

workshop #2 Composing a pitch letter

Introduction

Every submission needs to be accompanied by a pitch letter, also known as a 'query letter' or 'cover letter'.

If you're submitting a novel, the letter will be addressed to a literary agent or an editor in an independent publishing company (see the Submission Process section of Get Published on the website). And the most important thing to do is put yourself in their shoes.

Agents and editors are people besieged. Their desks and shelves, the floors around and beneath their desks, are piled high with jiffy bags and manuscripts. Crime writers' agent Jane Gregory gets 4,000 book submissions a year; Virago editor Lennie Goodings gets 80 a week.

They long to discover a marvellous new author, but they have to wade through a mountains of submissions for every one they take on. Your pitch letter is there to help them do their work. It should tell them what they need to know – which is not necessarily what you want to tell them.

A friend of mine recently took leave of absence from her high-powered job to write a novel. When I asked what the book was about, she said: 'It's an allegory based on the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It explores two conflicting aspects of womanhood: the madonna and the whore.' It was an answer – but it didn't answer my question. She'd told me what she wanted me to know about the book, but she hadn't told me what I wanted to know.

I tried again. 'So what happens in the story?' I asked. 'It's about a woman who becomes possessed by the spirit of a dead man, who makes her behave in a sexually predatory manner.' Bingo! Now I'm interested.

I hope you can see how an agent reading the first version might sigh and drop her head into her hands – and how the second might make her sit up and turn eagerly to the rest of the submission.

What's in a pitch letter?

A pitch letter needs to interest an agent or editor in the book's subject matter, it needs to convince them it will sell, and it needs to tell them something about you as an author.

The letter should be short – around 150 words and no more than 250 – and it should fit on one side of A4 paper, single-spaced with generous margins. Use a 12-point character size in a no-nonsense font.

Divide it into three paragraphs as follows:

- the first paragraph should say what the book is about
- the second should describe the book's genre and style, and why it's interesting and important
- the third should say something about you, the author

You'd be surprised how many people start their pitch letters with a paragraph about themselves. But unless you are already famous, or aged under 18 or over 80, an agent won't care two hoots who you are until you have interested them in your book. So you have to begin your letter with what they want to know first – which is what your book is about.

We writers are bad at choosing titles because we know too much about our books. We know all their subplots; we know what they mean. As a result we tend towards titles that are abstract, grandiose and obscure.

Editor Sajidah Ahmad says: *Here's a quote from a letter that made me want to read on: 'It's about a woman who comes to terms with her phobias and panic attacks during a journey with a small-time criminal.'*

EXERCISE 1

What is your book about?

This first exercise is to help you focus on what

actually happens in your book. Below is a series of four questions. Please write the answer to each question in a couple of complete sentences. Don't try to impress; just write the answers as if you're writing a letter to a friend – and keep it short! Give yourself one minute for each answer.

- **Who is your main character?**

(e.g. *The book is about Helen Gloag, the teenage daughter of a Scottish blacksmith, who runs away from home and boards a ship to the Colonies in 1769.*)

- **What is s/he like?**

(e.g. *She's headstrong and striking, with pale skin and a wild mane of 'Gloag hair', the colour of amber. She's a poor girl who adores pretty things and longs for the trappings of wealth.*)

- **What is s/he trying to achieve in the novel?**

(e.g. *She wants to marry the Emperor of Morocco. When her ship is attacked by pirates, her colouring sets her apart and she's sold into his harem. Here she becomes one of 4,000 concubines, all vying to become his fourth wife.*)

- **What's standing in his or her way?**

(e.g. *The role of wife is dangerous. One of the Emperor's wives has fallen mysteriously ill; another has gone insane. Is there poison or witchcraft in the harem?*)

If you've followed these instructions, you have just written the components of what's known as the 'dramatic premise' of your book. This takes the following form: 'This is a story about X, who wants Y, but is impeded by Z.'

Now take five minutes to edit your sentences into a 50-word paragraph about your book.

Two pieces of advice before you start:

- steer clear of abstract words; this should be about the nitty-gritty of what happens, not about underlying processes
- don't comment on how 'compelling' or 'heart-warming' the story is; this is not a back-cover blurb

Below is a 50-word paragraph about my novel *The Fourth Queen* (Penguin), edited down from the sentences above. I've cut out lots of words and combined some of the sentences, but this short paragraph contains most of the crucial information about the story.

The book is about headstrong red-haired Helen

Gloag who boards a ship for the Colonies in 1769. When the ship is attacked by pirates, Helen is sold into the harem of the Emperor of Morocco, where she finds herself vying with 4,000 jealous concubines to become the Emperor's fourth wife.

The first paragraph of your pitch letter should contain the dramatic premise of your novel.

Editor Leo Hollis says: *The cover letter should be short and typed. It should include a bit of biog and an intelligent description of the book showing the author has an awareness of the market.*

EXERCISE 2

What kind of book is it?

Now you've piqued their interest, it's time to set your book in context and convince the agent or editor that it's worth publishing.

Answer the following questions in complete sentences. Give yourself one minute for each answer.

- **What genre is the book?**

The genre tells you where it will be shelved in the bookshop, e.g. murder mystery, psychological thriller, family saga, a collection of linked literary short stories. If the book straddles two genres, say so – but no more than two! You could also say how long the finished manuscript is.

- **What are you trying to achieve?**

This is the place to mention your writerly ambitions, e.g. 'I wanted to examine a society where the norms of physical beauty are turned upside down'; 'The book sets up and then challenges the conventions of the typical Mills and Boon love story.'

- **How is your book different from others in this genre?**

Here you need a sentence that starts: 'The book's unusual because...' For example: 'It's unusual because it's based on a true story and the published accounts of travellers to Morocco in the eighteenth century'; 'It's unusual because it shows what harem life was really like at that time.'

- **Why is the book particularly relevant right now?**

If your book is topical – e.g. about binge drinking, internet bullying, the rise of fascist politics – this is where you should say so. But beware: what's topical today could be old news by the time your book comes out in a year's time.

• **Who is going to read it?**

This is where you list any particular groups who might be interested in your book, using a sentence that starts something like 'I thought it might appeal especially to...' For example: women having treatment for infertility, people concerned about internet porn, people who are involved in animal rights. Be specific here if you can. Don't simply say that it will appeal to older women or teenage boys. This is also the place where you could mention authors you admire, who write in a similar vein. For example: 'I admire the work of Sophie Hannah and Nicci French, especially the way they heighten tension by focusing on a vulnerable female protagonist.'

Now give yourself five minutes to edit these sentences together into a 50-word paragraph that describes the kind of book you've written and explains why it is interesting and saleable.

Literary Agent Ali Gunn says: *You should treat the cover letter like a job interview. Use it to convey something of your personality. It needs to be clever and witty, with some biographical detail and a clear sense of what genre the writing is.*

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EXERCISE 3
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Who is the author?

This final paragraph is to reassure the agent of your credentials as a writer of your chosen subject and give them an idea of the kind of person you are. Take one minute each to answer the following questions in complete sentences:

• **Who are you?**

Include basic facts such as your age and occupation as well as a few interesting details. For example: 'I am a 40-something physics teacher who has been moonlighting as a minicab-driver to pay the mortgage following

the break-up of my marriage.' Don't fret if your life seems uninteresting to you. A conventional lifestyle combined with the racy subject matter of your book can make a dramatic impression.

• **Why are you qualified to write about this subject?** Here's where you should mention your degree in archaeology, if your book is set in ancient Egypt; your social work qualification if your book is about a children's home; or your experience of dog obedience classes, if your you've written a witty romance in which the star-crossed lovers own psychopathic canines.

• **What else have you written?**

This part is only relevant if you have a publishing track record. Summarise your achievements to date in one sentence (e.g. I have an MA in Creative Writing from Newcastle University and have had several short stories published in literary magazines.) If you have a longer publishing history, append a separate (brief!) CV. But if you're unpublished, don't worry. Your publishing record is not as important as you might think: it can work in your favour if the agent believes s/he is discovering a completely new voice.

Now give yourself five minutes to edit these sentences together into a 50-word paragraph about yourself.

Putting it together

You should now have three pithy paragraphs describing your book and yourself. Put them together on the page and see how your letter reads. Tweak them a little to make them flow on from one another. Check for stray abstract words and phrases and remove them.

Voila! Your perfect pitch letter.