

On Writing: Loglines and Query Letters

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With Julian K Graham

Every word counts.

The first page sells you novel to the reader, and your last page sells your next novel. But before an editor or agent reads one word of you novel or summary (if they want a summary), they will read your cover letter. Your cover letter convinces them to actually open your attachment and read that first page. It is the most important writing that a yet-to-be-published author will do in their writing project.

A cover letter should be one page if printed and no more. The end. No arguing about this, not if you want your submission read. Keep in mind, you are trying to get the attention of someone being overwhelmed by submissions, most of them bad, and they are tired, and they have many more to read, and they are looking for any excuse to move on to the next one. If you drop a two-page query letter on them, that's red-flag enough; on they go. This is not something to be angry about; it is something to strategize for. And that's what this paper is all about.

**Most say there are three parts of the query letter:
HOOK, BOOK, COOK**

But there's also the **GRATITUDE**. Never forget that these people are people. You are asking them to consider putting their time, effort, and money into your work, to help you while running the risk of loss for themselves. So, be polite to them and remember to thank them for reading you letter; a line or two of gratitude should be the last thing you write before "Sincerely," followed by your name and contact information.

HOOK

A.K.A. The Logline

The most important part of your letter is the log line.

Your query will be skimmed. Accept this and design your query accordingly by placing the logline at the top in a paragraph by itself. It should be no more than two sentences; preferably one sentence and ***no more than fifty words***. Preferably less.

The logline is also something you memorize before going to writing and genre conventions; have it ready to recite in case you meet an agent, publisher, or anyone who might help you get the attention of an agent or publisher. You will also need to know your own novel well enough to converse about it effortlessly in these situations.

A logline can also help you from the beginning to the end of your writing process by serving as the mission statement for your book. If you have ever found your novel wandering away from the plot and theme you had intended, and off into something unfocused and dull, then try writing a logline for your

novel before you write the novel—or even in the middle if you are already there, it's not too late. Then, as you develop and write your story, look at it every day. Use it to keep yourself on track.

To find your logline, first ask yourself: **What is the core of my story?**

This is the hardest part because your story is going to be layered and complex and you're going to feel the urge to tell all of it all at once. But you have *less than 50* words. In this tiny amount of space, you need to follow these principles:

A bad logline will:

- Be too plain
- Be too complicated or verbose
- Does not describe the arc of the story
- Holds back the "surprise"

A good logline:

- Has irony
- Creates a compelling visual picture
- Contains the full arc of the story
- Implies who the audience would be for this work
- Establishes background or premise of the book
- Describes inciting incident that launches the plot
- Includes conflict that prevents the goal from being reached or explains what is at stake
- And it gives away the ending!

To simplify your approach to your logline, there are a few formulas you can choose from.

The basic formula

An [interesting/flawed/(strong adjective)] character [does the thing/goes to the place] in hopes of (intended goal) and ultimately [learns/discovers/becomes/overthrows] (unintended goal).

In this formula, a good adjective for your character is critical. We should have a clear idea of what sort of protagonists we'll be following and what we can expect to happen to them. For example, E.T.'s logline would call Eliot a "lonely boy" and just the word lonely clues us in that this will be a story about friendship.

The same, but different formula

Publishers are looking for something the same as [insert your favorite bestseller here]; saying your work is just like a known bestseller, proves there is an existing market for your type of book. But you also must do something new with that general concept, something that makes it not just a knockoff of what has already been done. The "different" is what sets your story apart from the rest of the slush pile.

Successful examples include:

- "Just like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, only based on the War of the Roses." (George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*)
- "Just like Jane Austen's *Emma*, only set in Beverly Hills." (Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*)
- "Just like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, only the slaves are the main characters." (Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*)

X meets Y formula

George Carlin once said that if you nailed two things together that have never been nailed together before, someone will buy it from you. That may or may not be true in inventing, but in writing "X meets Y" has been the beginning of many successful stories. Describing your story as "X meets Y" works well when your story is a new twist on an old favorite or a mash-up of two genres, ideas, or characters.

Successful examples include:

"Abraham Lincoln meets vampires." (Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*)

"The Handmaid's Tale meets The Hunger Games." (Shannon Stoker's *The Registry*)

"Prizzi's Honor meets True Lies." (Simon Kinberg's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*)

The only trouble is... formula

Here you use your hero or heroine's main problem to highlight what is unique about your work. You will need to identify the main obstacle your protagonist must overcome and show how that obstacle relates to your theme.

Successful examples include:

"A young man meets the girl of his dreams. The only trouble is, she's a fish." (Lowell Ganz, Babaloo Mandel and Bruce Jay Friedman's *Splash*)

"A playboy joins a single parents' group to hit on single moms. The only trouble is, he doesn't have a kid." (Nick Hornby's *About a Boy*)

"A newly crowned king must comfort his people during troubling times. The only trouble is, he stutters very badly." (David Seidler's *The King's Speech*)

Famous examples dissected:

Here are two famous examples broken down to show how every word contributes to a good log line.

A bullheaded cop comes to LA to visit his estranged wife and her office building is taken over by terrorists.

A bullheaded cop

This is a cliché but only when sitting there on the page all by itself. Within the context of the whole sentence, it's an easy first step into the concept. The main character is much more interesting than these three words convey but this is enough for us to understand who he is and what kind of story we are about to get into.

comes to LA to visit his estranged wife

In eight words we know that this marriage is not doing well. Not only are they estranged, they don't live in the same metropolitan area. We all know now that he was from New York but it didn't really matter within the context of this logline. What is important is that he had to travel to see her. That shows they are trying to do something about this marriage. And it is 'to visit', not to finalize the divorce. And all that happened in eight words.

and her office building is taken over by terrorists.

Before we get here, we've already established the emotional conflict, which is what makes this element so interesting. If it was just his wife, as opposed to his estranged wife living in another city, then this would come across flat, just like 'bullheaded cop' would have.

A young man travels to the past where he must reunite his parents, or he will never exist.

A young man travels to the past

This is the start of a million stories at this point. Time travel is nothing new, nor is a young man traveling through time. Mark Twain had a time travel novel. And yet these seven words narrow down where we are in genre and audience. He's a young man so this will be for a young audience. He's traveling to the past, not the future. So, we can expect a certain variety of adventure.

where he must reunite his parents

This is the main conflict of the story. Though we learn during the actual story there's also his need to get back to his own time and that he has to deal with a number of complications related to his high school aged parents, this is the core of the story. This is also the irony. It's also tells us where we are traveling to in time. This is not an adventure through ancient times; this is a

or he will never exist.

And this is why the previous clause is the core of the story. If the main character fails to reunite his parents, none of the rest of the story elements will matter because he will no longer exist. This part is now a cliché but it wasn't at the time. This is what is at stake.

A Longer Famous example:

In the future, teens are chosen to compete in a televised fight to the death. One young girl volunteers to take the place of her twelve-year-old sister and ends up falling in love with a fellow contestant who she must kill to survive.

Some Lines I wrote for my work:

A sergeant from an old military family dies childless. Seeking to regain honor in the afterlife by rescuing his father's soul from a false god, he finds himself leading an army to prevent Armageddon.

In a utopia where anything is possible and death is optional, a young man endangers his life by rejecting his powers and traveling the world to find something that feels real.

BOOK

This should be a one or two paragraph book summary that follows the logline paragraph. You have no more than 300 words. But try to keep it under 250.

In one sentence or less, identify your genre and/or subgenre.

Narrow it down as best you can but don't get granular. Just make it clear what kind of story this is. This can come in as a clause in the HOOK ("In this...") or as part of the GRATITUDE at the very end ("I hope you enjoy my...").

One way to do identify your kind of story, is the "A ____ ____ ____ novel" method:

A bikinis and explosions novel
A beach read romance novel
A surreal SciFi adventure novel

Another way is the "YOU KNOW THIS" meets "YOU ALSO KNOW THIS":

"Jaws" meets "The Truman Show"
"The Matrix" meets "Total Recall"

Be sure you don't pick an esoteric example unless it's very well known in the circles you want to market to. Even then, try looking for something everyone will know unless they've been a multi-decade coma. And do not use "X meets Y" as your logline and as your genre identification in the same cover letter.

Tell me about character and conflict, not plot.

DO NOT RECITE THE PLOT. Let the plot come through on its own, while you focus on telling the reader about the main character's primary conflict, the obstacles they overcome to resolve the conflict, and how it changes them. If you start telling me about all the obstacles Frodo faces on his way to destroying the ring (Orcs, spiders, swamps), you're burying the real story of the battle of his will against the will of the ring. Only tell as much plot and side-plot as is necessary to bring out your main character and the conflicts that change them. There will be things left to the imagination, but the ending is not one of them. Give the ending away and tell us how this has changed the character, or how they failed to change.

Let the 'voice' of your novel come out in your cover letter.

DO NOT WRITE DRY just because this is a letter; write like it's your novel...but shorter. This is your chance to show what kind of writer you are. If you write like it's a book report, then the first impression you leave is that you write like a book report; don't do that. Instead, you want to write in the style of your novel, but keep in mind your limited word count. If your book is Noir, write your letter with a Noir feel. Is it surreal? Let that come through in the words and sentence structures you choose. DO NOT WRITE DRY.

COOK

Who is the author? Keep this to one paragraph. Use the most important or impressive information about you and discard what doesn't fit thereafter.

If you have any awards or short story bylines, list them. Focus on any that paid money. Even a non-paying finalist position in a contest with a dollar award package will look good.

What have you been doing all your life? ...I mean, that which has anything to do with this book? Pick the most pertinent elements of your life. My years in the military often play into my work as does my work as a computer programmer, and so have my love of documentaries and cartoons.

If you have any expertise or experience that relates to your novel, include it. This means, if your character is a fly fisherman and it's important to the plot and that's what you did growing up, mention that. Your

character is a hacker and you're a computer programmer, definitely mention that. It's set in Korea and you've been to Korea, say so.

If you have no credentials, you still have you. After all, you wrote this book, you must have had something driving you, some interest or past experience. Whatever it is, tell it. Did you write your young adult book because you love to binge read young adult books? Say so and say *why* it is that you love young adult books. If your book centers around an interest of yours—history, science, knitting, trains, flanges—then share something about your interest that shows your devotion to it.

GRATITUDE

Always thank them for their time and for this opportunity. They work hard, and you want them to choose you to be someone to work hard for. Be grateful they are considering you. And if they pick you, be someone they want to work with. If they ask for a rewrite, do it and do it as quickly as you can without compromising quality. Yes, this is art, but this is also business. Be a professional that other professionals want to work with.

EXPECT TO GET REJECTED. It's part of the deal. Don't get angry, especially when you're rejected unread. There are other agents and publishers, keep submitting, and **NEVER** send an angry letter to anyone who rejects you. Just because they rejected you today does not mean they will reject you next time...unless you send them an angry letter, then they will definitely reject all of your future submissions.

NOW GET OUT THERE!

Here are two places to find agents, as well as more information about writing query letters and loglines:

www.AgentQuery.com
www.QueryTracker.com

There is also Google and 'The Writer's Market' published by Writer's Digest. Always read the submissions page of the agent or publisher before sending and be sure to follow their instructions. Even then, you will be rejected but if that stops you from submitting, you will never be accepted, either.

SUBMIT!