

QUERY LETTER BASICS

WHAT IS A QUERY?

A query is a pitch for your book, a cover letter that you send to prospective agents, to get them interested in reading your book. Many agents ask you to send pages along with your query, and your job is to get them to want to read those pages!

A query consists of 3 essential parts + 2 optional:

THE HOOK

A pithy one-liner that sums up what makes your book/character/concept compelling/intriguing. The hook should also introduce us to your main character and convey a sense of who they are and what they want. The hook may also be the inciting incident/main plot thrust.

Tip: DON'T start with a question, let alone a rhetorical one! Ever. Agents hate them. Ditto cheesy loglines.

THE BOOK

The essence of your book, boiled down to a paragraph or two. Essential to this section: conflict & stakes. What does your character want, what is standing in their way, and what will happen if they fail?

Tip: DON'T summarize the whole book, or spoil big plot twists/ending. Tease the set-up/character/conflict/stakes the way a back of book blurb would.

THE COOK

About you! If you don't have previous publishing credits or relevant experience, keep it short and sweet: who you are, maybe what you do or where you live. You don't need to say it is your first/only novel, as that is assumed.

Tip: DON'T talk more about yourself than your book.

OPTIONAL

COMPARATIVE TITLES

Book comps tell an agent a) where your book would sit on the shelf and b) that you are well-read/knowledgeable about your genre. Don't use mega-popular comps: Harry Potter, Twilight, Divergent, etc.

Media comps are TV shows, films and other pop culture concepts that can help an agent pin down your book's concept/tone. You can use these in combination with book comps to give them a sense of your book's "flavor" or scope.

PERSONALIZATION

Many agents like hearing why you are querying them specifically. Don't get too flowery, and be genuine. A good personalization at the start can get an agent interested in your query. BUT personalization is optional, and don't stretch trying to say something. When in doubt, don't personalize!

QUERY ESSENTIALS

Every story boils down to character, conflict and stakes, which is precisely what you need to convey in your query. The best queries also include the inciting incident—the moment in your book where the lynchpin of the plot/conflict takes place. A combination of these elements, woven well, should answer the key question an agent will be asking: “what is your book about, and why should I care?” If they care, they’ll read!

CHARACTER

Introduce your main character either in your first line hook, or soon thereafter. Instead of giving an agent plot beats, center your query around the character—who are they, what do they want, and why should we care?

+

CONFLICT

What is standing in the way of what your character wants? This is your essential conflict. If paragraph 1-2 contain your hook & character, the “book” paragraph is where you lay out conflict and stakes.

+

STAKES

The stakes are what the main character has to lose, in relation to the conflict. Character + conflict + stakes should make the agent feel something, especially a punch in the gut with the stakes, or a sense of anticipation, re: how on the earth the character will overcome the conflict to avoid the stakes.

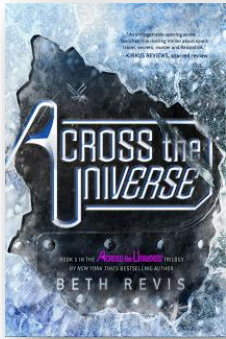
QUERY DOs & DON'Ts



- DO** carefully research & selectively query agents
- DO** make sure your query fits on a single page
- DO** follow submission guidelines
- DO** tell an agent you are a fan of their clients' books
- DO** include your main character's age in your query
- DO** be sure to spell the agent's name correctly, and apply the correct gender



- DON'T** ever open with a question
- DON'T** address the agent as “Dear Agent”
- DON'T** attach your whole manuscript unless explicitly asked
- DON'T** mass email agents
- DON'T** name drop someone unless they explicitly give you permission
- DON'T** insult YA, the agent, their authors, or any of the genres they represent



SUCCESSFUL QUERY: BETH REVIS

The following query landed New York Times bestselling author Beth Revis her agent—renowned Writers House agent Merilee Heifetz.

Dear Agent,

Seventeen-year-old Amy has no desire to become one of the first colonists on a new planet--but her parents do. So she agrees to be cryogenically frozen for the journey, even if it means giving up the life she loves on Earth.

Much later, Elder--part of the generations of workers born on the ship--begins his training as the future commander. He has no idea of the cargo of cryogenically frozen people hidden beneath his feet.

Then Amy wakes up fifty years early.

Amy must now adjust to life without her still-frozen parents on board a space ship that is vastly different from her home on Earth. Trapped by both the metal walls of the ship and the lies that keep it running, Amy discovers her cryo chamber hadn't malfunctioned--someone had tried to kill her. As more and more helplessly frozen victims are unplugged, Amy combines her knowledge of the past with Elder's knowledge of the ship to find and stop the murderer...before Amy's parents are the next victims.

Complete at 80,000 words, ACROSS THE UNIVERSE is science fiction for teens who don't like science fiction. **The character-driven plot with a focus on mystery, secrets, and an unreliable narrator will appeal to fans of Mary Pearson's THE ADORATION OF JENNA FOX, and the contained mystery may attract older readers of Jeanne du Prau's CITY OF EMBER.**

I am currently a high school world literature teacher and an active member of SCBWI, having been published in and working as the copy editor of the state SCBWI magazine. I can be found online at bethrevis.com or [email].

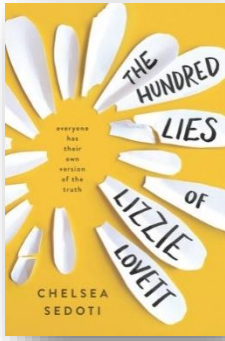
I am prepared to submit the entire manuscript upon your request. Thank you for your time and consideration with this project. Below are the first five pages as a sample of my writing.

Sincerely,
Beth Revis

Beth opens with/focuses on a character driven set-up. She also teases her dual POV by briefly covering each POV character.

Your last paragraph or so should cover conflict & stakes like Beth does here. She also works in world details/color without overkill.

Excellent, detailed use of comps.



SUCCESSFUL QUERY: CHELSEA SEDOTI

Chelsea's debut novel just came out, and this is the query she sent to her agent, Suzie Townsend.

Dear Ms. Townsend,

Hawthorn Creely has spent her life waiting for something to happen. Something meaningful. Something extraordinary. Something real. Now, at seventeen, Hawthorn suspects all that waiting was a waste of time. You can't wait for excitement, you need to go out and find it.

And that's how Hawthorn ends up in the middle of a missing persons investigation.

On its own, Lizzie Lovett's disappearance is a totally boring event. Sure, people are saying Lizzie probably got eaten by a wild animal or murdered by her boyfriend or something, but they don't mean it. Everyone knows bad things don't happen to girls like Lizzie Lovett.

Hawthorn's pretty sure Lizzie will turn up at any moment, thus ending the only fascinating mystery their town has ever had. Which means the time for crazy speculation is now. Not one to pass up an opportunity, Hawthorn comes up with her own theory for Lizzie's disappearance. A theory way too absurd to take seriously. At first.

But a strange thing happens. The more Hawthorn talks, the more she believes the words coming from her mouth. The more she talks, the more she needs to believe them.

It doesn't take long for Hawthorn to move beyond theorizing and into the more complicated realm of looking for proof. And what better way to find evidence than immersing herself in Lizzie's life?

Admittedly, it's a tiny bit inappropriate. But also totally necessary. Because if Hawthorn's theory is right, it's not just exciting. It's something so monumental it could change her life forever.

Either that or lead to complete disaster.

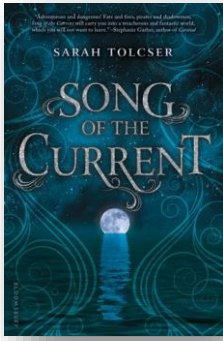
THE MOONLIGHTERS is a contemporary young adult novel, complete at 75,000 words. I have included the first five pages with this email.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Chelsea Sedoti

This gets across a bit of voice with the cadence of the sentences, which also gives a sense of the character's personality. The hook catches the eye as a standalone sentence.

Chelsea's query is a bit longer than recommended HOWEVER the cadence is zippy, readable and gives an excellent sense of the plot and tone. The conflict & stakes are sprinkled throughout, and are both character & plot driven.



SUCCESSFUL QUERY: SARAH TOLCSER

Sarah's debut novel, *SONG OF THE CURRENT*, comes out June 6, 2017 from Bloomsbury. This is the query that got her her agent, Susan Hawk.

Dear Ms. Hawk,

Caroline Oresteia has only ever wanted to be a smuggler like her dad. She dreams of captaining the family sailing wherry someday. That day comes too soon when Caro's father is arrested for refusing to transport a mysterious crate of cargo. In exchange for his freedom, Caro must make the delivery instead.

After pirates attack the wherry in search of the cargo she's carrying, Caro's curiosity gets the best of her. She cracks open the crate, finding the last thing she expected: a boy in an enchanted sleep. When Caro accidentally wakes him, she discovers that Markos is the missing heir to the Akhaian Empire. His father is dead, murdered by his cousin, who now holds the throne. Markos' cousin has hired the Black Dogs, a pirate company, to hunt down the remaining members of the royal family. Caro is dismayed to learn her cargo isn't interested in being delivered. Instead, he wants to go on a mad quest to save his little sister.

But Caro doesn't take orders from anyone, especially on her own boat. She's an Oresteia—after all, didn't her grandpa once famously fight off river bandits with only a knife and a frying pan? Nothing's going to get in her way, not traitorous shadowmen, meddling gods, or her estranged mother, whose powerful family might be interested in Markos for their own purposes. And certainly not Markos himself, who's rude and spoiled—and might just change her fate, if she doesn't throw him overboard first.

RIVERBORN, a YA high fantasy set in an alternate Age of Sail, is the story of a flintlock-toting girl pirate and the prince who's messing up her life, and is complete at 108,000 words. This book is a standalone project but has series potential. The full manuscript is available upon request.

I hold a B.A. in English and philosophy from St. Lawrence University. I live in New Orleans, where I am an elementary technology teacher. Thank you for your consideration.

Sarah Tolcser

First sentence tells you immediately who the main character is. The last sentence tells you the inciting incident/hook.

TONS of layers of conflict here that have inherent stakes, re: personal welfare of the main character & what she wants.

There are also layers of stakes in the next paragraph, and some nice voicey writing—but not overly voicey. You can already tell the MC will jump off the page.

Sarah's query is long, and heavy on plot/detail, but it works. This is an example of when you can break the rule—when the query works, making the agent want to read more.

SUCCESSFUL QUERY: HEATHER KACZYNSKI

Now called DARE MIGHTY THINGS and coming out October 10, 2017 from HarperTeen, this is the query that caught Kristin Nelson's attention. Heather is my longtime critique partner and I helped her with her query!

Dear Ms. Nelson,

Seventeen-year-old Cassie Gupta was made for space. Literally. But despite her genetically engineered DNA, Cassie's dream of becoming an astronaut seems hopeless. NASA hasn't minted any new astronauts since the Mars landing, and the crewed space program is circling the drain. So when she's offered the chance to compete for a spot on a very hush-hush experimental mission, Project Adastra, Cassie accepts without a second thought.

At astronaut bootcamp, Cassie discovers her enhanced smarts and athletics do little to set her apart from the sixty-three other cutthroat geniuses vying for the top spot. Navigating the psychological tests and complex social aspects of close-quarter living, Cassie must choose who to trust—her temperamental roommate Hanna, the effusive and flirty Emilio, or the loner and her number one competition, Luka. Making friends doesn't come naturally to Cassie, but the tenuous and risky alliances of bootcamp may be her only shot at success.

When game turns dangerous—and violent—after a high stakes space simulation, Cassie begins to question whether NASA is really running the show, and why they're looking for an astronaut in a pool of untrained kids. The deeper she gets into the program, the more she realizes she's in over her head. But nothing will keep her from the stars—not even the true objective of Project Adastra.

LIMITLESS is a YA *Contact* with a multicultural cast that will appeal to fans of Malinda Lo's ADAPTATION and Shannon Hale's DANGEROUS. Complete at 82,000 words, it is the first of a planned duology. The full manuscript is available on request.

I work in an Army library on Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, home of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center and birthplace of the technology that took men to the moon.

Thanks so much for your time and consideration,

Heather Kaczynski

Heather packs a lot of detail/color from her world & main character here but without overloading the information. The details she chooses to reveal play into conflict & stakes.

The whole query is details + conflicts + rising tension, and it culminates nicely here, echoing the rising tension & mystery tone of the book