



The Insider's Guide to Querying

Brought to you
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The Insider's Guide to Querying

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Introduction

Congratulations! If you're reading this eBook, then you're probably at (or near) the querying stage. Finishing your book or proposal is a terrific accomplishment in and of itself.

Now, it's time to take the next big step toward publishing by querying.

How does it work? The fairytale version might go like this: you send your query letter and first 10 pages to a small batch of agents. Within the week, your dream agent responds to say the book sounds fantastic and they'd like to read the whole thing. After just a few days, they get back to you. They *loved* it, and they want to have a phone call. After you chat, you're practically walking on air. The agent gets you and your book — and better yet, they're confident they can sell it. After reviewing their contract and following up with the other agents you queried, you make it official. Then you live happily ever after, placing your debut book (and many more!) with their help.

Sounds nice, right? Yet it's important to keep in mind that this is the dream scenario. We'll be honest: finding an agent is rarely quick or easy. If you've ever looked at query stats on Twitter or heard tell of the “querying trenches,” you might already have some concerns. What if agents say your book isn't good enough? What if they never respond at all? Does that mean they hated it?

While it's normal to have moments of both exhilaration and fear, we recommend thinking of the querying process as a

journey. It will take time, energy, and patience to reach your ultimate destination — getting your book published — but we're here to help you chart your initial course and navigate the potential twists and turns. (If you're submitting directly to publishers, you'll find the information here equally applicable to the pitching and submissions process.)

In this guide, we'll explain how to research agents and publishers, write a strong draft of your query letter, and create your submission strategy. Along the way, we'll provide insider tips and tricks from Reedsy editors — most of them former or current literary agents (there are a few award-winning authors in the mix, too!).

Already have a draft of your query letter? Get a professional [query letter review](#) to take it to the next level. All of the editors featured in this guide are available, along with 500+ other top publishing professionals.

I

Preparing to Query

1

Deciding When to Query

Moby D. (yes, this is a pseudonym) was three-quarters done writing a novel that he was *sure* had a shot at achieving bestseller status when he realized his #1 choice agent was about to close to queries for the rest of the year. He sent his letter off on a sunny Friday morning, expecting that, best-case scenario, he'd hear back in a few months (by which time he planned to be finished).

He got an email 23 minutes later: "Sounds right up my alley. Please send along the novel."

Moby panicked. The email he'd been hoping for for *months* suddenly left him in a bind. He had two options: explain the situation and offer to send a partial manuscript, or try to write another 20,000 words before Monday. He opted for the former, and the agent was understanding — but when he finally submitted the book, they seemed to have lost interest and took several more months to pass.

When Are You Ready to Query?

When you're looking for an agent, a query letter gets your foot in the door, but you need a strong, polished manuscript to maintain their attention. This is why it's best to query once you've written, rewritten, edited, and proofread the materials an agent might want to see. Whether that means the whole book depends on your genre:

- For **fiction**, you'll need a finished novel or a book of short stories.
- For **children's books**, you'll likewise need a finished manuscript (it's okay if you don't have illustrations, as an interested publisher may be able to pair you with an artist).
- For **nonfiction**, you'll need a book proposal including a project overview, sample chapters, and a marketing plan.

In short, you're ready to query when you're confident that your manuscript is as strong as it can be.

✓ Pro-Tip: Reread, Revise, and Get Feedback

Are you still unsure how to tell when your materials are ready? Bestselling children's author [Vanessa Curtis](#) recommends that you print out a hard copy of your draft, put it away for a few weeks, and then re-read it:

When you pick your book up again, resist the temptation to start scribbling or tweaking straight away. Just read it

right through. This helps you refamiliarise yourself with the story. Then, read it again, this time with a pencil in hand. Once your text is marked up, key in the whole book again from scratch, amending as you go. You'll be amazed how many new ideas come up as you write, plus the finished book will be much tighter and more compelling.

[Melissa Richeson](#), editor and assistant literary agent at Apokedak Literary, suggests finding a trustworthy feedback partner who can help you identify your blind spots and make further progress:

You know you've found a good feedback partner when their notes are delivered in a positive yet honest manner. If something's not working with the writing, they should be able to give objective reasons why rather than offering only opinions based on taste.

Not every book is right for every reader, but every book has merit that can be drawn out and developed for that right reader. A good feedback partner will help develop the strengths of a manuscript regardless of whether or not they like the book personally.

Researching Publishers

First things first: the major presses and their associated imprints (also called the Big Five) rarely accept unsolicited submissions. However, there are a number of independent and

university presses that accept submissions from authors without agents. Check Reedsy's [Publishers Directory](#) to find 450+ vetted book publishers.

In every case, do some research to find out if the publisher is a good fit for your goals before you commit to them.

Understand their model. Some presses ask authors to share the costs of production; this is called “hybrid publishing.” While hybrid publishers charge, they rarely offer the publicity and marketing support that traditional publishers do. Ultimately, you may spend as much or more as you would to self-publish while receiving fewer royalties. If you *really* want to publish with a particular hybrid press, be sure to read the fine print to make sure you completely understand the costs and responsibilities you're taking on.

Check out the quality of their books. First, browse the press's online inventory. Are the books available in both print and eBook? What's the quality of the cover design? If you can, get your hands on a physical book and see how it compares to your other favorite titles. Publishing with a small or medium-sized press shouldn't mean compromising on format or design.

Dig into their relationship with their authors. One potential benefit of publishing with a smaller press is working with a dedicated team. If that team is flakey or non-communicative, the experience might be all the more disappointing. Check to see what authors say about the press in interviews, and if possible, speak to authors directly.

Keep in mind that, unlike agents, reputable publishers may sometimes charge a reading fee, especially if you're submitting to a contest. This is generally under \$30.

Submitting to Agents vs. Publishers

If your goal is a traditional publishing contract and a big advance, you'll almost definitely want to start by querying agents. An agent's job is to advocate for your work. That means shopping your book to the best (and best-paying) publishers in your genre and negotiating a contract that's favorable *to you*.

However, some authors place their first books without agents. You should consider submitting directly to publishers if:

- You've already queried agents and been told your book may be a better fit for small or independent publishers,
- You write in a less commercial genre (e.g., poetry, flash fiction, academic work),
- You have an existing relationship with an acquiring editor at a specific press and they've expressed interest in reading your book, or
- You're already a fan of a particular press and feel it would be the perfect fit for your work.

Creating Your Submissions Lists

On her first round of queries, paranormal romance novelist Jane E. googled the agents representing bestselling authors Nora Roberts and Diana Gabaldon. She queried them, plus the niece of her mother's co-worker (an up-and-coming literary agent who specializes in nonfiction). After two non-responses and a "Sorry, it's not for me" from her far-flung acquaintance, she decided her book wasn't good enough.

One year later and 50,000 words into a new project, she'd joined Twitter, made a few new professional connections, and learned that most writers query over *thirty* agents (not *three*) before they throw in the towel. So she started the querying process again from scratch — with *extensive* research on agents who specialize in paranormal romance. After seven months of querying, she got an offer of representation from an agent who was interested in both books.

Querying is a Numbers Game

The lesson from Jane's story? No matter how strong your manuscript is, it won't appeal to every agent (or publisher). Just like writers, agents specialize in particular genres. Likewise, they're most drawn to certain themes and writing styles. Finally, some agents already have as many clients they can handle, while others are more actively looking for new talent.

Like Jane, you need to get eyes on your book — enough eyes, and the right eyes. It's your job to narrow down the pool of thousands of agents out there and find those who specialize in books like yours, while still casting a wide enough net to include actively acquiring agents.

Researching Agents

There are many agents (and a few people who call themselves agents), but not all are equally equipped to sell your manuscript.

Start your search in databases of reputable agents. No legitimate agent will *ever* charge you to consider your work. Likewise, an agent won't contact you out of the blue with a publishing deal. You can find vetted agents in Reedsy's [Literary Agents Directory](#). If you're unsure whether an agent is legit, check to see whether they're a member of the Association of American Literary Agents.¹

Find agents who sell books in your genre. It might *seem* like great news if an agent who specializes in journalistic nonfiction falls in love with your speculative horror novel. But if they

¹ Browse agent lists by name and category at the [Association of American Literary Agents](#).

haven't sold books in your genre before, they probably don't have relationships with the editors who would most want to buy your manuscript.

Consider geography. If you're living in Kansas City, you absolutely don't need an agent who's also in Kansas City. However, you *do* probably want one who's in the U.S. rather than the U.K.

As you do your research, go beyond these essential characteristics to find agents who are the best possible fit. Once you find an agent who looks promising, read their bio on their agency's website. Check out their manuscript wish list (MSWL).² Read their thoughts on Twitter. Pay close attention to the themes and styles they'd like to see in queries.

✓ Pro-Tip: Research, Research, Research

[Megan Close Zavala](#), founder of Turn the Page Book Coaching & Editorial, says that "it all comes down to research, research, research." She suggests trawling the acknowledgments section of books similar to yours:

This knowledge will also come in handy while writing your query letter because you can reference the agent's client(s) ("As your agency represents up-and-coming diet gurus like Joe Schmoe...").

For [Andrea Hurst](#), President Andrea Hurst & Associates, LLC, one of the biggest mistakes querying authors can make is failing to visit the agency website, too:

² Agents frequently use the hashtag #mswl on Twitter, but you can also check out the official [Manuscript Wish List](#) Website.

There are a multitude of agent listings on the web, but many are very outdated as to what agents are still seeking. By going to the agency website, the author will learn which agents are still working there, whether they are open to submissions, and their preferences for submitting.

Researching Publishers

First things first: the major presses and their associated imprints (also called the Big Five) rarely accept unsolicited submissions. However, there are a number of independent and university presses that accept submissions from authors without agents. Check Reedsy's Publishers Directory to find 450+ vetted book publishers. (You guessed it — the link is in the appendix!)

In every case, do some research to find out if the publisher is a good fit for your goals before you commit to them.

Understand their model. Some presses ask authors to share the costs of production; this is called “hybrid publishing.” While hybrid publishers charge, they rarely offer the publicity and marketing support that traditional publishers do. Ultimately, you may spend as much or more as you would to self-publish while receiving fewer royalties. If you *really* want to publish with a particular hybrid press, be sure to read the fine print to make sure you completely understand the costs and responsibilities you're taking on.

Check out the quality of their books. First, browse the press's online inventory. Are the books available in both print and eBook? What's the quality of the cover design? If you can, get

your hands on a physical book and see how it compares to your other favorite titles. Publishing with a small or medium-sized press shouldn't mean compromising on format or design.

Dig into their relationship with their authors. One potential benefit of publishing with a smaller press is working with a dedicated team. If that team is flakey or non-communicative, the experience might be all the more disappointing. Check to see what authors say about the press in interviews, and if possible, speak to authors directly.

Keep in mind that, unlike agents, reputable publishers may sometimes charge a reading fee, especially if you're submitting to a contest. This is generally under \$30.

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- You've already queried agents and been told your book may be a better fit for small or independent publishers,
- You write in a less commercial genre (e.g., poetry, flash fiction, academic work),
- You have an existing relationship with an acquiring editor at a specific press and they've expressed interest in reading your book, or
- You're already a fan of a particular press and feel it would

be the perfect fit for your work.

II

Writing Your Query Letter

3

Writing the Greeting and Synopsis

The first time Holden C. sent out query letters, he included everything he'd heard might sway a potential agent: a synopsis of his novel; his reasons for writing it; a list of well-known writers he knew and how he knew them (from college, a writing conference, and email correspondence); and a marketing plan.

He got eight non-responses and two form rejections.

After a [query letter review](#), he realized where he'd erred. Can you guess? Yup. It was word count. His query emails were 1,200 words long.

There are many ways to get a query letter wrong, from excessive length to simple cliché. Your query letter should be under 400 words, and it *must* contain certain ingredients — but at the same time, it *must* be totally unique.

Half or more of those 400 words should be occupied by basic information and a compelling synopsis. Let's take a look at that now.

The Greeting

Start your query letter with a simple greeting: “Dear [First name].” Then, follow up with a short paragraph that lays out the basics of your book. You should *definitely* include three pieces of information:

- Your title
- The book’s genre
- The word count

This can be straightforward, e.g., *I’m excited to query you with my 83,000-word new adult romance, Have Number, Will Call.*

Ideally, you’ll also find a way to pique the agent’s interest. That could include:

- **Recognition or awards** – *An excerpt of this novel was selected as a finalist in CRAFT’s annual first chapter contest.*
- **A professional connection** – *It was a pleasure to meet you at last year’s AWP Conference in Philadelphia, where we briefly chatted about your affection for “unlikeable” narrators.*
- **A referral** – *Jane Doe at Tor suggested that you might be interested in my debut fantasy novel, The Beast in the Picture (90,000 words).*

Don’t have any connections or accolades (yet)? Not to worry. You can dive directly into your book’s hook.

The Hook

The hook, also called the topline pitch, is a two-to-three-line explanation of your book's concept. A good hook surprises the reader, making them eager to learn more — or dive right into reading!

A hook doesn't give away the entire plot. Instead, it introduces a central conflict or problem, leaving the reader with questions rather than all the answers.

Let's take a look at some hooks for famous books.

Fiction: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith

*Con artist Tom Ripley charms his way into the life of a charismatic heir — and takes drastic measures to keep his lies from catching up with him.*³

Here, the reader will be left wondering what Tom Ripley has lied about and what measures he'll take to conceal the truth.

Nonfiction: *Nothing to Envy* by Barbara Demick

*Nothing to Envy is based on interviews with six North Korean citizens, taking readers through an Orwellian world where displays of affection are punished, informants are rewarded, and an offhand remark can send a person to the gulag for life.*⁴

³ Logline taken from Netflix. Hint: Netflix is actually a great source for one-sentence hooks!

⁴ Drawn from the [Amazon Book Description](#).

In the case of this nonfiction book, the hook previews the structure of the book (it follows six characters) while teasing the dystopian elements readers can expect. As an added bonus, it sneaks in a literary reference to George Orwell, suggesting that the book is a real-life *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Children's literature: *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

Yearning for escape and adventure, a young boy runs away from home and sails to an island filled with creatures that take him in as their king.⁵

Picture books are already short, but a good hook can condense your story further, leaving your reader curious about the relationships developed between characters and the lessons learned.

For your hook, work on identifying the most exciting or surprising elements of your book and condensing them into a one-sentence pitch.

There are countless potential templates for a hook, and you can use them to start brainstorming. However, it's key to remember that these are just a starting point — your hook should ultimately be as unique as your book. That means you must adapt the format to add your unique flair.

- **When [event] happens to [character], they must _____ or _____.**
- **In order to [reach their goal], [main character] must [conflict or obstacle].**

⁵ Drawn from [IMBD](#).

- **Do you [have a problem or question]? This book explores _____, offering [solution to problem] and [providing other takeaways].**

✓ Pro-Tip: Avoid Hype in Your Hook

[Andy Ross](#), founder of Andy Ross Literary, has some expert advice on keeping your hook exciting *but honest*. He writes:

Avoid hype. I expect you to be honest. You might be seeking an agent who is a master of the wily arts of snake oil selling. If so, I'm not your man. Part of it is selfish. I need publishers to trust me. But also you need to be aware that agents and editors have pretty good BS detectors. We've seen every form of hype. And it sends a bad message. Either the writer has delusions of grandeur, or else he is dishonest. These aren't good qualities.

What counts as “hype?” Ross has some helpful examples:

“There is nothing like this book that has ever been published.”

“This book will make a great movie.”

“Oprah/Terry Gross will love this book.”

In short, lead with your story's strengths — not speculation about the success or accolades it could theoretically achieve.

The Synopsis

While the hook draws your reader in, the synopsis gives them more information about how your book unfolds (while continuing to avoid spoilers). It's similar to the copy you'll see on the back of a book cover, fleshing out the plot, primary characters, and rising action.

Like a book cover description, your synopsis will generally be less than 150 words, as your hook and synopsis should take up less than 200 words when combined. If you're writing a picture book, your synopsis should be even shorter (after all, your whole manuscript might be 500 words!).

No matter the length of your synopsis, you need to reflect the voice and atmosphere of your book in that small space.

Next, we'll take a look at examples in several genres.

Fiction: *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (107 words)

For years, rumors of the “Marsh Girl” have haunted Barkley Cove, a quiet town on the North Carolina coast. So in late 1969, when handsome Chase Andrews is found dead, the locals immediately suspect Kya Clark, the so-called Marsh Girl. But Kya is not what they say. Sensitive and intelligent, she has survived for years alone in the marsh that she calls home, finding friends in the gulls and lessons in the sand. Then the time comes when she yearns to be touched and loved. When two young men from town become intrigued by her wild beauty, Kya opens herself to a new life—until the unthinkable happens.⁶

⁶ From the [Amazon book description](#).

This synopsis begins with a dead body, setting up a mystery. It provides key details about the main character, Kya — who she truly is and how others perceive her — so that readers understand why she becomes a suspect. Finally, it sketches the vivid setting against which the murder investigation unfolds.

Nonfiction: *Stiff* by Mary Roach(94 words)

*For two thousand years, cadavers — some willingly, some unwittingly — have been involved in science’s boldest strides and weirdest undertakings. They’ve tested France’s first guillotines, ridden the NASA Space Shuttle, been crucified in a Parisian laboratory to test the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, and helped solve the mystery of TWA Flight 800. For every new surgical procedure, from heart transplants to gender confirmation surgery, cadavers have helped make history in their quiet way. *Stiff* investigates the strange lives of our bodies postmortem and answers the question: What should we do after we die?⁷*

This synopsis is packed full of surprising facts related to the main topic of the book (cadavers), creating a strong hook. It concludes with the existential question that drives this fact-based investigation, explaining why readers should care.

Children’s: *My Friend is Sad* by Mo Williams (44 words)

Gerald is careful. Piggie is not.

⁷ From the [Amazon book description](#).

*Piggie cannot help smiling. Gerald can.
Gerald worries so that Piggie does not have to.*

Gerald and Piggie are best friends.

*In My Friend is Sad, Gerald is sad. How can Piggie be
happy if Gerald is sad?*⁸

This synopsis effectively conveys the direct, appealing style of the book. Although it's incredibly short, it also introduces the two main characters as well as the book's driving question.

✓Pro-Tip: Write an Active Synopsis

[Sarah LaPolla](#), freelance editor and founder of Next Chapter Editorial, stresses the importance of focusing on your story:

Writers always ask the best way to “stand out” in their query, and the answer is always the simplest — say what your book is about. If three out of the five paragraphs are spent on why you wrote the book or the themes you hope to convey, your query will fall flat. Make it come alive by showing what makes this story yours and only yours. Agents need to come away from the query knowing who the story is about, what happens in the plot, what is at stake, and why the reader should care.

[Annie Bomke](#), President of Annie Bomke Literary Agency, notes

⁸ From the [Amazon book description](#).

that the central story can sometimes get lost in details and subplots. To avoid this, she recommends highlighting the central conflict and climax with specific, active language:

I see a lot of queries where the plot description doesn't sound active and exciting because it's not showing how the events build on each other until the protagonist needs to make a change. My advice to authors is to set up the climax, but not give away how it's resolved.

Use specific details from your plot and avoid abstract language. For instance, instead of saying "he finds himself in a pit of despair," which is abstract, use something specific from your book that shows why his situation is so dire. It could be "he finds himself spiraling after the death of his mother" or "he finds himself doing 40 years to life with no chance of parole."

Adding Marketing Information and Personalization

Elizabeth B. only got form passes to the first round of queries for her nonfiction book on yoga and parenting. It was a big disappointment, but she tried to deal with it graciously, eventually emailing her Substack subscribers a short meditation on the practice of non-attachment in parenting, life, and publishing.

One of her friends texted her in reply: “You really couldn’t find an agent?! Don’t they know you have 10,000 subscribers?!” Elizabeth realized that, in fact, potential agents probably *didn’t* know that. She hadn’t thought to include it anywhere in her query letter.

On her next round of queries, Elizabeth got her query letter *and* her book proposal reviewed. With the newfound understanding that traditional publishing loves nonfiction authors with an existing platform, she was able to prove the marketability of her book and find an agent.

You don’t need an audience of 10,000 to get an agent — but you *do* need to include information that conveys its marketability and shows your professionalism. Next, we’ll go over four

query letter elements that can make all the difference: your comparable titles, author bio, sign-off, and personalization.

Comparable Titles

Including comparable titles can quickly communicate the tone and feel of your book while demonstrating your awareness of the market.

When choosing comps, avoid genre-defining bestsellers. While titles should be successful, this is another place to avoid hype (alas, Andy Ross notes, your book probably won't be the next *Eat, Pray, Love*). Demonstrate that you have a realistic, nuanced understanding of your genre by picking highly relevant titles rather than rare runaway hits.

At the same time, avoid obscure books. Your goal with comparable titles is to prove your book's marketability. Very obscure books probably haven't sold well, which defeats the purpose of including them in your comps list.

There are several ways to include your chosen comps:

“X meets Y” – A popular Hollywood formula, X meets Y allows you to show how your book contains elements of two titles, explaining how it differs and draws from them both.

This book features the multi-POV family drama of We Are the Brennans amidst a near-future climate crisis like that in A Children's Bible.

“For fans of” – If you'd like to choose a few authors with a similar writing style to your own, you could present a range of closely related comps.

For fans of V.E. Schwab and Melissa Albert, this book is a modern, character-driven fairytale.

“Comparable titles include” – You can also keep it simple, including your comps as a simple list. However, you’ll be creating more work for the agent by asking them to see the connection between the titles you’ve chosen.

Comparable titles: Matt Bell, Applesseed; Isabelle Yap, Never Have I Ever; Ling Ma, Severance.

✓ Pro Tip: Show Your Thoughtfulness

[Emma Borges-Scott](#), freelance editor and founder of EBS Literary, further explains the purpose of comps:

I suggest using two to three comparable titles. Comparable titles should be recent (published within the last ten years), and books that have had commercial or critical success. Writing about what you admire about a certain title is an opportunity to show that you’re a thoughtful reader, and to tell the agent something about your purpose or intent in writing your book.

Sarah LaPolla emphasizes the importance of staying positive:

Avoid trying to subtly deride popular novels in the market you are hoping to join. Taking an “I’m not like other books” approach to querying often comes across as confusing at best and immature and mean-spirited at

worst.

The Author Bio

After your synopsis, take the time to tell the agent a little bit about yourself.

Here, it might be tempting to talk about your passion for literature and your deep desire to become a published author, but the real goal of the biography is to demonstrate your relevant credentials. It's a bit like a creative cover letter, and as such, it should include:

- Publication history (short stories, op-eds, reviews, etc.)
- Awards, scholarships, and fellowships
- Relevant degrees
- Attendance at writing conferences, workshops, or retreats
- Information about your platform and audience, if applicable

For example:

*I hold an MFA in fiction from Emerson College. My stories have appeared in **The Greensboro Review** and won [Reedsy's short story contest](#) (#132).*

If there's a reason why you're uniquely qualified to write the book, that belongs in your author bio, too.

*My six years of experience as an elementary school garden teacher inspired me to write *Plant Friends for children**

and their families.

✓ Pro Tip: Remember, Agents are People, Too

Not sure what to write? Melissa Richeson notes that short isn't necessarily bad.

If your bio is lacking in writing credentials, that's okay! Mention any experiences that make you the right author for this story, and keep it short. Feel free to add one sentence about who you are as a person in your bio. Unique hobbies or pets or background info can all be great, as long as it's not overdone. Remember that agents are people too, and you never know when that extra personal touch will spark a connection.

The Sign-Off

Just like any formal communication, your query letter should close with a polite sign-off.

Thanks so much for your consideration.

All the best,

Your Name

Or:

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Personalization

Once you have a basic template for your query letter, it's time to personalize it for each of the agents on your list. Include 1-2 sentences showing you've done your research and indicating why the agent might be interested in your work, referencing any of the following:

- **Their current clients**, e.g., *I'm a fan of your clients including Jane Doe and Richard Roe, and I see my nonfiction collection in conversation with their work.*
- **Their MSWL**, e.g., *I see you're looking for high fantasy as well as complex, intergenerational sagas. For these reasons, I think The Ivory Orb might fit well on your list.*
- **A personal connection**, e.g., *It was great to see you speak at the Slice Writer's Conference in 2019.*

Where should this personalization go? It all depends on where your letter has adequate space.

If you haven't found a strong way to open your letter, but you know your work closely aligns with the agent's current wish list, it might be worth including that in the introduction. Conversely, if your greeting and author bio are both long already, you might put your personalization just below your bio as a final, personal

note to end the letter on.

In some rare cases, your personalization actually shouldn't go in the query at all. Remember to read the agency guidelines. While many agents accept queries via email, some require submissions via an online form. The form might contain a separate box like "*Why A+ Literary Agency?*" or "*Why do you want to work with me?*" In that case, include your personalization in the appropriate field.

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Elevating Your Letter With a Query Letter Review

How do you know that you've written a strong query letter? Many writers don't find out until they've sent their first round of submissions and seen how they fare on the market — and by the end of that trial and error experiment, you'll have wasted your one shot with several agents.

This is why a query letter review is invaluable.

This editorial service is exactly what it sounds like. A Reedsy editor will review your query letter, providing industry-tested comments and suggestions on how you can strengthen your hook, tighten your synopsis, and generally lead with your best foot (and your best writing). Some will also review your sample pages (generally 5-20 — be sure to discuss specifics in advance).

Many Reedsy editors have experience as literary agents, acquiring editors, or authors themselves, which means they understand exactly what agents are looking for.

The cost of a query letter review ranges from \$50-\$150. That's a small investment in a document that can make or break your chance of getting traditionally published.

[Sign up to start browsing editors](#) and polishing your query letter.

III

Submitting Your Queries

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Developing a Submission Strategy

Peter P. was easily able to find 25 agents who were interested in YA #ownvoices novels like his. After a query letter review, he felt confident in his pitch, and it worked well, resulting in quick responses and several requests for more pages. But he didn't get an offer. A few of the agents had similar feedback: the voice didn't grab them, but the story might work better in the first person than in the third person.

Peter felt lucky — he'd ended his first round of queries with a clear plan for revision — but he also had some regrets. What if he'd gotten that feedback and made revisions *before* he'd sent the query to his entire list?

On the one hand, querying can be a numbers game, and many writers need to query 30+ agents to find the right fit. On the other, as Peter's story demonstrates, querying dozens of agents at the same time eliminates your ability to revise and improve your letter and/or sample pages in response to feedback.

Next, we'll explain how a thoughtful submission strategy gives you the opportunity to adjust your approach while minimizing your wait time.

Picking Your First Batch of Agents (or Presses)

How big should your first batch of submissions be? While there's no magic number, submitting to between 6-10 agents can give you a sense of how strong your materials are.

How should you select them? We have a few tips.

Don't submit to multiple agents at the same agency. In most cases, agency guidelines explicitly ask you to submit to one agent at a time. Pick the agent who is the best fit for your work. If they pass, you can likely submit to one of their colleagues at a later date.

Consider experience. Senior agents already have a full roster of clients shopping second and third books. This means they're unable to take on many new authors. In contrast, newer agents might be more actively building their client list (while benefiting from the mentorship of more senior colleagues). Keeping fit at the forefront of your mind, consider submitting to a mixture of new and experienced agents.

Timing Your Submission

Ideally, you'll submit to your list of 10ish agents over the course of a few days. That way, you'll have a good sense of how well your materials performed after two to three months.

While you can submit whenever your materials are ready, considering your timing. Like other professionals, agents are usually off during major federal and religious holidays, so you might want to avoid querying U.S.-based agents on July 4th or Christmas Eve.

Beyond that, Megan Close Zavala advises that "editors most often acquire projects at the beginning of the year and then post-

Labor Day, so literary agents will be busiest during those times, too.” While that doesn’t mean September queries are forbidden, keep in mind that you might receive a slower reply. If there’s anything else you can do to perfect your manuscript, it might be more fun to spend your time revising than waiting.

Remember: publishing is not a race!

Double-Checking Your Submissions

Before you query literary agents and publishers, be absolutely sure you’ve set yourself up for success by double-checking your letter.

Is it an appropriate length? Agents and editors will expect a document that’s fewer than 400 words, with one to two paragraphs of synopsis. Don’t write more.

Has it been edited and proofread? Your query letter is a writing sample. The writing needs to be *perfect*.

Have you personalized it? Make sure you’ve researched their authors and their interests, but don’t get *too* personal. In addition, check that their name is spelled correctly.

Is the agent or publisher currently open for queries? If you submit when they’re closed, you shouldn’t expect a response.

How do they prefer to be queried? Don’t query someone via their email if they prefer Submittable or QueryManager.

Do they want pages included? How many? Don’t include more than requested. Where? Be sure to attach or copy & paste according to their preference.

✓ Pro Tip: Don't Give Agents a Reason to Ignore You

When it comes to querying, it's important to get it right the first time. Megan Close Zavala explains:

It's so important to follow agency submission guidelines because often if you don't, your query will be immediately deleted, no matter how amazing your query letter or your book project is. Some agencies have authors submit their projects through their website, for example, so any email submissions will likely be ignored.

Tracking Your Queries

Once you've sent out your query letters, it's imperative that you keep track of them. Why?

- You should follow up with agents after the appropriate amount of time (more on this in Part Three!)
- If you get an offer of representation, you'll likely want to contact the other agents who are considering your materials.
- Keeping track of pass notes, revision requests, and other feedback can help you plan your next step in the event that you don't receive an offer right away.

We recommend using [our handy submission spreadsheet](#) as you start submitting.

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Planning self-care

Anna K. sent out four queries over the course of two weeks. After she sent the first, she hoped she'd hear back quickly, so she waited patiently for a week — and then shot off the second letter while feeling discouraged and out-of-sorts. When she immediately realized she'd misspelled the agent's name, she sent two new queries in a flurry to hedge her bets.

She decided that was it for her first round. The whole process had been stressful enough. And, once she'd gotten four passes a few months later, she decided she wasn't ready to send out more queries until she had a plan for overcoming her nerves.

It's no secret that the querying process can be stressful. You've put significant time into your manuscript and your query letter, all with the hopes of getting a book deal. When it feels like your literary future is on the line, waiting for responses from industry insiders is nerve-wracking.

A strong submission strategy can help you maximize your chances of finding the right agent or publisher; a self-care strategy can help you stay calm and grounded throughout that journey.

First, know what to expect: you probably won't receive an offer right away. Instead, you'll get one of three responses:

1. A pass — aka a rejection
2. A request for more pages
3. A non-response

Rejection is difficult to deal with — but so is the waiting game, especially when you don't always know when or if you'll receive a response.

We're crossing our fingers that your first request is right around the corner, but we still recommend planning ahead for the inevitable stress of querying.

Create an Email Address for Querying

If you're anxiously awaiting news from agents, it's tempting to keep refreshing your inbox until you get a reply. It *almost* goes without saying that this is bad for your stress levels.⁹

To keep your nerves at bay, create a new email address from which to send out your queries. Check this email at a scheduled daily time (or every other day — an interested agent won't be offended if you take a couple of days to respond).

Don't connect this email address to your phone's mail app.

Get Started on Another Project

There's no better distraction from thinking about your first book than working on your second. If you don't already have a book

⁹ Thanks and credit to author M. Stevenson for this suggestion [on Twitter!](#)

idea, consider working on a short story or essay.

If you kept to a regular writing routine while completing your first book, try to keep it up, even if you're just taking notes or journaling.

Need some inspiration? We can help with that. [Reedsy Prompts](#) is home to 1100+ creative writing prompts, and five more are added each week.

Connect with a Writing Community

Spending time with friends and family can help take your mind off the stress of querying. However, it can be frustrating when friends without much understanding of the publishing industry assure you you'll *definitely* find an agent.

That's why it's so helpful to find a community of writers who can commiserate. As an added bonus, they'll be able to provide advice as you move through the querying process.

Grow your community on Twitter (start by searching #writingcommunity).

Communicating with Agents Before an Offer

Jude O. was lucky enough to get two full requests on their first round of queries — but that introduced a whole new layer of stress into the process. After they sent off their manuscript, they found themselves waiting....and waiting. Should they follow up? Try to play the agents against each other (“*Just so you know, I do have others interested...*”)? Query more agents? Without any guidance, they chose to wait it out. It took them four months to get the first rejection and another three to get the second. Both were formulaic: “I just didn’t fall in love.” Suddenly, after seven months, they were back to square one.

Jude’s experience wasn’t rare — querying is a waiting game. However, effectively communicating in responses to passes, nonresponses, and requests can help you speed up the process.

It’s pretty easy to respond to passes. In general, all you’ll need to do is say a simple *thank you*. Resist the temptation to ask for more information or argue with the agent!

We’ll guide you through the other possible outcomes so that you can plan your next steps.

Following Up with Unresponsive Agents

Some agencies let you know exactly when you can expect to hear back (“*Our current response time is 12 weeks.*”) Others let you know that you may not get a response (“*Due to the volume of submissions we receive, we cannot respond to all inquiries. If you have not heard back from us in 12 weeks, please assume we’ve declined.*”)

As long as your potential agent doesn’t explicitly discourage follow-ups, you can send a polite note after the appropriate amount of time has elapsed (as noted on their agency website or, otherwise, 12 weeks).

Keep it short and sweet, asking if your manuscript is still under consideration.

It’s only appropriate to follow up earlier if you secure a major publishing credit or receive an award or you have another offer of representation (more on this later!)

If you don’t receive a reply to your follow-up, note the non-response in your submission tracker.

Responding to Partial and Full Requests

If all goes well, the next step on your querying journey will be a request for more pages — either part of the manuscript (a “partial”) or the entire book or proposal (“a full”).

Getting a request is a wonderful sign that your query letter and any sample pages are working well, but keep in mind that a request isn’t an offer of representation.

Once your work has been requested, continue to show your professionalism.

Send the pages promptly. If you’ve followed our advice so

far, your writing is edited and reader-ready. Make sure your manuscript is appropriately formatted (Times New Roman, size 12, double-spaced) before you hit “send.”

Say “thanks!” This is a great opportunity to reiterate your interest in working with the agent.

Settle in for a wait. Once you’ve grabbed an agent’s interest, you *might* get a fast read, but depending on their current client roster, it could still take some time to carefully consider your book. Check in after about two months.

Don’t contact other agents just yet. Unless another agent has explicitly asked you to keep them posted in the event that someone else requests your manuscript, it’s better to stay mum.

Not every partial request translates into a full request, and not every full request leads to an offer of representation. However, at this stage, even a pass may come with helpful feedback that can help with your next round of submissions (should you need to do one).

Responding to Feedback

Feedback can come in two forms — subjective and constructive. Sometimes, pass notes come with a brief explanation explaining that your book just didn’t fit the agent’s personal taste: “I didn’t fall in love with the narrator” or “I’m looking for books with more momentum.” Subjective feedback is just that — subjective (and many agents will go out of their way to make clear: “This is just one person’s opinion” or “I am sure another agent will feel differently”). It shouldn’t change your overall submission strategy.

More rarely, passes come with constructive feedback. These notes explain what an agent would have liked to see developed

in your story, e.g., particular characters, themes, or plot points.

Constructive feedback can be more useful *and* more frustrating. If an agent has lots of specific, actionable advice, it might feel like you were *very* close to finding a great editing partner. And naturally, you might start to wonder whether you should take their advice immediately. Our general advice is *no* — especially not before you've considered it carefully.

Consider whether you agree. Agents are experts, but there's *always* a subjective element to their evaluation. If an agent has a very different vision for your book, they may simply be the wrong fit. Thank them for their feedback and move on.

If the advice resonates, ask if they'd be interested in seeing a revision. Don't commit to editing quite yet, but do see if you leave the door open to working together.

Wait to revise until you've completed this round of queries. Assuming your manuscript is still out with other agents, wait to hear back from *everyone* before diving into rewrites. After all, you may get conflicting advice — or an offer of representation!

Navigating Offers

When an agent asked Eleanor O. if she had time to hop on the phone, Eleanor was equal parts thrilled and terrified. First of all, she'd said she was a *big* fan of one of the agent's clients when the truth was she'd only read one of their novels. If there was a pop quiz, she would fail it.

Second, there was the matter of talking about herself and her career aspirations. Eleanor finds it so much easier to express herself in writing than on the phone! Couldn't the agent just make a decision based on the query letter?!

It was a relief to find out that the agent was easy to talk to. In fact, once Eleanor got a few *other* offers, her easy rapport with the first agent is what sealed the deal on their partnership.

Once you have an offer from an agent, it's important to remember that you're interviewing *them*. Ideally, your relationship will be a long-term partnership that succeeds thanks to great communication and a shared vision for your career.

Preparing for the Phone Call

During your initial conversation (often on the phone, unless you're in the same city), an agent might have questions for you, including:

- Your hopes for the book
- What else you're working on
- Your long-term goals as a writer
- Your openness to specific editorial suggestions

You don't need to study up before your chat, though — you've probably been fantasizing about literary success for years!

Instead, think about the things *you* want to know about your potential agent. Ask questions like the following:

What revisions would they like to see? Make sure their recommendations feel reasonable, appropriate, and on-point.

What do they see as comparable titles? Get a sense of how they see your book in the market and what else they're a fan of.

How do they communicate with clients? Think about the relationship you'd like to have — would you like to text weekly? Email monthly? Make sure you have compatible styles.

How much do they work with their colleagues? If the agent is very new to the industry, it might be helpful to get a sense of whether they have strong mentorship and can consult more senior agents.

Can they put you in touch with current clients? No matter how good your first impression is, you can gather more information by directly connecting with their existing clients.

What are the terms of their agency's contracts? An agent's standard commission is 15% on domestic print sales. If an agent

asks for a different fee structure or says they don't use contracts, consider checking in with a friend, mentor, or the Author's Guild.¹⁰

Responding to an Offer

If you get an offer of representation during your phone call, you might be tempted to accept it immediately. But if your submission is still out with other agents, it's wise to ask for ~2 weeks to make your decision. (In some cases, a particularly eager agent might ask you to make a decision even more quickly — say, in a week.)

It's normal to want to jump at your first offer, especially if you've been querying for months! But there are several advantages to taking more time to make your decision. This gives you extra time for research and consideration.

Talk to their clients. Follow up to hear about other authors' experiences being on submission, selling their books, and working with the agent on publicity and marketing.

Discuss the offer with friends and mentors. If you have *any* hesitation or doubt, get another perspective. You don't have to say yes (or inform other agents about the offer) if you genuinely don't think the agent would be the right fit.

Give other agents the opportunity to make competing offers. In general, it's polite to let other agents know you've received an offer and that you plan to make a decision by a certain date. This may move your manuscript to the top of their pile. If they're also interested, you could wind up with multiple offers.

With an extra week or two, you can be 100% confident you've

¹⁰ Check out the Author's Guild [guide to agency agreements](#).

made the right decision for your future literary career.

Negotiating Multiple Offers

Let's be clear: you only need *one* yes to sell your book, not a dozen offers. And while celebrities might find themselves with multiple interested agents, this is not the norm.

However, if you *are* in the happy position of choosing between two or more interested agents, consider your original phone call, along with the following:

- **Personality fit.** Hopefully, you'll be working together for a long time. Consider who you get along with best.
- **Their vision for your career.** Is one of the agents already talking about shopping your op-eds or short stories to national outlets? Do they seem excited about your next project?
- **Their recent sales.** Which agent has sold the most debut books in your genre? Have any of those books achieved bestseller status or been nominated for major awards?
- **Their submission strategy.** Where would they submit your book? What would they do if it didn't sell on the first round of submissions? How would they communicate with you about updates?
- **Their agency.** Would you rather be at a big agency or a small boutique agency? How well-known is their agency? Does it have a TV/film department?

What To Do if You Don't Get an Offer

So far, we've discussed some potential best-case scenarios.

However, finding a literary agent on your first round of submissions is the exception, not the rule.

After you've received responses from your first batch of <10 agents, consider the best course of action based on your responses thus far.

If you've most received form rejections and non-responses, consider a query letter review (if you haven't already had one).

If you've received specific, actionable feedback that could improve your book, it might be time to implement it. Likewise, if you've seen any sort of pattern in responses — e.g., agents say they fell for the hook but not the first few pages — there may be room to improve your manuscript before your next round of queries.

How many rounds of revisions and queries should you do? The answer will vary from person to person. Bestsellers *Still Alice* and *The Help* racked up over 50 agent rejections on their route to publication, but not every author can keep the faith

after hearing so much “no.”¹¹

Rejection is difficult. You can always query more agents, but sometimes, it's better to recalibrate with the following in mind:

You can always revise. A big *aha* moment could arrive at any time, but if you didn't work with a developmental editor while writing your book, you can also call in expert advice.

Market trends change. If you believe in your book, you can always shelve it while you work on other projects. Over time, trends could change, as could your overall profile as an author.

You can work on your platform. We talked about credentials throughout this guide, from publication history to workshop participation and beyond. A few short publications — or a larger social media following — might make a difference in your book's marketability.

Your first book might not be *the* book. Finishing a book is a major achievement. Now that you know the process, you're better equipped to write the next one. When you're ready, requery with a new project.

You can always self-publish. Self-publishing can launch a successful career. In 2022, thousands of indie authors earned over \$50,000 in royalties on Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing. More than 2,000 earned over \$100k.¹²

Whatever route you choose, keep in mind that your first book is just the beginning of your journey as an author. And, as you keep moving forward, the team at Reedsy is here with more resources to help you develop your skills and reach your audience.

¹¹ LitHub. [The Most-Rejected Books of All Time.](#)

¹² Amazon. [How these authors found success with Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing.](#)

Appendix

[American Association of Literary Agents](#)

[The Author's Guild Guide to Agency Agreements](#)

[Manuscript Wish List](#)

[Reedsy's Literary Agent Directory](#)

[Reedsy Prompts](#)

[Reedsy's Publishers Directory](#)