

## Writing Queries from *A Writer's Edge* <http://www.writers-edge.info>

Are You Sure Your Query Is Ready?  
- A Checklist for Successful Submissions

by Gary McLaren

One magazine. Hundreds of writers. Thousands of queries.

One editor. One desktop ... and a trashcan that appears to be incredibly, almost unimaginably deep. Where exactly will your submission go?

It has all the makings of an editor's nightmare. Stacks and stacks of submissions, and some of them are dreadfully inappropriate and unprofessional. It's enough to give our poor editor a splitting headache at the very least. No wonder that some of these submissions have only a brief existence before being filed in the circular bin.

How will you ever get through to an editor who is wading through scores of submissions being sent by your competitors? That's right, your competitors. It's important to think of those other writers with that understanding. And it wouldn't hurt to keep in mind that some of them may be reading this newsletter. Face the facts. Space in most publications is limited. Very limited. Not at all like your editor's trash. That trashcan really does appear to be as dark and bottomless as a cup of Aunt Annie's coffee.

Do you want to be successful in the business of selling your writing? If so, then having recognized your competitors for who they really are, look at the challenge from a business point of view.

Your client has a project. The project is to provide the client with writing services and writing material for publication. Your client has tendered their requirements to you and to your competitors. The project and the space in their publication are up for grabs, and work will be awarded to the most appropriate tenderer. Keep in mind that the lowest or cheapest proposal is not always accepted. In fact in this business it probably will not be!

It is very common to receive Requests For Proposals (RFPs) in the business world. Serious tenderers would not even consider submitting a sloppy, hastily drafted proposal. For a submission to be short-listed, the entire proposal has to be thoroughly researched, well written, and carefully packaged. To successfully

submit a writing query or manuscript, you should be just as thorough and just as professional. Naturally your submission will be much shorter and more concise than tender documents in many other businesses.

So how can you make the shortlist with your editor? Firstly, you need a great topic or idea but this article is not designed to help you with that. Secondly, your idea or article must be professionally presented. Here is a ten-point checklist to help you ensure your submission is ready to send. Do some of the items on the list sound elementary? Please check them again. You'd be surprised how many queries are sent every day by writers who fail to perform some of these fundamental checks.

### 1. Have I read the publication?

Elementary? Indeed! Come on, be honest. Have you ever read a publication's writer's guidelines at a web site or in a newsletter, had a superb idea for an article and queried - or even written the article - all without going to look at the publication? Don't, don't, don't ever do this! You may as well play the poker machines, if you intend to leave your writing career to blind luck.

Especially since most publications have a web site, there is no excuse for not studying a publication before querying the editor or submitting an article. Take a look at other pieces they have been publishing recently. What types of topics are they running? What style of writing was used?

### 2. Have I checked the publication's writer's guidelines?

If they have any guidelines, that is. This is more common for publications in North America than in other continents, and the type and amount of information contained in the guidelines varies widely. First check a publication's web site to see if there is a link to 'Writer's Guidelines' or 'Submission Guidelines' or occasionally 'Contributions'. Sometimes you will need to go first to the 'About' or 'Contact' page before you find this link to their guidelines. If you can't find any link, you might drop the editor a polite, brief email asking if they have any writer guidelines.

Do you consider obtaining and reading writer's guidelines to be a waste of time? No way. In the last few months my newsletter for freelance writers has received queries on a wild variety of topics from archaeology to gardening to European history. If there are guidelines, please read them. Ensure your manuscript meets the requirements of style, length etc.

### 3. Is my submission method correct?

A publication's writer's guidelines will often tell you how the editor likes to receive submissions. Do they prefer to receive a query or a finished article? Do they want submissions sent through the post or electronically by email? If sending an article by email, does the editor prefer attachments such as Microsoft Word or do they request the article to be sent as regular text within the body of your email? With the proliferation of computer viruses, many editors now refuse to open attachments that may be carrying dangerous macros or code. If you really want your proposal to execute a rapid depth test on the editor's trashcan, simply ignore this checklist item.

### 4. Does my opening catch the reader's attention?

If the editor only reads the first two or three sentences of your query, will you have captured their interest? The first paragraph must be a winner. Intriguing. Enticing. Like a fat, juicy worm wiggling on the end of a fishing line. Read your opening again. Can you improve it?

### 5. Can I cut any unnecessary or redundant words?

Many of us include unnecessary or redundant words when we first draft a piece. The makers of some editing software I know of claim that their software typically removes 25 to 30 percent of unnecessary and redundant words from users' documents. That's significant. Cast a critical eye over your work again. If the words add value to the piece, leave them. If you have waffled it may be worthwhile to take a black marker pen and start striking out any unnecessary phrases. Think crisp, think concise.

### 6. Have I checked my grammar?

It can be frustrating for an editor to read what would otherwise be a good article but for the fact it is riddled with bad grammar. Some writers wonder why editors haven't taken them seriously, but they haven't even taken the time to proofread their own manuscript before submitting it! Some good word processing software programs will even check your grammar for you.

### 7. Have I checked the spelling?

Again your software can probably do this for you. If you are writing for a publication in another country have you also taken into account any different spelling for that location, e.g. British

vs. American English? Also try to spot any words that may be different from country to country, for example footpaths and sidewalks, diapers and nappies.

8. Have I included some details about my background?

This may not be necessary if the editor already knows you. Otherwise be sure to include a brief biography and list any relevant credentials, clips, or links to your articles online.

9. Have I included the article's publishing history?

Remember the last time you had to clear customs at the airport? This is just like that. 'Do you have anything to declare?' If the article has been published elsewhere, you do.

10. Have I included my contact details?

If you want a reply from the editor, and hopefully one day to receive a check in the post, be certain to provide your full contact details. Many writers making submissions by email forget to include any other contact details.

It's been a long day. The editor, red-eyed and wired on caffeine, is ready to go home. Incredibly, the trashcan is nearly full now. A few crumpled manuscripts lie scattered nearby where they didn't quite hit the mark. 'One more', the editor thinks, 'then I'll hit the road.' Finally your submission is opened, and the editor, for what seems like the hundredth time today, wonders what this new writer has to offer.

Where will your submission end up? Have you helped yourself by sending in a well-prepared submission? If you have followed the advice given here, you're well on your way. Now let's hope your idea was a good one.

Happy Writing!

About the Author

Gary McLaren is the editor of Worldwide Freelance Writer. For more information on freelance writing and a database of more than 1,900 writing markets, visit <http://www.WorldwideFreelance.com>

From: *A Writer's Edge* <http://www.writers-edge.info>