

Pitching Professionally

How to Captivate Editors and Agents with Your Nonfiction Book Idea

By Julie H. Ferguson

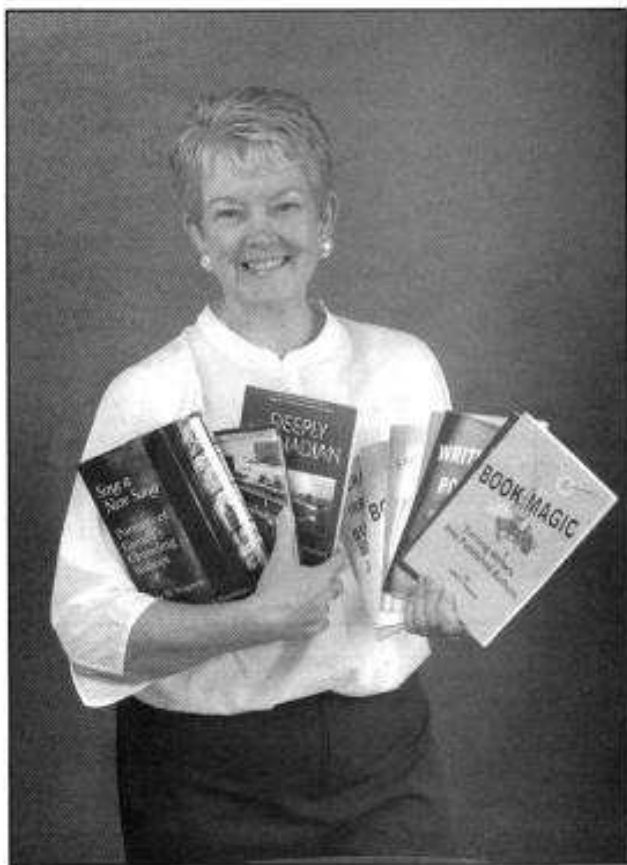
Imagine you are an acquisitions editor at one of Canada's publishing houses.

Query letters plop into your inbox at the rate of 50 to 100 a week; you are on a first name basis with the courier who twice a day delivers bulging packages addressed to "The Editor"; and piles of unsolicited proposals and manuscripts obstruct your office. How do you manage this onslaught?

Most editors cope by considering only book ideas submitted via query letter. They send unsolicited proposals and manuscripts back to authors unopened or periodically give them to interns to skim.

Today most query letters are emails. While electronic communications have improved access and speeded the process of pitching nonfiction book ideas, the letter itself hasn't changed in the 35 years I have been writing. Editors and agents remain adept at identifying publishable books from just one page and if they like your idea, will invite you to send along your nonfiction book proposal for consideration. Indeed, this is the goal of any query letter for nonfiction—to generate an overwhelming desire to see your proposal.

Irresistible query letters can be daunting to craft because so much rides on them. This formal request to submit the proposal takes sound research and dedicated effort to compose but, most of all, it needs a critical eye that is not your own. Key ingredients are outstanding writing, an ability to generate excitement, and realism, for no editor wants to hear about the next bestseller from a first-time author. A query letter is an elegantly blended mixture of



information, reassurance, and a "movie" trailer.

Here are some suggestions to improve your query letters so they rise above the competition and result in an invitation to see your proposal.

1. Remove all opportunities for rejection.

Given the deluge of queries each week, editors and agents are intolerant of any unforced errors a writer may make. These may include lazy grammar and spelling, choosing a fancy font in the hopes your letter stands out, sending attachments, or being too familiar. Remember, this is a letter from a professional. Other signals for instant rejection are sending the query to an unnamed editor or the wrong house, writing too long a letter (500 to 700 words is ideal), or omitting one of the required components. Do not give editors any reason

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Pitching Professionally, cont'd

to discard your query before they consider it.

2. Remember to categorize your book

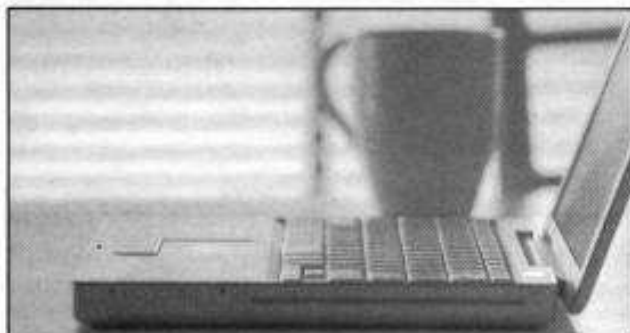
The editor/agent needs to know upfront what type of book your query letter is pitching. Is it a biography, a cookbook, or a how-to book? Categorization refers to the shelf your book will sit on in a bookstore and this needs to be precisely identified for nonfiction queries. Take the time to grasp the nuances of the many categories and sub-categories by prowling Amazon.com and the shelves of big bookstores, the independents, and perhaps a specialty bookstore. Some writers ask their local bookstore where they would shelve a book like theirs. Endeavour to slot your book into the right one. Sometimes books straddle categories, delivering an early warning of impending publisher angst. Get writer colleagues to assist too, especially if they are familiar with your manuscript. An accurately pigeon-holed book

can mean the difference between rejection and a request for more material.

3. Include all the required components

If you don't know exactly what editors/agents want in a query letter, books and courses on the subject are readily available to guide you. Some of the key ingredients include:

- Just like any letter, the query has a lead, a body, and a conclusion. The lead for nonfiction can be either a business-like statement describing your book or a creative, compelling hook. Nonfiction leads may use a surprising statistic, an anecdote, or a provocative question to entice the editor to read further. (50 words or less)
- The body of the letter for nonfiction is the all-important sales pitch. It must have details about your subject, the length, scope and distinctiveness of your book, as well as a discussion about its market and competition. (300 to 400 words)
- Today publishers also expect nonfiction authors to be experts and to demonstrate ideas for increasing the sales of the book—this is known as your platform. Your query needs



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to briefly address this—the proposal will detail your book's platform and post-publication plan. (75 words or less)

- The penultimate paragraph covers the author's credentials (bio) and focuses on why you are ideal to write this particular book. (75 words)
- The conclusion of any query contains the request to send your proposal to the publisher. As sales experts insist, ask for the sale: "May I send the proposal for Spirit Wisdom for your consideration?"
- You need not tell the recipients that you have sent the query to others—it's a given.

4. Get rid of the passive voice and other "to be" verbs

Nothing dooms your query more effectively than sentences like "John was seen at the beach by his wife" or "It is clear that..." If you do nothing else, scour your query for this weakness and reword the offending phrases. Next, give your finely tuned letter to some experienced/published writers and get them to critique and edit it—then rewrite it, several times if necessary, passing it back for comment each time.

5. Format your query professionally

First determine the route that the editor or agent prefers to use for queries—email or a traditional paper letter. Most publishers' and agents' websites have a page called "Submission Guidelines" that will tell you. Today nearly all accept e-queries. However, anything other than a standard business letter format will invite rejection. Here are a few pointers for electronic queries:

- Format your email program for plain text, not HTML.
- Write the subject line: "Query: cookbook, vegetarian" or "Query: Canadian history, naval" Note the category comes first, then the sub-category.
- Compose your query in a word-processing program and, when you are satisfied with it, paste it into the body of the email (never send as an attachment—they can transmit viruses).
- Use a black, 12 point font, single-spaced. Also, watch for the old-fashioned double space after a period—a telltale sign that you are not paying attention to detail.
- Place your enclosures below the letter, not attached to the email.

6. Enclosures

Recommended resources

Print

Attention Grabbing Query and Cover Letters, John Wood, Writer's Digest Books 1996 (USA)

Crafting Irresistible Query Letters that Result in Publication, Julie H. Ferguson, Beacon 2002 (Canada)

Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write, Elizabeth Lyon, Perigee 2002 (USA)

The Writer's Guide to Queries, Pitches and Proposals, Moira Allen, Allworth Press 2001(USA)

Electronic

Writers can access hundreds of useful articles and links on the web. Here are a few sites to get you started:

www.canauthors.org

www.writersdigest.com/topics/nonfiction.asp

www.writerswrite.com

www.writing-world.com

The essential enclosure for nonfiction editors/agents is the table of contents of your proposed book. It illustrates the structure and organization you have in mind. If your author credentials are lengthy and distinctly relevant, editors and agents will accept a separate one-page bio. (Although I could do this, I don't. I save my one-pager for the proposal, preferring a six line, enticing paragraph in the letter.) Indicate any enclosures in the normal way after your signature block, e.g. enc.

- Write your query letter after you have polished your book proposal. If your pitch works, an editor will ask for the full proposal immediately. As proposals can run 12 to 60 pages, excluding the chapter samples, only a magician can produce a winning one in a couple of days. Nothing screams "amateur" more than telling an editor the proposal is not ready.
- Expect to spend about twenty hours crafting an irresistible nonfiction pitch—your book idea deserves nothing less. If your query yields invitations to submit your proposal from 25 percent or more of the recipients, it has achieved considerable success. ☺

A coach for writers seeking publication, Julie H. Ferguson is the author of three books on Canadian history and five for writers. This year, she is a judge for the Surrey International Writers' Conference Nonfiction Contest. Julie can be contacted through www.beaconlit.com