

# How to Build Better Query Letters and Book Proposals

Melanie Rigney  
LaJolla Writers Conference  
November 2009



# What Is a Query Letter?

- It's a way to introduce your idea to agents and publishers.
- The goal is to whet their interest so they ask for a proposal or sample chapters.



# How Is a Query Letter Structured?

- Keep it short—**one** page, single spaced.
- Set up your query letter like any other business correspondence: block style with margins 1 to 1 ½ inches all around, white paper. Don't forget all your contact information.



# How Is a Query Letter Structured?

- Remember  
WHAT/HOW/WHY/WHO.
  - Paragraph One: WHAT is your idea?  
This is your hook, the most crucial part of your query letter.
  - Paragraph Two: HOW are you going to execute the idea/WHY should the publisher's customer care?
  - Paragraph Three: WHO are you—that is, what qualifies you to write this particular book or article?
- Conclude by saying you look forward to hearing from the recipient; enclose SASE if indicated.



# Query Letter Do's and Don'ts

- DO bulletproof your hook. Brainstorm with some “what if” questions.
- DON'T apologize if you're unpublished and/or have been rejected by others.
- DO use e-queries if the agent or publisher accepts them.
- DON'T make the second paragraph a cliffhanger.
- DON'T requery an agent or publisher who has said no once.



# What Is a Book Proposal?

- It provides a quick snapshot for prospective agents and publishers.
- It helps clarify your goal.
- It makes life easier for agents and editors.
- The goal is to get them to ask for the full manuscript.



# What's in a Book Proposal?

## Nonfiction

- A one-sentence summary
- 75-word summary
- 1- to 3-page overview
- Reader profile
- Competitive analysis
- Platform/marketing
- Author bio
- Chapter-by-chapter outline
- Three sample chapters
- Endorsements



# What's in a Book Proposal?

## Fiction

- Synopsis (length varies)
- Three consecutive chapters
- Chapter-by-chapter outline
- Author bio
- Endorsements
- 75-word summary
- Reader profile
- Competitive analysis
- Platform/marketing





# Synopsis/Overview

- A critical, perhaps the most critical, piece of the proposal.
- If a synopsis, written in present tense and in third person (even if the work itself is written in first person).
- Establish the hook at the beginning (lead character/conflict or key reader need).



# Synopsis/Overview

- Just hit the highlights; within reason, you're better to send a synopsis/overview that's too short than too long.
- Forget the flowery writing and scene setting.
- Don't include dialogue or exercises.



# Competitive Analysis

- Three to five books published in the past five years on a similar topic by a first-time author.
- The more successful, the better; stay away from self-published books for this exercise.
- Provide the title, author, publisher, page count, a brief synopsis, and how your book is different.



# Platform/Marketing

- For some agents and publishers, this may be even more important than the synopsis/overview.
- Include everything tangible you can do to reach your target audience.
  - Association memberships
  - Professional connections
  - Speaking opportunities
  - Media connections
  - Online activities



# Don't Despair!

- For many writers, proposal writing is the most difficult thing they will ever do. But if a publisher is going to take a chance on you, you need to do this right!
- Writing proposals also helps you with your marketing down the road, as you've learned how to succinctly say what your book's about.
- They get easier and easier to write. Honest!



# Resources

- *Formatting and Submitting Your Manuscript* (WD Books)
- *Write the Perfect Book Proposal* (Jeff Herman)
- *How to Write a Book Proposal* (Michael Larsen)



# Questions?

Melanie Rigney

Editor for You

4201 Wilson Blvd. #110328

Arlington, VA 22203-1859

(703) 863-3940

[www.editorforyou.com](http://www.editorforyou.com)

[Editor@editorforyou.com](mailto:Editor@editorforyou.com)

