

—Get Published Now Online Academy—

25 REALLY Dumb Query Letter Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

by Molli Nickell

Director: Get Published Now Online Academy

Your manuscript is completed to that “glow in the dark” stage.

Now it’s time to take the next step and write a fabulous query letter to introduce yourself and your work to the best possible agent to guide you through the publishing maze.

As you compose your query, avoid shooting yourself in the foot by committing any of the following. These were made by honest-to-goodness writers who believed they needed to “trick” the agent into reading their query letters.

None of them realized the best trick has always been to write a compelling query letter that will generate a submission request.

25 REALLY Dumb Query Letter Mistakes and How to Avoid them

ONE

Submit your query in a day-glow envelope with the agent's name written in sparkly letters.

Sends the message:

"Look at me, I'm special. Open me first." Proves you're a total amateur, out of touch with publishing realities, a little crazy, eight years old or . . . all of these.

Result:

Might receive a quick glance, but no serious consideration unless the manuscript being offered is "The Sequel to The Sequel of Gone with the Wind."

Suggestion:

Polish your query so the glow comes from content, not container.

TWO

Pack your envelope with sparkles, sequins, and glitter that will fly out and onto the agent's desk . . . possibly into their latte.

Sends the message:

You are clueless, thoughtless, and possibly an escapee from the Magic Fairy Dust Mental Hospital.

Result:

Karmic consequences (nasty thoughts of eternal damnation) fly in your direction while your glittery submission flies into the circular file. You do not hear back from this agent, never . . . ever . . . ever . . .

Suggestion:

Write powerful words to satisfy the agent's need to discover a fabulous writer instead of having to fish glittery goop out of their cup.

THREE

Make your text impossible to read by printing on too-bright-to-miss purple paper.

Sends the message:

You are confusing colorful paper with colorful writing.

Result:

Your letter will be re-purposed to become a paper airplane and flown into the nearest circular file.

Suggestion:

Satisfy your need to play with colored paper by learning origami (Japanese art of paper folding). Then, satisfy your desire to locate an agent by submitting your project on white paper

FOUR

Write your query by hand.

Sends the message:

You've escaped from the 18th century and have written your tome with a quill pen whilst downing a tankard of ale.

Result:

Nobody will read your submission although they may admire your penmanship.

Suggestion:

Learn to type or return to the 18th century.

FIVE

Ignore what the agent requests to receive and send them what YOU WANT them to read.

Sends the message:

You are: an amateur, unskilled in basic agent research, not able to follow directions, incapable of paying attention to details, and probably would be a difficult client.

Result:

A five (5) second glance at your few first lines, then “hasta la vista baby.”

.....
Suggestion:

Time for due diligence. Find out what the agent wants. Give them exactly that. Then, jump into your “sales pitch” first paragraph.

SIX

Center your contact information at the top of the page using a large, BOLD font so there can be no mistaking who you are. Also include cell/home phone numbers, email address, URL, home town, favorite food, and mom’s phone number (just in case).

Sends the message:

“Hey! Hey! Look at me. I’m self-aggrandizing and will be a pain-in-the-neck client.”

Result:

Because you’ve taken up so much space announcing yourself, there will be insufficient space on what’s left of the page for a full query.

NOTE: Agents don’t care about you, the writer, until they care about what you’ve written. Nothing personal. It’s business.

Suggestion:

Use Tahoma 8 pt. font (like this) to place all contact information across the top of the page in ONE line. This will give you a few extra lines of text in your letter to further “sell” your skills and “tell” your fabulous story.

SEVEN

Reference having read about the agent or agency in the 1998 edition of “Writers’ Market.”

Sends the message:

You’re not a serious writer. Probably bought the book at a garage sale.

Result:

Your query may receive a five (5) second scan, then it’s sent back to 1998.

Suggestion:

Research agents using the latest version of Writers’ Market. (Your library has a copy in their reference section). Or go straight to agentquery.com, where they’ve done the research for you. BTW: it’s not necessary to tell the agent how you found them, unless they ask.

EIGHT

Use a tiny font to leave more space to write your query.

Sends the message:

You have great eyesight (or wear strong glasses), but don't have much common sense and are unaware the query letter is best read without the aid of a magnifying glass.

Result:

Your query will not be squint read.

Suggestion:

Repeat 50 times. "The query letter is ONE PAGE, 350 words maximum." Then, revise your text and use Times Roman, 12 point. If you have difficulty writing within space parameters, this same problem also could be in your 500,000-word novel.

NINE

Set your margins at 1/4 inch so you have more room to tell your story. Leave no space between paragraphs. Cram as much text on the page as you possibly can. **Sends the message:** Amateur! Amateur! Reject! Reject! **Result:** Bye-Bye. **Suggestion:** Learn to format a query letter as per industry standards.

TEN

Place the Copyright insignia© all over your query.

Sends the message

You suffer from new-writer-paranoid syndrome and believe the agent (or their evil employee) is going to rip you off.

Result:

The agent might take a quick look to see if your project© warrants stealing, then will toss it. (And no, manuscript pirates do not lurk around agent trash bins, sifting through rejects for projects© to steal and sell on the black market).

Suggestion:

Instead of being fearful of having your manuscript© ripped off, place extra scrutiny on what you've written© and revise so that mechanical or structure errors don't rob you of the opportunity to locate the perfect agent.

ELEVEN

Misspell the agent's name, title, or company name.

.....
Sends the message:

You are careless or sloppy (or both).

Result:

Your lack of respect and unprofessional attitude will be noted. The agent might possibly give your query a five (5) second scan unless other errors are spotted, in which case it's "adios."

Suggestion:

Pay attention! Double and triple check the agent's name, title, and agency information.

TWELVE

Tell the agent how much they will love your story, because your mom, spouse, co-workers, and the barista at Starbucks adore your work.

Sends the message:

You fail to understand that agents don't care what anybody thinks about your writing, especially people in your inner circle . . . unless mom is president of Simon and Schuster, in which case, why do you need an agent?

Result:

Reeee-ject!

Suggestion:

Leave F&F (friends and family) out of your query. This is a business letter. Any agent is more prone to "love your story" if you tell it clearly, beginning with your query first paragraph which includes: who wants what and why, who/what stands in their way, and what might happen "if" they don't succeed.

THIRTEEN

Enclose cookies, brownies, or chocolate kisses with your query.

Sends the message:

Desperate, maybe dangerous. Who knows what microbes lurk in a box of brownies?

Result:

The bribe and query will be tossed.

.....

.....

Suggestion:

If you're compelled to supplement your submission, give something of value like a McDonald's coupon or Super Bowl tickets. Or, send the most effective bribe of all, a fabulous query letter.

FOURTEEN

Begin your query with a personal comment like, "Hey there, we met at the Writers' Conference two years ago and I finally finished that story you liked so much."

Sends the message:

Another novice who pitched an unfinished manuscript.

Result:

Possible quick scan of your query first few lines, five (5) seconds max.

Suggestion:

Unless you were totally naked, covered with tattoos, and sported a purple Mohawk, there's no chance any agent will remember you after two years. Mention meeting them at the conference and then state them your title. Stories and titles are remembered longer than names and faces.

FIFTEEN

Go creative and invent your own query format, lots of little paragraphs, maybe a picture or two. Or, write your first paragraph as one, very long and convoluted sentence.

Sends the message:

You are basically clueless about query letter structure and probably manuscript structure as well.

Result:

No thanks.

Suggestion:

Write your query in three paragraphs. Not one. Not two. Not six. Three. Can you break this rule? Sure, but you have to understand it first.

SIXTEEN

In your third paragraph (about you), chronologically list everything you've written since 6th grade.

Sends the message:

You're "padding" your writing experience.

Result:

Since the agent has read this far, you must have written your first two paragraphs reasonably well. They probably won't care about your lack of experience since you seem to have skill and an interesting/timely story they might be able to sell. All agents want to discover the next "great" talent.

Suggestion:

Briefly describe your writing experience in the adult world. If you don't have much (or any), tell about your interest/passion in the subject of your book. Be sure to include information about classes, writer's conferences, and critique or study groups you attend. Agents like to know you're putting effort into improving your craft.

SEVENTEEN

Begin your query by asking, "did you ever wonder what would happen if . . .?"

Sends the message:

Gotta be a newbie.

Result:

The agent will respond with, "no" and discard your query.

Suggestion:

Learn how to open a query with three well-written sentences that reveal the plot with such skill the agent will be motivated to keep reading.

EIGHTEEN

Use various colors in an attempt to make the page look appealing and cheerful.

Include a happy face. 

Sends the message:

OMG! Is this person for real?

.....
Result:

Your query will hippidy-skip off into the sunset, unread.

Suggestion:

Grow up and don't quit your day job.

NINETEEN

Do not scrutinize your query for writing and punctuation errors.

Sends the message:

Hears a bran-knew righter. A query letter filled with wrong words, weak verbs, non-descript nouns, excessive adjectives and adverbs is an excellent indicator these mechanical errors also appear throughout the manuscript.

Result:

Pass. Pass. Pass.

Suggestion:

Pay a professional editor (not your neighbor who loves to read) to help polish your query and your manuscript prior to submission.

TWENTY

Fill your query with extraneous phrases that state the obvious such as:

- I am writing to you because . . . (They know why. You want them to read your query. DUH!)
- Thank you so much for taking the time to read . . . (Guess what? Reading query letters is an agent's job. It has nothing to do with courtesy. It's how they find clients. DOUBLE DUH!)
- I'll be more than happy to send you . . . (Of course you would. Otherwise, why would you have sent the query? TRIPLE DUH!)

Sends the message:

Probably has filled the manuscript with extraneous and over-written phrases.

Result:

Not interested.

Suggestion:

Remember, this is a business and you need to be professional.
.....

.....

NOTE: Your appreciation to the agent is best stated in the query last line. “Thank you for your time and consideration.”

TWENTY-ONE

Leave tons of unused space by opening your e-query with three or four lines of contact information.

Sends the message:

Still wet behind the cyber ears.

Result:

The agent will wonder why you wasted lines that could have been used to tell your story? Although, from their point of view, that might be a positive. Gives them less to read before deleting.

Suggestion:

Since your email address already is on this email, begin your e-query with “Dear Merilee Sellsalot” (the agent’s name). Keep in mind the agent’s twitching finger is hovering over the delete key. Jump right into your query and fill their computer screen with an opening paragraph that sizzles. Motivate them to scroll and read your entire query.

TWENTY-TWO

- 1) Request a critique of your submission.
- 2) Resubmit the same query to the same agent month after month.
- 3) Reply to the rejection and insist your story is too fabulous to turn down and there must be some mistake.
- 4) Suggest a meet, greet, and eat at their favorite café where you’ve seen them, often.

Sends the messages:

Immature, stupid, and possibly dangerous.

Result:

Agent shares a “can you believe this” nervous laugh with their colleagues, trashes your query, and changes the lock on the office door.

Suggestion:

Don’t ever do any of these. Never . . . ever . . . ever . . .

.....

.....

TWENTY-THREE

Call to be sure the agent has received your query.

Sends the message:

Nervous Nelly Neophyte.

Result:

The agent, who accidentally answered your call, will slam their head into the wall because they were stupid enough to pick up the phone. You will be blamed for the resultant headache.

Suggestion:

Take up bungee jumping, yoga, or bowling, or (here's a novel concept), start on your next manuscript.

TWENTY-FOUR

Write boring and unappealing text in the "Subject Line" of your e-query.

For example: Enclosed is a query for my novel.

Sends the message:

What is this person thinking? Or not thinking?

Result:

Because you have given no motivation for the agent to "click" and read your email, it will be deleted. You may receive a standard "no thank you, not right for our list" email or nothing . . . never . . . ever . . . ever . . .

Suggestion:

Use the subject line of your e-query as a golden opportunity for a nano-second pitch of your story. Use it well. Example: Great white terrorizes summer swimmers.

TWENTY-FIVE

Whine (out loud or to yourself) about how you can't find an agent unless you're published. Then add, "Its impossible to write a query letter that works." Finish your laments with, "I'll never get published."

Sends the message (to yourself):

You cannot become a published author . . . never . . . ever . . . ever . . .

.....

Result:

You create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Suggestion:

Your word is your wand. Pay attention to what lurks in the recesses of your brain and comes out of your mouth. Activate the power of positive thinking. This shift can create magic in your life. 500,000 authors (books and articles) are published every year. You can join this group.



Hi there, I'm Molli Nickell.

During my years as a publisher and Time-Life editor, I've personally observed most of the misTrakes on this list.

Now, as a Publishing Wizard (consultant), I teach clients and students to be professional and never, ever resort to any of the above to trick agents into reading their queries.

The very best trick . . . isn't a trick at all. Write a compelling query letter. If it doesn't achieve the result you want (submission request), revise and send it to other agents.

Become your own version of "The Little Engine that Could." Think you can, know you can, and keep moving forward, regardless of the invitation to do otherwise.

I look forward to seeing your book on the shelves of Barnes and Noble.

Write On!

Molli Nickell

Director of The Get Published Now Online Academy: helping writers become authors.

PS: You can learn to write a query letter. Honestly, you can. Spend time in The Query Classrooms at my Online Academy, www.getpublishednow.biz.

Need more query writing assistance?

My 32-page tutorial/workbook (available at the Online Academy Bookstore) can help you learn to write a compelling "sales pitch" first paragraph—often the only one ever read by an agent.