

Finding Your Agent: 7 Steps to a Successful Query Letter and Mistakes to Avoid

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Mayra Cuevas:

Mayra Cuevas is the co-author of the upcoming YA novel *Does My Body Offend You?* (Penguin/Knopf) and author of the YA foodie romcom *Salty, Bitter, Sweet* (Blink/HarperCollins), named a Hypable “Best Books of Winter 2020,” and BuzzFeed “YA Books We Can’t Wait to Read in 2020.”

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Mayra is a producer and writer for CNN. She is a member of Las Musas Books authors collective, and co-founder of the Latinx KidLit Book Festival. She keeps her sanity by practicing Buddhist meditation while also serving on the Board of Directors of Kadampa Meditation Center Georgia.

[Pre-Order *Does My Body Offend You?* Today!](#)

Saritza Hernández:

Known as the first literary agent to represent marginalized creators in the digital publishing space, Saritza Hernández is a self-proclaimed geek who loves escaping into worlds and stories from all walks of life. Her love of great storytelling is what has driven her work in the publishing industry for the past 18 years and her passion for amplifying queer and BIPOC voices is what continues to drive her today. An avid romance and science-fiction reader, and strong advocate of the LGBTQ+ community, she enjoys fresh voices in YA and adult genre fiction. She specializes in romance and young adult fiction by and for diverse audiences.

To Query Saritza: <https://QueryManager.com/Saritza>
Remember to mention you attended this class!

THE 7 STEPS

The Manuscript

1. Is your book ready?

The Query (Fiction)

2. The personal greeting
3. The hook
4. The summary
5. Must-haves: title, genre, audience, word count, comp titles
6. Your credentials + publishing experience
7. Closing

The Query (Nonfiction)

1. The personal greeting
2. Your bio, platform and credentials
3. Hook: a compelling description of the narrative
4. What makes your book unique from everything else in the market
5. Essentials: genre, category, word count, title, subtitle
6. Target readership: who will buy this book and why?
7. Closing

BOOK READY?

Your manuscript is **NOT** ready if:

- Your book is not finished
- It's still the first draft
- No one else has read it (your mom doesn't count!)
- Your word count/genre doesn't meet industry standards
- You haven't done a final pass for:
 - copy edits (punctuation, run-on or fragments, grammar, etc)
 - consistency and continuity
 - following the theme throughout the book
 - tracking plot tension and character arc

Recommended reading:

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition: How to Edit Yourself Into Print by Renni Browne and Dave King

[\(Visit Mayra's website for a full list of recommended books on craft\)](#)

ANATOMY OF THE QUERY LETTER FICTION

Writing a query letter can seem like a really difficult task after completing your book but it doesn't have to be. A query letter is a note asking an agent if they're interested in representing a book. Agents may receive a dozen or more queries a day — and might only sign four or five authors per year. So it's crucial to make a good first impression and your query allows you to do that. While there's no "standard" format that all authors use for their letters, a query is a business document and as such should look like a formal one-page business letter. Let's take a closer look at the anatomy of a query letter.

Anatomy of the Query Letter (Fiction)

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Greeting

Keep it simple, professional with a personal touch for greater impact.

The Hook

You only get one shot to make an impression, make it a memorable one!

Summary

Summarize your work into 2 paragraphs that focus on letting the agent know more about the central plot of the book.

Credentials

Let the agent know about your publishing experience, platform, or what connects you to the work.

Closing

Again, keep it simple and professional.

ANATOMY OF THE QUERY LETTER NONFICTION

Your nonfiction work, unlike genre fiction work, can be submitted on proposal. It doesn't need to be complete to go out to agents and editors to review but it should be clearly outlined with a more detailed synopsis in the form of a table of contents with short summaries.

Your author bio and credentials are at the top of your query. They should provide us with information that lets us know why you're qualified to write this book. What sets you apart in the market and why YOU are the person to tell this story.

Your market analysis can include things like: comparable titles, the types of readers you plan to target with the work, etc. Then add any additional information that will help us see how your platform is a strong one. TED Talk videos, a link to your portfolio online, photos of the recipes, articles, or features that show your expertise in the subject matter.

Anatomy of the Query Letter (Nonfiction)

Greeting

Keep it simple, professional with a personal touch for greater impact.

Credentials

Let the agent know about your expertise and why that makes you the qualified person to write this book.

Summary

Provide a short overview of the book, including category/genre, proposed word count.

Market/Hook

Include the target readership. Who will buy your book and why?

Closing

Again, keep it simple and professional.

GREETING

Keep it simple, Dear (first name) is perfectly fine.

Avoid gendering your salutation and misspelling of names but include information that will immediately connect with the agent.

If you've met at a recent conference, for example, make reference to that here. If you've connected via social media in some authentic way, this is also a good place to mention that.

It is perfectly fine to use honorific if you're certain of recipient's gender expression. If unsure, "Dear (first name)" is fine too.

Example #1

Dear Ms. Hernández,

I am seeking representation for my 72,000-word contemporary teen novel *Tetonka Wilderness Camp for Young Ladies (and tiny pigs)*.

Greetings

Example #2

Dear Saritza,

I'm seeking representation for my young adult, contemporary novel, TROUBLE GIRLS and after reviewing your agency website, I feel it may fit nicely within your list.

THE HOOK

Here's a great formula to follow. Start with the main elements of your story:

- The protagonist: Who is the story about? Your protagonist should drive the story—even in the logline.
- The inciting incident and/or setup: What occurs that sets the protagonist on their journey?
- The objective/goals of the story: What is the action of the story? What is the protagonist trying to accomplish?
- The stakes: Why must the goal happen?

Craft those elements into a single sentence:

When [the inciting incident happens], [the protagonist] must [achieve the objective], or risk [the stakes].

Then revise and polish at the line level for great effect. Think smart, snappy, and scintillating. Less is more!

Then, add a second line about how it fits in the market: “[TITLE] is [COMP] meets [COMP] with _____ of [COMP].

The Hook:

- Sell the book, don’t apologize for it.
- Tell the agent what sets your book apart in the genre or what makes your work competitive in the marketplace.
- If your book is about something that’s common in the market right now but targets a specific audience (vampire book set in a Caribbean town in the 1700s, for example) tell us that too.

Example #1:

For queer women in World War 2, joining the Women’s Army Corps means serving their country, but falling in love means risking everything.

Example #2:

After stabbing a would-be rapist to death, two best friends go on the run across America in a journey that grows darker and deadlier with each new disastrous decision they make in this queer, modern re-imagining of Thelma & Louise.

Example #3:

Perfect for readers of Elizabeth Acevedo and Angie Thomas, DOES MY BODY OFFEND YOU? follows Ruby and Malena, two extraordinary teens from different backgrounds, who team up to take on a sexist school board and lead the “Bra-bellion”; but fighting for social justice is way more complicated than they thought, and soon they’re confronting racial bias, sexism, and even first love.

CREDENTIALS

- Your credentials or platform should follow.
 - For fiction, this is generally at the bottom of the query.
 - For nonfiction work, this can appear in conjunction with the hook. Include credentials that are relevant to the work. If you’ve won literary awards, have had work published before (either longform or shortform) include that info here.
- Sign off with a simple, “Best regards,” or “Sincerely,” and your name. There’s no need to be cute or “funny” here. Keep it professional.

Example #1

I’m currently pursuing an MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults at The New School in New York City and have written short stories for the *North American Review*, *The Lascaux Review*, and *Black Denim Lit*.

Example #2

Freelance editor Deborah Halverson, writer of *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*, worked on a developmental edit of this manuscript.

My nonfiction work has been published by CNN, HLN, Court TV and EFE News Agency. I also volunteer with the We Need Diverse Books organization. I was born and raised in Puerto Rico.

The first five pages of the manuscript and a synopsis are pasted below.

HOW AN AGENT READS QUERIES

Because we receive so many queries and are finding ourselves at home more than before, we tend to read at all hours of the day and in various methods. Some receive queries via email to a designated inbox while others use QueryManager. Either way, it's safe to assume that we receive MANY queries every day (including weekends and holidays).

- We have to read our queries on top of our other reading: client manuscripts, contracts, editor's books, etc.
- I receive about 10-15 a day; my agency: 1,000+ per week
- Because I read so many, I have to read quickly and make fast decisions. If something doesn't grab me, I have to pass
- If I like it, I will request a partial or full (and read within two months, because I have so much reading)
- Different agents have varying criteria
- Some hate typos, some are sticklers for guidelines, some expect good comps
- Everyone is looking for a big hook and "the next big thing!"
- Number of queries in my inbox as of this morning: 475

ANATOMY OF THE SYNOPSIS

- A synopsis is an in-depth summary of a written work that describes the content of that work from beginning to end.
- A good synopsis will cover the main conflict and resolution of the story while describing the emotional development of the main character.
- When in doubt, start with an outline.
 - Who are the main characters? What are their goals, motivations, and conflicts?
 - Next, tackle your plot points. Be sure to include rising action or tension but avoid sub-plots.
 - Highlight what's unique about the work.
 - Don't forget to spoil the ending.

Third Person:

Write in the third person.

While the manuscript may be in the first person, your synopsis should be in the third person. This is really just an accounting of the plot, after all.

Formatting:

Keep formatting to single-spaced paragraphs
Use serif, or sans-serif font only, no less than 10-pt type.
Keep to 2 pages, if possible.

Main Plot Points:

Introduce your main character(s) and conflict in the beginning.
Include only necessary information.
Demonstrate character development and emotion.
Summarize the main events of the plot.
End with the resolution.

WHAT NOT TO DO!

Let's look at a few things to avoid doing when querying agents.

- Don't start your query with Dear Agent, or Ladies and Gentlemen, or even To Whom It May Concern.
- Avoid using passive voice in your query.
- Keep your word count under 400 words in your query.
- Don't "link" to your website for agent to read query.
- Don't use offensive, vulgar, discriminatory, or inflammatory language in your query.
- Start or end with a rhetorical question
 - Ex. Did you know... Have you ever wondered...
- Ask about submission guidelines in your query
- Compare your book to the Bible, JK Rowlings, Tolkien, the next Da Vinci Code
- Insert other platforms, i.e. "My story would be great for a magazine article, TV, film, etc
- Mention all the other projects you are currently working on
- Demand a series: "This is book one in a trilogy!"
- Say your work is copyrighted
- Tell agents that your mother/aunt/sister loved it!
- Include personal details not relevant to the book
- Say how long it took you to write the manuscript
- Mention that this is your first novel or the only thing you've ever written
- Mention previous rejections
- NEVER follow up with a phone call

A few synopsis tips!

- Do not complement your writing. "In a tear-jerking moment..." or "in a stunning flashback" should not be part of your synopsis.
- Do not spend so much time on the characters that you forget the plot.
- Even if the work is character-driven, they should drive the plot forward, not the other way around.
- Do not confuse your outline for your synopsis.
- Your synopsis should read like a detailed summary of the manuscript, not a grocery list.

RESOURCES

Looking for more information?

Newsletters & Blogs:

Nathan Bransford's Blog: <https://nathanbransford.com/blog>

Kate McKean's Newsletter: <https://katemckean.substack.com/>

Ask the Agent Tumblr: <https://literaticat.tumblr.com/>

Slushpile Hell: <https://slushpilehell.tumblr.com/>

Twitter Hashtags:

#QueryTip, #AmQuerying, #AskAgent, #AskKidLit

Info from agents and authors about query process

#PubTip, #WritingCommunity, #AmWriting

Info from agents, editors, and writers about writing and publication process

#DVPit, #DVArt, #PitMad, #PitchWars

Twitter pitch contests for unagented creators. DVPit & DVArt are specific to creators of marginalized communities but there are genre & category-specific events as well