

Query Letters for Freelance Writing Jobs

If you want to freelance for publications (whether trade or consumer, print or online), you've got to be able to query, and query well. A query letter has multiple functions. It serves as a sales pitch, a letter of introduction, and a writing sample—and it's how you demonstrate that you understand the editor's market and can give her what she wants.

New writers often struggle with query letters, but the letters don't have to be complicated. I find that when you have a template to follow, you're able to draft compelling queries more quickly.

Here is a template for a basic four-paragraph structure:

- The **lead**, or the **hook**, which is designed to catch the editor's attention. It might be a startling statistic, a time peg, or an anecdote. Your lead should interest the editor enough to continue reading your query:
 - The problem/'solution hook: defines a problem or situation facing the publication's audience.
 - The informative hook: presents two or three lines of information (e.g., facts, statistics), followed by an explanation of how this applies to the target audience.
 - The question, which is often a problem/solution or informative hook phrased interrogatively.
 - The personal experience/anecdote hook is useful for a publication that uses more personal stories, or to establish a writer's credentials.
 - The attention-grabber is designed to make the reader sit up and take notice—hopefully long enough to read the rest of the story.
- Hooks to Avoid:
 - The personal introduction. Never start with a line like "Hi, my name is John, and I'd like to send you an article about...." Don't offer irrelevant information, such as "I'm a housewife and mother of three lovely children."
 - The "suck-up" hook. Don't tell editors you've been reading their publication for 20 years; prove it by offering an appropriate proposal.
 - The "bid for sympathy." Don't tell an editor how much it would mean to you to be published in their publication.—or that your children will starve if you don't sell an article.
 - The "I'm perfect for you" hook. Don't inform the editor that your article is "perfect" for his readers. Never declare that your article is "wonderful" or "fascinating." Prove it.
 - The "I'm an amateur" hook. Never announce that you haven't been published before, or that your article has already been rejected by 20 other magazines, or that your friends/writing teacher/mother suggested that you send your article to this magazine. Act professionally, even if you haven't sold a single article.

- The **why-write-it** section. This paragraph (or two, if you have a particularly detailed query) fleshes out the idea, demonstrating why the readers of the magazine will be interested in the topic.
- The **nuts-and-bolts** paragraph. Here you give the details of the story itself. What types of sources will you contact? How long will the story be? Will it have sidebars, and if so, how many? What section of the magazine will the story fit in? What's the working title?
- The **I'm-so-great** paragraph, or credentials. Here you highlight your relevant qualifications, including your writing experience and background with the subject matter. This is the paragraph in which you showcase your unique qualifications and convince the editor to give *you* the assignment.

Using this structure, once you have your background research done, you can pound out a query fairly quickly.

That's it. Catch the editor's attention, make the case for your story, tell the editor how you plan to approach it, and demonstrate why you're qualified to write the piece. Include all four elements in every query and you'll have a lot more success.