
Agent: Demystified

Lifting the veil on the
secret world of literary
agents

Authoress

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To my blog readers – my fellow authors with whom it is an honor to take this
challenging journey.

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Chapter 1: Once Upon A Time (or, The Ancient History of Authoress)

It all began with a phone call.

Well, not really. It actually began with a book. Doesn't every writer's story begin with a book? At any rate, this story begins with a book – a self-published piece of nonfiction for a niche market I thought I had a fairly good handle on.

Turns out I was wrong. But that's another story altogether. Suffice it to say that in the midst of my having written a book that wasn't selling particularly well, I received a phone call. Not just any phone call, though. This phone call had a "212" area code.

It was a literary agent.

Through a quirk of fate, she had read my little masterpiece and thought that perhaps she could represent it. Sell it to, you know, a real publisher.

Sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it? It wasn't. Oh, this was a real agent. I wasn't being scammed by someone from Victoria Strauss's "[Thumbs Down Agency List](http://www.sfw.org/beware/twentyworst.html)" (<http://www.sfw.org/beware/twentyworst.html>) This agent's shingle was legitimate, if not a bit dusty. No, the problem wasn't the agent (not at this point, anyway). The problem was me. I didn't understand what literary agents were for.

I know, I know. I called myself a writer yet I didn't know anything about the publishing industry. In my own defense, I had made the decision to self-publish for specific reasons, not the least of which was maintaining the rights to my work. For me, self-publishing was not a "last ditch" effort after having tried, and failed, to break into print the traditional way. It wasn't a weasely way to avoid the querying process, either. We can't avoid something we don't know about, right?

So. In this, at least, I am vindicated.

"Tell me your dreams," the agent said. What more could a girl want? Here's my chance-in-a-million connection to NYC, asking me about my dreams. Heady stuff, that.

So I told her my dreams. And she promised to help fulfill them.

"I could get you at least a twenty thousand dollar advance," she said. No warning bells went off in my head, because I didn't know they were supposed to. Surely she was promising me the moon because, well, she was an agent. That must be what agents do.

They promise you the moon.

“What questions do you have?”

I had only one, really. I wanted to know about getting my rights back if my book went out of print.

“Oh, that’s not a problem.” Was I dreaming, or did she have an incredibly thick New York accent? “I can get you your rights back. That’s not a problem.” Something about the way she said it made me feel as though my question had been supremely stupid.

“I’ll have to discuss this with my husband.”

That’s probably the smartest comment I’d made. She heartily agreed that I should discuss it with my husband before making a decision.

In the end, Mr. Authoress and I decided that signing with this agent was likely the “break” that many authors don’t receive, and that I’d be foolish to walk away from the opportunity.

Following my verbal “yes,” a crisp, two-page contract arrived in the mail, waiting for my flourish on the line. It was a three-year contract.

For the uninitiated: Three-year contracts are not the norm. A typical contract is usually for a year, though a six-month or two-year contract isn’t unheard-of. But three? I may as well have signed in blood.

Again, no warning bells went off. I had done no research; I knew nothing. To me, three years sounded “safe.” As if we’d have plenty of time to sell the book and be hugely successful.

I signed.

Thus began eighteen months of Agent Hell. Yes, I brought it on myself. Yes, if you walk blindfolded in the direction of a precipice, you’re going to step off the edge to your death. Or near-death.

Obviously, I’ve lived to tell this tale, so there’s hope. Bear with me.

You don’t need to hear the tedium of every uncomfortable phone conversation, every ignored email. In my novice state, I had the impression that this agent existed in a realm beyond my comprehension; that it was only through her condescension and infinite good graces that my existence was acknowledged in the first place. If I didn’t hear from her for a week, a month, four months, it was because of my Low Position on the client totem pole. I wasn’t important enough, famous enough, “big” enough for her immediate, or even slightly-less-than-immediate, attention. After all, she had made it clear that a certain “household name” celebrity had recently signed with her.

While the thrust of our professional relationship was to attempt the sale of my already self-published book, my agent was also open to reading the young adult novel that I was in the middle of writing. Remembering that she had said, “Tell me your dreams,” I was supremely excited about this. Think of it – I had landed an agent with no effort on my part, and she was going to take my brand-new baby and make it come to life!

Mind you, this was my first novel. The first draft of my first novel. The *unfinished* first draft of my first novel. If you know anything about anything, you will know that agents don’t want to see first drafts of anything. They especially don’t want to see unfinished first drafts.

Is something smelling funny to you?

Thing is, even in hindsight, I’m not sure where the funny smell was coming from. As I’ve already said, this was a legitimate literary agent – not a scam, not a fly-by-night. She was, by all accounts, “real.” And being an embarrassingly uninformed neophyte, I thought I’d landed at the front door of my biggest dreams: my Very First Novel was going to be published!

My sense of “she is more important than I am” propelled me through the black hole of never-answered emails and no-shows for scheduled phone conferences (I kid you not). After claiming finally to have read the manuscript, she declared that it “needed a little tightening,” which admittedly meant nothing to me. She then offered to work on editing it chapter by chapter (ostensibly to achieve this elusive “tightening”).

“I don’t normally do this for my clients,” she puffed, “but you can send the chapters through email.”

Wow! I was getting Special Treatment. So I deleted a few phrases, changed a word here and there, saved the new version of each “tightened” (is that what I was doing?) chapter, and emailed it to my Agent Godmother. The plan was to use Word’s “track changes” feature so that she could add her input to my edits.

It never quite happened. I received the occasional email message stating things like “I have read your editing and the manuscript is getting much better,” and “this is just great,” and “I...only have a few comments you have done a beautiful job.” But there were never any comments (or commas). No edits. No real evidence that the manuscript had been read. Still, she continued to move forward as if this were normal, asking me for a legend of characters and a hard copy of the second draft (which she was supposed to have worked on with me).

After all that, she announced that the manuscript wasn’t quite “ready,” after all, and that I most likely needed to hire a professional editor. No, it wasn’t one of those “conflict of interest” stories; it was just...weird. As though she had to come up with some way to keep stringing me along, instead of shooting straight with me and telling me that the manuscript was horrendous.

Because it was. My first-and-only novel, like most first-and-only novels, stank. It was in no way ready to be shopped to editors. It wasn't even ready for an agent. It was the quintessential "learning my craft" novel that most authors have hidden somewhere in their archives or under their beds. It wasn't even close to being the polished, finely crafted story it needed to be.

And she should have told me.

Aside from all that, the business of sending my nonfiction book to editors pattered along, garnering a few rejection letters on which I noticed that my agent had misspelled my name. (No, seriously.) Add to that the bill I received for over \$100 in office fees and the continued lack of communication, and I began to think that maybe I needed to extricate myself once and for all.

There was a tiny problem, though. My contract did not include a bye-bye clause. Feeling rather like an indentured servant, I consulted my lawyer, who in the end declared that it was a simple matter of stating my intentions and mutually severing the relationship. So, as per his advice, I sent the following email:

I believe that it will be best for both of us at this time to mutually agree to end our contract without further obligation. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you. Please take a moment to send an email letting me know that you agree to this. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

It will come as no surprise that I received no response to the email.

Ever conscious of wanting to give my agent the benefit of the doubt, I sent the email a second time. Again, I received no reply.

So although it gave me the willies, I mailed a certified letter stating my intentions to dissolve the business relationship. About a week later, I received the signed stub from the post office. I knew, then, that she had received the letter, and that was that.

Until the phone call.

To say that she was irate barely captures the mood. I could almost feel the heat emanating from the froth around her mouth. How dare I – how *dare* I – send her a certified letter without warning? If I had a problem with her, why hadn't we discussed it on the phone? (She seemed to have forgotten our recent phone call detailing the problems in our relationship.) Why, her computer was down that week, and that's why she never received the two emails from me. Her *other* clients had called her to check in while her computer was down. Why hadn't I called her, too? (At which point I reminded her that she had a history of not returning my phone calls.)

She ranted; I kept my voice level. She cut me off mid-sentence; I let her spew. After several minutes of toxic overflow, she asked me if I wanted to pick up where we'd left off and continue on with our relationship.

She had to be joking.

And because my answer was still “no,” she resorted to name-calling and threats. Then she hung up on me.

Honest to goodness. That’s how we parted ways.

Truth be told, I felt raped for a while. Verbal abuse will do that to you. But an exhilarating sense of freedom soon superseded anything else I may have felt. Because – wow. I could finally move on.

During the final, angst-ridden months of my agent situation, I’d been far from idle. In an attempt to determine what things were supposed to be like, I began an amazing journey across the Internet that built the foundation of what ultimately became Pure Knowledge – or, “What Every Fledgling Writer Needs to Know.” Now that I was free from the bondage of Wrong-Agent-ness, I was ready to throw my hand in and do this thing right.

“This thing,” of course, wasn’t just finding a new agent. It was learning how to strengthen my writing; learning what it meant to “tighten” my manuscript; learning to throw my work out there for legitimate criticism. (Eternal thanks to [Miss Snark](http://www.misssnark.blogspot.com) (<http://www.misssnark.blogspot.com>) of Crap-o-meter fame.) And, too, it was learning what, exactly, a query letter was and how to figure out who should be on my to-be-queried list.

It was a long process. It was a bizarre mixture of invigorating and exhausting. And the end result, besides my having become an expert on the agent querying process, is this book.

But, truly – and here comes the swelling strings and vox in the background – if I hadn’t gone through the pain of being strung along by an agent who, frankly, didn’t give a flipping fig about me or my writing career, my writing – and my knowledge of the agenting process – wouldn’t be what it is today. This book is an important “first step” for you to take as you prepare to catapult yourself into the agent-seeking arena. It’s also an important tool if you’ve been playing the agent game for a while and you’re feeling like you’re just not “getting” it. Wherever you may be in your personal journey, I’m confident that this book will be a step in the right direction.

We’re not supposed to be frightened by, intimidated by, daunted by, ignored by, belittled by, embarrassed by, or discouraged by agents or our interactions with them. And if we take the right approach, we’re going to safeguard ourselves against the junk that will only serve to trip us up as we attempt to bound forward.

Take a deep breath. The water is actually warm and inviting. Are you ready to swim with me?

Chapter 2: Demystification Step 1 -- Arm Yourself With Info

Ignorance is Never Bliss

I can't imagine how difficult it was, prior to the Internet, to find an agent. The publishing cogs turn slowly as a general rule, but the one area that can be dizzyingly fast is Personnel Turnaround. Editors become agents. Agents switch agencies, or hang their own shingles. People quit. People arrive. People get married, move across the ocean, die. And a lot of these things happen even before the current year's [Writer's Market](http://www.borders.com/online/store/TitleDetail?sku=1582975418) (<http://www.borders.com/online/store/TitleDetail?sku=1582975418>) is on the shelves. So mailing a submission to the wrong address, or to the wrong person, or to the wrong everything must have been common.

Frankly, with the wealth of information available, there's no excuse for any writer to make mistakes in his quest for an agent.

I feel so strongly about this, I'm going to repeat it: THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR ANY WRITER TO MAKE MISTAKES IN HIS QUEST FOR AN AGENT.

Disclaimer: I'm not talking about silly mistakes like accidentally sending an e-query twice or forgetting to put a stamp on your SASE. These things happen even when we're careful. They stink, but they happen.

I started researching the world of agents months before I severed my relationship with the agent I had. When I finally began sending out my first few, tentative queries, I was already on the right track. Granted, I still had a long way to go. (As in, I needed to write a completely new novel. But I digress.) But the bottom line is that I hadn't made a move until I'd girded myself with serious research.

Even as you research, though, you're going to have to start breaking out of the "mystical and mysterious" mindset. You're not searching for someone from Mount Olympus (more on that later); you're searching for a professional person to represent your work. So, let's begin.

What Do Agents Do?

Some of you already have a thorough understanding of what agents do. Others of you are still learning. This section is for both of you. (Because refresher courses are a good thing.)

The short story is this: a literary agent is a person who represents your manuscript in the publishing world. In other words, your agent will attempt to sell your story to the right publisher for the best price. Your agent will not make a dime off of this venture until the manuscript is sold, at which time your agent will make his hard-earned fifteen percent.

Some agents are heavy on the editing aspect, others are hands-off. Some agents want to sign you for a particular book; others are in it for the long haul, interested in helping you develop a long and productive writing career. But the bottom line is that your agent is someone who is on the same page as you when it comes to your novel. And he's going to do his best to promote your work and sell it well.

Agents do more than reading and selling manuscripts, of course. But that's where your own research comes in. The more you learn about how agents work and what they do when they're not busy sending out form rejections via email, the better equipped you will be to launch a successful agent search.

Equally important to understand is what an agent is *not*. Forthwith:

An agent is not an editor. Do not inquire as to whether the agent would like to “acquire” or “purchase” your manuscript. Don't get in touch with an agent expecting him to copyedit your story and get back to you with groundbreaking suggestions. And don't make the mistake of referring to an agent as an agent/editor just because both terms seem important to you and you don't want to leave one of them out.

Things like this really happen.

An agent is not a benevolent soul who is available to answer your neophytic questions. If you don't understand the business, or don't know what genre your own story is, or aren't even sure how to begin the process of trying to get your book published, the query letter is not the place to ask these things. Do your research.

Period.

An agent is not a snake oil salesman. If you discover that the agent of your choice is offering editing services, charging a reading fee, or in any other way displaying a conflict of interest (or a blatant grab for your wallet), cut off communication immediately. Agents don't make money until they've sold your novel. Move away rapidly.

Once you're certain you know what an agent is, you need to determine whether you actually need one. Have you just decided to live your dream of writing a novel but you haven't started yet? You don't need an agent. You need to write something first. Have you finished the first draft of your novel and you're chomping at the bit? You don't need an agent. Not yet. Your novel still needs a lot of work. You may want to join a good critique ("crit") group, or hang around [Miss Snark's First Victim](http://www.missnarksfirstvictim.blogspot.com) (<http://www.missnarksfirstvictim.blogspot.com>) for some of our fabulous in-house crit sessions and monthly "Secret Agent" contests (shameless plug).

Have you written a collection of short stories for a niche audience? You probably don't need an agent. Self-publish the thing and market it to your audience. The same holds true if you've written a genealogy, a book of local interest, or a collection of poetry.

So when *do* you need an agent?

When you have written, re-written, re-re-written, polished, proofread, and polished again a novel of which you are certain of the genre, audience, and potential marketability, and you want someone with connections, experience, and a good sales record to find a publisher for it, then you are ready to search for an agent.

Lucky you! You're ready to set your hook and cast.

But what if you're not there yet? What if you're still toiling through the first draft and wondering what the difference between an agent and a publisher is? The good news is this: by reading this book, you're way ahead of the game. You're in "learn everything I can learn ahead of time" mode. My hat's off to you.

Tread carefully, though. There is a right way and a wrong way to query agents. Understanding how to take the right approach should keep you from feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of shingles bearing agent names. It's possible to hone in on the ones who might be a good fit for your work, and it's important that you make this determination before you begin sending those queries. So let's get started.



How To Find An Agent That “Fits”

I’m going to share with you a systematic approach to building your “to-be-queried” list so that it’s a good fit for your genre. Pay attention; you can do this without leaving your seat and without spending a cent. If you’re serious about matching an agent with your work, you’re going to have to spend time on this step. Otherwise you’ll end up wasting it. Time, that is. Yours and that of countless agents who have to deal with receiving a query letter for a novel they’d never be interested in.

Here are the steps you need to follow:

Step One:

Decide which genre you’ve written in. Don’t aim for the esoteric or bizarre (“young adult cozy western mystery with fantasy elements”). Label your story with the genre its content encompasses, in the broadest terms possible: “commercial fiction” or “middle grade fantasy” or “paranormal romance.” And don’t call your work a “fiction novel.” If it’s a novel, then it’s fiction; there’s no such thing as a “nonfiction novel.” If you’re not sure which genre your story falls under, spend some time browsing the shelves in your local bookstore. Find out which books are similar to yours in theme and content, and make note of where they’re displayed. It helps if you read a lot, too. But that goes without saying.

Step Two:

Go to [AgentQuery.com](http://www.agentquery.com) (<http://www.agentquery.com>). (AgentQuery.com is not the only available resource [see below], but I’m taking you step-by-step through my own, personal system. So follow my lead.) When you get there, begin a detailed search for The Perfect Agent. There are drop-down menus to search by specific genre, or you can type in key words. But be warned: typing in key words will also bring up results that are the opposite of what you’re looking for. For example, if you type in “science fiction” you will have to wade through all the entries in which the agent “does not accept science fiction.”

A second excellent choice for agent research and tracking is [QueryTracker.net](http://www.querytracker.net) (<http://www.querytracker.net/index.php>). This very helpful web site is user-friendly and offers the option of keeping track of your queries and the responses you receive. The only reason it's not listed as "Step Two" is because, well, I don't personally use it. I have spent time on it, though, and I recommend it wholeheartedly as an alternative to AgentQuery.com.

As you discover agents who represent your genre, begin to make a list. Note the submission guidelines of each agent. Check whether they will accept e-queries (that is, query letters via email or a form on the agency web site), or if they're still stuck in the age of paper (some are – read carefully). If the agent has listed a web site URL, go there. Read the submission guidelines and any further information you find on the agent.

IMPORTANT: Information on an agency web site trumps information found on AgentQuery.com or any other agent information web site. Period.

Here is an example of the kind of information you can expect to find on AgentQuery.com versus an agency web site, and how they might differ:

First, an example of what an agent's front page looks like on AgentQuery.com (with names changed):

NAME

Jennifer Tentofour

AGENCY

Donald Duck Literary Agency

1 West East Street, Suite 0

New York, NY 10001

EMAIL

jtentofour(at)duckagency.com

FICTION GENRES

Science Fiction | Chick Lit | True Crime | Mystery | Christian | Commercial Fiction | Fantasy | Women's Fiction | Romance | Historical Fiction | Young Adult | Thrillers/Suspense | Multi-Cultural | Military/Espionage

NONFICTION GENRES

This agent accepts queries

And now, information from the agency web site:

“E-mail queries can be sent to info(at)duckagency.com and should include the word “query” in the subject line. Please know that we promptly and carefully read every e-query that we receive. We will respond to every e-query that is properly addressed and follows the submission guidelines below. We will not respond to e-queries that are addressed to no one, or to multiple recipients.”

Did you catch the different email addresses? The web site’s address is the one you should use. Remember, the agency’s web site information trumps all.

But here’s where the savvy writer will spend a little more time researching. Does Jennifer say something different on her blog? Has she given an interview or graced an online chat lately in which she explicitly stated that the AgentQuery.com email listing was preferred, or at least acceptable? Because of course you want to have the best chance of getting your query on Ms. Tentofour’s laptop, right?

Here are some real-life examples:

Agency B only accepts submissions directly to their assistant, who funnels each query to the appropriate agent. However, Agent A, who works at Agency B, once hosted a “send me your query directly” via her blog. Several authors received requests for additional material as a result of this.

Agency Z explicitly states, on their web site, that they will under no circumstances accept any unsolicited submissions for anything, ever. Yet if you read Agent Q’s bio on AgentQuery.com, you will discover that, though she works for Agency Z, she does, indeed, accept personal email queries. (And I can personally attest to the fact that she responds personally and quickly.)

So make sure you have unturned every stone before sending off the query. The general rule remains “agency trumps all.” But it doesn’t hurt to do some extra snooping first.

If a particular agent’s listing states “does not accept unsolicited queries” or “queries by referral only” or any such warning, heed it. Don’t attempt to be a rule-breaker. Success is less likely to come your way if you can’t follow simple directions.

Once you’ve got your “A” List, continue your research on each individual agent in the following manner:

a. Check out the agent/agency on [Preditors and Editors](#) (<http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors>). This is a web site that will let you know if the agent has reported any sales (some don’t report, so take this with a grain of salt), if the agent is “recommended”, or if the agent is a scam artist who should be avoided at all costs. Note, in the example below, this agency is recommended and has verifiable sales (\$):

Well Established Literary Agency, Inc.: \$ Recommended. A literary agency. (Robert Well: Literary, Adult).

b. If the agent has a blog, check it out. If it’s an agent you’re particularly interested in, spend some time there – you can learn a lot about an agent’s likes and dislikes this way. I’ve seen a trend in the past year or two of more agents blogging – and blogging regularly. Many are willing to teach and give advice to aspiring authors; others offer query dissections and an “insider’s” view of agenting, as well as the occasional “slice of life” post that furthers our demystification cause. Check the sidebar on [Miss Snark’s First Victim](#) (<http://www.misssnarksfirstvictim.blogspot.com>) for a regularly updated list of blogging agents.

c. Google the agent. This goes without saying. Google the name in quotes and outside of quotes. If too many bizarre entries come up (things like “dog trainer” and “endodontist”), add the word “agent” or “literary” or “submission guidelines” to your search. Be persistent; get as much information as you can. (Note: This does not include inane rambles on the blogs of disgruntled or misinformed writers. Use discernment while you do your research.)

d. Visit the [Verla Kay](#) (<http://www.verlakay.com/boards/index.php>) discussion boards if you are writing for children or young adults, or the [Absolute Write Water Cooler](#) (<http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums>) discussion boards if you are writing in any other genre. These communities are a rich source of information on everything from response times to who is moving to which agency to what your favorite agent is looking for this week. Membership on one or both of these boards will greatly enhance your knowledge and networking base. And they both have search engines, so you will be able to find posts containing the name of the agent or agency you’re researching.

e. Type the agent's name (in quotes) in the search engine on Amazon.com. This will give you the least amount of information, but it's a way of discovering if any thankful authors have mentioned their agents on their acknowledgements pages. Happy clients are the hallmark of a successful agent. This is a back-door way to find some.

For the sake of remaining conservative, let's say you've ended up with a list of twenty agents who represent your genre and whom you feel would be a good fit for your work. This is going to be your starting place, as the publishing business is fluid, as you will soon discover, and things sometimes seem to change overnight. We'll talk about the actual querying process in another chapter.

You're going to invest a big chunk of time into the research portion of your Quest To Be Published, but look at it this way: If you want to demystify the agent, the most effective way to do it is through the gathering of information. (Remember: Knowledge is power. And if you are "powerful," you are not going to be easily mystified.)

A name printed in stuffy Times New Roman on the page of an already-out-of-date book is going to seem almost...otherworldly. As in: *Do I dare to send this person a query? Do I know that this person will actually read what I send? Am I doing the right thing?* The key is to move beyond the name-in-a-dusty-book and take a new, proactive approach.

If you follow my systematic approach to researching literary agents, you will feel confident at the end that you *are* doing the right thing.

To recap:

- ⇒ If you are going to demystify the agent, you **MUST** gather information. Information is King!
- ⇒ The more effort you put into information gathering, the stronger your foundation.
- ⇒ If you get to the point where you are able to have conversations about the likes and dislikes of individual agents without having to refer to your two-inch-thick book of notes, you're well on your way.
- ⇒ It's important, too, to keep researching on a regular basis.
- ⇒ In the duration, agents on your list whom you may not have queried yet might have changed agencies, or launched their own agency, or quit agenting altogether.
- ⇒ Keep up with the publishing world and keep up with your research on individual agents.
- ⇒ It takes much longer to land an agent that you may have originally hoped.

Repeat your genre search on Agentquery.com every few months, too. Agents sometimes change their tastes, and new agents pop onto the scene whose names you've never heard before. So stay current. Set aside regular time to make sure your agent information is up to date. Keeping good records will go a long way toward your ultimate success.

Once you've mastered the skill of agent research and have fine-tuned your list of Perfect Agents, you're ready to move on to actual contact.

Are you ready? Onward!

Chapter 3: Demystification Step 2: This is business, not art for art's sake

When Art Meets Business

For as vital as it is to carefully research literary agents, I would venture to say that the most important step in demystifying the elusive agent is to treat this process like what it is – **a business venture.**

Now, your initial response may be, “Well, duh. I know that.”

Perhaps you do. But, frankly, many of us “writerly types” don’t have the business acumen it takes to approach this the right way. We don’t *really* view the agent as a prospective business associate, a professional advocate for our work. If we’re honest, we’ll admit that we view the agent as a Fairy Godmother (or Godfather) of sorts. We don’t deserve the attention, but once we get it, we will be lavished with everything the Fairy Godagent has in store for us. As long as we’re nice. And write well. And – Let’s stop right there.

There are two distinct types of writers.

1. The My Goal Is Publication Writer

This is the aspiring author who prefers to be called “author.” Writing is a passion, yes, but it is a passion with purpose. Without the ultimate goal of publication (and accolades from the adoring masses), writing would lose its point. It’s something that is done for a reason, not simply done “because.”

2. The I Breathe, Therefore I Write Writer

This is the quintessential “artiste.” He writes because the voices in his head will not shut up until he gets their words on paper. A day without writing is like a marriage without sex. Publication would be awesome, but the world will not stop spinning if nobody ever acknowledges the brilliance of his work. He writes because he must. It’s a survival thing.

It stands to reason that the second type is far more dangerous when it comes to completely missing the meaning of “business relationship.” Both types of writers invest a lot of “self” in their work. (Let’s face it – the act of writing is intensely personal.) But the “I Breathe,

Therefore I Write” writer struggles more with separating “self” from the business of attaining a literary agent (not a Fairy Godagent).

Yet either type of writer can easily miss the mark. Folks miss the mark in business all the time, in any field you can think of. Cluelessness is rampant. (Think: Badly written cover letters, resumes that include your eighth grade newspaper route and volunteer work for the local Over-Eighty Tap Dancing Society, sending a scented thank you note to impress someone after an interview, passive aggressive emails to coworkers, etc.)

But you’re not going to make business blunders in your agent search. You’re reading this book and learning how to view agents as business associates. And human beings.

In order to facilitate this “agent-as-business-associate” approach, I recommend the following:

Write a business plan detailing your goals as an aspiring author.

This is accomplished by asking yourself the following questions:

- ⇒ Why am I writing?
- ⇒ Why am I writing *this particular story*?
- ⇒ Why is it important for me to have an agent?
- ⇒ How long do I want to do this?
- ⇒ How do I define “success” as a writer?
- ⇒ How do I define “failure” as a writer?

Remember that you are answering these questions from a *business standpoint*. The objective is to train yourself to view the agent-finding process as a business exercise. While answering the questions, remove the “emotion of writing” from your answers (easier said than done if you’re a “Type Two” writer). Your answers should be concise and clear. When you are finished, your business plan may look something like this:

I am writing because I believe I have the talent and skill to produce marketable books. Currently, I’m writing a cozy mystery because it comes naturally to me and I enjoy this genre above all others. I want to land a good agent because I believe my chances of publication will be greatly increased if I have good representation. I’m willing to keep working at this until I achieve my goal of publication. To me, “success” as an author is writing the best novels I can and seeing them published (and selling well). “Failure” as an author is never seeing my books published – or giving up before I reach this goal.

Keep in mind that your business plan is for your eyes only. It serves two purposes:

1. To help clarify your goals

2. To keep you grounded in the *business* of writing while you are searching for an agent.

Print it out and keep it with your “Agent Search” files. Tape it to your bathroom mirror if you need to.

Mind you, you’re up for more of a struggle if your business plan looks something like this:

I am writing because if I didn’t write, I would die. Beyond food and drink, writing is my life source. I am writing this particular story because it’s leaking out of my brain a little bit each day, and I have to capture it before it dissolves. It’s important for me to have an agent who understands my need to write twenty-two hours a day and receive lots of emotional support. I will write until I can no longer place my shriveled hands upon a keyboard. “Success” is writing. “Failure” is ceasing to write.

This is where the rubber hits the proverbial road. If you are a “Type Two” writer, you must learn to separate the artiste from the businessperson. Period. If you don’t, your agent search will be fraught with angst, and you will be more likely to make the egregious errors that surely make agents question why they continue to torture themselves by accepting queries in the first place.

Change the focus of your agent search from “dream catcher” to “business associate.”

“Tell me your dreams.” That’s what the Agent-from-hell said to me during our first phone call. In truth, there is something to be said for that. Many agents are looking to sign authors for the length of their career, not for the life of one book. So an author’s “dreams” are going to reveal a lot about what direction the author wants to go in, and whether that vision lines up with the agent’s own ideas.

If, however, you are approaching agents with a mindset of “this is the person who could make my dreams come true,” you are going to end up

- ⇒ Intimidated
- ⇒ Ineffective
- ⇒ Frustrated
- ⇒ **Agentless**

“Dreams coming true” are not what the agent-author relationship is about. And if you want to learn how to approach agents without your knees knocking, remind yourself over and over again (until you believe it) that a literary agent is a prospective business associate.

This is why it’s important to get that business plan in writing. It will help to keep you focused on having a realistic view of your work and of agents in general.

Instead of “dreams,” refer to your visions-of-authorly-bliss as “business goals.”

Turning your “dreams” into goals removes the emotion from it and calls it like it is. You want an agent so that your book is published so that people will buy it so that you will receive payment for your work. That sounds dull and unromantic, but it’s the truth. So stop trembling at the thought of sending out that first query. You’re making a business contact. Treat it as such.

Learn what it means to “make a business contact.”

When it comes to making blunders in business communications, authors are in good company. Whether it’s bad manners, lack of savvy, poor grammar, or borderline sociopathic behavior, bad practices abound. We’ll talk more about the actual query letter in an upcoming chapter. What I want to focus on right now is the attitude behind the letter – the approach.

In order for your query letter (and any subsequent written communiqué) to reflect this “right attitude,” bear in mind the following:

1. No groveling. It isn’t necessary to express your utter delight at an agent’s blogging talents, or the sheer wonder that seven of the agent’s clients happen to be your favorite authors.
2. No life story. A business letter is not a personal letter. Therefore, do not include your reasons for being a writer, your pastimes, your past lives, or what you did on summer vacation.
3. Short and sweet. A business letter is as succinct as possible. Always.
4. Don’t pester. That is, do not call/write/email to check up on your query ten days after you’ve sent it. In fact, don’t call/write/email at all. (You wouldn’t call someone after an interview for a position at a large corporation and say, “Well, did you like my interview? Have you made a decision yet? Huh? Well??”)
5. If you choose to status query after sending requested material (that is, a partial or full manuscript requested by the agent), the “short and sweet” rule applies. So does the “no groveling” rule (e.g., “I know you’re soooooo busy and I don’t want to add to your

workload, but I was just wondering – and please don't feel like you have to respond right away – if you've, perhaps, had a chance to look over the fifty pages I emailed you two months ago?").

6. Do express thanks, in queries and in status queries. Short and sweet, of course. Good manners go a long way.
7. It's "Mr." or "Ms." So-and-so, period. Regardless of how well you feel you "know" an agent after doing your research (or hounding his or her blog for hours a day), the initial contact is always title-plus-surname. I don't care what anyone else tells you. This is business, folks. That's the way it works.
8. And just because you're using "Mr." or "Ms." doesn't mean you're going to start feeling intimidated.
9. Do not respond to a rejection letter or email. Not ever. Bite your fingers off if they are inclined to do this without your permission.
10. Follow the directions on agency web sites. Don't assume that your brilliance warrants an exception to their stated policy. If it says "no attachments," don't attach anything. If it says "no email queries," don't send one. If it says "queries by referral only," don't imagine that you can refer yourself and get away with it.

Here's the bottom line: If you do not approach this as a business venture, you will hamper your efforts to secure an agent. And even if (when!) you do secure one, you will most definitely need to continue to approach everything as *business*. Remove your heart and soul from the "business end" of things. Save it for your writing.

Bonus Material: How not to make yourself look like a clueless neophyte

Authoress will now humble herself and tell you what she did, once upon a time.

I was querying my first novel. I had already done plenty of research and had chosen the agents on my "to be queried" list with great care. These were mostly paper queries, as the email query phenomenon was, at the time, just beginning to take off. So I was receiving, with much trembling, SASE's in my mailbox – rejections, mostly.

I received the following rejection letter from a huge – yes, huge – name in the agenting world. This came from the desk of the “Head Bigshot” at an excellent agency:

August 15th

Dear Authoress:

Thank you for sending me your letter. I appreciate your patience while I’ve considered your project.

I like the premise of your novel and you write very smoothly. Your opening pages, though, are pure set-up with only just enough tension to keep us reading. There’s got to be a better way to start this novel. As is, I have to pass on *The Great Authoress Novel*—with frustration.

Thanks again, however, for thinking of me. Please accept my best wishes for your project’s success.

**Sincerely,
Very Nice Agent**

So. I was a newbie. My query letter and sample pages had not only passed through the hands of Mr. Wonderful’s assistant, they had landed on Mr. Wonderful’s desk and graced Mr. Wonderful’s very eyes. After all that, I received not a form rejection, but a kind, personalized rejection.

I decided that Mr. Wonderful was the agent for me. Bar none.

So I set to work rewriting my first chapter. Then, haplessly, I requiered Mr. Wonderful thus:

Dear Mr. Wonderful,

Thank you for the helpful critique you included in your recent letter to me. I have taken it to heart, having completely rewritten the first chapter of my novel. There was, indeed, a “better way to start this novel,” and I appreciate your pointing me in the right direction. I would be honored by your further consideration of THE GREAT AUTHORESS NOVEL:

(Rest of query redacted for reasons of personal dignity.)

**Sincerely,
Authoress**

Are you cringing? You should be.

In due course, I received the following rejection letter from Mr. Wonderful:

September 8th

Dear Authoress:

Thank you for sending me your letter. I appreciate your patience while I've considered your project and I'm glad to hear that my earlier critique was of help to you.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid I must pass on *The Great Authoress Novel*. I realize it is difficult to judge your potential from a query alone, but please know that I give serious attention to every letter, outline, and writing sample that I receive. I represent a very full list of authors, so I must be highly selective about what I request.

Thanks again, however, for thinking of me. Please accept my best wishes for your project's success.

Sincerely,
Very Nice Agent

Shortly after having received the second rejection letter, I mailed a heartfelt letter to Mr. Wonderful, thanking him for the profound effect he had had on my writing.

Can you point out the errors I made along the way? Can you tell where my lack of business understanding (and lack of understanding of the publishing business in general) got me in trouble?

Here's where I went wrong:

- ⇒ **Rule One: "No" means "no."** I took Mr. Wonderful's positive comments – "I like the premise" and "you write very smoothly" – to mean that, if I just did a little bit of work, his "no" would change to a resounding "yes."
- ⇒ **Rule Two: Agents don't want you to send a new query two weeks later after having made minor changes.** In fact, they don't want you to send a new query at all. Unless it's a completely new project. I worked on *one chapter* in a short period of time, then rushed a new query to his desk, in order to prove that I could, indeed, improve the writing and change his "no" into a resounding "yes."
- ⇒ **Rule Three: Do not respond to rejection letters.** Ever. Agents receive enough mail as it is. I sent what was, in essence, a thank you letter for a rejection.

In my defense, my query was well written (obviously it got past his assistant) and I followed the protocol on this agency's web site. Part of the problem was my inexperience with actual agent interface. I was too green to realize the "no means no" rule, for instance. (I think agents would love me forever if I could effectively get this across to all aspiring authors.)

Let's go back to the corporate interview analogy. If you interviewed for the job and ultimately were turned down, would you call back a month later and ask to be re-interviewed? Would you write a letter explaining that you've made some inherent personality changes and brushed up on your knowledge base, and you'd like another crack at it?

Sounds ludicrous, doesn't it? Yet somehow we feel like we can take a different approach when it comes to agent-hunting. Somehow it's okay to go for "second chances" and such.

There's a time and a place for getting back in touch with an agent you've already queried. Here are some examples of appropriate re-connects:

- ⇒ The agent has specifically invited you to "submit work in the future."
- ⇒ The agent has specifically asked to see the manuscript again after certain revisions have been made.
- ⇒ You have done substantial work on the novel and a good chunk of time has passed. As in, at least a year.
- ⇒ You are querying the agent on a completely new project.

Again, it all goes back to appropriate business practices. Separate your "writing brain" from your "business brain," and keep at it until you can view agents as prospective business associates. Once you're viewing them that way, they will shrink down in size and begin to feel more approachable.

Remember: Intimidation gets you nowhere. Business smarts, however, can propel you forward at a constant rate. And once you're moving forward – writing well and going through the querying process as though it were a "day at the office" – there will be no stopping you!

Chapter 4: Demystification Step 3: Author-Agent, Not Peon-Demigod

Agents Need Authors

Want to know what I believed about my Agent-from-Hell?

- ⇒ She was too busy with “important” clients to give me the time of day.
- ⇒ She knew it All and I knew Nothing.
- ⇒ Everything she said had to be right, since I knew nothing.
- ⇒ Long silences and lack of response to email and voicemail are normal agent behavior.
- ⇒ She actually cared about my work, undeserving though I may have been.

If you read between the lines, you’ll see that I was suffering from a typical case of Agents Are Gods disease (heretofore referred to as AAG). In my case, it was the result of not having any idea what agents were all about. Remember, I came into this whole thing in a convoluted manner – an agent read my book and called me, wondering if I might want representation. I had done no research, no reading up. When she called, I wasn’t even sure what she was offering. So it followed in short measure that I came to view her as Bigger Than Life. And, frankly, she seemed to enjoy my perception.

Even writers who follow agent blogs, research agent web sites, and generally do their homework before querying can end up suffering from AAG, though. Prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, the heavy veil that hung between the Publishing World and the rest of us was largely to blame: “Who *are* those people behind locked office doors in NYC? If I mail a query, will anyone actually open the envelope? How will I know if my manuscript got there? Do these agencies exist in the first place? And by the way, Jane Austen didn’t have an agent, so why do I need to go through all this?”

Then – and particularly in the last few years – the Internet exploded with all sorts of “insider information” on agents and agenting. Web sites, blogs, and lists of “the good, the bad, and the abominable” became accessible to any writer with a computer and an ISP. Yet despite this plethora of information, the “agents are bigger than I am” myth has largely prevailed.

And my question is, why?

I think there are several answers to that question:

1. The ancient veil remains. Despite the easily accessible information available online, there remains a “mystique” about agents and the publishing world in general. Our perception is that we’re trying to “break in” to something from which we feel largely separated. Like the nerdy loner who longs to join the popular crowd, the aspiring author feels like he needs to learn a secret handshake, talk differently, and break the code before he can “enter in.” And even after entering, he’s afraid to open his eyes and look around because, well, this is hallowed ground. He’s read everything he could dig up on literary agents, but he has failed to lift the veil.

My sister, who is not an aspiring author, espoused this attitude recently after I shared a snippet of a conversation I’d had with an agent. In reference to a casual remark the agent had made, she said, “Wow. Somehow I always expected literary agents to be so...snobby.” So ask yourself – where did a non-aspiring-author get that idea? And how much more prevalent do you think it is among those of us actually trying to “break in?”

2. We seek affirmation instead of representation. Like a child craving a gold star on the top of his creative writing assignment, we often submit our work in the hope of receiving a mark of approval. We want the agent to *approve of* our work. We want to be *approved*. Thing is, it isn’t about that. This goes back to separating your heart from the business end of things. A rejection letter isn’t a sign of disapproval; it’s simply a rejection letter. It’s “I’m not interested,” regardless of how it’s been worded. And a request for material isn’t a sign of approval; it’s a sign that the agent sees potential in your writing – potential, ultimately, for sales. So if we’re trembling and clearing our throats and wiping sweaty hands on our Old Navy clearance-rack henleys, we’ve got to ask ourselves why. Are we seeking approval? We’d better not be.
3. We still have misconceptions about the agent’s role. If we fully understand where the agent exists in the publishing food chain, we are less likely to bow down to his graven image. I’ve said it before, and here it comes again: This is a business relationship. You have a product – your novel – and the agent is going to attempt to sell it to a buyer – a publisher. If you find that you truly don’t understand the way things work, I suggest you do whatever you can to learn. It’s hackneyed but true: knowledge is power. And if you’re feeling powerful, you’re not going to feel like a peon. Learn the industry.
4. Incomplete research won’t cut it. The less you know about an agent you’re querying, the more you’re going to feel that “she’s from another world” feeling. Again, I can’t stress enough the importance of doing your homework. Research agencies and individual agents (using the method I outlined earlier). Network with other writers to learn about their personal experiences with agents. Cross examine your witnesses; human nature dictates that you’re going to hear stories that are diametrically opposed to one another.

One person's dream agent might be the next person's recurring nightmare. And bear this in mind, too: If you find that a particular agent is hard to dig up facts about, then one of two things must be true: 1) The agent isn't worth digging up any facts about; or 2) The agent is so big and busy and well established and largely inaccessible that it probably wouldn't be a good idea to pursue him in the first place.

5. Insecurity, self-doubt, and fear are getting in the way. And this may be the number one reason why the us-them phenomenon occurs. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that, even when we've pruned and polished and preened our manuscript, we still wonder if it's "good enough." The success stories of others may encourage us at first, but after a while we may start to hear the voices whispering, "See? You're not good enough. It happens to others, but it's not going to happen to you." We hold off on sending that first query because we're terrified we've made a mistake that's going to make us look supremely stupid. Even after the first round of queries has gone out, we sit around checking our email and wondering...is it a go? Am I a fool for trying? And in the midst of all the insecurity and worry, we make the silent assumption that "we" are small and "they" are huge. Our agent search resembles a flea trying to get an elephant's attention by clearing its throat. It's time – really, truly time – to let go of that I-am-so-small-and-insignificant mindset. You may not even realize you have it. But if the thought of talking to an agent on the telephone makes you feel as though your bones have melted and your tongue has frozen to the roof of your mouth, well, you've got the flea-to-elephant mindset. And you need to ditch it once and for all.

How To Know For Sure That Agents Aren't Gods

This goes back to doing excellent research. The more you uncover about an agent, the less likely it will be that you'll feel intimidated.

Paying close attention to agents when they communicate – via blogs, interviews, web sites, books, and personal emails (yes, you may actually receive some of these) – reveals the humanity of the person behind the Veil. If you become a regular reader of some of the popular agent blogs out there, you'll soon learn about said agent's frustrations, weaknesses, personal victories, and overall personality arc. Sometimes an agent will send you an email that contains a misspelled word. Sometimes a Google search will reveal another side to an agent – a side you'd never read about on the agency web site or agentquery.com. Often you'll discover that your Dream Agent has written a book or two. Or plays a musical instrument. Or used to be a stand-up comedienne. Or loves sushi. Or...

Get the idea?

This doesn't mean you can start off your query letter with, "Hey, there! I hear you play the mandolin, and so does my great-uncle. This is really cool, because my novel is about a mandolin player who wants to become a literary agent." Learn what you can about them to humanize them, yes. But remember to always approach an agent as a potential business associate. Not a potential mandolin-playing buddy.

My point – and I am striving to make it without beating it into the ground – is that agents are people. Just people. Not granite statues, not royalty, not aliens from deep within the sewer system.

People.

Stop Second-Guessing Yourself

It's possible that you've done your research and have written an excellent query letter. Are you still feeling wide-eyed and star struck when you discover an agent's name sitting in your inbox? It's time to go back to your business plan and read it out loud. Training yourself to view every communiqué as a business transaction is going to help to de-godify the gaggle of agents on your to-be-queried list.

You don't need to "change your voice" each time you communicate with a different agent. It may sound like something from kindergarten, but you need to be yourself – in a business sense. The more comfortable you are with who you are and what you've written, the more confident you will feel as you approach agents. You will also have a better chance at success, providing that your writing is the best it can be.

"Second-guessing" can also take the guise of fearing that everything you say is potentially wrong. As in, an agent asks you if anyone else is currently reading your manuscript, and you panic and think, "Oh, no. Should someone else be reading my manuscript?" or "Oh, no. Should I not have queried because someone else is reading my manuscript?" Or an agent asks you to send the first fifty pages as a Word attachment and you're having trouble attaching the file to your email, and you panic and think, "Oh, no. If I don't send this right away he's going to cross me off his list," or "Oh, no. If I email him and tell him I'm having trouble with the file, he's going to think I'm stupid and cross me off his list."

This is just another form of AAG thinking. Ask yourself how you would respond to a problematic file with someone who *isn't* an agent. Wouldn't you simply send a quick email that says, "I'm having trouble attaching the file. I'll have to ask my husband to help me figure out the problem when he gets home."? Or perhaps, "I'm going to try sending the file from my other email address, which is (insert address)."

You know. Basic Communication 101. It really isn't that hard once you realize that you're conversing with a mere mortal.

Human Relations

In the end, it's about giving and receiving respect. Yes, I believe the river of respect should run both ways. No one wants to work with a business associate who is disrespectful, right? So just as you should be respectful of an agent's time and basic personhood, so, too, should the agent be respectful of your time and basic personhood. If you don't feel you deserve the same level of respect as the agent, then you're still suffering from AAG. Yes, you're trying to "break into" the business. But you're still a person. And as long as you're not obnoxious ("This is the third time I've queried you and I just wonder why you keep sending me a form response every time??"), clueless ("To Whom It May Concern:"), arrogant ("You would be foolish, indeed, to pass up the opportunity to represent my one-of-a-kind novel."), or annoying ("Hey, it's me again. I know I emailed you this morning, but I was wondering if you had a chance to read those blog links I sent you? One of them was about my latest e-book."), then you deserve the respect that any potential business associate deserves.

Give yourself as much credit for being human as you tend to give agents for being somehow slightly more than human. Once you do that, you will be well on your way to approaching agents confidently and appropriately. No groveling, no sniveling, no shrinking back with trembling and fear.

The agents on your list aren't drinking ambrosia. They're drinking bottled water, coffee, and gin – and not necessarily in that order. Stop worshiping them and start sending them the best darn queries you can come up with. That's what we're going to talk about next.

Chapter 5: The Elusive Great Query Letter

Finding the Signal in All the Noise

This is a tough chapter to write, and it's not because I don't know what I'm talking about. It's because, frankly, there is so much query-writing advice available on the Internet, that my readers might find themselves feeling skeptical that I have anything new to offer.

Here's the truth: I'm not going to tell you how to write your query letter. For every agent and agented writer and publishing know-it-all who explains, step by step, how to write a killer query letter, there is another agent or agented writer or publishing know-it-all who will tell you something different. It might be something *slightly* different, but it will be different enough to make you question if you've done it "right" the first time.

It can be infuriating.

So rather than give you a bulleted list of what to include in your query letter, I'm going to give you some statements about what a query letter *is*. If you've got a thorough understanding of what it *is* rather than simply trying to master its form, you'll be able to write yours confidently and effectively.

A query letter is a business letter.

This goes right back to the business mindset. Before you sit down to hammer out the query, remind yourself that this is a business communiqué. It's not a friendly letter, a graded writing assignment, or an extra "bit of fluff" that you throw in with your manuscript. For ages untold (or at least since the birth of the agenting movement), the query has been the standard procedure for initiating contact with a literary agent.

So bear in mind that there is a right and a wrong way to approach a business letter. Forthwith:

DO:

- ⇒ Type your letter in block or modified block style. (If you don't know what this is, grab an old typing manual and read all about it.)
- ⇒ Include your full name and address, and the full name and address of the agent you are querying. (Note: When you are emailing, it is not necessary to include the mailing addresses, for obvious reasons.)

- ⇒ Address the agent as “Mr.” or “Ms.” Nothing else is appropriate in a business letter. Nothing.
- ⇒ Use a 10-, 11-, or 12-point “standard” font. Nothing smaller, nothing larger. In the days of typewriters, you only had two choices: pica (12-point) or elite (10-point). Today there are almost endless choices. Ignore them. No curly-queues or boldface or fonts that need a translation key to decipher. Think: Times New Roman. Or something very similar.
- ⇒ Limit the letter to one page, normal margins. There is no excuse for sending anything longer.
- ⇒ Sign your name above the typed signature (for paper queries). Full name, formal signature.
- ⇒ Include any previous publishing credits or legitimate awards won. (But please know that this is not a prerequisite for garnering interest in your work.)
- ⇒ Carefully proofread the letter. Nothing yells “unprofessional!” more loudly than a typo.

DON'T:

- ⇒ Address the query to “Dear Agent” or “To Whom It May Concern.” If you don’t know whom the letter concerns, you shouldn’t be sending it.
- ⇒ Include anything personal – as in, “I’ve been writing stories since I was three,” or “My eighth grade English teacher loved my novel.” This is a business letter, not an opportunity to find a pen pal. Stick to the facts.
- ⇒ Include a vanity press publication as a “publishing credit.” It’s not. (If you’re not sure what a vanity press is, do your research.)
- ⇒ Use scented paper, cute stickers, homemade parchment embedded with dried violets, or anything that isn’t standard, 8 ½ by 11 printer paper.
- ⇒ Use “stationery” or include attachments of any sort with an e-query.

A query letter is a reflection of your professionalism.

I think a lot of aspiring authors miss this one completely. It’s easy to focus on the query as a reflection of your talent as a writer (more on that in a moment). Often, it’s not easy to separate the “I’m a writer” from the “this is a business letter,” simply because the query letter is

something that we *write* about something that we've *written*. The ultimate encapsulating of everything we “are” as writers. Right?

But not really. The tone and “personality” of your query is either going to come off professionally or unprofessionally. And a query that screams “I am a professional!” is going to be stronger, more effective. Of course agents want clients who write well and have something highly marketable to offer. But they also want clients they can actually work with on a professional level.

Compare:

Dear Ms. Smarmy,

I have been reading your blog for about eighteen months now and I am amazed at how funny and talented you are. Since your Agent Query page says you accept e-queries and also that you are interested in representing edgy young adult fiction, I have finally decided (with much angst) to send you this query letter. I hope I've sent it to the right address. If this email has been somehow misdirected, I apologize.

Dear Ms. Smarmy,

I understand that you handle young adult fiction for The Bragalott Agency. Strictly Censored, my 64,000-word young adult novel, is complete and ready for your review.

If you were an agent, which paragraph would make you feel more confident about its writer?

As you work on your query letter, remind yourself that business letters need to have *personality* without *emotion*. By “emotion,” I’m not talking about your novel. I’m talking about you – your voice in the query letter. In addition to providing a great hook for your story, a professional query letter will send the message, “I’m mature, I’ve researched the business, I’m a dream to work with.”

A query letter is a reflection of your writing ability.

This is a no-brainer – but don’t let it trip you up. A query letter is not your opportunity to show the world – or at least a few agents – how wonderfully you wield a pen. This is not the time to pull out the Thesaurus and spend hours agonizing over just the right way to phrase each sentence. (Remember: It’s a business letter.) Of course you want to spend time carefully crafting a hook. Of course you want to capture the mood and voice of your novel in the

paragraph or two that describe it. But you can be a really strong writer who ends up with a weak query letter on account of having agonized over it too much. You really can “over-think” your query letter.

So as you sit down to craft your query, make sure you’re wearing your business cap *first*. Then, draw on your writing ability to take what you know about writing business letters and make it work. Avoiding typos and grammatical errors goes without saying.

A query letter is a short commercial for your novel.

This is another area in which authors often fall short: **marketing**. A query letter isn’t a plea for favor, a platform for showing off in the hope of impressing, or a passionate effort to somehow jump off the slush pile into someone’s eager hand.

A query letter is a business letter written with the intent to *market your novel* to a potential business associate.

I’m going to say it again: **A query letter exists to market your novel.** And to market yourself as well.

Again, it’s important not to get bogged down with too many details. It’s all about capturing the protagonist and the conflict in such a way that the agent wants to read more. Secondary plots, supporting characters, a map of the world you’ve painstakingly created – these don’t belong in your query.

Think of a movie trailer. If it’s effective, it’s going to show you the main characters and reveal that there is some sort of conflict that needs to be resolved. By the end of an effective movie trailer, you’re feeling like you simply must see the movie, or die trying. (Especially if it stars Johnny Depp.) Now think of the scenes in the trailer. They are short. Poignant. Hinting at conflict, suspense, romance, destruction, whatever. They get the message across without really “explaining” what’s going on.

So resist your need to “explain” things in your query letter:

Paula McGhee is a thirty-three-year-old ex-waitress with naturally curly hair who has been married twice and now wants to learn how to be a professional mud wrestler.

T’v’hm, the second born son of Grand T’v’lmyy of the Third Circle of Dependents on the northern continent of the planet Xvrxd, is in love with M’l’e’l, the firstborn daughter of Grand D’d of the

Second Circle of Dependents on the southern continent of the planet Xvrxd, and they are mortal enemies.

Take a moment to re-write those ridiculous sentences so that they pack a punch.

Hint: Too many details.

A query letter is a means to an end.

That’s all it is, really. It’s not the apex of your writing career. It’s not something that belongs on your list of goals and objectives (“Goal: Write a fantastic query!”). The query letter is a tool; it exists to bring your completed novel to the attention of someone who has the means of representing it and ultimately selling it for the best price. The query isn’t something you “achieve” or “accomplish;” it’s something you use. Your goal is publication. Your strategy is to land a literary agent. And the means to that end is a well written query letter.

So let’s look at a poorly written query letter.

No, this isn’t something I actually sent out. I want you to read this and pick out everything that’s wrong with it (answers at the end of this book). Bear in mind that writing style and voice are subjective. What you’re looking for here are the egregious errors that are easily avoided if you take my no-nonsense business approach to writing your query.

Fran Frittata
Agents R Us Literary Group
12345 Bleeker
New York, New York 10010

Dear Fran,

Hi! I found your name on a list of agents and thought I would send you a query, since the list said you’re interested in middle grade fiction novels. This is my first novel and I would be glad to send it to you. The title is *My Cat Is My Best Friend* and it has 34,512 words. I have attached the first two chapters in case you would like to take a look.

The story is about a ten-year-old boy named David Dapper. David is a fifth-grade student at Mercury Middle School, where he struggles every day with the mean comments from all the popular boys in his class: Mike Mucus, Taylor Trick, and especially Nebraska Nitwit, whom everybody calls “Neb.” Making matters worse is the fact that David’s older sister Dahlia, who is twelve years old and in the seventh grade, is extremely popular and has at least twenty-three best friends (she counts them every Friday). David also has trouble in school because his science teacher, Mr. Beaufont, hates him, and also David is afraid of the janitor with tattoos all over his

arms, ever since he saw him punch a guy in the face in the alley behind Mrs. Swift's house on Gray Street. So David has a lot of problems and not a lot of friends. In fact, he doesn't have any friends at all.

Then one rainy day when David is thinking about running away from home, a scraggly cat appears outside the garage. The cat looks hungry and tired, and David shares his tuna sandwich with the cat. For many days, the cat keeps coming back, and David names it "Pal" and decides to keep it. David and Pal get into a lot of adventures together, and these adventures make the story very exciting and interesting, especially for young readers. There is a happy ending, so that's good for the age group, too. I think my novel is a lot like books by bestselling authors Clarence Clip and Noreen Slopster.

I have been writing poems, stories, and essays since I was three. My parents called me a "prodigy" and I guess I was. I have never been published before but I have posted several things on my blog and my readers are always very excited about what I post and are always asking for more. I am sure they would all buy a copy of *My Cat Is My Best Friend*, should you choose to publish it.

Thank you very much. Please let me know if there is anything else you need to know. I look forward to hearing from you and potentially working with you.

Sincerely,
Ima Wreck

One final word on queries: Always include the first three to five pages of your novel. Always.

Well, okay. Do not send the first three to five pages if an agent has expressed a particular aversion to it. Every once in a while you will run into submission guidelines that clearly state, "We do not want any additional material included with your query. Not ever." In this case, always abide by the guidelines. Don't be a rule-breaker.

In the majority of cases, though, an agent will want to get a small taste of your writing, provided that the query letter captured his interest. In the end, it's all about the writing. So if you're sending a snail query, include the first three to five pages in the envelope (make sure it's a good stopping point – not in the middle of a sentence). And if you're sending an e-query, include the first three to five pages right in the body of the email, after your signature. Don't include them as an attachment. Not ever. Most agents immediately discard emails with attachments, and I don't blame them.

And there you have it – the query letter as a business letter, doing what it's supposed to do. Now let's talk about how not to scare an agent away, even if you've got the best query letter on the planet.

Chapter 6: Crossing Boundaries – Sycophants, Shadows, and Sociopaths

The Three S's

So let's say you've been successful at demystifying literary agents. You've got your research techniques well-honed; you follow half a dozen agent blogs regularly, plus several more intermittently; you've read blurbs, interviews, agent listings, and the experiences of other writers. You're not intimidated any more, and you've got a stellar query letter in your hand.

Want to know how to blow it in ten seconds? Cross the line from "author" to "groupie." That'll do it for you.

The flipside of all this Internet access to agents (and human beings in general) has a downside, and I'm sure most agents would agree with me – namely, once the veil is dropped, we feel as though we "know" the agent. "Know," as in, "friends." Or, at the very least, "know" as in, I-read-everything-you-write-and-I-really-like-you-so-I-hang-on-your-every-word-and-comment-often. In other words, you've become an agent groupie.

Not good.

There are three main types of agent groupies, and I am going to describe each one so that you can avoid even remotely resembling any of them. I haven't written this book to spawn an army of groupies, you see. I've written this book to arm aspiring writers with the information they need to break out of the knocked-kneed state and hit their stride with confidence. This is writing-as-business, and we have to learn to avoid unprofessional behavior at all costs. So listen closely.

The Sycophant

Dictionary.com's definition says it the best: "Noun: a self-seeking, servile flatterer; fawning parasite." Ugh! Let's talk about what type of behavior this encompasses.

Sycophants are mostly found on agent blogs, but will occasionally show up on bulletin boards where agents are known to stop by to do "guest posts" and the like. Their language sets them apart as sycophants immediately, and I'm convinced that most of them don't realize how obvious they're being:

"Bravo! I agree with everything you've said. Why didn't I think of this before? Yet you're the agent, and I'm just the scruffy writer trying to learn a thing or two. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Gosh, I can't believe how many queries you've read this weekend. I mean, gosh! So I guess this means I need to wait another few weeks before querying you, huh? I don't want to add to

your current workload or anything. What's your policy on status querying, by the way? I don't want to be pesty. *wink wink*

“Ohhhhh, you poor thing! Here you are, trying to have a life or something, and we measly writers keep bothering you with our (stupid?) questions. Can you forgive us? Can you find it in your heart to read our queries, anyway? I mean, if it weren't for you, my query wouldn't be half as good as it is (if I do say so myself).”

And so on. Ad nauseum.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong with posting a question on an agent's blog – *if* the agent has invited readers to do so. There's nothing wrong with thanking an agent for a particularly enlightening post – *if* you do so in an appropriate manner. (“Thank you so much for this enlightening post” comes to mind.) But there's something in the spirit of a sycophantic comment that sets it apart, gives it that toadying edge that's enough to nauseate the most stalwart.

We've learned that agents are not gods. Remember? So if you're going to frequent the blogs of your favorite agents, resist the temptation to leave effusive, obsequious comments. You're seeking a business relationship, so conduct yourself professionally at all times – and this includes blogs and other online forums where you're leaving messages with your name attached.

As for posting as an anonymous sycophant? Well, let's just hope nobody attaches your real identity to your bottom-kissing ramblings. I can't tell you how to spend your, ur, anonymous time.

The Shadow

The shadow may or may not be a sycophant. The behavior that screams “shadow” is twofold: 1) following an agent wherever he goes (online and possibly in real life); 2) initiating or continuing communication when it is inappropriate to do so.

No one likes to feel like they're being shadowed. The “Hi, it's me!” wears thin quickly. And being the fly that hangs around everyone's beer isn't the best way to endear yourself to people. If you feel compelled to follow an agent around the Internet (or to every writer's conference he attends within a thousand mile radius), go for it. But do it quietly.

On following an agent: Making your presence known at every blog posting, every bulletin board special appearance, every live chat, every *everything*, puts you into the “shadow” category. It may well be that, through thorough research, you have found your “dream agent.” Well, good. But if you find that you are compelled to leave a comment on every single blog post, submit questions to every single live chat, participate in every interactive event, I can assure you that, unless you are a movie star or the agent's spouse, your presence will not be welcomed.

As the social networking phenomenon continues to grow, you'll be increasingly tempted to “friend” an agent or two. Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Twitter – they make people seem

gloriously accessible. Sit on your hands if you must, but do not “friend” agents that you are querying. It will not ingratiate you in any way; you will not get brownie points or a free ride to the top of the slush pile. In fact, you will probably end up looking silly. Especially if you write, “Hi, I just sent you a query for my romance novel!” on somebody’s Wall.

It goes back to viewing this process as a business venture. The whole point of demystifying agents isn’t so that you can kick back and let it all hang out, hoping to befriend your favorite and end up happily agented. The point is to become knowledgeable and confident in your approach while remaining professional. Shadowing someone isn’t professional. Sending a handmade sympathy card at the death of your favorite agent’s cat isn’t professional. So be savvy, stay professional. Don’t shadow.

On communicating inappropriately: There is specific time in which it’s appropriate to make initial contact with a literary agent: the query. It is never – no, beyond never – okay to send an email to an agent asking him to explain his submission policy, or to call an agent to pitch your book, or to initiate an online chat with an agent in order to “get to know him better.” All the information you need is already out there. When the time is right and your novel is ready, send out your query letter.

If you do not receive a response to your initial query, do not pop an email asking if the agent has, in fact, received your letter. The sad truth is that there are agents out there who consider “no response” as an appropriate way to say “no.” (I hate it as much as you do, but there you have it.) If you hear nothing, consider yourself rejected. Period.

If you’ve received a request for further material, it’s perfectly fine to send a status query, provided that a decent amount of time has passed. “Decent” does not mean three days. It doesn’t mean three weeks, either. Step back and think about how much reading a literary agent has to do. Yours isn’t the only potato in the pot. So read the web site. Does it state a time frame for responses to requested material? Don’t status query before that time period has run out. If there is no time frame stated, then wait a minimum of two months on a partial and three months on a query.

Yes, you’ll read different advice on that. Some agents actually state that it’s okay to status query sooner. Again, you’re going to have to draw on your business sense when making decisions like this.

Another complete faux pas on the part of a (rejected) author is responding to the rejection letter. Folks, agents do not need more mail, snail or electronic. There is no need to thank a literary agent for his time after he has rejected you. You should, in fact, have thanked him ahead of time in your query. So resist the temptation.

What’s worse that the unwarranted thanks-for-rejecting-me email is the how-dare-you-reject-me email. We’ll get into that in the next section.

Bottom line? Minimum communication, only initiated when appropriate. This is a business, not a buddy-finding system. Once you’ve got that idea firmly in your head, you won’t be at risk of becoming an agent shadow. And that’s a very good thing.

The Sociopath

It's unbelievably easy to shoot yourself in the foot. Anything you do that's outside the realm of "normal" is going to raise a red flag for any agent (or anyone else, for that matter), and could mark you for life.

Seriously. Agents do talk to one another.

Truth be told, anyone with a basic personality flaw is going to struggle with relationships, business or otherwise. But even those of us who happen to be "personality flaw free" need to guard against behavior that will assuredly lead to the death of a writing career before it even has a chance to take off.

1. Sociopaths do not follow directions.

I'm not talking about inadvertent errors, like forgetting to include a SASE or sending your query to the wrong person at an agency. I'm talking about people who refuse to follow clearly delineated instructions on an agency's web site or on an agent's personal listing. The thought, "I don't need to do it this way" is a clear indicator of a person's ability to actually work with other people. Agents want good writing, yes – but they also want clients with whom they can work. As in, give and take. Listen to advice. Follow directions.

If you attach a file to your email when the agent has clearly stated "no attachments," your query most likely will be deleted. If you call an agent to give a personal pitch for your unwritten novel, you will deserve the "Nitwit" title immortalized by the sainted [Miss Snark](http://www.misssnark.blogspot.com) (<http://www.misssnark.blogspot.com>). And if you send your requested chapters handwritten with elk blood on authentic papyrus when the agent clearly requested Times New Roman, your writing had better be beyond anything in the known universe if you want a chance to move forward. Think about it: If you can't follow an agent's simple directions, how are you going to work with an editor at a large publishing house? No agent who values his reputation is going to knowingly foist an author like that on someone.

One of the winners in my popular **Secret Agent** contests on the blog was unwilling to follow the agent's submission instructions for the prizewinners. This particular agent had requested that the winners send their requested chapters directly to me, and I was to then forward them to the agent. It was her idea, not mine; she didn't want her private business email "out there" (can you blame her?). And since these agents are volunteering their time and talents, who am I to question how they want to go about administering their prizes? Yet this contest winner claimed to be "uncomfortable" sending the submission to a "third party."

Hello? If it weren't for this "third party," his first page would not have ended up in front of this particular agent (as she was quick to point out to me). Not only that, but most agents – particularly the well-established ones at larger agencies – have assistants. It is highly likely that most of your queries will land on someone else's desk, or in someone else's email box. "Third

parties” are rampant in the world of agenting. The contest winner’s cluelessness and lack of business sense made him look – well, silly. Slightly sociopathic.

Mind you, he didn’t use inappropriate or impolite language. He at least had enough sense to control himself. But the actual content of his communications, and the spirit behind it, were “off.”

2. Sociopaths query inappropriately.

This is a combination of “not following directions” and “not approaching this as a business.” An inappropriate query letter takes many forms: the mass email “To Whom It May Concern,” the way-outside-the-box, ultra-creative approach that looks more like a sixth-grade art project than a query, the five-page tome rife with misspelled words. Basically, if you can’t write a normal business letter, you are at risk of coming off sociopathic. For example:

Dear Mr. Amazing,

Hi there. I’m going to let you in on a big secret: I’m the next best thing to hit the book market. And I’m going to tell you why. The novel that I have completed defies description; it is a thriller, a mystery, a fantasy, a romance, and an instruction manual rolled into one. After having spent seven and a half years writing the first draft and another three years refining it, I can safely say that there is nothing stronger, nothing more exciting, and nothing more potentially profitable for you on the market today. I hope that you will take the time to read the enclosed synopsis; you absolutely don’t want to miss out on this! I have a long list of agents, so I’m only going to give you two weeks to reply. After this time, I will have to move onto the next available agent. So don’t let this opportunity pass you by!

I think you get the general idea. Write a crisp business letter with a good hook for your novel, and leave your personality defects out of it.

3. Sociopaths communicate inappropriately.

This goes beyond the socially challenged query letter. Inappropriate communication includes any communication, written or verbal, that is outside of decent behavior. Examples include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

Blasting an agent with an angry email after he’s rejected you. Yes, it happens: “You obviously didn’t take the time to read what I sent you, or you wouldn’t have rejected me so fast.” “Your form response was totally rude and I can’t believe I wasted my time querying you in the first place.” “Thanks for nothing. When I’m the next John Grisham you’ll regret the way you treated me today.” It blows my mind that people actually do this. Of course, I know that you’re not one of them.

Arguing with an agent's feedback on your work. Personal rejections are not something to be taken lightly; most agents don't have time for them. So if an agent sends you a rejection with specific comments on your writing, take the advice – gratefully – and use it to the best of your ability. (Bear in mind the overall subjectivity of the business; use the advice that resonates with you. You can't make a change in your manuscript every time an agent comments about something he didn't like.) Don't send an email declaring how vehemently you disagree with what the agent has said, or attempting to explain how the agent misunderstood what you were trying to accomplish, or accusing the agent of not reading carefully enough. And don't send an email asking the agent to further clarify himself, either. He's already spent enough time on your material, and he's decided he doesn't want to represent you. Leave it alone.

Someone argued with one of the **Secret Agents** on my blog after she had left a critique that had obviously offended the writer. I was dumbfounded. Really, I was. The agent responded graciously, only to be rebuffed a second time. All I can say is, it's lucky for this writer that the submissions are posted anonymously on the blog. This was shoot-yourself-in-the-foot behavior in its most classic form.

Posting a detailed account of your submission and rejection history on your blog. Belly-aching about agents and editors (by name) is frowned upon, and it's not a good way to present your writing self to the world. Why anyone would want to do this is beyond me, yet it's out there on the 'net. All over the place. "So-and-so rejected me for the second time; it was a really curt letter." "So-and-so's agency needs to get its act together." "So-and-so rejected my partial after only a day, and I'm convinced she didn't even read it." Beyond the (obvious) fact that displaying your failures doesn't exactly "sell" you as a writer, being a curmudgeon or crone isn't going to make people want to, you know, work with you. Who wants to spend time with someone who complains and gripes and badmouths others?

Not only is it unkind and unpleasant to be a bellyacher – especially a public bellyacher – it's unprofessional. And since you are pursuing a writing career as a *profession*, then you will need to conduct yourself professionally at all times. Blogs are public forums – anyone can read them. So if you've got a blog, then write well and be professional. Don't spew venom.

I'm sure that, for most of you, this type of "sociopathic" behavior is way outside of who you are. And as we learn to "be" professionals on the bumpy path toward publication, the inappropriate behaviors will naturally fall away.

If they don't...well, we've got a problem. But I'm going to stick to demystifying literary agents. We'll leave the psychotherapy to someone who knows more about it.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: What your agent search should look like

Taking Action

We've covered it all, and now we're going to put it together to map out your personal agent search. Remember, I'm not telling you how to write your query letter or whom to query. I've laid out the *approach* for you – the underlying attitude and perceptions of this process that need to be addressed. Now I'm going to take you, step by step, through the “I'm looking at this the right way now” querying process.

- 1. Finish your novel.** Remember that you're not ready to enter the Realm of Agents until you've got a finished, polished manuscript to pedal. Do your homework as far as genre, too – is your word count in the ballpark? Do you know which other books might share a shelf with yours in a bookstore? A novel is ultimately a product. (Yes, it's a piece of art; an amalgamation of creativity. I mean besides all that.) So make sure you know your product.
- 2. Enter the in-house critiques and Secret Agent contests at [Miss Snark's First Victim \(http://www.MissSnarksFirstVictim.blogspot.com\)](http://www.MissSnarksFirstVictim.blogspot.com).** Of course I'm going to tell you to do this. But my blog isn't the only resource available for online critique. Research carefully; the feedback you receive on your work will only be as strong as your critique group. It goes without saying that the **Secret Agent** contests offer invaluable feedback from our guest literary agents each month. So don't miss out on this opportunity.
- 3. Formulate your list of agents.** Following my earlier advice, carefully compile a list of agents who are appropriate for your novel. Double check their contact information and make sure you are following submission guidelines. Remember, too, that this industry is fluid. As your agent search continues, make sure you keep regularly doing your research so that the information on your “master list” isn't out of date.
- 4. Write your query letter.** For the sake of reminding you yet again that this is a business venture, I'm going to rephrase this to say, “Write your business cover letter.” You'll find examples all over the Internet of query letters that worked for particular agents. Read them, learn from them – but don't copy them. What worked for one person will not necessarily work for the next. Stay in the “business letter” frame of mind and spend time perfecting your “hook.” Don't write someone else's query.

5. **Send your query to agents in small batches (five or so).** If you end up with a list of fifty agents, it's not wise to query them all at once. For one thing, your query letter might not be strong enough to garner interest in your novel. Sending the weak query to all fifty agents effectively erases them from your list without giving them a chance to see your best. Choose five or so and send it out. As responses begin to come in, send out five more. Remember to include the first 3-5 pages of your manuscript (unless an agency web site explicitly tells you not to) with each query letter. And keep records. It helps to know who you've queried and when – and how (or if) they've responded.

6. **Reevaluate your query's effectiveness if you're not getting positive responses.** I have personally experienced rejections from first queries that turned into requests for material from second queries – which proves it wasn't the novel, since I hadn't changed it. If you're not getting anything but rejections, the first thing you have to ask yourself is, "Does my query suck?" There's a good chance that it might. So halt the process and take a hard look at your letter. If you want some feedback as you work, check out online resources, such as the Queries and Critique Requests board on [Verla Kay](http://www.verlakay.com/boards/index.php) (<http://www.verlakay.com/boards/index.php>) (if you're writing for children), or Janet Reid's [Query Shark](http://queryshark.blogspot.com) (<http://queryshark.blogspot.com>) (if you don't mind being publicly critiqued). Once you've strengthened your letter, (and it's likely that a complete rewrite is in order), begin your querying process again.

7. **Continue to query.** And you keep pressing forward. Despite the rejection, despite the passage of time. You simply keep going until you run out of agents or the world ends. Or you decide that you'd rather be a marine biologist, after all.

8. **Continue to write.** Above all, don't stop doing the one thing that brings you the most satisfaction: writing. Keep working on your new projects. Keep returning to your finished manuscript to take fresh looks at it, particularly if you receive valuable critique from agents along the way. Separate the business of writing from the joy of writing whenever you need to sit down and simply write. This is what it's all about, anyway, regardless of whether you are a "My Goal Is Publication" writer or an "I Breathe, Therefore I Write" writer. Just. Keep. Writing.

9. **Repeat.** And so the process will continue with each completed project, until you are agented and on your way to publication.

Of course, the above process will not be half as effective if you haven't successfully demystified the agents on your list (and, for that matter, agents in general). Are you still knock-kneed? Afraid to hit the "send" button on your query letter? Feeling as though you haven't learned the

secret handshake? Then you need to re-read this book. Because once you're approaching this agent search with the right perception and attitude, you are absolutely going to soar.

Disclaimer: I didn't say "You are absolutely going to get an agent." There are so many factors involved in that golden moment when agent and author click; shifts in barometric pressure, the ozone layer, indigestion, the alignment of Venus and Jupiter, PMS, and global warming, to name a few. But you will be a success in your own right because you have conquered the "sacred territory" of literary agents, approached it with professionalism and grace, and ceased to be intimidated by a process (a world) that once baffled you. You should be proud of yourself.

The veil has been lifted -- get out there and knock 'em dead. And send me your success stories -- perhaps I can share a few on the blog. There's nothing like a good success story to keep us going on a woe-is-me sort of day. After all, we're all in this together.

I'll be waiting to hear from you!

Answers to query letter errors on page 32

Fran Frittata

Agents R Us Literary Group

12345 Bleeker (Just checking to see if you New Yorkers are awake: it's Bleecker. Mr. Authoress has a favorite Italian restaurant on Bleecker.)

New York, New York

Dear Fran, (Ms. Frittata)

Hi! (Too informal to open a query) I found your name on a list of agents and thought I would send you a query, since the list said you're interested in middle grade fiction novels. (Poorly worded, and who wants their name picked from an arbitrary list?) This is my first novel (Never mention that it's your first novel. Never.) and I would be glad to send it to you. (You might be glad to send it, but never say so.) The title is *My Cat Is My Best Friend* and it has 34,512 (Word count should always be rounded to the nearest 1000.) words. I have attached the first two chapters in case you would like to take a look. (Ack! Never attach anything.)

The story is about a ten-year-old boy named David Dapper. David is a fifth-grade student at Mercury Middle School, where he struggles every day with the mean comments from all the popular boys in his class: Mike Mucus, Taylor Trick, and especially Nebraska Nitwit, whom everybody calls "Neb." Making matters worse is the fact that David's older sister Dahlia, who is twelve years old and in the seventh grade, is extremely popular and has at least twenty-three best friends (she counts them every Friday). David also has trouble in school because his science teacher, Mr. Beaufont, hates him, and also David is afraid of the janitor with tattoos all over his arms, ever since he saw him punch a guy in the face in the alley behind Mrs. Swift's house on Gray Street. So David has a lot of problems and not a lot of friends. In fact, he doesn't have any friends at all. (This entire paragraph is rife with too much information and overwriting. Stick to main characters and main conflict.)

Then one rainy day when David is thinking about running away from home, a scraggly cat appears outside the garage. The cat looks hungry and tired, and David shares his tuna sandwich with the cat. For many days, the cat keeps coming back, and David names it "Pal" and decides to keep it. David and Pal get into a lot of adventures together, and these adventures make the story very exciting and interesting, especially for young readers. (Do not presume to tell an agent that your story is "exciting and interesting." Write a good hook that shows the excitement.) There is a happy ending, so that's good for the age group, too. (Extraneous, unnecessary) I think my novel is a lot like books by bestselling authors Clarence Clip and Noreen Slopster. (Do not compare your work to bestselling novelists unless you already are one yourself.)

I have been writing poems, stories, and essays since I was three. My parents called me a “prodigy” and I guess I was. I have never been published before but I have posted several things on my blog and my readers are always very excited about what I post and are always asking for more. I am sure they would all buy a copy of *My Cat Is My Best Friend*, should you choose to publish it. **(This entire paragraph is useless and should be deleted.)**

Thank you very much. Please let me know if there is anything else you need to know. I look forward to hearing from you and potentially working with you. **(A simple “Thank you for your time and consideration” is all that is needed. The rest is unnecessary.)**

Sincerely,

Ima Wreck

(and remember to include your contact information)

BONUS MATERIAL: Helpful URLs

Information on Literary Agents

Agent Query: <http://www.agentquery.com>

Query Tracker: <http://www.querytracker.net>

Association of Author Representatives: <http://www.aar-online.org/mc/page.do>

Preditors and Editors: <http://anotherrealm.com/prededitors/>

Writer Beware: <http://www.sfwaweb.org/beware/>

Writer Communities

Verla Kay's message boards: <http://www.verlakay.com/boards/index.php>

Absolute Write Water Cooler message boards: <http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums/>

Writer's Net message boards: <http://www.writers.net/>

And, of course, Your Favorite Blog for Aspiring Authors:

Miss Snark's First Victim: <http://www.missnarksfirstvictim.blogspot.com>