

NOVEL QUERY BASICS

1. First: You must have a finished, polished novel. Revise it until you know it can't be any better.
2. A novel query letter has one goal: To convince the agent to request your manuscript (the first few chapters, the first 50 pages, whatever).
3. Always check the submission guidelines before querying. Send what they want, nothing more or less. (However, if the editor/agent asks for only a one-page query, it's generally safe to add the first five pages of your manuscript, if you think they're compelling.)
4. A query must be professional and courteous; it is not a personal letter or a request for information. Don't use unusual colors, fonts, or packaging. Pretend you're writing a financial institution.
5. Address your query to a specific editor or agent. You may want to start your letter by stating the reason for contacting that specific person. Maybe you met at a conference, maybe you know the editor acquires certain types of books, maybe you're a referral. Find a real connection to the person you're querying, and you'll set yourself apart from 99% of the other queries.
6. Limit your query to one page, single spaced, with one-inch margins. Don't try to cram more information onto the page—agents/editors need very little information to determine whether they're interested in your work. Brevity is your friend!
7. Show how your novel is unique/different. Give 100-200 hook (or mini-synopsis) that concisely describes your novel's protagonist, problem, and setting. Avoid blather and long-winded discussions. Assume you have five seconds to convince them to read the book. Focus on the *story* and its compelling human elements (not plot twists and turns).
8. You might decide to open your query letter with your novel's hook. Your hook must be compelling, strong, and make the editor or agent say "Wow!" when they read it. The hook is the special plot detail or approach, a twist that grabs readers' attention and makes them want to read more.
9. AVOID: Editorializing ("this is a heart-breaking story that will make you cry," "this is the next best-seller," "you won't be able to put this down"). Your hook should *show* the qualities of your story without you *telling* what they are. Don't waste time talking about marketing and promotion at this early stage unless it's somehow integral to publication. **The story is the only thing that matters.**
10. Give the agent or editor some information about yourself near the end of the query. Include any fiction publishing credits or writing education. List nonfiction writing credits if they somehow pertain to your novel or show that you have professional publishing experience. If you're unpublished, don't belabor the point. If you are unpublished, but this is the third or fourth novel attempt, you might mention it. (It shows you have some measure of experience and determination—you know a lot more after your third novel attempt than your first.)
11. Never telephone the agent or editor to follow up unless invited to do so. Remember: It can take weeks, even months, for an editor or an agent to respond to a query. If you don't hear back after a follow-up letter, then move on. Sometimes agents/editors just don't respond, which should be interpreted as "no."
12. Don't be afraid to simultaneously submit. Life's too short.