**Using a Query Letter to Identify Developmental Problems**

**in a Manuscript**

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One of the first things that acquisitions editors and literary agents learn in their jobs is to use the query letter to evaluate a manuscript. AEs and lit agents are looking for cues that a project is or isn’t right for them. In my career, I’ve worked as both an AE and a lit agent. I quickly learned that queries also show the developmental weaknesses in a ms. Now, as a dev editor, I find that by reading an author’s query letter, I can frequently spot potential ms problems. Having these cues before I start work editing the ms makes my job a lot easier.

And that’s what I want to show you how to do—spot developmental problems as they appear in a query so that you have an easier time of identifying them in the ms itself.

First, let’s back up a bit and talk a little about query letters. These are used by authors seeking traditional book publication. The query letter, sometimes called the pitch letter, is what the author sends to an agent or editor to get him or her interested in reading their novel manuscript and eventually representing it or publishing it. This is usually a one-page business letter (almost always sent by email these days).

Most of the time, authors send these short pitch letters to agents who then offer (or more likely, don’t) to represent them. Sometimes authors can pitch acquisitions editors directly, such as with small presses that don’t pay advances or who publish direct-to-digital. In either case, the author’s pitching process is the same: the letter has to make the reader interested enough in the book to want to read it.

Once an agent has accepted a client for representation, the agent pitches the project (often using the same query letter or a version of it) to an editor and asks if she’s interested in reading the ms. The editor says yes or no. If the editor says yes, then after a reasonable period of time, the agent asks if the editor wants to make an offer to publish. The editor says yes or no. That’s the process in a nutshell.

An agent is looking for work she thinks she can sell. An acquisitions editor is looking for work she thinks she can sell. If there’s a mismatch—a thriller is pitched to a romance editor or a literary novel to an agent who represents only genre fiction—then the query is rejected. If the story sounds like one that’s been done a million times, the query is rejected. If the story isn’t clear from the query, if the author sounds like a lunatic, if every third word in the query is misspelled—rejection.

That’s the gate-keeping role of the query letter. As dev editors we don’t care about that. What we care about is what the query letter can tell us about the story. A good query letter indicates the genre of the ms; describes what the main characters want, why, and what’s getting in their way (the central conflict); and gives some indication of how the conflict plays out. So, given that these elements are, or should be, neatly laid out for us, we can assess whether they are likely to work in the ms itself.

If so, then yay! We will probably have an easier time with the edit. If not, then at least we know what issues to look for on the page.

Even if you are working with indie authors, asking them for a query letter or at least a brief pitch will provide you with a similar perspective—the big picture perspective that is at the heart of all dev.

The main things we’re going to look for in the query letter are:

* Adherence to genre conventions
* Clear description of motivations for main character(s)
* Strong central conflict

If any of these are missing from the query letter, that does not *necessarily* mean they are missing from the ms, but they may well be.

Let’s look at some sample letters to dig into this a little. Note that for our purposes, I’ve removed extraneous material such as salutations and author’s bios.

**Sample #1 – Mystery**

When former B-movie actress Maureen Haines’s converted barn burns down, her first concern is that her husband Gary has been killed. When it turns out that he wasn’t hurt in the fire, she realizes that he has disappeared.

In her search to find out what happened to him, she uncovers evidence that he has been having an affair. Maureen is furious that Gary has betrayed her – despite the fact that she’s ready to divorce him. Her former lover and sometime friend Miller thinks there’s more to the story than she’s seeing.

As they piece together what might have caused Gary to leave, Maureen finds herself the target of mysterious threats. At first she’s afraid that it’s a former fan who stalked her some years previously, but when Gary shows up with a wild story about enemies wanting to steal his scientific research, Maureen doesn’t know what to think. But she knows she’s going to find out the truth – even if it kills her.

**Sample #2 – Paranormal Romance**

Psychologist Jasmine Zehr seeks to escape a stalker, a sociopath who seems impervious to every effort she makes to thwart him. A chance encounter with a mysterious man in the desolate scrublands of the southwest frees Jasmine from the threat of the madman. But when her rescuer turns out to be a member of the mysterious Brotherhood, she learns that she is in even greater peril than she ever thought.

My recently completed novel, *Title* is a sexy paranormal about a demon hunter and his band of brothers, and the woman – a demon seer who doesn’t recognize her gift – whom he believes is fated to become his true companion.

**Sample #3 – Urban Fantasy**

 When NYPD police detective Morgan Reilly discovers the lamp and frees the djinn, she thinks she’s hallucinating. After all, she’s just back on the job after a high-speed chase left her with a head injury, and it’s not the first visual hallucination she’s had since the auto accident.

But freeing the djinn brings Mere, an exiled merman, charging into her life. He and his sidekick, Lynell, an elf, failed in their duty to protect a dragon’s hoard that was stolen centuries ago. All this time they have sought to get it back.

Because Morgan can see him and interact with him although other humans can’t, Mere must enlist her help in finding the hoard before the human sorcerer into whose hands it has fallen can learn its secrets. But first he must convince her that he’s real.

**Sample #4 – Mystery**

Piano teacher and spinster Ruby Moss thought she could start life over at 60 with a fun-loving young friend and a trip to Ireland—when her friend was found brutally murdered in his own kitchen. Though there’s no apparent motive for Sean’s killing and few clues, Ruby channels her grief into figuring out who could have done this. Ignoring warnings to stay out of the investigation, Ruby looks into the backgrounds of Sean’s lover, his professional rival, and even his handyman. She discovers her own brother had questionable dealings with Sean.

Roland Watkins, the town’s new black police chief, hasn’t investigated a murder yet, but he has a pretty good idea of who the bad guys are in town. He can’t reveal that to anyone yet, though, not even Ruby, who taught him piano when he was a child. With both his wife and his assistant chief questioning his decisions, Roland feels the stress tighten as he tries to sort out this puzzling crime. In this small South Carolina town, everyone knows everyone else’s business, or tries to. And many remember the murder fifteen years earlier of another gay young man, a crime no one went to jail for. Will Roland and Ruby track down Sean’s murderer before anyone else is killed?

[author bio, etc.]

Sincerely,

Ramona

**Sample #5 – CONTEMPORARY YA**

Ever since her best friend died in a car accident, Mackenzie Quinn-Zislowsky has been a social outcast at Vegas’ super shmancy Gunshier Academy. Which would suck...if she hadn’t created a new life on the internet. As the anonymous author of a morbid but moderately successful blog called ‘Kicked the Bucket List,’ Mackenzie writes about the last wishes of strangers who recently dropped dead. Then with the help of her best friend, Jules, she fulfills their final wish and blasts her adventures all over social media. Oh, and she may or may not be learning about these deaths in her dreams. One night, instead of imagining a death, Mackenzie dreams that a lonely classmate is contemplating suicide. Mackenzie flat out refuses to let another teen land in the morgue, even if this Colton guy doesn’t seem interested in being saved. In the hopes of proving to him, and herself, that life is worth living, Mackenzie manipulates Colton into joining her bucket list escapades. But Colton’s involvement with the list begins to present a serious threat to the lies that cradle her online community. Now Mackenzie must decide if helping Colton is worth exposing herself as a fraud to the only world that has ever accepted her.

[author bio, etc.]

All the best,

Laura