

Linda Formichelli:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to lesson two of Pitch Clinic where we're going to talk about how to write a killer query letter. This is Linda Formichelli and I'm here with the lovely Carol Tice.

Carol Tice:

Hi there.

Linda Formichelli:

In case you're not familiar, a query letter is basically a sales letter than sells an editor on your article idea. It also sells them on you as the best person to write it. Now, as you go through this class I think a lot of people will be asking themselves, why do I need to go to all this effort to come up with this big research pitch letter? Why don't I just write up the darn article and send it in? But you generally don't want to just write an article and send it around to editors because editors like to have a hand in how the articles go. They want to give you article specs. They want to tell you the word count, they want to fiddle with the angle, suggest sources and so on. The chances that you'll nail exactly what any particular editor wants without any of their input is pretty slim. That's why you want to send a query letter that outlines your idea. Then once an editor accepts the idea she'll send you the article specs, the word count, who to interview and so on. Then you'll start writing. This is a really big time saver and it also increases the chances that you're going to actually get an assignment.

Now, at this point, at the very beginning I do want to give you the heads up that writing a query is not easy. A lot of people just want to dash off these pitches with sketchy information and not do any research. You know, sure, they save time, kind of. Except that they're not going to get you any assignments. So, what we're outlining here sounds like a lot of work but especially when you're fairly new to writing this is what you need to do to convince an editor that you have the goods.

You can take heart because once you start building relationships with editors then you can start writing quicker pitches without all the research. I mean your goal as a writer is to be able to stop writing these queries. Eventually, you're going to get to the point in your career where you have a stable of editors that you write for, that come to you with work, that if you have an idea you can write a quick sentence or a paragraph or two and you're not doing these all the time. So, this is just to get you a kick start, get you started, get you to start building up your career and your arsenal of gigs so that you can move on to that point. Carol?

Carol Tice:

Absolutely. Once you have an established relationship with an editor I often just dash off a paragraph and say here's something I've discovered. What do you think about a story on it and that's all it takes. But at the beginning you really want to show what you got right in the query and that is what can get you over the hump and get you into some new markets.

We have a query template in our module two materials that you can take a look at. In this training we are going to break that template down and give you seven essential elements that reliably make queries succeed. They can work in many formats but there's one layout that's fairly no fail. That's what we're going to focus on. It's the basis of our query template. In this training we're going to expand on each of the essential elements and give you a lot of details on how to execute them the right way.

Here's our outline. We're going to go over each of these in detail. But it starts with the greeting, the lead, the nut graph, the body, your credentials, the ask and the closer. And we're going to explain what each of those mean and what belongs in them. I think I actually have the first one, which is the greeting.

You want to be sure to find a real editor's name, title and email address for starters. A lot of people are really lazy about this and they want to grab that editor@magazine.com email and then dash up a query that says dear editor. We think that very, very few queries ever make it out of that slush pile into a real editor's inbox and get approved and get assigned because really partly by giving out that mass email address they're sort of giving you a personality test. If you're the type of writer who's going to do the kind of research they want for an article you're going to go beyond that and you're going to find an editor's real name. You want to do that and we've included a handout with a bunch of techniques on how to discover editor's names that ought to really solve this problem for you.

Once you have their name, of course, the real question is whether you're going to write dear Mr. Smith or hey, Joe, I have a story idea for you. There's a lot of different theories on this. One thing is to take your cue from the tone of the publication and the age of the person you're addressing. Older people tend to maybe want a little more respectful form of address. You can always take a look on LinkedIn or just search on the person's name and title and then click images on Google and see if you can turn up a photo of them, get a sense of their age, their personality.

When in doubt, Linda surveyed a handful of editors and they all prefer to be called by their first name. But they also said that they wouldn't be upset if a writer called them Mr. Smith. So don't stress too much about it but do a tiny hair of research and then make a choice on how to go with the greeting. Linda?

Linda Formichelli:

Yeah. Definitely don't stress about it. I think a lot of writers, especially new writers think I don't know whether I should call them Mr. Smith or dear Joe and I'm just not going to write the query because I'm completely stuck at the most very initial part of the query writing process. Really, don't freak out about it. Do a little bit of research like Carol was saying and you'll be fine.

Carol Tice:

Linda, before you jump into the lede, there are sort of two ways to approach the opening of the query. The first is to just go straight to your pitch and the other is to quickly introduce yourself. I know some people who feel like it's like asking a total stranger for money to just dive right into their pitch. I personally have always just gone straight in. If not, you might want to begin with something like I'm long-time Seattle business writer, Carol Tice, with an article for your X section or about X topic and then go into it.

Linda Formichelli:

Just don't say you're Carol Tice.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. First let's back up a little and explain what a lede is and why it's spelled like that.

Linda Formichelli:

Sure. The lede is actually spelled L-E-D-E and the lede is the first paragraph or two of your query where you want to hook the editor and draw her into your story. Ideally, this will be the same lede that you would write for the article if you were to get the assignment so that way the editor can picture the article in the magazine. It also does kind of double duty. It draws the editor in, makes them want to give you the assignment and then once you get the assignment you already have a really compelling lede so you're all set.

But one problem we see a ton when we critique queries is that too many writers go through what I like to call throat clearing where they ramble on and on with all this preliminary stuff before getting to the exciting stuff. For example, I recently critiqued a query where the writer waited until the third paragraph to bring up a really great anecdote from someone she interviewed that related to the topic of the article. You really want to get stuff like that right up front. You want to start with the action, get that surprising statistic up there, start with the super-compelling quote.

For example, for a travel piece instead of saying I'd like to write about destination X, this is who I am. Transport her there so she can experience the sights, the sounds, the smells of the place you want to cover. Get them right into the action.

Now, there are a lot of ways to write a good lead but one of the most effective ways, as I just mentioned, is with an anecdote. An anecdote can be either from your own experience, a personal anecdote or from someone in the same demographic as the magazine's readers. For example, if you were writing an anecdotal lede for a query to a woman's magazine like Family Circle you would interview a woman who is maybe in her 25 through 50 or something like that.

Another example – for Entrepreneur you would want an anecdote from a young business owner. Anecdotes help the editor and your reader relate to your idea and it makes them want to read more to find out what happened. I'm going to give you an

example. This is a pitch I sold to Body and Soul when it was still in existence about what to do if you're an emotional sponge.

It went like this: last year I attend the first session of a group therapy stress reduction course. When the man across from me shared how his marriage was falling apart I sniffled. When the woman next to him described her travails with chronic pain, fat tears rolled down my cheeks. By the time we got to the woman whose unborn baby needed open heart surgery, people were passing me wads of Kleenex. I'm an intuitive empathy.

So that's the key to any kind of effective lede is you want the editor and reader to be able to relate to it and show how it effects their life. So, as another example, here's the lede of a query I recently sold to Redbook called I Over Did It about what to do if you've had too much caffeine, junk food, exercise, late nights, sun or alcohol. It goes like this: you had a little too much wine at that girls' night out and now you're paying for it. Or you gulped down two venti mocachinos to get revved up after a bad night's sleep and now you're more jittery than a cat at a dog convention. Notice how I address the reader as you and I threw her right into a situation that she's probably experienced before. It's very relatable.

Then finally, I have the lede to a pitch I wrote that I'm shopping around now that starts with a personal anecdote I think many service magazine readers can relate to. In case you don't know, service magazines are those that give you information that you can use to improve your life. So the health magazines are an example because they give you information on how to improve your health. They have a lot of how-to type of articles. So here's that lede. The article idea was called Boost Your Shine: Taking Your Life to the Next Level. The lede goes: I've outgrown all my self-help books. I've worked through panic and depression, exercise consistently, meditate daily, eat well, have a nice financial cushion, enjoy great relationships and I'm happy with my work. Overall, I feel pretty darn good and now I feel lost. Almost every personal develop book and website is aimed at people who feel they're lacking in some area, whether their health, their finances or their careers. But once you've read and applied all the advice and are feeling generally satisfied, what's next? In other words, how do you get from generally satisfied to freaking awesome?

Carol Tice:

I want to read this article. I love the idea of this article.

Linda Formichelli:

I hope I sell it.

Carol Tice:

I also wanted to read out loud this...did you read this one?

Linda Formichelli:

No. The Alan Hager? Nope.

Carol Tice:

I'm going to read that one. The one other one example we wanted to throw at you was just this anecdotal lead. When you're covering things like business and drier topics opening with an anecdote is really super-strong because it personalizes it and kind of draws you into the story instead of starting with something like now we're going to talk about business insurance or something. You really need something that draws people in. This is how I led a piece I did for Forbes about a senior car franchise that was a top performer and we start with one of their clients.

Among Alan Hager's first clients after he opened his Right At Home senior care business in Omaha, Nebraska, was an elderly farmer named Art. We go on to hear a little bit about Art and how what he needed was to be taken care of a bit with dressing and chopping but also to be driven around his farm in his three speed, column shift, 1958 Chevy truck. And then it follows with a quote I never thought I'd get someone who was qualified to handle the aide work and could drive that truck, recalls Hager, Right At Home's founder and executive chairman. "But I called and called around and finally did and we took care of him for many years." That was through the start of his business.

Obviously, a lot more fun than just one day Alan Hager decided it would be neat to start a senior care business. It's sort of...so another one that I did that sold to the Writers' Market and another approach for ledes is to create a little mystery or bust a myth, present something a little counterintuitive. I know Linda loves doing this. So I opened my pitch for cracking good paying online markets by saying online markets always pay less than print publications, right? Not necessarily. Then I go on to talk about a few online markets I've written for that paid really well and to explain there's more opportunity here than a lot of people realize. Linda, you have any other final lede thoughts?

Linda Formichelli:

Yeah. I want to mention something about the personal anecdote lede. You can lead in with an anecdote from your own personal experience and not have it be an essay. I think a lot of people are confused about whether to pitch essays or not. You don't pitch essays. You write the whole essay. But when you're writing, for example, a service idea pitch you can lead in with an anecdotal lede from your own personal experience but then you're not really going to go back to that. You're just going to go on into the next parts we're going to describe, the nut graph and the body and so on. That turn into service for the reader. So you just use your own personal experience to illustrate the idea but the article is not about you. This is not an essay we're talking about.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. We do get a lot of confusion about that. The thing to know is often, in my experience, doing the reported essay style where you start with your own personal anecdote is going to work a lot better once you already have a relationship with an editor. I think when you try and do it and they don't know you yet it just seems lazy, like you didn't make the effort to find an example that wasn't you to write the story. So, this

is something to think about. But if you have something that is a perfect fit for the scenario, sometimes you want to just go for it and put it in there.

Linda Formichelli:

Especially because a lot of times, at least in my case, I get a lot of my ideas from my own personal life. Like I'm having this problem. You know what, I bet a lot of people have this problem. That just naturally leads into a personal anecdote as a lede.

Carol Tice:

True enough. So on to...once you've setup a fabulous lede that has an interesting mystery, has a fascinating anecdote of yours or someone else's then you are ready to get to the nut graph. It's time to sort of get to the gist of the article idea you're purposing. You might flush it out with research stats that prove your trend or idea is real or show why it's interesting and timely. Something new is happening now that makes this a reason we should read this article at this point and this magazine's readers would like to know about it right now.

This news hook concept is huge in convincing editors that they need to assign you this story right away. We hear from a lot of writers who hear back from an editor and say, "I'm kind of interested in this. I might assign it." And then it just keeps getting put off forever. The reason that happens is the lack of a news hook.

Another big thing that we see omitted a lot is you want to state your headline in the nut. And I just wish I had a dime for how many queries I've read that do not have a headline anywhere in them. I just think editors glaze right over those pitches because they're sort of scanning through them for the headline to see if they relate to it. If they can't find one I think they just kind of assume the idea isn't fully formed yet and kind of move on. So, you want to make sure it's in there.

The nut often may be more than one paragraph. A lot of the ones I do are a couple of paragraphs because I want to lay out some stats or research or who I'm going to talk to and then I'm going to give them the gist of it.

So to sum that up, we want to give it a news hook, talk about what makes it timely and why the editor needs to run it now. Here is the nut from my story about the farmer named Art and the founder of the senior care business.

Nineteen years on that persistence in calling and calling and getting the right people to serve his clients proved to be a winning formula for Hager. A former hospital administrator, he trained and worked as a certified nursing aide before launching his startup to better understand the concerns of the aides he employed.

Today, Right At Home offers services ranging from help with chores to in-home nursing. The company has nearly 400 locations in eight countries and hit 265 million in 2013 system-wide revenue. And corporate's cut approach 17 million last year.

So, I'm doing a bunch of things in here. Kind of telling you about why he's an unusual executive. He took the time to be a nursing aide before starting the business and the company is large and global. By saying what corporate's cut of a franchise chain's revenue is I'm indicating that I understand the world of franchising and that system-wide sales aren't all going in his pocket. That's the franchise owner's money and then they get a royalty on that at the franchisor. So I'm kind of tipping that off.

This is the point at which you get to a sentence that usually looks something like in my article, headline here, readers will learn X. Just sort of the basic formula. So here it might be in my story, Healthy Franchise: How Right At Home is Banking on the Senior Boom, readers will learn how this franchise succeeded against dozens of competitors to become an industry leader. And why massive opportunity for expansion lies ahead.

Besides the current news hook, editors love to hear that an article has some future outlook and future spin to it that might give their story something that competitors don't have. Another approach that I think Linda uses a lot is to go straight to this formula. So do you want to read this out, Linda?

Linda Formichelli:

Yeah. I was going to say it's pretty classic, pretty straightforward and simple. Here's an example of the nut graph from the pitch I talked about before whose lede I read, Boost Your Shine. The nut graph goes: In my article, Boost Your Shine: Taking Your Life to the Next Level, I'll talk with experts to tell Health's readers how to go from good to great in five key areas of their lives. For example...and we're going to talk more about this in the body but then I go on to give maybe three or four examples of what I'm going to be talking about. Again, that's just a very strong way to tell the editor you've got the title, you've got what the article is about, you've got what you're going to share and then you jump right into the body of the query.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. It's amazing how few queries really tie it together like this where the editor can read a couple sentences and get an immediate snapshot of what you're proposing here. I think it's just so key. Think about editors getting dozens and dozens of pitches every day that they're trying to skim through and you just need this nut there for them to graph onto and get a sense of what it's about.

Speaking of the body...

Linda Formichelli:

Speaking of the body, that's what I'm going to be talking about. The body of the article, which is basically everything after the lede and nut graph where you support your idea by showing the editor a little bit of what you're going to be offering in the article itself. So, this is where you might either mention or quote some of the experts you plan to use in the story, for example.

Now, this means that you're pretty much writing part of the article in your query, which I think turns a lot of writers off because they're like I'm doing all this work ahead of time. But the good news is that this increases the chances that you'll actually get an assignment, so obviously worthwhile and worth your time. Then once you get the assignment the really good news is that part of your work is already done. You know, you wrote the lede that echoes what you would write in a magazine. Now you've got the body where you've given a few examples, maybe have a little bit of quote, have some sources lined up. You're all set.

One problem is that many readers feel they need to tease the editor by offering up incomplete information and then hope the editor will be intrigued enough to give them an assignment. As opposed to doing a fully flushed out researched query letter with examples and showing what you're going to offer it's just like I'm going to write about topic X. I will tell your readers a couple of things. Let me know if you're interested.

But if you're new to the writing world or ever just new to an editor, the editor is taking a huge risk by giving you an assignment. An editor's goal is to have no empty pages in the magazine. A writer who flakes out or an idea that doesn't fly increases the risk that that's going to happen. So, if you try to just give the editor a sort sketchy idea of what you're offering, chances are she's going to pass because she doesn't want to give you an assignment thinking, "Gee, I hope the information is going to be good." You need to show and not just tell the editor what your article is going to be like.

The query is a writing audition, so you want to show the editor how you would write the article if it were assigned by giving little tidbits of examples of how you're going to do that. One example is that we recommend doing a couple of what we call pre-interviews. Just quick, five, ten minute interviews with your experts or your real people sources that you would include in the article. Then you can add compelling quotes to your query as well as some of the expert advice or some of the information you would be offering.

Incorporating quotes into your pitch this way shows that you have good sources in mind. It shows you know how to get powerful quotes. It shows that you know how to weave those quotes in. Doing quick interviews will also let you get really great anecdotes to use for your lede if you choose to structure your lede that way.

You're probably wondering though who's going to agree to give me an interview for a pitch if I don't have an article assignment in hand. Really, you would be surprised. I just like to email potential sources and say I'd love 10 minutes of your time to get some good quotes for my pitch and if the article idea is accepted I'll be back in touch for a more in-depth interview. So that really kind of lessens their risk. You're just saying I just want a few minutes of your time. And it also makes it clear that it is a pitch and that you're going to be sending this around and that if you get the assignment then the hard work comes.

You can also include a link to your writer website so the source can check you out and make sure you're a serious writer and not just some weirdo off the Internet being like, "Hey, can I talk to you for 10 minutes."

Then finally, a little flattery never hurt. I always tell the source why they would be perfect for my article. You know, I'm working on this pitch on ways to boost your shine and I see you have a book on this area. I think you would be really perfect for this. I was wondering if I could talk to your for 10 minutes and get a few quotes. That always helps. Carol?

Carol Tice:

Yeah, I agree. I think that the other thing is a lot of new writers get into trouble because they pitch articles and propose experts that they've never reached out to yet or they propose I want to do a profile of some celebrity that they've never reached out to, hoping that once they get the assignment they can then leverage that to access the person. But it just does not work that way. You're going to end up in an embarrassing situation here you're having to go back to that editor and say Brittany Spears' people won't give me the time of day and the whole thing's going to implode on you.

So, you really want to do at least one pre-interview, especially if someone forms much of the basis of the piece so that the editor sees you definitely have access to that person. Because that's another big sort of nervousness they're going to have.

My secret, I know a lot of people hate this pre-interviewing phase where you're going to call someone and bug them without an assignment and try to get them to talk to you. I almost have never had to do that because my secret is that at the end of interviews I'm doing I schmooze up the source and harvest more ideas from them. I ask them some open-ended questions. What's next for you? What are you working on? What conference did you go to recently and what was the hot topic there? What's the breaking news in your industry, in your life? So, I harvest a few ideas at the end of an interview I'm already doing and then I have the pre-interview for the next article. Pitch that new idea to another magazine that hasn't just seen that expert from me and I'm all set. So that's sort of how I handle the pre-interview.

Linda Formichelli:

That's a good idea. I also want to bring up something I didn't put in the outline but I want to bring up now is that doing a couple of quick pre-interviews will help you see if the idea you have in your head is going to fly. So, if you have this idea for an article and you start contacting experts and you tell them what the article is about and they say it doesn't really work that way or I don't understand it or it's not quite making sense then you know you need to tweak your idea because something about it is not right. That really, really beats sending an editor a query, getting it accepted and then finding out oh my God, this idea is not going to work because then you're in trouble.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. It's more awkward. I'm so glad you brought this up. It is so much more awkward to go back to the editor and say when I started talking to the editors they said that more people aren't really inline skating now. Instead the hot thing is hula hoops right now. So then you're hoping the editor will go for what turns out to be the real news. That's the thing. We get ideas in our heads and then most articles are going to succeed by talking to the experts about that and refining the idea based on what is really going on out there, not just sort of what we think, what we overheard on the bus, what's happening to us personally.

When you have that info already in hand, it does really impress the editor that you're not just coming at them with something you mused about this morning and there's some meat to it and it's real.

Linda Formichelli:

Awesome. Thank you. Another way to show the editor what you'll be offering is to include some of the actual copy that would go into your article. For example, if you're pitching a service piece, which again is sort of a how-to type of article, you'd give a few of the tips you're proposing to write in the article complete with quotes from the experts that you got the tips from. Or if you're pitching a travel piece on weird New England museums, for example, you would list some of the museums you would be covering with a little detail in each.

Up above I read you my nut graph for the article I was proposing called Boost Your Shine. I'm going to read it again and I want you to pay attention to the end. In my article, Boost Your Shine: Taking Your Life to the Next Level, I'll talk with experts to tell Health's readers how to go from good to great in five key areas of their lives. For example...notice how at the end it says for examples. This is a classic way to introduce the information, tips, whatever you're going to have in the body of your query.

Then you want to check out the publications that you want to pitch to get an idea of how to structure the body of your query. For example, if a target magazine divide up articles with clever subhead, you can do that in your query. If a parenting magazine quote real moms, you get a couple of real moms. If every article has a sidebar, you suggest a sidebar idea to go with your article and so on.

So in my nut graph above that we just talked about that ends with for example, I included after that three examples selected from the five tips I plan to include in the article, each with a compelling subhead and a paragraph of detail. Because when I read these magazines, and I know them because I read them a lot, I see what kind of subheads they use and I want to echo that. So here are my subheads. The first one was Health: From Feeling Good to Feeling Amazing. So remember, this pitch is about how to go from being good in your life to being really great. So it's Health: From Feeling Good to Feeling Amazing.

The next one is Relationships: From We All Get Along to My Family is My Joy.

And Spirituality: From I Find Comfort In My Beliefs to I Feel This Close to Enlightened.

Doing all this research and showing instead of telling can make your query a little bit lengthy. But I find that a detailed, well-researched body of a query can really help sell your idea. Where you can often cut many, many words is actually in your lede where many writers tend to go on too long with all that throat clearing I was talking about. A lot of writers can just chop off the first couple of paragraphs for their query, cut to the chase in the lede and have more space for the body, which is where the real convincing happens.

Carol Tice:

Right on. So I have the next section. If you've written a fascinating lede, you've got a great nut with a killer headline that's totally a fit to the style of headlines that publication uses and you've laid out who you're going to talk to and what the rest of the article is going to be about in the body, you are up to giving them your credentials. This is actually a place where we see a lot of new writers really shoot themselves in the foot. The secret of creating a strong paragraph about you for a query letter is to keep it short and simple.

We find that amateurs tend to ramble on and on here, telling their life story, revealing all kinds of potentially embarrassing or negative details about their lives. I've seen writers put that they just started freelancing, that they're only freelancing because they got fired from their job, that they've turned to freelancing out of desperation, that they've never written on this topic before but they're sure hoping you'll give them a flyer on it. Or they're planning a six month world tour that starts in a few weeks. Don't do this. The basic rule is don't tell editors what you don't know or can't do.

The syndrome that happens is that writers want to sell the query through their credentials but in fact your idea sells the query not your bio line, which they are maybe just going to kind of glance at. They're really interested in the idea primarily.

A typical bio line that established writers use are something like I'm a long-time Seattle business writer who's appeared in Entrepreneur, Forbes and Seattle Magazine. If you're brand new, you might use some life experience or just keep it really simple and say I'm an Atlanta-based freelance healthcare writer. Just leave it at that if you don't have any published clips. Or perhaps mention your blog if it's topic appropriate. You don't have to say that you just started it last week. Just do not supply any negative details.

You can really work off your education, your hobby, your job background, especially for first clips. It's a great way to show you have relevant knowledge of a topic and get an assignment. So if you used to work in retail you can pitch an article to a retail trade magazine. In your credentials paragraph you'd say I'm a freelance writer with a 10 year background working for retail stores like Macy's and JC Penny.

Linda and I actually had one student who brewed beer as a hobby and he pitched an article on beer-related food recipes and sold an article on it. He was sort of a wannabe chef kind of guy and he sold a recipe story with the beer in his background. Once you rack up a couple of clips by capitalizing on your experience you'll be able to branch out and you'll have some publishing experience to mention in your credentials. But don't worry too much about writing a huge credentials paragraph. This is not where you're making the sale. It's in the creativity of your idea. Linda?

Linda Formichelli:

Awesome. Yeah. So I don't have anything to add to that so let's get on to the next section of the query, which is the ask. Too many writers just kind of peter out at the end of their query and they don't tell the editor what it is they're looking for. So are you sending them this idea out of the goodness of your heart so they can give it to a staff writer? No. You want to write it so you need to be really clear on that.

This is basically the call to action. The part of the query where you drive it home that you're hoping to get an assignment and that you want to write it. I like to reiterate in this section why I think my idea is perfect for the magazine and then I close by asking for the sale. One example is, and this is something I've been pitching around lately. I know Women's Health's readers are looking for new surprising ways to boost their, well, health. Taking it down a notch, how slowing your pace can rev up your health won't disappoint them. Would you like me to write this article for you?

Here's another one. By the way, in this next one, notice how I re-spun that boost your shine idea for the parenting market. It goes I know Parents readers work hard on improving their family's lives and many of them are likely ready for the honors level classes. Does my article, Level Up Your Family Life: Five Ways to Go From Good to Great, sound interesting to you? Short and sweet is the way to go. You don't need to go on and on about why the editor should hire you but you do want to have that ask in there. This is why it's perfect for your readers. I'm the right writer, can I do this article for you?

Carol Tice:

Right on. You know, the other thing to know is that in making the ask you help the editor understand that you're not the other category of pitch that they get all the time, which is PR people working on behalf of companies and personalities and coaches who are pitching magazines that they should assign a story to one of their writers about their person or business. So, it's kind of a confusion that happens. As they're scanning and scanning dozens of queries, a lot of them are from PR people. You want to make sure that it's really crystal clear that you're not a PR person. That you've researched this topic, you're an independent writer with an unbiased opinion that this is something interesting for readers as opposed to a self-interested PR person who's pitching this company is really great because they're paid to do that by a company. That's the other reason you say would you like me to write this article for you. Because that clarifies that this isn't a PR person pitching.

I have the finale of the query, which is the closer. You're almost there. You've said who you are, you've asked for the assignment, you've got a great idea, you laid it out in the lede and the nut graph and the body and now it's time to wrap it up and send it off. A lot of people kind of stumble over this because they don't know what to say. You don't want to say sincerely or yours truly or kind of yesteryear signoffs. But a lot of people will do that and just kind of blow an opportunity to be a little more creative and memorable with that final line.

For many years, I used to close my pitches with enjoy and then sign my name because that's in line with my personal mission of trying to experience joy in as many moments of my life as possible and to spread joy through the world. I know other top writers who sign warmly or best or best wishes or cheers.

Linda Formichelli:

That's mine.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. So rather than swiping these particular ideas I'd encourage you to take a little time think about a signature that really reflects your own personality and would help the editor remember your query and who you are. It's a chance to stand out a tiny hair more.

You might think we're done because we've covered our seven points but there is one other aspect to sending query letters because we do mostly send them on email these days. That is what to put in the email subject line. We do have a few tips for you there.

Linda Formichelli:

We have a little bonus here. So, we just talked about all the different parts of the query and now you have it done and you're going to email it, like Carol was saying, most likely. So you're going to need to come up with an email subject line that'll have an editor wanting to open your email. Think of how much email people get every day and the spam and everything else. So, it really needs to stand out.

Also, editors get tons of press releases so you want to make sure that she's not going to mistake your query for yet another generic PR pitch. How many times have we talked about that today? It's like do not let them think you are a PR pitch.

One type of subject line I like to use, especially it works for trade magazines, is to put your credentials right in there. For example, for a restaurant trade magazine I would have an email subject line like writer for Pizza Today, QSR and Restaurant Management with a story idea. If you have credentials that are relevant to what you're pitching. If you don't, don't worry. There are other things you can do.

Another really killer subject line is your article headline, which is why it's so important to come up with a good title for your article before you start writing. I like to write query from writer: and then my proposed article title in quotes so the editor can see this is not

a PR pitch because it says query from writer and then they're hopefully really intrigued by the title.

Then finally, a simple, straightforward subject line is freelance writer with a story idea for you. You can feel free to add in any personal information that helps your case. For example, for a parenting magazine you could say writer and mom of five kids with a story idea for you. Or for another type of magazine you could say San Francisco-based writer with a story idea for you.

So, those are our seven basic elements of a killer query letter. We also had the bonus on the email subject lines.

Carol Tice:

Thanks a lot, Linda.

Linda Formichelli:

Bye. Thanks, everyone.