How to write a query (submission) letter

Sophie Hamley – November 2015 version

Your query/cover letter should clearly state, in the opening paragraph, without too much ancillary text:

1. The title of your work.
2. The genre – or, if you can’t define the genre, just say that, but then clearly describe the storyline so that the agent or publisher can attempt to guess a genre.
3. The word count.
4. Anything defining about the setting (place and/or time) or the main character, although these things can be saved for the pitch.

As an example: ‘TITLE is a young adult novel of 50 000 words set in Australia during the 1950s.’

In the following one or two paragraphs, pitch your work, including a short description of the story – not the whole synopsis – and mention of main characters. This doesn’t have to be a ‘perfect pitch’ – you just need to be able to state clearly what’s good/different/appealing about your manuscript. Start with the pitch and then lead into the description.

You may also state that the manuscript ‘may appeal to readers of …’ but don’t be grandiose and say that you write like so-and-so author (especially do not mention JK Rowling).

Then, in one short paragraph, provide any other information that is relevant (e.g. if you are a journalist writing about a subject you’ve covered for years; if you have had short stories published; if you’re a member of a writers’ centre or association). If you don’t have any ‘writing credits’, that’s okay – just say what inspired you to write the story or something like that.

Your query/cover letter should not state, especially in the first paragraph:

i) That being a published author is your dream - this is assumed.
ii) That it’s taken you X number of years to write this manuscript and you hope it’s ready now. The amount of years it takes to write is not a badge of honour, it’s just a fact.
iii) What you think having an agent or publisher will do for you and how it fits into your dream of winning an Oscar and the Booker Prize (you’d be surprised how often there are variations on this theme).
iv) That you are the world’s greatest undiscovered/unpublished writer and the agent/publisher will be sorry if they don’t take you on (this one also turns up a surprising number of times).
v) That your best friend or mother thinks you’ve written a work of genius.