

Cook Up a



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My mother-in-law could take flour, lard, salt and water, work her magic and transform the ingredients into flaky pie crusts to die for. In my hands, however, the dough was more suitable for doorstops. I could make anything else; just not pie crusts.

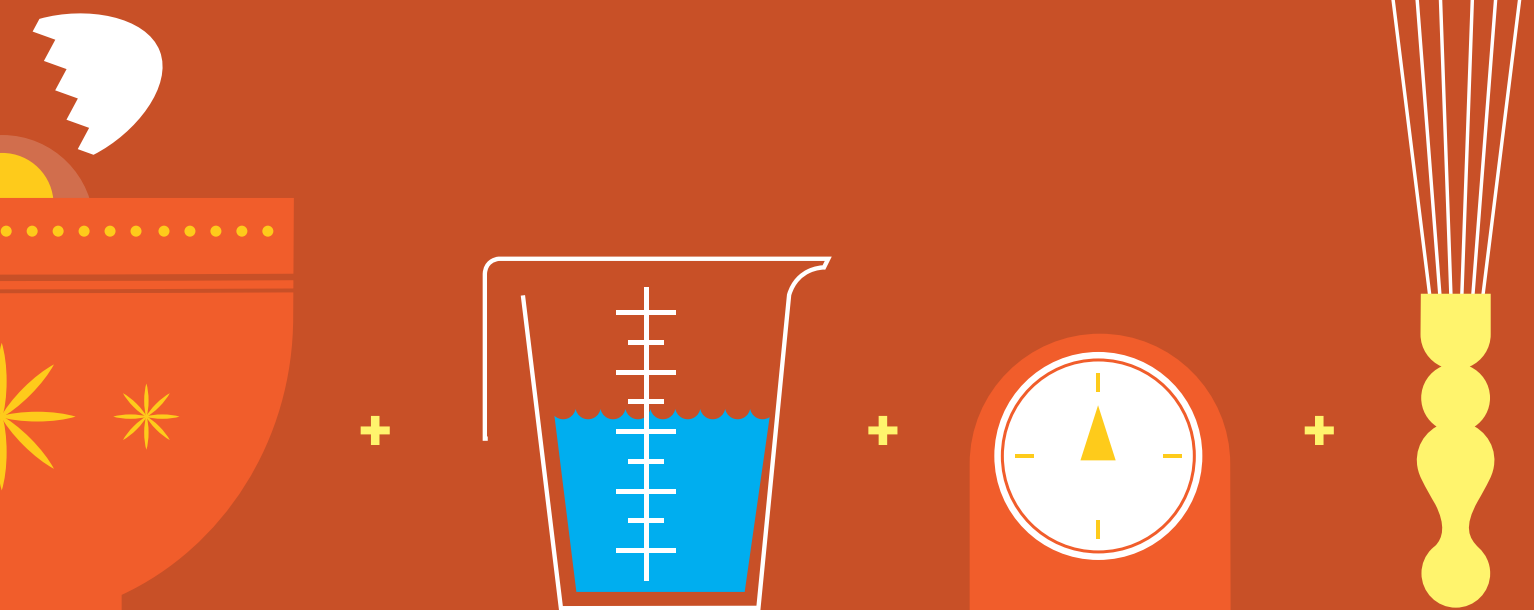
Queries are like that. They use the same basic ingredients, but success is all in the technique. The good news is there is a recipe for a well-written query. It's not a secret, and it can be learned. By the way, agents and editors receive lots of doorstops when they're really craving deliciously flaky pie crusts.

A query is a business letter designed to whet the reader's appetite for more information. You don't need to cram all

Killer Query

By Kathryn Hammer

A Recipe for Success



of the golden goodness of your brilliant idea, fabulous writing skills, content-rich wisdom and expertise, and lengthy credentials into a few paragraphs. Your query hints at the promise of it.

You can cook up a winning query letter with these basic ingredients:

Hook. Grab 'em and make them want to continue reading.

Mini-synopsis. Title, actual or proposed word count, brief summary of topic, categorization and treatment.

Writer's biography. Relevant background to establish your authority and credibility to write, which will help market your work. Increasingly, that means platform, too—your public reach and influence.

Market information. Who will buy the book? Why is it needed? What makes it fresh and timely?

The hook always comes first. Other ingredients go in separately, or are pre-mixed to reflect your strengths. It's

important to cover everything in one page. That means no rambling, no navel gazing, no begging, and no testimonials from your critique group. Every sentence must be highly efficient. Consider these hypotheticals that combine elements for a big bang in limited space.

Example 1: *Based on a three-day workshop that I presented to more than 30,000 hospitality industry employees, my 60,000-word manuscript is filled with bullet points, checklists and*



exercises that will equip any in-house trainer to deliver an intense, fun and effective customer service boot camp.

Result: In one breath, you've nailed the book's format, topic, style, target audience, highlighted your credentials and established a great platform.

Example 2: *After CNN picked up the story of my frustrating and oddly hilarious decade-long search for my birth parents, my Web site received over half a million hits in three weeks, prompting me to write this practical guide to help millions of other adoptees navigate and outwit the system.*

Result: It's all there: topic, style, voice, target market and size, documented interest, platform and established credentials.

If you have a strong referral or previous encouraging contact, say it. ("Oprah Winfrey suggested I contact you ...") For best results, it should be true. Otherwise, lead with a startling, funny or thought-provoking statement that strikes to the heart of your subject. Quirky works, too, or in my case, bizarre. The first line in the successful query for my first book—a humor manual on surviving hospitals and medical care—posed a question: Have you ever been probed with a Chem-Lawn applicator by people wearing shower caps on their feet?

They had to read on, if only to see if I was pitching a book on alien abductions, or if they should take out

a restraining order. Then, I set the hook by defining the market: There are more than 35 million people hospitalized annually, plus another 20 million outpatient surgical visits, and 3.5 million health care workers—all of whom could use a good laugh and fewer potted plants. If only 1 percent had friends willing to accommodate that, well, *ka-ching*.

The Write Stuff

Don't sweat slim writing credits. Stress the credentials you do have. Here's how I finessed it for a woman whose query letters on teaching dyslexics had struck out with agents and editors:

To a dyslexic, my PhD is no better than a BFD. While I'm accredited in all of the right professional organizations, and have all of the right letters after my name, so do a lot of people who have tried and failed to bring real solutions to desperate and frustrated children and their parents. However, I've got the ultimate letters: XOXOs. Boxes full, written on beautifully composed notes and cards from hundreds of students who were unable to write their own names when they first came to me.

Two agents requested the manuscript. An offer of representation followed, and the book sold to a mass market publisher.

Write well and without errors. After all, your query letter is your writing sample. If you can't manage one page, who would

think you can sustain 250 pages?

Do your homework. Agents and editors have different preferences, so personalize each query to interests and tastes—don't just substitute names. People caught on to that trick 40 years ago with Ed McMahon's personalized letters from The Publisher's Clearing House.

Your book's premise can be about breaking rules. Just don't break an editor's or publisher's rules if you're trying to make a great first impression. It seems counterintuitive when you're trying to stand out in a hugely competitive market, but most queries don't resemble what agents and editors ask for. They ask for pie, and they get pineapple or Play-Doh. If you give them pie—you will stand out. Now, get cooking!



Kathryn Hammer is an author, ghostwriter and executive communications consultant. In addition to ghostwriting books, articles and speeches,

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“Write well and without errors. After all, your query letter is your writing sample.”