



janetsfox.com

Query Letter Clinic

How To Create An Eye-catching Query
With Bonus:
Publishing Today



Welcome!

I'm Janet Fox.

I'm the author of ten books for young readers, and a book coach.

I've been working as an author for over 20 years, and have seen all sides of the writing and publishing industry.

This query letter clinic is my guide to help you navigate the murky waters of that industry.

Please let me know if it helps!

Warmly,

Janet

www.janetsfox.com



Crafting the Killer Query

The words "query letter" make some writers weak in the knees. You may be able to write a 40,000-word novel, but when it comes to crafting a great 500-word query...ach!

A great query letter is more than the sum of its parts. It's also a way for you to see more deeply into your work, as you'll see in this tutorial. If you have trouble with the synopsis, now is a good time to think about your novel's themes.

General things to remember:

1. A query letter should be no longer than one single-spaced typed page in length.
2. About 50% of agents and editors today say that they don't read the query letter. Some say they don't read it at all; but most will read it only if they find the first ten pages or the entire picture book appealing. Thus, a perfect query letter will not sell a poorly crafted manuscript, but it may provide additional insight.
3. Always address your query to the agent or editor directly. Don't use "Dear Editor/Agent". Research the agent/editor so that you know what they've worked on and who they've worked with - this will become the basis for your first paragraph.
4. Be professional. Don't exaggerate (or, heaven forbid, lie). Don't be a stalker - don't be chummy. Use the kind of clear language you'd use in a business letter.
5. A great query is a kind of 3-paragraph essay, no more, no less.

I've divided this lesson into two parts:

creating a synopsis (basis for the middle and most difficult paragraph(s) of your query), and creating the query itself. Let's get started.

Part 1. Crafting the Synopsis

A. Create your story question

Protagonist's name:

Antagonist's name:

Protagonist's external goal and the conflict faced to reach this goal:

Protagonist's ultimate realization/growth objective; what she learns:

Set up the above as a story question as follows:

(Name of protagonist) must (protagonist's external goal) by (conflict with antagonist) only to realize (what the character learns that helps him/her grow)

Example from Wizard of Oz: Dorothy must defeat the Wicked Witch who stands between her and home by marshaling her friends and resources only to realize the power to go home was within her all along.

B. Identify your protagonist's internal/emotional conflict

Protagonist's main flaw:

What does your character need to learn in order to overcome her flaw?

How does your character change/evolve on an emotional level?

Now define the theme or the emotional journey in a single sentence, as follows:

(Protagonist) must (learn to do what) by (changing how on an emotional level).

Example from Wizard of Oz: A young girl must uncover the traits that form her as a fully developed person by conquering her fear of growing up.

C. Identify the elements that you must relate (time, place) in order for a reader to understand your synopsis.

Time period:

Setting:

D. Create a series of sentences that describe the arc of your story in external and internal terms. This template uses The Hero's Journey.

1. Opening image

An image/setting/concept that sets the stage for the story to come.

Example from Wizard of Oz: How can a young girl find her true self?

2. Protagonist Intro

Who is the main character? Give 1-2 descriptive words and say what he/she wants.

Example: At home in Kansas fourteen-year-old Dorothy Gale feels misunderstood.

3. Inciting incident

What event/decision/change prompts the main character to take initial action.

Example: She longs to go "somewhere over the rainbow", and she runs away from home.

4. Plot point 1

What is the first turning point? What action does the MC take or what decision does he/she make that changes the book's direction? Once he/she crossed this line, there's no going back.

Example: But Dorothy is caught in the open and a twister transports her to the magical realm of Oz.

5. Conflicts & character encounters

Now in a new life, the MC meets new people, experiences a new life, and meets the antagonist/villain.

Example: When she arrives in Oz she makes an enemy of the Wicked Witch by killing her sister and "stealing" the magical ruby slippers. Now realizing she wants to go home, Dorothy finds that the only way there is to ask for help from the great Wizard of Oz. On her journey to the Wizard Dorothy collects friends who also seek his counsel, but he won't reward them until they defeat the Witch.

6. Midpoint

What is the middle turning point? What happens that causes the MC to make a 180 degree change in direction/change in emotion/change in anything? Again, once he/she has crossed this line, there's no going back.

Example: Dorothy resolves to try.

7. Winning seems imminent, but...

What happens that makes the MC think he/she will win? She seems to have the upper hand, but then oh no! The antagonist defeats her and rushes off more powerful than ever before.

Example: The Witch kidnaps Dorothy but can't take the ruby slippers while Dorothy lives. Dorothy is trapped in the Witch's castle and time is running out.

8. Black moment

The MC is lower than low, and he/she must fight through the blackness of his/her emotions to find the strength for the final battle. What happens here?

Example: Her friends come to her rescue, but the Witch corners them.

9. Climax

What happens in the final blow-out between the MC and the antagonist?

Example: When the Witch tries to kill her friend the Scarecrow, Dorothy steps up to save him, inadvertently killing the witch, thereby earning the Wizard's reward.

10. Resolution

Does everyone live happily ever after? Yes? No? What happens to tie up all the loose ends?

Example: Dorothy discovers that the power to go home was actually within her. She has displayed the traits desired by each of her companions: brains, courage, and heart. Now she also knows that to return to Kansas, she must accept the responsibilities that come with growing up.

11. Final image

What is the final image you want to leave your reader with? Has the MC succumbed to his/her own demons or has he/she built a new life?

Example: Dorothy is no longer a child thinking that life is better in a land over the rainbow; she now knows that there is no place like home.

E. Bring all of these elements together.

Example from The Wizard of Oz:

How can a young girl find her true self?

At home in Kansas fourteen-year-old Dorothy Gale feels misunderstood. She longs to go "somewhere over the rainbow", and she runs away from home. But Dorothy is caught in the open and a twister transports her to the magical realm of Oz. When she arrives in Oz she makes an enemy of the Wicked Witch by killing her sister and "stealing" the magical ruby slippers. Now realizing she wants to go home, Dorothy finds that the only way there is to ask for help from the great Wizard of Oz. On her journey to the Wizard Dorothy collects friends who also seek his counsel, but he won't reward them until they defeat the Witch. Dorothy resolves to try.

The Witch kidnaps Dorothy but can't take the ruby slippers while Dorothy lives. Dorothy is trapped in the Witch's castle and time is running out. Her friends come to her rescue, but the Witch corners them. When the Witch tries to kill her friend the Scarecrow, Dorothy steps up to save him, inadvertently killing the witch, thereby earning the Wizard's reward.

Dorothy discovers that the power to go home was actually within her. She has displayed the traits desired by each of her companions: brains, courage, and heart. Now she also knows that to return to Kansas, she must accept the responsibilities that come with growing up. Dorothy is no longer a child thinking that life is better in a land over the rainbow; she now knows that there is no place like home.

F. Rewrite the above to a single paragraph or two, adding a bit of "mystery."

Example from the Wizard of Oz:

Fourteen-year-old Kansas girl Dorothy Gale runs away from home because she feels misunderstood, and longs to be "somewhere over the rainbow." When disaster strikes and Dorothy is transported to the magical land of Oz, she makes an enemy of the Wicked Witch. The only way Dorothy can find her way out of her predicament is to ask the great Wizard in Oz City for help. On her journey there Dorothy collects friends who also seek the Wizard's counsel; but he won't reward them until they defeat the Witch.

Only by standing up to the Witch together will Dorothy and company prevail. Dorothy must display the traits desired by each of her companions: brains, courage, and heart. Dorothy must also recognize that only by losing her fear of growing up will she become a fully rounded person who can find "home" and happiness within herself.

Example from my novel FAITHFUL:

In 1904 seventeen-year-old Margaret Bennet has it all – money, position, and an elegant family home in Newport, Rhode Island. But just as she is to enter society, her mother ruins everything, first with public displays, and finally by disappearing. Maggie's confusion and loss are compounded when her father drags her to Yellowstone National Park, where he informs her that they will remain. At first Maggie's only desire is to return to Newport. But the mystical beauty of the Yellowstone landscape, and the presence of young Tom Rowland, a boy unlike the others she has known, conspire to change Maggie from a spoiled girl willing to be constrained by society to a free-thinking and brave young woman living in a romantic landscape at the threshold of a new century.

Some agents and editors prefer to see a slightly longer synopsis – up to two pages single spaced. Using the example from *The Wizard of Oz*, that shorter synopsis can be lengthened by detailing Dorothy's three companions and their desires, and by adding the trials that Dorothy undergoes on her journey.

Whether a longer or shorter synopsis, agents and editors like to see a complete story, including the ending.

Part 2. The Query Letter

Almost all queries today are email cover letters, and your manuscript or pages are usually sent as a Word attachment. But these are requirements you should establish first as some editors/agents still prefer your pages and/or query in the body of the email, and many are now using the database submission format of QueryManager.

Note also whether the editor/agent prefers pages (usually the first 10-20) or the full manuscript. Never send something from the middle of your novel. You should send the entire picture book.

The norm today is multiple submissions are acceptable. Also, the norm today is that if you don't hear back in three months, consider your work rejected.

Here are the fundamentals of query letter writing:

1. Should be no longer than a single typed page. Single spacing, 12 point font, Courier or Times New Roman, no special letters or colors, 1 inch margins all around. Make sure your full name, address, and email address are on the letter.
2. Should be addressed to the individual editor/agent. Check spelling, check your facts.
3. Your opening sentence should be short and to the point and include word count and genre: "I submit FAR CRY, my 75,000 word young adult romance set in contemporary Indochina, for your consideration." Or, "I'm submitting my picture book, BIG BEAR, suitable for K-4 readers."
4. Follow this with your pitch sentence: why you have chosen this editor/agent for your work. Find out what the editor/agent has previously edited/agented because you will tell them why you believe your work is a good fit for them. If your comp titles are works they have edited, this is the place to mention them.
5. Your middle should be your synopsis (see the example on the next page) or a reasonable facsimile thereof. The synopsis is a very short, usually single paragraph summary of the story and why it's important.
6. Your ending summarizes your previous publications if any, and your professional writing-related experience (i.e., membership in SCBWI or other professional organization, MA/MFA from wherever, whether you are/have been a teacher or librarian, won any awards, etc.). Non-writing-related experience need not be mentioned unless they bear directly on your story, i.e., "My story was inspired by my personal experience at an elephant sanctuary."
7. If you didn't mention them up front this is the place to cite your comp titles and very briefly why they are comparable to your work.
8. Don't tell the editor/agent that your mother/aunt/children/students loved the story.
9. Don't go on and on with gushy personal feelings. Do sound professional, serious, and educated.

Best-selling author Marissa Meyer shared her query letter for CINDER, and I've deconstructed it here. Her letter is slightly on the long side, but it won her not only an agent but also a major contract. It doesn't hurt that she came up with one heck of a premise, and notice how irresistible she makes it sound.

I'm seeking representation for Cinder, an 85,000-word futuristic young adult novel and a re-envisioning of the classic Cinderella story. I'm submitting to you because Scott Westerfeld's Uglies series was hugely inspirational in the writing of this novel, and I hope my futuristic world will capture your interest.

Sixteen-year-old Cinder is a cyborg, considered a technological mistake by most of society and a burden by her stepmother. Being cyborg does have its benefits, though—Cinder's brain interface has given her an uncanny ability to fix things (robots, hovers, her own malfunctioning parts), making her the best mechanic in New Beijing. This reputation brings the prince himself to her weekly market booth, needing her to repair a broken android before the annual ball. He jokingly calls it a matter of national security, but Cinder suspects it's more serious than he's letting on.

Although eager to impress the prince, Cinder's intentions are derailed when her younger stepsister, and only human friend, is infected with the fatal plague that's been devastating Earth for a decade. Blaming Cinder for her daughter's illness, Cinder's stepmother volunteers her body for plague research, an "honor" that no one has survived. But it doesn't take long for the scientists to discover something unusual about their new guinea pig. The surgeons who turned Cinder into a cyborg had been hiding something.

Something valuable.

Something others would kill for.

I've had a novelette, "The Phantom of Linkshire Manor," published in the gothic romance anthology Bound in Skin (Cats Curious Press, 2007), and am a member of the Romance Writers of America. I hold an MS in Publishing and a BA in Creative Writing, emphasis on children's literature. My bi-monthly writing newsletter reaches over 450 subscribers.

Cinder is the first of a planned series.

I've attached the first fifty pages. Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,
Marissa Meyer

www.janetsfox.com

Her
synopsis

Bonus: Publishing Today

Things in the publishing world do not remain static for long. This document will give you a rough idea of where things stand as of 2023. (Updated as of 3/2023)

First, here are publishing options:

Traditional, large press.

Traditional publishing through one of the large New York houses is still an option, although the other options mentioned here have gained traction and garnered respect in recent years. The “big 5” traditional houses have numerous imprints, catering to different audiences. Most of these imprints are closed to submissions from authors unless through an agent, but it is possible to find an agent or editor open to submissions, especially through conference attendance (SCBWI, for example, which requires presenters to be open to attendees). But also see below.

Traditional, small press.

Small presses are more likely to be open to unagented submissions. Some of the better ones – Algonquin, for example – are closed. But there are a number of highly respected small presses open, especially those catering to specific reading niches (examples: Free Spirit Publishing; Web of Life Children’s Books).

Hybrid publishing.

A new niche has formed in the industry, catering to writers who are willing to pay (often quite a lot) to have their books edited, formatted, printed, distributed, and marketed, with professional covers and reviews. What used to be called “vanity” publishing has evolved into hybrid, largely because these publishers do vet the submissions, and will suggest further edits/coaching to strengthen a book’s chances in the marketplace. This is a viable option if the author can pay, has a book in a specific genre, and has a solid manuscript that may not appeal to a broad audience (examples: She Writes Press, Spark Press). However, some vanity presses that do nothing for the author or charge enormous hidden fees masquerade as hybrid publishers, so research is essential.

Self-publishing.

Any author at any time can self-publish, simply by creating a digital copy through a service/software such as Vellum and uploading it to Amazon. Self-published books can also be printed on demand. The downside is that any editing, marketing, cover design, etc. must be done by the author. Self-published books range from the sublime to the ridiculous.

This excellent article goes into a deep dive on the smaller and non-traditional presses, with caveats, warnings, and explanations: <https://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/small/> And this article helps explain the non-traditional route: <https://www.underdown.org/no-advance.htm>

Ways to find agents and editors, what they want, and who is open to submissions:

Starting in the 1990s, editors who used to be open to manuscript submissions over the transom closed to all but agented submissions. This was due to an enormous increase in the volume of submissions. Finding representation by an agent became essential. But with the advent of self-publishing, and greater avenues for authors, some editors have now re-opened to unsolicited submissions.

First, most agents now use a service called querymanager:

<https://querymanager.com/>

This is a standard form, requiring answers to the same questions. Much like college applications today, you'll get used to filling in the same blanks. Almost all submissions require a query letter and the first 10 pages to 3 chapters of a novel, or the full picture book manuscript.

This same platform offers querytracker: <https://querytracker.net/>

This highly useful database will allow authors to search for good prospective matches. If you do nothing else, sign up with this platform.

The best market guide in the industry: <https://bookshop.org/books/children-s-writer-s-illustrator-s-market-33rd-edition-the-most-trusted-guide-to-getting-published/9780593332054>

SCBWI has extensive resources available to members, as do all specialized organizations (Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, etc.)

The agenting professional organization, AAR, has an online searchable database:
<http://aaronline.org/>

There are unscrupulous “agents” out there, so as with anything else, buyer beware. Any honest agent should be a member of AAR, as they make sure their member agents are legit.

Manuscript wish list is a private consortium of editors, and another database resource for authors: <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/>

Literary Rambles gives you more detailed information, through interviews, of agents you may be interested in querying: <http://www.literaryrambles.com/>

This recently updated list of publishers accepting kidlit is very useful:
<https://bitsykemper.wordpress.com/2023/01/31/over-50-publishers-accepting-unsolicited-picture-book-manuscripts/>

Note: Submit to agents/editors in batches of no more than 5 at a time. If you have interest, let every other person where your query is still open know that you have interest.

Send only your best work, and best of luck!



janetsfox.com

Fox Tales Big Picture Story Coach LLC

Fox Tales offers services in multiple children's genres in age ranges from picture book through young adult. At Fox Tales I can help you understand and harness the craft of story-telling, and discover the heart of the story you wish to tell.

Please contact me for more information.

Fox Tales does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation. We are proud to support and assist all writers.

