing Irresistible Query Letters, and The Writer's Digest Writing Clinic. I also recommend the following websites:

The Writer's Write Site

<http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/apr98/keegan7.htm>

Letter from an Agent to an Author

<http://www.writedirections.com/letter.html>

How to Write a Query Letter

<http://www.plantbio.uga.edu/courses/pbio4930/query.html>

Standards for Queries

<http://4-edit.com/publishing.html>

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