

# Anatomy of a Kick A\$\$ Query Letter

JAN 12, 2015 by Kent Bridgeman

 published in Community*Art is fire plus algebra. — Jorge Luis Borges*

Query letters are strange and intimidating beasts. They are the much obsessed, much abused, much scorned part of the marketing process. Essentially they are like movie trailers for your book; they create the urge to see more.

Somehow, by some feat of magic, you are forced to describe your 80,000+ word novel in a page, really just a few brief paragraphs.

How the heck do you do it?

You've already written a novel (or you're working on it), so the hardest part is over. By connecting to the fire, what you love about your story, and using the algebra of a query letter, the form, you can craft a compelling and highly readable query.

I'm assuming you have the fire covered, so I'll focus on the structure of the letter, the algebra.

## Parts of the Query Letter

A Query can be divided into four basic parts:

- 1 The Introduction, aka "The Hook"
- 2 The Body
- 3 The Tag
- 4 The Bio

Each section has a unique function designed to engage the reader by sparking their interest and helping them envision how to sell your story, which is, after all, an agent's job.

One nice thing about Query letters is that each part can be customized and rearranged, depending on what makes the most sense for your story.

One core thing to remember is this: Don't lose your fire. Use your style, your voice, to tell the story, even if it is only a couple paragraphs.

### 1. The Hook – 2 – 3 sentences

Agents read a lot of these things. You've got to grab their attention pretty quickly. There are a couple ways to do this.

#### The meaningful connection

You mention some connection you have to this specific person you are querying. This works very well if you have met the agent at a writer's conference and had a chance to describe your work:

*Dear Mr. Olsom,**I was thrilled to have the chance to met you at The Writers Digest conference last august. I'm even more excited to have finished the novel I pitched you then, The Awakening of the Socks.*

Other meaningful connections might include following the agent's blog or really enjoying a book that they landed a deal for. This tactic involves a bit of homework, but can really get your foot in the door right off the bat.

#### In Medias Rey

Another method that works well, especially if you don't have much of a connection to the agent, is to launch into the story. For example:

*Dear Ms. Mesler,**Brie has a problem. Not only do her socks not match, but they seem to be... alive!*

This technique works to grab your agent reader right off the bat, and help them get a feel for your voice

### 2. Pitch (3 – 10 sentences)

The Pitch is notoriously the hardest part of a Query Letter to write. It's here that you actually tell the story. So, how do you sum up 60,000 – 100,000+ words in ten sentences or less?

The good news is, you *don't*.

A pitch is a lot like the text you'll find on the back of a paperback or in the inner flap of a hardcover book. It's a teaser, a lot like movie trailer. It gives you enough to want to see more (like all great movie trailers).

You'll want to focus on the first third of your story, the first act in other words. Starting with the Plot Catalyst or the inciting incident you'll then kick into other key details about the story. You might cover some backstory, character insights; plot points or a mix of all three.

The key is to answer the important questions about your story:

- What is the book about?
- What makes this story unique?
- Who are the major players?

Let's add to our example:

*Brie has a problem. Not only do her socks not match, but they seem to be... alive! [Catalyst] After a strange dream of aliens visiting her room (at least she thinks it was a dream), Brie's socks start disappearing. Next, the remaining ones start talking to her telepathically! [Backstory] Brie thinks she going nuts until one night her socks guide her to the crash site of a UFO. [Character insight/Plot Point] With only her socks to guide her, Brie is charged with getting the aliens back home and saving the world in the process! She's gonna need more fabric softener.*

This isn't a treatment or a synopsis. You don't need to spill the ending or even get into the second act. Just focus on giving a succinct and compelling description of the first part of your book.

Remember; use your voice to tell your story. Let your fire come through, especially in this part.

### 3. The Tag – 1-2 Sentences

The tag is a brief thumbnail of your book. It tells the title of the book, how many words and the genre with a word or two about target audience. This is really pretty easy, think of it as telling someone where your book belongs in a book store:

*The Awakening of the Socks is a 80,000 word YA novel that blends Sci Fi and humor in the spirit of Douglas Adam's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.*

This is also a good place to mention if this book is part of a trilogy or series of books.

### 4. Bio 2 – 4 sentences

It's not uncommon for new writers to admit the Bio. And that's fine; it even gives you a little more room to add to your Pitch. This section is really just about vetting you and showing why you are the best person to have written this book. Some things you could mention:

- Who are you?
- Qualifications
- Published books, short stories or articles
- School or training
- Awards
- Platforms, promotional processes
- Where you live, who you live with and pets

Example:

*I am a full time novelist and Mom. I live in Toronto with my hubby Jordan and vengeful hamster Morgan. I hold an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU. My short stories have been published in Tin House and The Atlantic. My first book, Journey to Hamsterville, received a Critics award for best new comedic novel.*

## Wrap Up

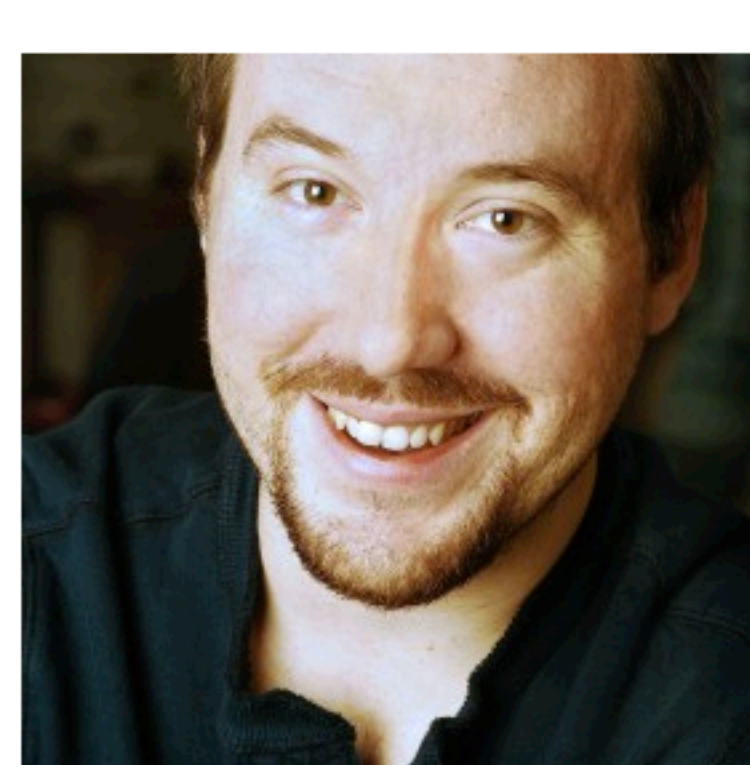
Here are the key points to take away when setting out to write your kick ass Query:

- Write in your voice; let the reader feel the heat of your fire through the algebra of the query.
- Hook your reader with a meaningful connection or by jumping into the story.
- Pitch your story by focusing on the first act of your story.
- Tag your story: let the reader know how to sell your story by clearly defining what the story is and who will like it.
- Show why you're the best person to write this story by including a pertinent bio (or omit and focus on strengthening your pitch)

In case you're curious, click here to see the full Query we used as an example.

*Dear Mr. Olsom,**I was thrilled to have the chance to met you at The Writers Digest conference last august. I'm even more excited to have finished the novel I pitched you then, The Awakening of the Socks.**Brie has a problem. Not only do her socks not match, but they seem to be... alive! [Catalyst] After a strange dream of aliens visiting her room (at least she thinks it was a dream), Brie's socks start disappearing. Next, the remaining ones start talking to her telepathically! [Backstory] Brie thinks she going nuts until one night her socks guide her to the crash site of a UFO. [Character insight/Plot Point] With only her socks to guide her, Brie is charged with getting the aliens back home and saving the world in the process! She's gonna need more fabric softener.**The Awakening of the Socks is a 80,000 word YA novel that blends Sci Fi and humor in the spirit of Douglas Adam's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.**I am a full time novelist and Mom. I live in Toronto with my hubby Jordan and vengeful hamster Morgan. I hold an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU. My short stories have been published in Tin House and The Atlantic. My first book, Journey to Hamsterville, received a Critics award for best new comedic novel.**All the best,**Cynthia Small*

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