



The Query Letter.

*the one page that
gets the pages.*

A working field guide to the query letter: the three-paragraph structure, what goes in the hook, the pitch, and the bio, how to choose comps that help you, personalizing without groveling, the mistakes that earn form rejections, and a printable query worksheet to draft your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

A query letter is the strangest piece of writing you will ever do for your book, because it is not your book. It is a one-page business letter to a literary agent, and it has exactly one job: to make that agent request pages. It does not have to summarize your novel, prove you are brilliant, or capture everything you love about the story. It has to earn the next click. Every decision in this guide traces back to that single outcome.

The query has no single inventor to credit. What follows distills standard publishing-submission practice as agents and writers have used it for decades: the three-paragraph shape, the hook that opens it, the pitch that carries it, the housekeeping that closes it, how comps position a book, and where queries lose the reader. This is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of that practice, with a running example (an invented novel, **THE TIDE CLOCK**) whose query we build piece by piece and assemble into a finished letter you can read in one pass.

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What a query is, and its one job.

one page, one purpose. get the pages requested.

A query is a short, formal letter that pitches a finished manuscript to a literary agent. That is the whole definition, and the important word is **finished**. The letter's single job is to make the agent stop scrolling and ask to see pages. Not to sell the book outright, not to tell the plot, not to prove your talent in three paragraphs. To open a door. Everything you put in the letter should be measured against that one outcome: does this earn the request?

The consequence of a single job is liberating once you accept it. A query can be a poor description of your novel and a perfect query, and a beautiful description of your novel and a failed one. You are allowed to leave almost everything out. The subplots, the themes, the secondary cast, the clever chapter you are proudest of, the ending. The letter is a trailer, not the film. Its purpose is to make someone want the whole thing.

Three moving parts do the work. A **hook** that states the premise in a few sentences and makes the agent care. A **pitch** that expands the premise into conflict and stakes and stops before the ending. And a paragraph of **housekeeping** that delivers the business facts and gets out of the way. The rest of this guide is those three parts, taken one at a time.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A query is a one-page letter whose only measure of success is that the agent requests pages. Write toward that click, and cut anything that does not move you closer to it.

How agents read the slush.

fast, in volume, on a phone, looking for a reason to stop.

Understand the reading conditions and the whole letter changes shape. An agent opens queries in bulk, dozens or hundreds a week, in the gaps of a working day that is mostly about the clients they already have. They are not settling in to savor your prose. They are triaging, and the first lines decide whether the rest gets read at all. This is not cruelty; it is arithmetic, and your letter has to survive it.

So front-load everything. The hook must arrive within the first four lines, because a reader deciding in fifteen seconds never reaches the bio in paragraph three. Anything you place before the hook, a warm-up, a paragraph on how you discovered them, a rhetorical question, spends the only attention you are guaranteed to get. Lead with the person and the problem. Explain later, if at all.

There is hope buried in the speed. Because agents read looking for a reason to say yes, a clear, confident, well-positioned letter stands out instantly in a pile of vague ones. Most queries are muddy: they hedge, they summarize, they bury the story under throat-clearing. Clarity is rare, and clarity is your edge. You do not have to dazzle. You have to be the letter that is easy to understand.

WATCH OUT

The query is often read on a phone, between meetings. Long dense blocks of text get skimmed or skipped. Short paragraphs, plain sentences, one idea at a time.

The mindset the letter rewards.

the query tests one skill: can you state your own story clearly?

Under the format, a query measures a single ability: can you say what your book is about, plainly, in a handful of sentences? Writers who struggle here are usually writers who are too close to the manuscript to see its shape, or who quietly suspect the premise is thinner than they hoped. The letter is where that shows. If you cannot state the story clearly, the problem is rarely the letter. It is that the story is not yet clear to you.

This is good news, because the skill is learnable and the shape is stable. It does not change by genre or by year. Once you can name your protagonist, their want, the trouble, and the stakes without hedging or apology, the letter mostly writes itself. The hard part is upstream, in knowing your own book. The letter just reports it.

One reframe steadies the hand. You are not begging a stranger for a favor. You are offering a business proposition to a professional who is actively looking for books to sell and makes a living finding them. Write from that footing. Not groveling, not swaggering, just clear and direct, the way one working person addresses another.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET THE TIDE CLOCK

*Throughout this guide we build one query, for an invented novel called **THE TIDE CLOCK**. Nora Vance, a clock restorer, inherits her estranged grandmother's failing repair shop in a fading Maine harbor town and means to sell it by winter. Inside a two-hundred-year-old tide clock she finds a hidden ledger: forty years of names, dates, and sailing times, in her grandmother's hand. The women in it all vanished from the town on the tide, and one of the names is Nora's mother, who she was always told had simply left. Adult upmarket book-club fiction with a mystery spine. We will draft its hook, pitch, and housekeeping, then assemble the whole letter.*

The anatomy of one page.

three short paragraphs, three different jobs.

The whole query is three paragraphs, and each does a distinct job. The first makes the agent care about a person. The second turns caring into wanting to read. The third proves you understand the business and then gets out of the way. Here is the shape, with rough word budgets. Learn the order and the logic; the exact counts flex.

THE HOOK • 2 TO 3 SENTENCES

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 01 | A specific protagonist, in a specific situation | who |
| 02 | What they want, made concrete | wants |
| 03 | The trouble that collides with the want | but |

THE PITCH • ABOUT 150 WORDS

- | | | |
|----|--|---------|
| 04 | The setup escalates, the world sharpens | then |
| 05 | The central choice the protagonist faces | so |
| 06 | The stakes: what is lost either way. Stop here | at risk |

THE HOUSEKEEPING • 50 TO 80 WORDS

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 07 | Title, category and genre, rounded word count | facts |
| 08 | Two comps, each with why it fits | shelf |
| 09 | One-line bio (or none), thanks, sign-off | close |

Budgets are targets, not laws. The one hard rule is the page: everything above fits on a single page, generally 250 to 350 words. If it will not, the pitch is almost always carrying subplot the hook and housekeeping should not have to.

The hook.

protagonist, want, trouble. the logline with room to breathe.

The hook is two or three sentences that introduce your protagonist, what they want, and the problem about to get in the way. It is your logline stretched slightly, and it obeys the same rules: describe the character rather than just naming them, make the goal concrete, and make the collision between who they are and what they face visible on the page. If the agent reads only your first three sentences, and often that is exactly what happens, those sentences must contain a person, a desire, and a threat.

Placement is a decision, not an accident. Many writers open with the metadata line first (title, genre, word count), and that is fine, but the hook has to land within the first four lines either way. Never bury it under a paragraph of throat-clearing. The single fastest improvement most queries can make is to delete everything above the hook and start with the human being in trouble.

ON THE PAGE

- Lead with a specific person in a specific situation, not a theme, a setting, or a mood.
- Make the want concrete. “She wants peace” is not a hook; “she wants the shop sold before winter” is.
- Stop the hook at the threat. Do not resolve it. Resolving is the pitch’s job, and the tension is the reason to read on.

WATCH OUT

The rhetorical-question opener: “What would you do if you found a secret in a dead woman’s shop?” It asks the reader to do the imagining that is your job. Cut the question and state the situation.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE HOOK

When clock restorer Nora Vance inherits her estranged grandmother’s failing repair shop in a fading Maine harbor town, she plans to sell it by winter and never come back. Then, inside a two-hundred-year-old tide clock, she finds a hidden ledger: forty years of names, dates, and sailing times, all in her grandmother’s hand. Every woman listed vanished from the town on the tide, and one of the names is Nora’s mother, who she was always told had simply left.

The pitch.

escalate to the central choice. back-cover copy, not a synopsis.

The pitch expands the hook. The setup escalates, the stakes get specific, and you stop at the point where the protagonist faces the central choice. Think of the copy on the back of a book, not a plot summary: you are selling the read, not reporting events. Do not give away the ending. The unanswered question is precisely the thing that makes an agent request pages.

Two disciplines keep it sharp. Introduce no more than two or three named characters, because the reader cannot hold a cast in a page. And write it in the book's voice, wry for a wry book, taut for a thriller. A pitch in flat summary language tells the agent nothing about how the novel reads; a pitch in the manuscript's register is a sample of the prose they would be signing. Keep it to roughly 150 words.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate, do not list. Each sentence should raise the cost, not bolt on another subplot.
- Pitch the story, not the theme. “A novel about grief and memory” says nothing; what happens, to whom, and what do they stand to lose?
- End on the dilemma, not the outcome. Leave the agent needing to know how it resolves.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE PITCH

Nora means to catalog the shop and list it. Instead she starts reading. The ledger, she realizes, is a map of a rescue: for four decades her grandmother timed women's escapes from dangerous men to the ferry and the turning tide, and the whole harbor kept the secret. Some of those women are still hidden, still watched, still one loose word from being found. Then a soft-spoken detective arrives asking about a cold case from the year Nora's mother disappeared, and his questions circle nearer the shop with every visit. To learn what became of her mother, Nora has to open the ledger. To protect the women who trusted it, she has to burn it. And the tide that carried them out runs both ways: the man one of them fled is already back in town, asking after an old clock.

The housekeeping.

the business facts, stated once, then out of the way.

The final paragraph delivers the facts an agent needs to place your book: title, genre and age category, rounded word count, two or three comps, and a bio limited to what is actually relevant. Then a one-line thank-you and your name. This paragraph is deliberately short and unglamorous. Its job is not to persuade. Its job is to signal that you know how the business works.

State the genre and category the way the market does, adult upmarket, YA contemporary fantasy, cozy mystery, rather than inventing a hybrid label. Round the word count, and keep it inside the range readers expect for that category; an outlier count is one of the fastest routes to a form rejection, because it suggests the writer has not read the shelf. The bio is one line or none: publications, a directly relevant credential, or nothing. Unpublished is not a confession. Most debut queries carry no bio, and agents know it.

THE HOUSEKEEPING LINE, IN ORDER

- Title (caps or italics), then the category-and-genre label, then the rounded word count.
- Two comps, recent and in your lane, each with a short clause on why it fits.
- “Standalone with series potential,” if true. Then the bio, or skip it. Then thanks and sign-off.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE HOUSEKEEPING

THE TIDE CLOCK is a work of upmarket book-club fiction, complete at 92,000 words, that will appeal to readers of Sarah Penner’s THE LOST APOTHECARY and Shelby Van Pelt’s REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES. It is a standalone with series potential. I am a horologist who has restored clocks for two maritime museums, and the shop in these pages is drawn from that work. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Choosing comps.

two titles that say where your book sits, and that you know the shelf.

Comparable titles do two things at once: they tell an agent where your book belongs on a shelf, and they prove you have read that shelf. The convention is two, occasionally three, published in the last few years, in your genre and category, successful but not phenomena. Naming a global bestseller as your comp reads as ambition, not positioning. Nobody is looking for the next unrepeatable hit; they are looking for a book they can confidently place with an editor.

The most useful comps are compound, and specific about the axis of comparison: the premise of one book with the voice of another, or a novel crossed with a film or series the agent will know. A short clause explaining why each comp fits is worth more than the titles alone; the titles make a claim, the clause proves you understand it. Do the pairing deliberately, so the two comps together sketch a book that does not fully exist yet, which is exactly the gap yours fills.

ON THE PAGE

- Recent (roughly the last three to five years), in your category, mid-successful. Not decades old, not the top of the list.
- Compound and specific: name the axis, voice, premise, structure, or setting, that each comp shares with your book.
- Read your comps. Naming a book you have not read is a bet that the agent has not either.

WATCH OUT

Comping to nothing (“there is truly nothing like this book”) or to everything (five titles hedging your bets). Two confident, well-chosen comps beat both.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE COMPS

THE LOST APOTHECARY, for the hidden record of women quietly helping other women escape dangerous men, and the pull between a present-day discoverer and a decades-old secret. *REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES*, for the warm, small-town coastal voice and the long-buried family disappearance at its heart. In a line: the secret network of the first, told in the book-club register of the second.

Personalizing to the agent.

why them, in one honest sentence. then get to the hook.

Personalize when you have a real reason: a book of theirs you admired and can say something specific about, a manuscript wish list or interview where they asked for exactly this kind of story, a conference where you actually met. One specific sentence at the top, then straight into the hook. A genuine reason to query this particular agent is worth including, because it tells them the letter is not a mass blast sent to two hundred inboxes at once.

The trap is groveling and flattery. A paragraph about how deeply you respect their career, or the story of how you found their name, or how honored you would be to work with them, adds nothing and delays the pitch past the point the reader has already decided. Specific beats effusive every time. “I’m querying you because your wish list asks for atmospheric mysteries with a strong sense of place” lands; “you are my dream agent” does not.

If you have no real reason, do not manufacture one. A clean, confident query with no personalization outperforms a paragraph of invented rapport. And whatever you do, follow each agent’s submission guidelines exactly: which pages they want, in what format, pasted or attached. Guidelines are the first filter, and getting them wrong is read as a preview of how you will be to work with.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE OPENING LINE

I’m querying you because your wish list asks for atmospheric mysteries with a strong sense of place and older women at the center, which is exactly what THE TIDE CLOCK is.

Format and logistics.

one page, plain, no gimmicks.

The physical letter is a normal business letter. One page, roughly 250 to 350 words, in a plain register. A proper salutation to a named person (“Dear Ms. Okafor,” spelled correctly, never “Dear Agent”), short paragraphs, a standard font. No gimmicks: no colored text, no fake urgency, no props in the mail, no writing the letter in your protagonist’s voice. The presentation quietly says “professional” or “amateur,” and the agent reads that before your first sentence.

Most queries are email now, which adds a few rules. If the agent specifies a subject-line format, use it exactly (“Query: THE TIDE CLOCK, upmarket fiction”). Paste the letter and any requested pages into the body of the email rather than attaching them, since many agents never open attachments from strangers. Address one agent at a time, with no visible mass CC. Close simply, with your name and contact details underneath.

THE ONE - PAGE CHECK

- One page. If it runs over, the pitch is carrying subplot it does not need.
- Salutation to a named person, spelled right, with the submission guidelines followed to the letter.
- Pages pasted, not attached, unless the agent asks otherwise. One agent per email.

The finished letter.

the pieces, assembled. read it as an agent would, in one pass.

Here is the whole query for THE TIDE CLOCK, the parts from the last six pages assembled in order: a personalized opening line, the hook, the pitch, and the housekeeping. Notice how little it explains and how much it withholds. It never mentions the ending, names only three people, and comes in comfortably under one page.

THE TIDE CLOCK • THE COMPLETE QUERY

Dear Ms. Okafor,

I'm querying you because your wish list asks for atmospheric mysteries with a strong sense of place and older women at the center, which is exactly what THE TIDE CLOCK is.

When clock restorer Nora Vance inherits her estranged grandmother's failing repair shop in a fading Maine harbor town, she plans to sell it by winter and never come back. Then, inside a two-hundred-year-old tide clock, she finds a hidden ledger: forty years of names, dates, and sailing times, all in her grandmother's hand. Every woman listed vanished from the town on the tide, and one of the names is Nora's mother, who she was always told had simply left.

The ledger, Nora realizes, is a map of a rescue: for four decades her grandmother timed women's escapes from dangerous men to the ferry and the turning tide, and the whole harbor kept the secret. Some of those women are still hidden, still one loose word from being found. Then a soft-spoken detective arrives asking about a cold case from the year Nora's mother disappeared. To learn what became of her mother, Nora has to open the ledger. To protect the women who trusted it, she has to burn it. And the man one of them fled is already back in town, asking after an old clock.

THE TIDE CLOCK is a work of upmarket book-club fiction, complete at 92,000 words, for readers of Sarah Penner's THE LOST APOTHECARY and Shelby Van Pelt's REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES. It is a standalone with series potential. I am a horologist who has restored clocks for two maritime museums. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Seven ways to earn a form rejection.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. A synopsis instead of a pitch.** The letter reports the plot beat by beat, ending included. Fix: cut to the central conflict and one choice, write it as back-cover copy, and stop before the ending.
- **2. The buried hook.** A paragraph of metadata, biography, or throat-clearing before the story appears. Fix: put a person, a want, and a threat in the first four lines; move everything else below them.
- **3. Vague stakes.** “Her world will never be the same.” The reader cannot tell what is actually at risk. Fix: name the concrete thing the protagonist loses if they fail, and who pays.
- **4. Too many named characters.** Five names in the pitch and the agent is holding none of them. Fix: name only the two or three people the central choice depends on; everyone else is “her sister” or “a stranger.”
- **5. Comps that miss.** A mega-bestseller, a decades-old classic, or nothing at all. Fix: pick two recent, mid-successful titles in your lane, each with a clause on why it fits.
- **6. Querying too early.** The letter goes out before the manuscript is finished and polished. Fix: never query an unfinished novel; the request for pages can arrive the same day, and the pages must be ready.
- **7. Openers and clichés.** Rhetorical questions, “in a world where,” or telling the agent how much readers will love it. Fix: delete them and open on the situation itself, in the book’s own voice.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

Draft the letter, put it away for a week, then read it aloud as if you were a stranger who owes it nothing. Cut whatever a stranger would skim. What survives is the query.

Your query worksheet.

print this page. hook first, then the pitch, then the facts.

HOOK (2 TO 3 SENTENCES)

COMP 1 (AND WHY IT FITS)

PROTAGONIST + WANT + TROUBLE

COMP 2 (AND WHY IT FITS)

PITCH (ESCALATION TO THE CHOICE)

BIO (ONE LINE OR NONE)

STAKES (WHAT IS LOST)

WHY THIS AGENT

TITLE / GENRE + AGE / WORD COUNT

ONE-SENTENCE LOGLINE

Keep going.

the letter is the easy part. write the book it stands in front of.

A query only works when there is a finished, polished manuscript waiting behind it. Agents request pages the same day, and the pages have to be ready. So the real next step is never another draft of the letter. It is the book. A clear query is almost always a sign that the story underneath it is clear, and the fastest way to a strong query is to finish and sharpen the novel first.

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard formatting with professional export, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, when you want a second pair of eyes on your opening pages before they go out. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

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MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- How to Write a Synopsis · the query's companion document, page by page
- How to Outline a Novel · from premise to a chapter plan
- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat screenplay standard
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- The genre how-tos · mystery, thriller, fantasy, romance, and more

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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