

THE STANDARD STRUCTURE OF A QUERY LETTER FOR FICTION

A Straightforward /r/PubTips Guide

(Last updated 5/23/2021)

DISCLAIMER:

I am not an agent. I am not a slush reader. I am an r/PubTips user who's been on this subreddit for three years, read hundreds of queries and the respective advice given, and given critique myself. Over the years I've picked up on the traditional structure that is recommended on this subreddit. It is recommended because it is a good baseline for success.

My goal is to provide an all-encompassing document on a standard structure of a fiction query letter as a resource for aspiring and revising queriers.

I've tried my best to ensure the knowledge here is indeed accurate and of good quality. I am always open to revisions, suggestions, and new perspectives.

I acknowledge that this document is prescriptive; it's all about rules and direction. You don't have to take this advice by any means. It is, however, a compendium of the most common advice given to queries over the years. At the least, it's good for a read.

I want to emphasize that this is a **standard, foundational structure**. You can break traditional advice in your query letter, and some people have had great success in doing so, but to do it well, it's helpful to know the most recommended structure first.

These guidelines apply to books with multiple POVs as well, since the common advice for a multiple POV book is the query should choose one main character to follow.

INTRODUCTION:

I created this guide because I wanted a resource for hopeful queriers looking to establish a baseline level of knowledge. Query advice on the Internet is vast and varied; it can be overwhelming for someone new to writing them. I wanted to pool together this subreddit's most common query advice, and thus this compendium was born.

I will be specifically outlining the main part of the query, where your story is actually detailed, and the housekeeping. I will not be covering personalization. Read Janet Reid's advice here <https://www.janefriedman.com/personalize-query-letter/> if you're looking for information on that. I will also not be covering biography in depth.

I will be sparse on examples because this link

https://www.reddit.com/r/PubTips/comments/6slgyd/pubtip_agented_authors_post_successful_queries/ covers successful examples that both follow and do not follow this standard advice. You can look there for examples. (And you should; they're really good. Inspirational. Nearly required reading, even. And it helps contextualize everything that I'm writing here, from queries that use these familiar guidelines, to queries that don't.)

I especially recommend u/Nimoon21's query as an example of standard structure. I'll be deconstructing it later in this document, after all the advice is said and done.

It's worth saying again, just in case the disclaimer was skipped, that this is a **standard, foundational structure**. You can break traditional advice in your query letter, and some people have had great success in doing so, but to do it well, it's good to know the most recommended structure first. At the least, this document is good for a read.

Thank you for your interest. I hope this helps on your query journey.

OVERVIEW-- THE ABSOLUTE ESSENTIALS:

- **Always follow the agent's submission guidelines.**
- A query should read, usually in this order: hook/character, setting, **main** conflict, stakes, hint of what's to come.
- A query should be written in third person, present tense.
- A query should be between 250 to 300 words, closer to 250.
- A query should be clear and concise.
- A query should have a voice.
- A query should maintain tension.
- A query will cover the first act of your book, and sometimes partway into the second act.
- A query should focus on the main plot. If you want to mention a subplot, like a romance, you can hint at it with less than a sentence.
- A query should limit proper nouns to around two or three, excluding the main character. This means only name something if it's really important, like an antagonist.
- The *pitch* of a query should *not* address the agent directly, at any point. ("You may think chess is for suckers, but at only thirteen, [main character] became Grandmaster . . .")
- If a book has multiple POVs, it is recommended to choose one main character to follow.

ZOOMING IN: THE SPECIFICS OF THE QUERY LETTER

HOOK/CHARACTER:

The first sentence of your query starts with explicit mention of your main character. Not your setting, not background information about the world. That comes after.

It starts with your main character **by name**. For middle grade and YA, you should state how old your main character is. The first line is often the best place to do that.

That's not the only guideline. The first sentence should be a hook, a sentence that "hooks" the agent's attention so they keep reading. It should not be "Mark was an ordinary man with an ordinary life, until he discovers a secret that upends his life." None of your query should waste words stating the words 'an ordinary life.' It wastes word count. Another variation of this is:

Sandra spends most of her time idling away in her Appalachian hometown, until the new kid comes to town.

This tells us nothing about Sandy. There are better ways to state her specific status quo than 'idling away in her Appalachian hometown'. That also robs her character of agency.

Lastly, in the beginning of the query, you should tell us who the main character is in as few words as possible. This can come after the hook/first sentence.

HOOK NO-NOS:

- DO NOT start with a rhetorical question
- DO NOT start with a list of any kind, i.e: *What do a rabbit's foot, a pair of rainbow sunglasses, and a raging music festival all have in common? They all contributed to Robert Thorne's house arrest.*
- DO NOT write from the Main Character's point of view (I, me, my)
- DO NOT wax philosophical about life, the universe, tragedy, hardship, et cetera. This goes hand in hand with rhetorical questions. The query is not where a writer's personal philosophical quandaries are revealed
- DO NOT be vague or use general terms. Specificity and specific details are key. More on this in the section 'Extra Content-- Phrases to Avoid'

SETTING:

The setting should not be the focus of your query.

The setting should be a brief mention to contextualize your story, and you can add more if it's relevant to the main conflict and stakes. Do not go overboard with mentioning names. Too many names make it hard to follow the query.

For fantasy and sci-fi, an extra line about setting may be required because worldbuilding is important to those genres specifically, but there are better ways one can indicate worldbuilding without being pointed about it.

An example of when this guideline was broken successfully was u/MarioMuzza's query letter, where the setting is elaborated on more than 'recommended' in this guideline. The post explains why it was a good choice for their query:

https://www.reddit.com/r/PubTips/comments/i9pz4u/pubtip_i_have_an_agent_thank_you_rpubtips_query/

CONFLICT:

Then your query should clearly state/illustrate the **main** conflict. This means clearly stating what your character wants / their goal. Then you clearly illustrate what is standing in their way.

There's been conflicting advice on the sub about how much the query should cover. The most common advice is to cover the first fifty pages / first act, but some users prefer to cover all of act two and beyond (75%+). The danger with writing a query letter encompassing most of the book is that if the writer isn't careful, the query may become unfocused or read more like a summary. That being said, it's still doable, but the more common advice is that the query should cover the first act, extending into the second act if needed. If in doubt, write two versions and compare.

This section is short, but is one of the most critical to get right, because it's the beating heart of your novel. It's short because there aren't super stringent guidelines for describing your conflict; just make sure it's interesting and illustrated clearly. It should also draw clear connections between elements it introduces.

Additionally, conflict helps illustrate your main character's agency (or if not executed well, their seeming lack thereof). You don't want to show your MC just reacting to events, but your MC actively responding, taking actions, and making decisions.

STAKES:

Then your query should clearly state/illustrate the stakes. The stakes are what your character stands to lose in the book.

Zooming in, the character needs to be facing a choice, and there should be a pull to each option. If they don't do [something], horrible thing X happens. But if they do [something], they lose/could lose great thing Y. This choice **doesn't have to be** explicitly stated in the query-- stakes can be framed any number of ways-- it just needs to be clear that they're compelling.

A cost should be present for both sides of a choice. It is commonly here that a writer realizes their character faces no real choice, and their stakes aren't strong enough.

Example (states choice explicitly to frame stakes): *If Nina doesn't break the curse, her town will be frozen in eternal winter. But to hunt the wizard who cast it, she'll have to enter the forest, and no one who's entered has ever come back.*

HINT OF WHAT'S TO COME:

This is pretty self explanatory. Near the end of the query, you hint at what's to come.

This can be a solid few sentences you write, but it's also an element interwoven through the back half of the query *through your stakes*. It's also easy to identify in queries in the example thread I linked. **I really recommend reading those** for examples of different techniques.

Showing what's to come can take many forms, and is a part of the natural course of detailing the first act of your story. It may come in the form of the defining choice your character makes to engage the conflict, or just be outright stated. Examples:

Harriet must decide whether to stay quiet about what she witnessed that night, or risk her career to bring justice to the victim.

Or,

Harriet begins investigating the circus murder, while far above her, the acrobat grins.

After you've told us the conflict and the stakes, you hint or tell us what the character will do to win the conflict / advance their goal.

The agent wants this because they need to be able to see where your story is going. It hints at the character's arc. It also shows them your novel leads into a compelling middle. All of this helps them decide whether to follow up or not.

VOICE:

Your query should have a voice. This gives the agent a taste of what your manuscript will read like. It also makes the query more interesting to read. A voice is created through word choice, sentence variation, and the overall structure of tension in your query.

Many queries I've read on r/PubTips are made entirely of long, multiple-clause sentences. This is usually a byproduct of cramming too many elements and details into your query in an effort to cover everything you think is important.

Do not do this. It saps your query of tension. It will make your query seem long-winded. The agent might also assume that is how your manuscript is written too, since the query is a representation of the manuscript.

If you're suffering from Query Cram, then critically examine each detail included. There's details that can be cut and sentences that can be restructured to make your query tighter.

CAUSALITY:

The sentences in the query should build on one another, the way the beginning of a novel builds on itself. The query should clearly draw connections between the elements it introduces.

This helps build clarity and focus, and will illustrate the way these elements are connected in your novel itself.

HOUSEKEEPING:

Your housekeeping can go before or after the pitch. Janet Friedman says after, but some agents prefer before, to contextualize the book before reading the pitch.

Your housekeeping should include your book's genre/category, word count, title/subtitle, and comparison titles (comps).

Your titles should be in capitals, and your comp titles italicized. The word count should be rounded to the nearest thousand.

It will look something like this:

TITLE is a young adult fantasy complete at 80,000 words. It combines the pacing and comedy of *BookTitle1* with the voice of *BookTitle2*.

Or another version,

TITLE (80,000 words) is an adult literary novel that will appeal to fans of *BookTitle1* and *BookTitle2*.

HOUSEKEEPING NO-NOS:

- DO NOT state your themes.
 - e.g: “*This book is about love, loss, and found family after the trenches of war.*” No need to state. An agent should be able to guess your themes after reading the bulk of your query.
- DO NOT praise your novel
 - This comes off tone-deaf and boastful
- DO NOT present an ego
 - e.g: “TITLE attempts something remarkable that has *never been done before* in sci-fi. I believe it is material that has strong blockbuster potential.”

COMPS:

Comps are books you compare your manuscript to in your housekeeping. They can also sometimes be an author's style, or a movie, or a fairy tale, which we'll discuss later. But the most common ones are books. It's okay to comp a movie, TV show, or video game, *but make sure you comp at least one book too.*

Comps are not strictly necessary, but they give your query a boost by helping to contextualize your manuscript for the agent. Some agents require comps, and others don't, but the common advice is to include them in your query.**

Common advice given to contextualize comps is to pick books that would fit next to your book in a bookstore. They are to show the agent that you keep up with reading in your genre, therefore are familiar with what's being published and becoming successful in your genre/niche, and have overall done your research.

It also shows the agent that this book can sell, since there are books already like it out on the market. It also helps your potential agent when they pitch your book to publishers.

It's also suggested to read in your genre while writing so comps are easier to find, and you understand the market for your work better while in the process of writing. This ensures you don't get to the end of years of work only to find your book doesn't fit in the market at all.

GUIDELINES FOR COMPS:

- Should be published within the last five years
- Should be books in your genre and age group (adult, YA, middle grade, etc)
- Should not be mega-blockbuster sells--
 - Examples: Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, The Lord of the Rings
- Can specify characteristics of books, e.g *SUNSET IN STARLIGHT combines the irreverent humor of GIDEON THE NINTH with the epic scale of the RED RISING series*

TIP: If you decide to comp something that is not within the guidelines, give it a specific rationale, and pair it with a more recent book.

****As an aside,** it's a debate on PubTips whether agents really care as stringently about these suggested guidelines as some think.

BIO NO-NOS:

Your biography goes after your housekeeping, so it's located at the very end of your query letter. A list of things not to include in your biography section, quoted from Janet Friedman's blog here, a link I highly recommend reading: <https://www.janefriedman.com/query-letters/>

- Your many years of effort and dedication
- How much your family and friends love your work
- How many times you've been rejected or close accepts
- How much money you've invested in editors or editing
- Quotes of praise from anyone, or mentioning how such-and-such well-known person has read your work and/or offered advice on it. Perhaps it's boosted your ego or confidence that some VIP has read your work or offered a critique. But agents/editors will make up their own mind, and if your VIP really believed in your work, why aren't they offering you a referral to their agent or editor?

And lastly, bullet points from me:

- Your age
- How many manuscripts you've written before this. It may not help you to include that this manuscript is the third you've written.
- Any insults toward other books or the genre
 - e.g: "I was unimpressed with the romance books I've read, so I set out to write my own."

EXTRA CONTENT-- PHRASES TO AVOID:

u/Sullyville posted a great list of common query tropes that they've seen over their time on the sub, found here in full https://www.reddit.com/r/PubTips/comments/msbgfz/pubtip_query_tropes/. u/Sullyville cautions against using these phrases, and I agree. In their own words:

- These tropes may make your query vague, where before it was crystal sharp.
- You may be attempting to dramatically evoke mystery, but in reality leave an agent with too many questions that need to be answered to even become interested in the first place.
- Or sometimes these tropes leave your main character sounding very passive, where all the plot points happen to them, instead of them making things happen.
- Additionally, an agent has probably heard these a million times, so each time one trope is used, it serves as a red flag.

Lastly, u/Sullyville says, "This is not to say you shouldn't use them. The particular stringent format of a query . . . demands that writers elide and summarize. But I would urge you, if you see one of these phrases used in your query, to ask yourself if another, more specific or descriptive phrase, might be used in its place. Or if it's necessary at all."

THE LIST:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| • secrets of his/her own | • more than s/he bargained for |
| • must/forced to choose between | • more questions than answers |
| • finds him/herself XXXXXing | • not quite what he/she seems |
| • a game of cat and mouse | • reality and fiction begin to blur |
| • mysterious old... | • has their own inner demons |
| • suspicious old... | • face inner demons |
| • moment that will change everything forever | • races against time |
| • XXXXXX never expected that/to... | • means certain death |
| • will do anything to... | • escape his/her fate |
| • as s/he fights to deal with... | • places in harm's way |
| • the only one whose power can... | • sinister |
| • more than meets the eye | • nefarious |
| • in ways no one could have imagined | • or any list for an introduction* |

^^ *discussed in the comments of the post

LOOKING AT A GREAT EXAMPLE: NIMOON21

Here's an example of a query that is structured well and landed an agent. It is u/Nimoon21's submission in the Successful Queries thread on r/PubTips. I'll be deconstructing it on the next page:

Sixteen-year-old Kiora can climb to the top of a windmill and fix it without breaking a sweat. On her Isle, the barrage of the wind is a constant—until the Wind Beast disappears from the sky and the wind stops.

With no wind to spin the mills on her family's windfarm, they struggle to earn the money they need for her sister Nima's medicine. The Isle is defenseless, and rumors of a coming invasion fill the Islanders with desperation. Some start poaching skychis, the horse-sized flying reptiles believed to be the children of the Wind Beast, for gold. Gold enough to save Nima's life, if Kiora can catch one.

When Kiora begins her hunt for a skychi, she stumbles upon a camp full of them—and their human riders. The riders share a special bond with their skychis, and they're trying to find the Wind Beast and bring him back. Kiora could steal a skychi and sell it, purchasing her sister's medicine, maybe even buying her brothers' way out of the Navy. But it wouldn't bring back the wind and save her family's farm. Or Kiora could join the riders—if she's foolish enough to hope the Wind Beast is still alive, and daring enough to take to the sky.

THE DECONSTRUCTION:

Sixteen-year-old Kiora can climb to the top of a windmill and fix it without breaking a sweat.

Here we have the hook. Since this is YA, the author also includes the age of the character. Notice the query starts immediately with the main character and hooks interest enough to continue reading.

On her Isle, the barrage of the wind is a constant—until the Wind Beast disappears from the sky and the wind stops.

Here we have an introduction of the setting. Then we have an introduction to the conflict. All of it is deft and clear.

With no wind to spin the mills on her family's windfarm, they struggle to earn the money they need for her sister Nima's medicine. The Isle is defenseless, and rumors of a coming invasion fill the Islanders with desperation. Some start poaching skychis, the horse-sized flying reptiles believed to be the children of the Wind Beast, for gold.

Here we have more information about the character by way of her family situation, further explanation of the conflict, how the conflict personally impacts the main character, and information that is relevant to how the main character will behave throughout the first act of the story (attempting to hunt skychis). This also tells us the stakes. If they don't get the wind back, her family will suffer and her sister might die.

When Kiora begins her hunt for a skychi, she stumbles upon a camp full of them—and their human riders. The riders share a special bond with their skychis, and they're trying to find the Wind Beast and bring him back.

Here we have more causality as she finds the camp of skychi, and an Act One plot point. We have information that presents a new possibility to the main character, and will eventually trampoline her into how she tries to solve the rest of the story.

Kiora could steal a skychi and sell it, purchasing her sister's medicine, maybe even buying her brothers' way out of the Navy. But it wouldn't bring back the wind and save her family's farm.

This describes the first half of the choice she has to make, the choice that the entire story hinges on. It also reiterates the stakes.

Or Kiora could join the riders—if she's foolish enough to hope the Wind Beast is still alive, and daring enough to take to the sky.

Final cincher, and the 'hint of what's to come'. This helps the agent imagine the events of the novel, her character arc, and the general way the second arc will take shape. Great job, Nimoon21.

CONCLUSION:

I hope this was a helpful and straightforward guide for anyone who may need it. I've done my best to address many mistakes I see in the queries submitted on r/PubTips.

Thank you to the moderators of r/PubTips for fostering such a high-quality community and giving feedback on drafts of this (especially u/Nimoon21 and u/CrowQueen), thank you to u/MarioMuzza and u/Nimoon21 for giving permission for their queries to be included here, thank you to u/Sullyville for giving permission to have their list of query tropes included, and thank you to the whole of the publishing community here on Reddit. I would not be able to write such a guide without your knowledge.

And to the reader: best of luck with writing your query letter!