Querying Agents, The Fundamentals

Seven steps to help you through the query process.
By QueryTracker.net

1. The most important step when querying agents is not about your query at all. It's about your book. Make sure your book is ready. Have you edited it fully and worked out all the kinks? If not, consider giving it a little more work before you begin querying. Agents and publishers want to see books that are polished, so make sure yours is ready.

This only applies to fiction. If your book is non-fiction, your book does not need to be finished before querying. But for this paper, I'm going to focus on fiction. For querying purposes, memoirs can be treated as fiction.

There are many places online where you can meet up with other authors and review each other's work. These are usually referred to as "Critique Partners" or "Beta Readers". Here's a list of places where you can go to find critique partners: https://thewritelife.com/find-a-critique-partner/. The article is a few years old, but most of the places mentioned are still active.

And here's an article about how to find the right critique partner for you:
https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/how-to-find-the-right-critique-partner/

2. Before you can start querying, you need to know who to query. Not all agents represent all types of books. Most will specialize in specific genres, so you'll first need to determine the genre of your book, so you can target the right agents.

Here are some articles to help you determine your book's genre:

https://querytracker.blogspot.com/2009/04/defining-genres-where-does-your-book.html

http://www.rockyourwriting.com/2013/06/how-to-figure-out-your-books-genre/

https://www.janefriedman.com/genre/

Querying an agent for the wrong genre is a top reason for being rejected.

3. Once you know your genre, you'll need to ensure your book is the right length. Books of certain genres will have specific word count expectations. For example, a fantasy of 100,000 words may be acceptable, but you'd be hard pressed to place a cozy mystery or young adult novel of that length.

Here are some blog posts by agents explaining how long books should be, based on genre.

http://bookendslitagency.blogspot.com/2009/07/word-count.html

http://theswivet.blogspot.com/2008/03/on-word-counts-and-novel-length.html

And, yes, there have been exceptions to these rules, and that will continue. But for most first-time authors, sticking to the rules is important. You'll have plenty of time to break the rules after you're famous.

Querying a book with an inappropriate length is another top reason for being rejected.

4. Next comes the hard part; writing the actual query letter. A query letter is a one-page letter that describes your book. It should tell the agent exactly what your book is about, but, because you're limited to only one page, it needs to be very concise.

There are many different opinions about how to write a proper query letter. Here are some links to help you get started.

http://bookendslitagency.blogspot.com/2014/11/dissecting-query.html

http://bookendsliterary.com/2017/04/25/dos-and-donts-of-querying/

https://querytracker.blogspot.com/2009/01/writing-query-letter-hook.html

You can also find examples of query letters that worked as part of QueryTracker's success story interviews at https://querytracker.net/interviews.php.

The Query Shark Blog regularly posts actual query letters and reviews them.

5. Now that your query is written, it is time to send it off. You can use QueryTracker to find agents who represent your genre. Here's a short video that walks you through the process: https://vimeo.com/211112052

Each agent will have a preferred method for receiving queries. These days, most will prefer email. Some will have a form on their website that you can fill out instead of sending a query. And a few will still ask you to mail your query the old-fashioned way.

You can view the agent's profile on QueryTracker to learn each agent's preferred query method.

Research each agent to make sure they represent your genre and are open to queries. But only send about five to ten queries to start with. This is important because many agents do not want repeat queries. If there's a typo in your query, or it just isn't hitting the mark with agents, you'll want to make changes, but you won't be able to send it again because of the no-repeats policy. So, don't send them all at once. Send out small batches at a time, and you can modify and improve your query with each batch.

Here are some tips for formatting email queries:

https://blog.nathanbransford.com/2010/03/how-to-format-query-letter

6. Analyzing your replies can help you determine what to do next. Unfortunately, it has become popular for some agents to never reply to queries. The idea being, if you don't get a reply then consider it a rejection. If this is an agent's policy, most will say so on their website and hopefully give a timeframe to wait; such as, "if you don't hear from me in 60 days, please consider it a rejection."

To make it easier to judge the quality of your query, you may want to start with agents who you know will respond quickly. QueryTracker keeps a list of the 10 fastest responders at https://querytracker.net/top10fastest.php

Remember, some agents might respond quickly, some might take months to reply, and some may never reply at all.

Here's an article that talks about some of the reasons queries might be rejected: https://querytracker.blogspot.com/2014/08/reasons-for-quick-rejection.html

7. If you're not having any luck, make sure you haven't broken any of the rules in steps 1-3, then go back to step 4 and start over again. Finding an agent is a long game. Good luck.

You can find more QueryTracker help videos at https://querytracker.net/videos.php