

Converting Queries into Book Deals

Sample Nonfiction Query Letters that Worked

Query letters are often the first contact between an author and literary agent, or an author/agent and a publisher. Because an agent or editor can receive hundreds to thousands of queries a year, it's important that to rise above the "slush" (the semi-affectionate term for queries that will be placed in the slush pile, i.e., rejected). You can avoid the slush pile and increase your chances of being seen by an agent or editor by 1) writing a proper and succinct query, and 2) following the agent's/editor's submission guidelines *to the T* (we can't stress this enough!).



Effective queries should contain the essential information about both the project being proposed and you, the author, to show the agent or editor that there is a need for the book in the already crowded book marketplace and that *you* are the person to write it. Publishers have guidelines for how many books they'll publish each year, and are responsible for adhering to an acquisition budget, so their standards reflect their need to publish not just the books they love, but more importantly, the books they feel will sell in the current market—which, by the way, constantly changes.

The best thing you as the author can do to start out in the query process is to read anything you can get your hands on in the topic you're writing about, and carve away at your project to make sure it's offering something both unique and valuable in that space. We say it all the time at NFAA, but the more you understand your audience and are thus able to carve out your own niche within your field, the more you can write a book your readers truly want to read—and a book agents and editors will feel can sell.

What's in a Query?

Briefly, here are the elements of an effective query letter:

- The book title, genre, projected word count (if possible), plus a hook (descriptive sentence or phrase that grabs the reader's attention)
- Proven understanding of the market and the need for your particular book
- If you have them, extraordinary promotional efforts or media attention for your book or your brand, to show that you can help sell the book

- An author bio that details your outstanding credentials and experience with the book's subject matter

To demonstrate, we've included some real queries for books that were pitched by actual agents to publishers. The names and book titles have been removed at the literary agency's request, but all other pertinent information is intact.

Query 1: Dog-Training Book

This first query is from a dog trainer (and former Guide Dogs for the Blind trainer) who found an inspired and intelligent niche: offering personalized—and free—dog training online! Her personal website received about 5,000 monthly views, and she contributed to a popular website that, at the time, had more than 100,000 views monthly. All of these elements showed the agent and publisher that she had a well-established platform in the dog-training world.

This query was sent to an agent, who, after some editing and polishing, sent it to the publisher, and ultimately, the author was offered a book deal!

Dear,

I'm currently working with former Guide Dogs for the Blind trainer and current owner of [REDACTED].com on a dog training book that features a one-on-one online component.

I see that you're looking to build your list in (among others) the area of pets. Is this the type of pet book you're seeking? I've included a query below, if you are interested, and can email you a proposal.

Thank you for your time,
[REDACTED]

NFAA: This introduction was by the literary agent to the editor.

Imagine a book written by a friendly dog trainer that not only teaches you how to have a better life with your dog, but also offers you access to ask any question you have about your own, unique dog. I am proposing an innovative book concept that connects the reader from anywhere in the world to the author, offering direct online guidance. This one-on-one service offers personalized, affordable dog training advice that's private, flexible, and creates solutions. I've been using the same concept successfully on my positive, interactive, online dog-training program.

This book will be friendly and easy to understand. It will go beyond basic dog training to offer anyone who has a dog or works with dogs, a special understanding of how humans and dogs view our everyday experiences differently. When we are aware of *why* our dogs behave the way they do, we can better communicate *how* we'd like them to behave. Additionally, when we recognize how *our* moods and body language affect the dog's experience, we may eliminate many unnecessary behavioral problems we ourselves unknowingly cause! When we combine the book with the innovative, one-on-one guidance, we offer people the chance to have an incredibly happy human/dog relationship.

I have 15 years of experience as a dog trainer and the exceedingly respected position of having trained at the world-renowned Guide Dogs for the Blind, an organization known for producing some of the best-trained dogs in the world. I have a deep understanding of how dogs and humans think differently and specialize in techniques that promote harmonious relationships between dog and human. When I connect with the human, I connect with the dog, and through that I can get them to connect with each other.

NFAA: While this intro is a bit long, it does a masterful job showing both the author's understanding of her field, and the market for this book, as well as succinctly showing the scope and approach of the proposed book.

I am dedicated to promoting my book, and have allocated **\$10,000 to my promotion campaign**, and will gladly **purchase 1,000 books** at pub date.

NFAA: The author was prepared to use her own promotional budget to help promote the book, and purchase books from the publisher at a discount (called a buyback) to then sell at events and from her website. Though buybacks or a promo budget are never a requirement for being published, this is obviously a fantastic detail to include if you're prepared to provide something similar!

With a degree in education, I've studied canine behavior and human psychology. I also worked alongside a Veterinarian and then owned and operated a successful dog training business for more than eight years. Additionally, my online training program has given me the unique perspective of working with an impressive cross section of people from around the world, allowing me to fine tune exactly what's needed and what works. Furthermore, I have been met with enthusiastic reviews as the "dog expert" on several leading Web sites, including ██████████.com, with an audience of 187 million monthly visitors.

NFAA: This section wisely showcases the author's educational and professional experience and credentials that shows she's the right expert to write this book.

My success has typically involved a combination of guiding the human to understand their dog better through my written training program, as well as offering personal tips so that they can reach their own individual goals in training. For example, a client once wrote to me about having trouble walking her large dog because he would sit and refuse to move in the same spot on each walk. She was extremely frustrated, as this behavior had been going on for months. I advised her to try putting a long line on her dog and walk several feet ahead tempting the dog with food treats to come towards her. When the dog reached her she should offer the treats and casually continue walking and treating. Almost immediately the dog had forgotten its reason for stopping and she never had a problem again! The combination of my written training program, along with my personalized tip solved her crisis. Sometimes the simplest tips can change someone's life. This book, combined with direct, online training guidance, can offer an all-in-one successful training program.

NFAA: Again, this section runs a little long and could have been condensed, but it shows the author's unique approach to dog training that would be represented in her book. It also shows how her existing website was utilized in the training—which ultimately brings us back to how she could use the website to leverage the book, and vice versa.

As you can see, the query above had all the necessary elements for success, but could use a bit more streamlining. It's important that you do as much revising and tightening as possible before submitting your query to an agent or editor. They will know when you've done your homework!

Query 2: Prescriptive Pain Management Book

Here's another example of a query—this one polished by an agent and then submitted and sold to a publisher:

I would like to share with you a life-changing book in the field of health and wellness entitled: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] by [REDACTED] M.D.

NFAA: This opening paragraph aligns much more with the prescribed formula of identifying the book's topic/genre, proposed title, and author's name with credentials. If possible, working in the proposed word count is helpful as well. "Average" word count for nonfiction books can range from 50,000-60,000 words, so if you're grossly out of those margins—say, your book is 20,000 words or 150,000 words—that could be an immediate reason for an agent or editor to send your query to the slush pile, since it shows a lack of understanding of publishing guidelines.

The impact chronic pain has on our society is staggering. It is estimated that over 50 million Americans suffer from chronic pain. Everyone with chronic pain struggles with inactivity, managing stress, and sleep disturbances. These problems also contribute to other common medical problems, such as diabetes, arthritis, and cardiac disease. Poorly managed pain often has a domino effect, causing a myriad of other health problems.

NFAA: This section establishes 1) the book's scope (managing chronic pain), and 2) the need for the book, including the number of people affected by the topic that the author aims to address.

With his over 20 years' experience treating patients with chronic pain, Dr. [REDACTED] now offers a book that addresses the diverse and often debilitating effects of chronic pain with a new and innovative approach. Rather than appealing to the worn-out notion of making a reader "pain free in x number of weeks," this practical book features cutting edge research, a multi-disciplinary approach, and real case studies that focus on creating the best health possible for each individual. The typical western health care model generally prefers to focus on reactionary treatments, which is akin to putting fingers in the holes of the dike. There is a tremendous focus now in our society on **wellness**, but nobody has brought that broad topic into the chronic pain arena with any real impact.



NFAA: The author establishes his credentials and the book's approach, showing how the book will be different from others on the same topic/genre (chronic pain management).

Since 1996, Dr. [REDACTED] has worked in private practice in the San Francisco Bay Area, and co-founded [a well-known pain clinic]. He is one of the first to transform the traditional pain clinic model into a true wellness center, where patients receive modalities like art therapy, tai chi, and life coaching in conjunction with more traditional medical treatments. His center is nationally acclaimed, having become one of the only CARF (Council of Accredited Rehabilitation Facilities) accredited pain centers in the western United States. Over 25,000 patients are treated at [the clinic] per year, and all will have the opportunity to purchase this book at the retail counter in the clinic's lobby, as well as through his extensive newsletter and mailing list. Dr. [REDACTED] also serves as a volunteer clinical instructor at the **Stanford Pain Center**.

NFAA: This paragraph further establishes the author's credentials, in addition to the built-in audience for the book.

Dr. [REDACTED]'s promotion plan includes a **\$30,000 budget** for his marketing efforts, which includes hiring a prominent publicist to assist him with media, and continuing to book talks and workshops at wellness centers, pain conferences and health conventions. **Visit the clinic's website at [REDACTED].com.**

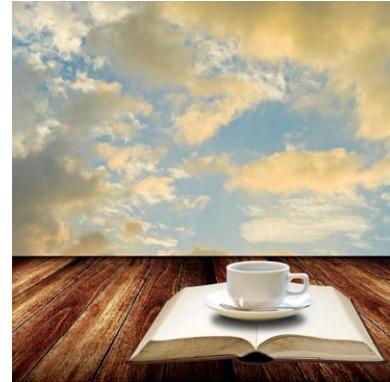
NFAA: Again, though buybacks or a promo budget are never a requirement for being published, include this information if you're prepared to provide something similar!

Please let us know if you would like to see a full book proposal and a sample chapter.

NFAA: Make sure you have a book proposal and sample chapter (or two) ready to send to the agent or editor as soon as he or she requests them!

Query 3: Women's Self-Help/Spirituality

This last example is another well-written query that is compelling yet straightforward, and made it into the hands of first an agent and then editors at both small and large publishing houses, who requested the proposal. Ultimately, however, this book did not sell because editors found the topic to be too “niche” for the publishing climate at the time.



Dear

I'd like to share with you this inspiring new non-fiction project, [REDACTED] by [REDACTED].

Over the past decade, women's spiritual development has gained popularity. A key aspect to spiritual development is learning to appreciate solitude. In this regard, both the holistic and travel industries have shifted focus toward women, as evidenced by the soaring “women's retreat” business. Companies like Journeys of the Spirit and Women's Quest offer world travel packages for women-only groups. A Woman's Way even provides opportunities for women to attend *virtual* retreats in the privacy of their own home. This trend points to an upsurge in women's desire to carve out quiet time for themselves and/or make peace with their lives of solitude.

[REDACTED] is a practical yet playful book to help both women who live alone and women who are in relationships but desire time for themselves to:

1. redefine solitude;
2. enjoy being alone; and
3. employ solitude as a tool to connect more wholly and deeply with others.

The book features brief, easy-to-read chapters full of comprehensive information and practical advice. Readers can either read cover to cover or open to a random chapter for a quick tip or few words of encouragement.

[REDACTED] holds a **Masters of Fine Arts** degree in Creative Writing from Emerson College in Boston and has studied **Theater and Acting** at Loughborough University (UK) and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York. In addition to being the 1996 Poet Laureate of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, [REDACTED] was a nominee for the Twentieth Annual Pushcart Prize for poetry.

Primarily a journalist and fiction writer, [REDACTED] founded a full-service writing company devoted to promoting positive and sustainable change in the world. She has taught, as an **adjunct professor of writing**, at a number of east coast colleges, including Philadelphia University Bucks County Community College, and Emerson College. She has served as the **head writer** for and performer in the New York City-based comedic theater company, and **Executive Creative Director** and co-founder of a company dedicated to uniting cultures through the globalization of cinema. Currently, she works as a voice-over artist for radio, television, film, and the Internet.

As a Peace Counselor since September 2002, [REDACTED] has given numerous readings across the country, and lectured at such venues as New York City's New School on the topic of employing the arts as a means toward conflict resolution.

Please let me know if you would like to see a full proposal and sample chapters by email.

NFAA: As mentioned above, we're including this sample to show not only another excellent query that reached the eyes of agents and editors alike, but to illustrate that sometimes even being seen by the "right" people doesn't necessarily guarantee that the book will be picked up. Receiving a book offer is an ultra-precise combination of 1) the book having the right elements for both the market and the specific publisher, 2) the author having the right platform to write and sell the book, and 3) sheer good timing with a market that changes often.

For you, the author, receiving a book deal is obviously the goal of pitching your book in the first place. But keep in mind that if you're getting interest from agents and/or editors (meaning they're requesting proposal materials from you) but nothing ultimately comes from it, you can at least have the reassurance that you're on the right track with your approach and platform—maybe the timing is simply off, or you could be better off writing a different book that would be more appropriate for the market at that time.

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