

DROWNING THE AGENT  
A lesson in writing query letters  
By Craig Faris

A few years ago, I sat down to write a letter introducing my first novel to the horde of the literary agents who were anxiously awaiting its release. At least that's how I imagined them to be. After all, I reasoned, every agent wants to "discover" a future best selling author, right? Needless to say, it didn't take very long to learn that I was in error. Of the 35 rejection letters I received, less than five gave a reason for the rejection. Obviously, I wasn't doing something right. It made me wonder if the editor/agent even read the material. If this was the case, then maybe the problem was the query letter.

I must admit that in my desperation I considered any number of gimmicks. Everything from starting off the letter with jokes to including a \$100 bill as a bribe were duly considered, and thankfully, rejected. I needed help and since I had yet to join a local writers group, I had little choice but to turn to the Internet. To my astonishment, not only was help available, it was offered freely and without reservation.

A published author of sixteen novels responded to my question, "what am I doing wrong?" with a four page email explaining the do's and don'ts of writing a query letter. Since her advice was so freely offered, I feel that it is only fair that I now pass on these simple instructions and in using her words, "pay forward" so that the next generation of writers might avoid the pitfalls we've had to encounter.

Most writers feel that a query letter is probably the hardest page you will ever have to write. But actually what makes it so hard is a simple lack of direction. Once you have mastered the blueprint, building a query letter becomes no harder than developing a character. The main thing you must keep in mind is to think like your agent or editor thinks. We will discuss this more extensively later.

A query letter has one purpose, to introduce the agent or editor to your novel and make them want to read more. If you tell them too much, there is no reason to read further. If you tell them too little, there won't be enough interest to read past the query. With close to 100 query letters a day, agents can usually tell whether or not to read further by the end of the first line. So your query has to be the one that is so professional, so intriguing that he not only reads your entire letter, but also continues on to read the rest of the submission. Nothing can be boring in a query. The agent will simply stop reading at that point.

Think of a query as your billboard. With a billboard you have perhaps 10 seconds to sell your product. With a query you have seconds, not minutes to get your message across. Just look at the teaser used in the movie, "Mission to Mars." "For ages man has searched for the origins of life. Maybe he's been looking on the wrong planet!" Now I don't know about you, but THAT makes me want to read more, regardless of my religious or cultural background. If you've got a great teaser, consider starting the letter with it. One of the biggest mistakes people make in a query is trying to turn it into a synopsis. A synopsis can and should accompany any query, but I recommend it be on a separate sheet, single spaced and in this case no longer than one page. If the agent is interested, he will ask for

a more detailed synopsis or an outline later. Right now your goal is get the agent to ask for more.

Here are a few simple steps the help you layout your query letter:

**Step 1: Finish your novel BEFORE writing your query.** I cannot stress this enough. Very few agents will bother reading a query if the book isn't finished. It's okay to query first in non-fiction, but not fiction. Be sure to include the word count as well. A good first line is: "I have completed a 90,000-word science fiction novel entitled, My Sci-fi Novel." (Although I wouldn't recommend that title)

**Step 2: Neatness counts.** A query letter is a single-spaced one-page letter that is typed or printed on at least 24-pound stock, measuring 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Don't hand write a query letter. Don't print it on flowery stationery with colored ink. Use a high quality laser or inkjet printer if possible. If you can afford to have your name turned into a logo, do so and print up some stationary. This will help your letter stand out, but don't over do it. You are selling your writing, not your name.

**Step 3: Spell the agent's name correctly.** Never address a query to Dear Sir! If you don't know the agent's name, call them and ask. Then ask how it is spelled. Also, make sure you know their gender. I once sent a letter to a Ms. Ashley Grayson only to find out later that it was Mr. Ashley Grayson. My query was promptly rejected.

**Step 4: Be polite.** You are asking a complete stranger to invest his or her time in reading your work. Agents are real people and they have feelings like everyone else. One of the worse mistakes you can make is to come across like you are offering the agent the opportunity to represent you. It is they who pick and choose, not you!

**Step 5: Know exactly what you've written, and describe it by its genre.** Mystery, Romance, Mainstream Thriller, Legal Thriller, Science Fiction, Dark Urban Fantasy, whatever best describes your novel, include it in the first line. Find out what the agent likes and send the letter only to agents who accept your genre. Don't kid yourself. If an agent doesn't like thrillers he won't like YOUR thriller. There is no sense in wasting the agent's time or yours if they don't represent your genre.

**Step 6: Describe your novel in ONE paragraph and if possible, compare it to similar published and hopefully successful novels.** If the agent represents one of these novelist, all the better. Remember, you want to make it interesting enough for him to read the complete synopsis so don't try to tell the whole story in the query.

**Step 7: Include in your query a reference to your single page synopsis and the fact that you are including a self addressed stamped envelope for their convenience.** Sometimes the SASE gets lost and this will go a long way in convincing the agent to reply on his or her stationary. And be sure to include the proper postage in stamps. A metered envelope is no good after a week. If you expect your materials returned then you need to include enough postage to do so.

**Step 8: Be reasonable. DON'T CALL THE AGENT ON THE PHONE!** Don't demand a reply or threaten to kill yourself if you don't get one. Don't expect answers within a week. Don't send your entire manuscript unless it is requested. Do thank them for their time and include a daytime phone number and an email address if you have one. If an agent loves your work, he will probably call rather than write.

**Step 9: Above all, be professional.** Try to put yourself in the agent's shoes. A typical New York literary agent, for example, comes to work on Monday morning and is hit with perhaps 100 email letters and proposals of various lengths. In addition to that, the postal service might bring another 200 letters and manuscripts to wade through. The real secret to getting an agent's attention is professionalism. That's why I wouldn't recommend a gimmick or a "funny" letter. It's also why you should never try to bribe an agent. Most "reputable" agents will find this offensive and write a terse reply along with your rejection. Agents, editors and publishers are inundated with people trying to be different everyday, when what they are desperately seeking is someone who is a true professional. If you want to get noticed, be the author of that letter!

Here's a sample of what you might say in a query letter to an agent: (Pardon my tongue-in-cheek)

Miss Anita Break  
3000 Mental Ailment Court  
Columbia, South Carolina 29204  
803-123-4567  
anitabreak@AQL.com

June 15, 2000

Mr. Pat Hugh Onhead (spell the agent's name correctly)  
Onhead Literary Agency Inc.  
1234 18<sup>th</sup> Street  
San Pedro, CA 90732

Dear Mr. Onhead; (spelled-correctly)

I am a published author of short fiction and I have completed a 90,000-word stand-alone dark urban fantasy manuscript entitled, Tossing the Cat. It is the story of an inner city family's struggle to hide the fact that they roam the city at night as cat burglars. Written in the vein of Drowning the Agent, by your client Hannibal Lecter, Tossing the Cat appeals to readers you are already well familiar with. I would love to have you represent me in selling this and the many books I plan to write on this subject in the future.

Prior to beginning my writing career, I spent ten years as a professional cat burglar in the northeast. Since my incarceration, and subsequent rehabilitation, I have interviewed countless burglars and have studied under Dr. Lecter extensively. Both your client Hannibal Lecter and Warden Chilton recommend you highly, and from what I've seen, I believe you are the perfect agent to represent my genre.

I would like to send the complete manuscript or sample chapters for your review. I would be interested in your evaluation of its commercial potential and would welcome any recommendations on how to improve the manuscript further.

I've included a single page synopsis of Tossing the Cat and a SASE for your convenience.

Thank you for your time and I eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,

Anita Break  
Cell Block C, Basement.

In the first paragraph the author explains that she has at least some experience in writing, that she has completed the manuscript and identified the genre. She then gives the agent a one-line description or teaser and compares it to a previously published work that the agent is familiar with. She also hints that she is already thinking about the next couple of books.

The second paragraph explains her qualifications to write the book. She refers to a recommendation from a published author and complements the agent's work. This seldom hurts.

The third paragraph requests permission to send further material and shows a willingness to accept recommendations and changes.

The author then refers to the attached material and thanks the agent for their time.

A typical query proposal should contain the query letter, a brief single page synopsis and perhaps a few sample pages of the first chapter. I say "perhaps" because you need to check the agent's guidelines in *Writers Market*, or *Jeff Herman's guide to Literary Agents* to understand exactly what they would like to see. Follow those guidelines. If it doesn't mention sample pages, it is usually ok to send one chapter as long as it isn't over 30 pages long. Personally, I like to send about five pages and the reason is simple. The conflict usually happens within the first five pages (or it should) and I like to leave the agent with a little cliffhanger. Here is an example from my short story, House of Ruth:

(Background: Three teenagers find an old abandoned house out in the forest. Inside they find a code hidden in a newspaper article from 1949. Dan has just deciphered the last word in the code and is telling his friends.)

"Look, I don't know who lived there," Dan said, "but whoever it was took a keen interest in this newspaper article."

“How do you know?” I said.

“Because of the third word; actually two misspelled words. That’s why it took me so long to decipher it.”

“What was it?” we asked.

“Big Surprise,” Dan said. “Root Cellar!”

Returning to the house took us twice as long due to the shovels, picks and flashlights we had to carry. It was well after 6 pm by the time we got there and the house seemed even darker and creepier. Before going inside, Dan got on his knees and shown his flashlight under it.

“There’s a ladder going down into an open pit,” he reported. “It’s near the fireplace.”

A breeze caused the shreds of newspaper to cast eerie shadows in our flashlight beams as we entered the old structure. We found the trap door under an inch of dust in a closet between the two bedrooms and it took two of us to lift it. A net of spider webs covered the opening and the inky blackness beyond it. Dan brushed them aside and tested his weight on the ladder’s top rail.

“Come on, guys,” he said. “It’s just a hole.”

“Just a hole,” I kept repeating until my foot found the dirt floor ten feet down. A large hole, that’s all it was, dug into the red clay and littered with dried cornhusks, rusted farm tools, and broken furniture. We searched for a quarter-hour before finding a trunk half-buried under junk in one corner. Clearing it off, we nervously pointed three flashlight beams on the trunk lid as Dan used his shovel to break the lock.

Slowly, carefully, we opened a lid into the past.

The key here is to tell just enough of the story to hook the reader (or agent) into the scene. Once they have read this far, and hopefully gotten hooked, it’s easy for them to pick up the phone and ask for more. Isn’t that the ultimate goal of any query?

Well, that’s about all the advice I can offer. Just remember one thing; literary agents and editors are real people, who have the toughest job in the world, selling your manuscript. Chris Reorden, a former New York editor, and fellow board member of the Southeast

Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America, once told me a little story about rejection letters. “I’m short,” she said, “and weigh only about 90 pounds. So when I go into a store to buy a new suit, it takes awhile. If I pick one or two suits off of the rack, am I not rejecting every other suit on that rack? It’s not that there is anything wrong with the other suits; I was just looking for the right fit. If I reject your manuscript, keep that in mind.”

Oh, and if you are curious about what happened to Anita Break’s query letter— Well, unfortunately before the agent could respond, Ms. Break’s body was found in Dr. Lecter’s cell, facedown in a bowl of fava bean soup. Which just goes to show that not all recommendations will prove to be fruitful. Give your agent too big a bowl, without any meat, and you just might end up drowning her.

## CRAIG FARIS

### Bio

Craig Faris is an eleven-time award-winning author of short fiction and plays, including four Best of Issue awards in the 1999, 2000, 2002 and 2003 editions of the South Carolina Writers Workshop anthology. Five of his short stories have won the South Carolina Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Short Fiction. He has 27 years experience as a graphic designer and has won two national design awards for direct mail, numerous marketing awards, the printing industry's PICA award, and the Scholastic Arts Gold Key Award.

He is a member of the Board of Directors of the South Carolina Writers Workshop and also serves as Vice-President of the southeast chapter of the Mystery Writers of America.

Years of listening to audio books while commuting to work inspired Craig to begin his writing career. In 1998 he completed his first novel, a 226,000-word unpublished manuscript, which taught him how to finish a major work. He recently completed his second novel, a 129,000-word thriller, entitled, *The Spectrum Conspiracy*, which is represented by Sullivan Max Literary Associates. He is currently working on a third novel based on the true story of a serial murderer in 1856.

Craig lives in Rock Hill, SC with his wife, Deena, and their two children, Katie, 13, and Charlie, 10.

#### Published credits:

Echoes from the Ether, Best of Issue, *1999 Horizons*, Anthology Collection, (juried regional competition)  
Dawn's Last Gleaming (short story excerpt), Best of Issue, *2000 Horizons*, Anthology Collection  
Last Run to Broad River, Honorable Mention, *2001 Horizons*, Anthology Collection  
Chaney's Gold, Best of Issue, *2002 Horizons*, Anthology Collection  
Through a Perilous Plight, Honorable Mention, *2002 Horizons*, Anthology Collection  
Broken Anvil, Best of Issue/Plays, *2003 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection (juried regional competition)  
Cinders in the Attic, Honorable Mention, *2003 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection  
Guatemala, Third Place, *2004 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection  
A Catfish Stew, Third Place/Plays, *2004 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection  
Drowning the Agent, Article, April 2002, *The Quill*, Published by the South Carolina Writers Workshop  
Reprinted June 2002, *The Scarlett Letter*, Mystery Writers of America  
Reprinted Oct. 2003, The Midwest Chapter, Mystery Writers of America  
The First Book, Article, June 2003, *The Quill*, Published by the South Carolina Writers Workshop  
The Wrong Way to Get Published, Article, April 2003, *The Scarlett Letter*, Mystery Writers of America  
Silent Assault, *2005 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection  
Big Daze, *2005 Catfish Stew*, Anthology Collection

#### Additional Literary Awards:

Silent Assault, 1999 Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Short Fiction (State-wide juried competition)  
Souls of the Abyss, 2000 Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Short Fiction  
A Pretty Good Year, 2000 Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Nonfiction/Essay  
Chaney's Gold, 2001 Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Short Fiction  
House of Ruth, 2005 Carrie McCray Literary Award for Best Short Fiction