



*Tutorial~*

**Write a  
Query Letter  
that Lands  
an Agent**

Molli Nickell

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## ESCAPE THE QUERY QUAGMIRE~

If you're a writer struggling to become published, the techniques in this tutorial will help you, just like they have hundreds of other writers who, since 2001, arrived at my virtual office doorstep.

They shared a common goal: to become published authors.

They also shared a common issue: not knowing *how* to write a query letter. Because of this, their submissions failed, time and time again. Most wondered if they'd ever be able to land an agent.

These writers had become trapped in the query quagmire of failure because they continually made one (or more) of the “big three” query letter mistakes. These not only blocked their potential success, but also identified them as “rookies.” Yikes!

No writer wants that.

If your history with the query has been try, try, try but fail, fail, fail with rejection after rejection after rejection, it's time to gain some critical information.

The three query mistakes and solutions described in this tutorial can help you move from “rookie” to “pro” to “published.” It's the information you need in order to get what you want: a top-notch agent to guide your project from manuscript to published book, and create the need to order your first box of “author” business cards.



## QUERY MISTAKE #1

Write your query as if it were to be delivered via snail mail with justified lines, date and address headings, double spaced, 1½" wide borders in Courier font (like this.) This query letter format has been around forever, but now has gone extinct, like the dinosaur. Despite this, you'll still find information in books and on-line blogs that suggest using this outdated format. Misinformation has a looooooong life span and tends to hang around our writers' world for a while before fading into obscurity.



Going . . .



Going . . .



Gone . . . . .

Snail-mailed submissions became obsolete in 2014 when agents, in an effort to reduce log jams of paper submissions, streamlined the process to become virtually 100% paperless. Writers were directed to submit submission materials via email. Quick *and* simple.

However, a small percentage of agents continue to request snail-mailed submissions accompanied by the standard SASE (Self-Addressed-Stamped-Envelope). Fine, give them what they ask for. Some of these agents reason that if the writer actually has to put out effort to buy stamps, envelopes, and print out their work, then snail mail it, this

extra effort may discourage non-dedicated writers and weed out manuscripts and projects that would never make the grade.

If you submit your emailed query, formatted in the “old” way, guess what? You increase the chances that, “CLICK,” your submission will be sent, unread, to delete-ville.

Here’s why.

Time-challenged agents, inundated with emailed submissions, go for the low-hanging fruit first, like queries formatted for small screens. Will agents put forth extra time and effort to read queries that only can be read easily on a large desktop computer screen?

Maybe yes. Maybe no.

### Why Size Matters~

Agents read queries wherever they happen to be: commuter train, at the gym, the beach, their kids’ soccer game, etc. Often, they review submissions on smart phones.



### A simple step to query success~

Give agents what they want: a device-friendly query they can read on desktop computer or laptop or smart phone. This immediately identifies you as a savvy, tech-current writer who has spent time and effort formatting your query to make it quick and easy for agents to read.

Plus, *and this is a biggie*, a device-friendly query increases the probability your submission *actually* will be read.

## QUERY MISTAKE #2

Fail to reveal the BIG THREE core issues of your story~

Agents need to know *immediately* what your story is about. Give them this information right off the bat.

ONE: Who wants what? **GOAL.**

TWO: Why can't they have it? **OBSTACLE.**

THREE: What is the terrible "or else?" **RESOLUTION.**

No agent will take the time to read and re-read a query to figure out what the heck the story is about. "CLICK" and off it flies to delete-ville.

Some writers forget that the purpose of the query letter is to tell the bigger picture of their *entire* story. Instead, they introduce every character in the book, or they ramble on and on about why they wrote the story in the first place, and how much their family and friends and critique group members love their story. In truth, nobody cares what your family (or anyone else) think about your story, unless your uncle happens to be president of Simon and Schuster.

### **A simple step to query success~**

Prevent your query letter from heading for delete-ville by revealing the core of your story—GOAL, OBSTACLE, and RESOLUTION—in the very first paragraph. It's really not that difficult, especially when you follow the Instant Query Content Template included in this tutorial.

## QUERY MISTAKE #3

Neglect to respond to the agent's need to know W.I.I.F.M.

When agents open an email, the first (and only) thing they want to know is:

### **What's In It For Me?**

Agents search, endlessly, for products: compelling and saleable manuscripts written by skilled writers. Does that describe you? Make sure your work addresses the agents unspoken question in a nano-second or else, (you know the drill) "CLICK," and your query flies off to delete-ville.

### **A simple step to query success~**

Revise your query so it clearly reveals the goal, obstacle, and resolution of your main character, and then, submit it using a device-and-agent-friendly format.

This telegraphs the message that you *are* the complete package: a writer with skill who has crafted an interesting and saleable project. And, as a bonus, you're digital savvy.

Woowzer! The agent will jump up and down with joy over the discovery of a skilled writer with a story that reads like a best seller.

Instead of the usual "thanks but no thanks" rejections, you'll receive what you've wanted all along. "YES! YES! YES!" Your inbox will overflow with invitations of "let's talk" about your project.

Wowzer.2! Now it's your turn to jump up and down with excitement.

## EASY-PEASY QUERY PRACTICE ~

The enclosed Instant Query Content Template demonstrates a perfectly structured query, written for "Jack and the Beanstalk," published in 1894, BC (Before Computers).

You may wonder about the value of writing a query for a story that's been published in a zillion languages around the world.



It's all about helping you learn a new skill.

When you have no emotional investment in the outcome, you can relax and have fun. That's right, I said "fun." You may not have thought that word would ever appear in the same paragraph with the word *query*. Think again.

When you hone query-writing skills on stories you've known most of your life, the process becomes less arduous and more of an exciting adventure with a trusted friend.

For example, here's how you might write a query letter first paragraph for the story about an encounter between a little girl (named after her coat) and a hungry wolf.

Little Red Riding Hood skips along the forest path, carrying pizza and brownies to share with granny. A sly predator delays her arrival by suggesting she pick flowers for the table. When Little Red arrives at granny's cabin, and discovers the old woman is not herself, will she be able to reverse the situation *and* keep herself off the lunch menu?

This paragraph contains the goal, obstacle, and resolution to help any agent easily identify the *three major issues* that form the core of your story.



## Who wants what? **GOAL**

Little Red wants to enjoy lunch with granny.

## Who or what stands in the way? **OBSTACLE**

The wolf wants to enjoy lunch with granny, the kid . . . and a side of fava beans.

## What is the terrible "or else?" **RESOLUTION**

Will Little Red resolve the situation, or will she *become* the blue-plate special of the day?

*(And yes, it is true that a wolf couldn't possibly swallow an old lady armed with knitting needles and wearing sensible shoes. Or snooze through a granny-ectomy, followed by having his stomach packed with heavy rocks. C'mon already. It's a fairy tale. OK?)*

Introduce this technique to your writing pals and suggest a fairy-tale query practice session. Doesn't matter if they're ready to submit their work or not. Practice not only makes perfect, it also reduces query anxiety, and often it reveals story structure issues that have been overlooked.

## Tease the agent to keep 'um reading~

What is the #1 query letter objective? To keep the agent reading.

How do you do this? It's simple. End the first (and second paragraph) with a tease that suggests the possibility of failure which could lead to the terrible "or else."

Will Little Red survive her encounter with the wolf? Inquiring agent minds will want to know what *might* happen.

## BTW~

When you decide your query is polished and ready to go, read it one more time. Carefully search for *any* red-flag words. If you're not clear about what these are and/or how to find them, check out my "35 Red-Flag Words" mini-tutorial, seen on page 24.

The Search-Mark-Revise techniques included in this tutorial will help you locate and revise away grammatical errors that wave "red-flags" and label you as a rookie . . . not quite ready for prime time.

Some agents want to read query letters first. Then, if interested, they'll request submission of synopsis and/or first pages.

Other agents want everything—query, synopsis, first pages—to be included in one email.

Regardless . . . every submission begins with the query letter.

The following template will help you write yours.

## E-mail Query Letter Format~

To: [Merrilee-Sells-a-Lot@thebestliteraryagency.com](mailto:Merrilee-Sells-a-Lot@thebestliteraryagency.com)

← Agent's email address.

SUBJECT: Hungry boy vs hungry giant. Outcome uncertain.

← Enticing email subject line.

Starving and desperate, 12-year old Jack (child of a single parent), stumbles onto genetically altered seeds that lead to untold riches, waiting to be plundered. But, inept at stealing, Jack's thievery is discovered. He becomes public enemy #1, wanted dead or alive . . . preferable dead.

← Jump into the story on the very first line. Introduce your protagonist (main character), what they want and why, the obstacle(s) standing in their way, and what *could* happen if their goal is not achieved. End this paragraph with the terrible "or else" tease. Jack might starve to death or be eaten. Either way, he's in big trouble.

Jack and his widowed mother face certain starvation when their crops fail and Bossy goes dry. Jack swaps the cow for a handful of *magic* seeds which sprout (overnight) into a cloud-high bean stalk. Jack climbs up into another dimension. He sneaks into a humungous castle and observes a nasty-tempered, carnivorous giant kneading crunch, fiber, and human bones into bread dough. Jack steals gold coins which alleviate the immediate need for grocery money. He climbs the stalk again and grabs a golden-egg laying goose, thereby guaranteeing residual income. Then, Jack pushes his luck, climbs back up the stalk to nab a miniature talking harp that rats him out. Running for his life, Jack heads for home, oblivious of the disaster that will ensue if the giant follows him down the stalk and into the human world.

Tab to indicate new paragraphs.

Note: the second paragraph expands on the first, showing more of Jack's actions and introduces the antagonist (meaning the bad guy, in this case, the giant).

*Jack and the Beanstalk* is one of twenty-two fables in my 56,000 word book, "English Fairy Tales." This compilation consists of unpublished stories as told by European storytellers. I've edited two published books of European folk tales. A member of the Storytellers' Guild, I attend their yearly conference, and host a monthly writers' critique group.

← Second paragraph concludes with a super-duper dire tease.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Joseph Jacob

Facebook: Storytime

Linkedin: J. Jacob

Blog: jospheystorydude.com

Twitter: @joseph's stories

Pinterest: joseph's cool stuff

YouTube: Storytime with Joseph

← Third paragraph includes your title, word count, genre, writing background (if any), plus affiliations/activities with writing/critique groups.

← Stack social media information flush left under your name. No need to add your email address, it's at the top of your email. Duh!

## QUERY EVALUATIONS AND MAKE-OVERS~

The following query letters have been created by members of “Molli’s Gang” of writers. Study each one and use the layout (when appropriate), as a template to help write your query. And of course, you can deviate a bit from the norm and present core information a little differently if your story requires this. What matters—however you decide to reveal it—is that your first paragraph is written so well the agent will recognize your talent and read your entire query.

Your first paragraph includes your goal, obstacle(s), and resolution tease. And yes, I harp on these three points because they *are* critical. Explaining them in your query is a *make-or-break* proposition in terms of landing an agent. This query format, developed over years of helping writers become published authors, absolutely works. It quickly reveals your story and main character (protagonist) and demonstrates who you are: a savvy, digitally-aware person with writing smarts and skills—the real deal.

I mentored the writers of the following to elevate their query letters from “rookie” to “stellar.” Some have produced the desired results of agent/contract/book on a shelf at Barnes and Noble. Others are in the process of achieving these goals. (*Disclaimer: I did not work with Sophie Littlefield, who graciously agreed to share her query that landed a top-notch agent and launched her career.*)

Notice how creatively each writer has described the story core: who wants what (goal), what stands in their way (obstacle), and the terrible “or else” tease (resolution).

First paragraphs really, really, really need to include an “or else” tease resolution to motivate the agent to keep reading. Same with the second paragraph, except this tease is more dire than the first. Both teases have one purpose: to motivate the agent to discover more about the story, *and* the writer, and then move on to synopsis and first pages, if these are included in your submission.

**NOTE:** Some agents request writers to follow a different format from what is suggested above. For example: you might be asked to begin your query with genre, title, and word count. No problem. Give ‘um *exactly* what they request!

**QUERY FOR:** “The Caller” • women’s fiction/romantic/mystery • 353 words

Betrayal and despair stalk Beth Stanton like a nighttime thug. Dumped by her lover, about to lose the family home, and with a twelve-year-Wall-Street career nothing but a memory, she decides enough is enough! Beth plunges into a new life, and looks forward to one filled with love, a secure homestead, and a unique career. The future looks bright, until Beth’s past emerges with a vengeance, hell-bent on taking her down a path of destruction and death.

Hours before Beth and her beloved sisters are set to open their 1930’s era family home as a Bed and Breakfast Inn, she receives the first threat scrawled across her morning paper. “You’ll pay for what you did.” Beth decides that someone believes she blew the whistle on her former Wall Street employer and caused its collapse. The threat is repeated in voice-disguised phone calls. Possible suspects mount. A colleague who offers advice, romance, and a sense of security, works against Beth behind her back. A widowed guest harbors a secret grudge against Beth’s former company as he captures her sister’s heart. Sleepless nights and sweaty palms abound. An “accidental” gas leak, intended to level the house, is detected in the nick of time. Next, the converted carriage barn behind the house burns to the ground, and is ruled arson. To protect her sisters and all she holds dear, Beth hires a retired cop to keep them safe and investigate the source of the threats. He not only saves Beth’s life (twice), but also offers the prospect of true love. Despite everyone’s best efforts, the surprise perpetrator escapes detection and arrives on Beth’s doorstep, determined to make good on the latest threat . . . death by Thanksgiving. Does Beth have one more resource she can muster, or will The Caller claim the ultimate victory?

My romantic suspense-mystery, “The Caller” is complete at 65,000 words. I am an active member of The Florida Writers’ Association, The Romance Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America, and a member of a critique group. “The Caller” received a Royal Palm Literary Award, a contest sponsored by the FWA.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Beth craves a different, more satisfying life, surrounded by her beloved sisters.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in her way?

Her past emerges with revenge in mind.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1:** What is the terrible “or else” in the first paragraph?

Beth must resolve issues from her past that threaten destruction and death of her future.

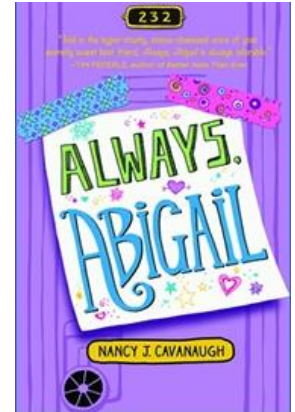
**TEASE RESOLUTION #2:** What is the dire “or else” at the end of the second paragraph?

Threats escalate to encompass everyone and everything Beth cherishes.

**QUERY FOR:** “Always Abigail” • mid-grade (MG) • 213 words

When Abigail’s dreams of becoming a pompom girl are dashed, she’s left in the awkward situation of having to choose between her two best friends and the school’s biggest outcast.

Abigail and her friends are poised for a year of pompoms and popularity. However, obstacles immediately mount for Abigail as she’s separated from her friends and stuck in Ms. Hendrick’s (aka Hendrick-the-Horrible-Hundred-Year-Old Hawk) homeroom. Old Hawk pairs Abigail with the schools biggest outcast, Gabby Marco, for a year-long “Friendly Letter” assignment. Abigail can hardly believe her bad luck, especially after she fails to make the pompom squad. As Abigail’s potential future of popularity slips away, she’s faced with the challenge of becoming an outsider when her former *best* friends turn against her. Finally, Abigail’s classroom association with Gabby, the loser of all losers, forces her to make a choice: struggle to cling to a thread of popularity, or let it go in order to become a real friend.



*Always Abigail*, complete at 35,000 words, is told in a unique format of notes, lists, and letters, which especially appeal to reluctant readers. My background includes 15 years of teaching middle school. I’m an active member of SCWBI, belong to a critique group, and attend writers' conferences and workshops.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Abigail craves a year of pompoms and popularity.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in her way?

Two obstacles block her. She is paired with the most unpopular girl in middle school *and* fails to make the pompom squad.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1:** What is the terrible “or else” in the first paragraph?

Abigail could become a social outcast. (A fate worse than leprosy for a 7<sup>th</sup> grade girl.)

**TEASE RESOLUTION #2:** What is the dire “or else” at the end of the second paragraph?

Abigail is forced to choose between becoming a real friend, or relinquish her self-esteem and grovel for scraps of attention from the snotty pompom queens, a choice that could launch a lifetime of self-defeatist attitudes.

**FYI:** *Always Abigail* is the first in a series of Nancy-written books for mid-grade readers.

**QUERY FOR:** “Chasing the Dragon” • mystery, romance, politics • 310 words

Senator Deacon Hamilton scrapped and clawed his way to the podium of the Republican National Convention, secure in his belief he was about to become the most powerful man on Earth. Only one person, his daughter Finley, could disrupt his history-making moment. Addicted to heroin and long estranged from the family, Finley might emerge from the shadows, and render his political career impotent with one tell-all YouTube video, seen around the world.

Deacon has every right to be nervous. After suffering a childhood of abuse at his hands, Finley craves payback, in the form of her father’s ambitious life in ruins. She disappears to a remote rehab facility in the mountains of North Carolina to sober up while she plots to destroy him and his ascension to unlimited power. Focused on vengeance, and wracked by painful memories no longer numbed by drugs, Finley is nurtured and supported by the family she’s always wanted, but never expected: her fellow addicts. Her hunger for retaliation recedes as her future blooms with promise and love rather than hate. Until Deacon locates her and targets everyone in her personal universe, intent on burying them all, along with the family secrets. Can Finley disarm the psychopath she calls “dad” with the only weapon he’s powerless to defend against . . . forgiveness . . . or will she fall victim to him one last time? Alive or dead, the campaign is on to finish the war between them.

*Chasing the Dragon* is complete at 84,000 words. The market for this story of abuse, survival, and forgiveness includes not only women who delight in emotional journeys, but also the 4.5 million victims recovering from physical and emotional abuse. I am an active member of Romance Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, Academy of American Poets, and the Southeastern Writer’s Association.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Finley’s wants revenge against her loathsome and power hungry father and to kill his dreams of ultimate power as the President of the United States.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in her way?

Finley’s addiction prevents her from being a credible accuser when she rats out dear old dad.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1:** What is the terrible “or else?” (Revealed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph).

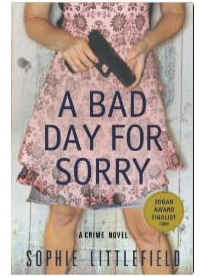
As Finley heals, her quest for revenge abates, placing her in a position of vulnerability as her father locates her whereabouts and plans to bury her and the family secrets.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #2:** What is the dire “or else” at the end of the second paragraph?

Will Finley survive or perish in the final battle against her father?

**FYI:** It’s smart to mention an additional market: victims of physical and emotional abuse.

**QUERY FOR:** “A Bad Day for Sorry” • women’s fiction, mystery, humor • 220 words



I am seeking representation for my 75,000-word thriller, "A Bad Day for Sorry."

Three years ago, rural Missouri housewife Stella Hardesty stopped her wife-beating husband in his tracks, for good. After being acquitted of his murder, Stella launched a career helping other abused women put an end to their problems. When Stella's on the job, abusive husbands and boyfriends disappear—sometimes to the far side of town, and sometimes forever.

When young mother Chrissy Shaw asks Stella for help with her no-good husband, it seems like a straightforward case. Until the husband, Roy Dean Shaw, disappears with Chrissy's 2-year-old son from a previous relationship. Now Stella and Chrissy must battle two-bit crooks and deadly Kansas City mafia to get the boy back—all the while staying one step ahead of the law.

I have written professionally for 10 years, publishing articles in computing, parenting, and women's magazines, and most recently working as a copywriter and editor for C&T Publishing. My short story, "Anything for You," was a runner-up for the Crime Writers' Association's 2007 Fish-Knife Award. Other short stories have appeared in "Thuglit" and "Pulp Pusher."

Thank you for taking the time to consider my work. As per your request, my first 10 pages and synopsis follow. Upon your request, I would be happy to provide the complete manuscript.

Sincerely,

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Stella is dedicated to help women escape from abusive domestic situations.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in the way?

Local crooks, the mafia, and the need to rescue a kidnapped child.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1:** What is the terrible “or else?”

Can Stella and her client evade the bad guys and rescue the kid?

**TEASE RESOLUTION #2:** What is the dire “or else” at the end of the second paragraph?

Stella faces life in an orange jump suit unless she can accomplish her goals *and* stay one step ahead of the law.

**FYI:** As per the request of the agent, the book title, word count, and genre appear in the query first line. Sophie’s query slightly deviates from the industry standard, yet presents the core of the story in an intriguing and humorous manner. Plus, it hints at the tone of the book.



## QUERY REVISION/MAKEOVER #1

**QUERY FOR:** “The Girl Who Called Ghost” • YA, paranormal • 307 words

Sixteen-year-old Alexandria Hawkings knows that lying spins a dangerous web, but she also knows her lies are the only things that save her.

At her new school, everything about Alex stands out, from her fishnet stockings and combat boots to the fibs she tells about her family, intended to impress her classmates. Alex desperately wants friends, but she was born the unpopular, quirky half of twin siblings and her family has taken up residence in the town’s rumored-to-be haunted house. To compound matters, Alex hears voices in her head—voices that guide and torment her. One night Alex is visited by Katarina, a dead girl who had died at her same age. They form an unusual alliance when Katarina asks Alex to help solve the mystery behind her death. Voices in her head. Seeing ghosts. Maybe she really is crazy. Alex worries about how she will convince others she’s seeing ghosts when she’s lied so often in the past. Fortunately for Alex, not all hope is lost. Dexter the school nerd, befriends Alex and makes it his personal quest to try to help solve Katarina’s mystery. Dexter seems to be Alex’s best shot, but there’s something not quite right about him.

THE GIRL WHO CRIED GHOST, complete at 74,000 words, is a YA paranormal novel, the first in a planned trilogy. Readers who like THE GHOST HUNTRESS series and GHOST GIRL might also enjoy THE GIRL WHO CRIED GHOST. I am the Regional Director of the Florida Writers’ Association, a member of the SCBWI, WEbook, YALITCHAT.org, and was senior editor of Fabulous 4orties Magazine. I moderate two adult and one teen writers’ critique groups.

I appreciate your consideration of my work and look forward to hearing from you.

### My comments~

The captivating opening sentence introduces the protagonist who wants to be saved from something dire. This implies an unfolding mystery, a great “hook” that will keep the agent reading.

The vivid description of Alex reveals her to be a complex teenager who lies to gain social acceptance with her peers. Since the twin is not mentioned again and it’s unclear what part she plays in the story, it’s better to leave her out of the query.

It’s important to clarify *why* Alex decides to help a ghost unravel the mystery of her death. I suggest a bit more information about why Katarina is trapped between worlds. Is it because her killer

has not been brought to justice? Or, does Alex identify with this spirit being who, like herself, doesn't belong?

When Alex enlists the aid of Dexter, what is it she senses that isn't quite right about him? Is he more than a volunteer? Could he be the murderer or an accomplice, determined to thwart the investigation, or quiet Alex permanently if she comes too close to uncovering the truth?

The terrible "or else" in the second paragraph needs to refer to Alex, not Dexter. Whatever threat Alex faces needs to be intense enough that the agent will want to read more of this story.

The writer lists impressive credentials, particularly her involvement in a critique group of teens. It's a smart idea to compare her story with other popular YA paranormal books of a similar nature.

## Revision~

Sixteen-year-old Alexandria Hawkings knows lying spins a dangerous web. But, she realizes lying may be her key to solving a mysterious death and preventing another one—her own.

Wearing fishnet stockings and combat boots, Alex doesn't fit in with the kids at her new school. She resorts to outrageous fibs about her life to change the dialogue (and deflect snickers) about how her family must be crazy to have bought the "haunted" house at the edge of town. Stressed over being the campus odd ball, Alex wonders if she really *is going crazy* when she begins to see *and* hear ghosts in her bedroom. One of them introduces herself as Katarina, a murdered teenager. She begs Alex to solve the mystery surrounding her death, an event so traumatic it imprisons her in a murky void between worlds. Now a firm believer in ghosts, and positive that she can help Katarina move on to a more highly evolved spiritual plane, Alex fibs her way around campus, asking questions about Katarina. A new friend, Dexter, the school nerd, volunteers to help her. Although there seems to be something not quite right about Dexter, she accepts his assistance as they dig through school records. These reveal a surprising picture of the murdered girl's life, *including* her friendship with Dexter. As Alex unravels clue after clue, she unknowingly pulls closer to the killer and the potential of becoming the next victim.

*The Girl Who Cried Ghost*, a YA paranormal story, is complete at 74,000 words. Readers of the *Ghost Huntress* series and *Ghost Girl* will enjoy my story. I'm a former senior editor of "Fabulous 40ties," and now am the Regional Director of the Florida Writers' Association, a member of SCBWI, WEbook, and YALITCHAT. I also moderate three writers' critique groups.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

## My comments~

I've added a line to explain why Alex becomes involved, and have expanded the threat by describing how she is setting herself up to become the next victim. The three titles in the third

paragraph looked awkward in ALL CAPS, so I've shifted them to upper/lower case and italic for ease of reading. I don't recommend mentioning future books, at least not at this point. The agent will be more open to a series once the first book is published and selling well. The writer needs to focus on the current story, polishing it so it becomes irresistible agent bait. Discussion about subsequent books will develop as the business relationship between writer, agent, and publisher matures.

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Alex fabricates outrageous lies to fit in and make friends at her new school.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in the way?

Alex chooses to give up on her quest to fit in and continue to use lies to gain information about Katarina's death.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1:** What is the terrible "or else?"

Alex continues to lie, except now with a purpose, which places her in peril.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #2:** What is the more dire "or else" in the second paragraph?

Alex accepts Dexter's assistance to unravel the mystery, moves that pull Alex closer to the unknown murderer, and increase the potential she will be silenced, permanently.

## QUERY REVISION/OVERHAUL

**QUERY FOR:** "Hair of the Dog" • Adult fiction, humor • 370 words

Overloaded with quips, amusing comments, and Hollywood-ish descriptions, this query is so clever and confusing it requires multiple reads to figure out who is what and where and when and why.

### FIRST DRAFT:

A former attorney and chef turned repo man and bounty hunter takes on what should be a simple, L.A. kind of case: recovering a lost Lhasa Apso belonging to a local businessman's wanna-be starlet girlfriend. But before he can say, "Let's take a meeting", bodies begin dropping like outtakes on the cutting room floor and he's scrambling to stay one step ahead of a crooked, height-challenged lawyer and a hit man who really loves his job.

HAIR OF THE DOG is approximately 70,000 words of fast-paced and funny detective fiction, reminiscent of Janet Evanovich and Carl Hiaasen as it pokes good natured, satiric fun at the West L.A./Beverly Hills mentality, as well as the movie industry.

Moe "Fish" Fishbein is a Harley-riding repo man and bounty hunter, with a ton of tats and a

Buddha-licious grin; his assistant, Einstein is up for his Ph.d in physics; and Kenny, well, let's just say Kenny exited the 60s a few brain synapses short of a full set.

The three are hired by a Beverly Hills jeweler to find his trophy girlfriend's missing lap dog, which jumped out of her Mercedes convertible at a stoplight in Bel Air. But somehow, he neglects to mention the tiny dog is wearing a collar studded with more than \$3 million in hot diamonds, and that he stole them so that he could support his gold digging girlfriend's wanna-be film career a little longer.

Next thing they know, their client gets whacked in the men's room of a deli, his girlfriend makes some serious moves on Fish, and they're all on the radar of a psychotic, mountain of a hit man named Leon, who wears nothing but black Armani and talks like Marilyn Monroe.

Then Leon takes out the jeweler's long-suffering, guilt inspiring Jewish mother, kidnaps Einstein and holds him in a sleazy motel in the wrong part of town, and bodies are piling up faster than an old Chuck Norris flick.

Can Fish find the little lost dog and rescue his best friend and road brother before the hit man in black can add any more to his body count?

Just have your people call our people.

I'm a single parent, living in the Los Angeles area with my two sons, Hoss and Little Joe. And I've been writing ads, commercials and winning my share of Belding, Pioneer, and Andy awards for more than 30 years. I've also been a finalist in a couple of writer's competitions (Santa Barbara among them).

Knowing your interest in commercial, detective and humorous fiction, I hope HAIR OF THE DOG resonates with you and I look forward to your response.

Until then, thanks very much for your time.

## **My comments~**

I guided this author through several drafts until he wrote the following version (just a tad over the limit of 350 words) that retains his humor, tells the story, demonstrates a unique and different writing style, and doesn't require a score card to keep track of the characters and/or bodies.

## **Final draft revision~**

Moe "Fish" Fishbein, a former chef turned repo man, bounty hunter, and private detective, takes on what should be a simple, Hollywood kind of case: recovering a lost Lhasa Apso belonging to a local businessman's wanna-be starlet girlfriend. But, before he can say, "Let's do lunch," bodies begin dropping like outtakes on the cutting room floor and he's scrambling to stay one step ahead of the law and a cross-dressing hit man who really loves his job.

Fish and his partner are the go-to guys for show business A-listers with runaway spouses and

agents with celebrity clients who've jumped bail. When he's hired to find the missing pooch which jumped out of a Mercedes convertible in Bel Air, his life goes upside down and sideways. Fish becomes public enemy #1, wanted for dog napping, jewel stealing, and . . . oh yes, the mysterious deaths of the starlet and boyfriend.

Somehow, the dead boyfriend had forgotten to mention the missing pooch wore a collar studded with more than \$3 million in hot diamonds intended to support the also-dead starlet's wanna-be film career. When news of the caper is leaked, it becomes *the* talk of the town. Planted evidence fingers Fish as the hit man and dog napper. Not only are the cops after him, but Fish also becomes the target of a psychotic, 400-pound killer, hired by a corrupt attorney who wants the diamonds for himself. Before Fish can clear his name, find the dog, and solve the murders, the hit man snatches his associate and emails Fish an offer he can't refuse: give me one jeweled dog collar in return for a moderately pistol-whipped partner. Fish has to move fast, stay out of jail, find the pooch, the collar, rescue his colleague, and stop the bodies from piling up faster than in a Chuck Norris flick.

*Hair of the Dog* is 72,000 words of quirky detective fiction. I'm a single parent, living in the Los Angeles area with my sons, Hoss and Little Joe. I've been writing ads, commercials, and have won my share of Belding, Pioneer, and Andy awards for more than 30 years. I've been a finalist in several statewide writing competitions.

If my story interests you, have your people text my people.

Air kiss, air kiss.

**GOAL:** Who wants what and why?

Fish wants to survive what seems to be a simple dog retrieval.

**OBSTACLE:** What stands in his way?

An enormous hit man and the Bel Air Police Department.

**TEASE RESOLUTION #1 and #2:** What is the terrible "or else?" Fish might be collared by the cops, killed by the hit man, *and* cause the death of his partner.

## 11-POINT QUERY CHECK LIST

Before you cut and paste your query into the email, check the following:

1. Have you used an easy-to-read font like “Georgia,” 12 point, single spaced or with spacing set “exactly” at 16 pt. to provide eye rest?
2. Are your paragraphs tabbed in five (5) spaces?
3. Is your query three paragraphs?
4. Have you written it in 350 words or less?
5. Did you clearly present your story core? Who wants what? Why? Why not? Or Else!
6. Does your query begin on the *very first line* of your email?
7. Have you included a “tease” at the end of the first and second paragraphs?
8. Does your query contain red-flag words like those listed in my mini-tutorial?
9. Did you add your email address below your name? (Trick question! Your email address is on the email itself. No need to include it again.)
10. Are your social media activities (if any) stacked below your contact information?
11. Did you double check the agent’s email address and follow any *specific* query submission instructions such as including “Query” or the their name on the SUBJECT line in front of your enticing 7 to 10 words?

## IN CLOSING~

Now, dear writer, it's time for you to sit down and practice, practice, practice writing a query as if your future as an author depends on it . . . because it does.

Be gentle with yourself. Acknowledge that you're going through a learning curve as you shift from *telling* your story to *selling* your story.

Is this stressful? Yes it is!

Can you do it! Of course!

You can learn to create a submission packet (query, synopsis, and sample pages) that will land an agent to guide you through the publishing maze.

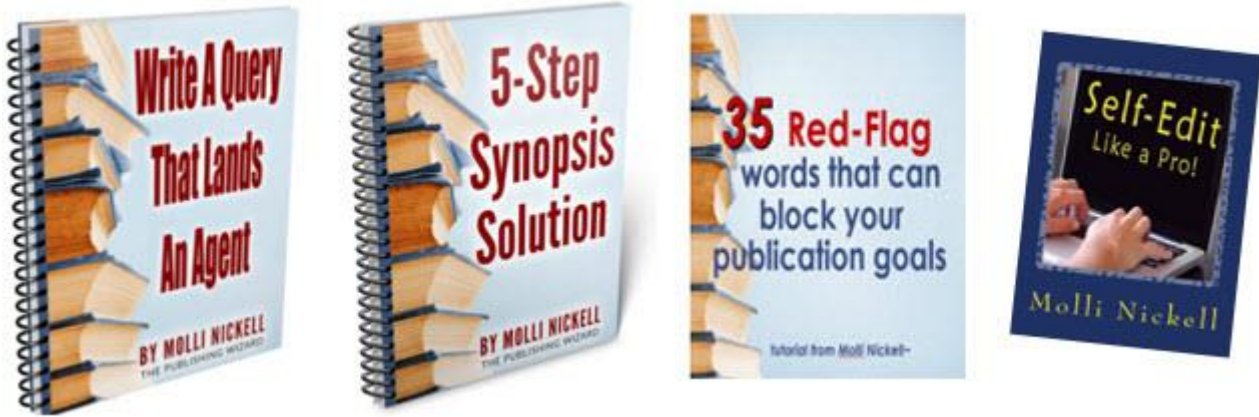
**PS:** If you want assistance on any aspect of the learning curve between polished manuscript and agent representation, contact me. I'll help you. Doesn't matter if you want a manuscript review or personal guidance to help you write your query, synopsis, and/or first pages (which need to be tailored for the agents who will read them). Use the contact page on my website, address below.

## About the author~

During my 35 years in the publishing business, I've authored and edited books, acquired (and rejected) manuscripts, written articles, designed projects, presented keynotes, and led workshops for publishing giants, national associations, and major institutions including:



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May the words be with you!

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