

The Write Stuff

Crafting a Query Letter and Your Best First Pages

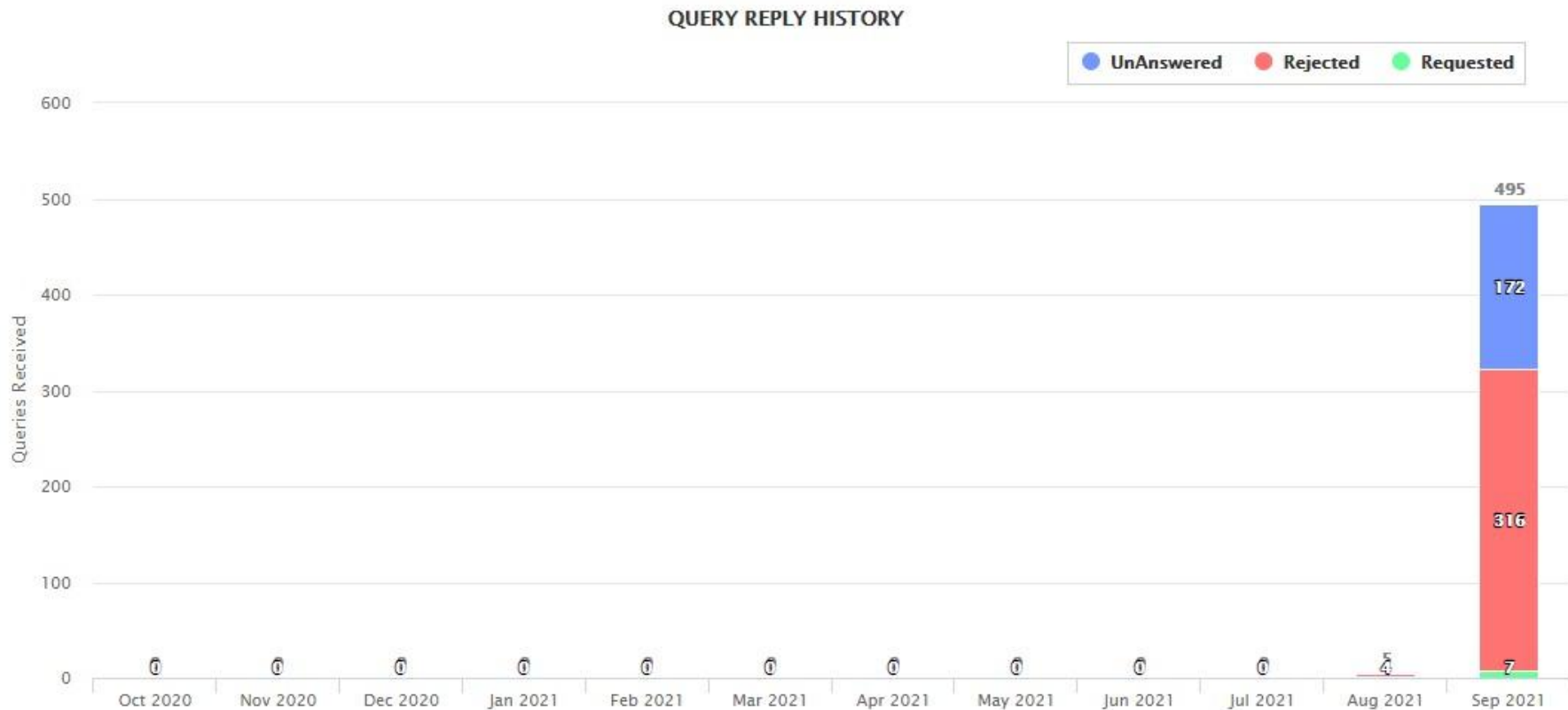


Overview

- The Query Process: Agent's POV
- Anatomy of a Query
- Dos/Don'ts of Query Letters
- Opening Pages: Agent's POV
- Dos/Don'ts of Opening Pages
- What Now?
- Q&A

The Querying Process: Agent's POV

Screenshot is from Sept 22



Note: I only opened to unsolicited queries on Sept 1

Why do I reject?

- Query is badly written - unclear about plot/characters/genre, focuses too much on telling me what it's about without actually telling the story, doesn't know the market
- Did not follow submission guidelines - went to my direct email, not in an area I represent, etc.
- Query simply does not appeal to me - taste, genre, mood
- Agents read hundreds of queries - don't give any reason for them to reject yours on a technicality
- A good query gives enough info about the plot to make the reader want to read ("Let me give this a chance")

Anatomy of a Query Letter

What Goes in a Query Letter

- Basic info: genre, word count, comparable titles
- Plot overview/premise: What is this story about? What are the stakes?
- Bio: share about yourself!
- You can present this in any order but these three things need to be in there

Basic Info

- Genre - If genre fiction, be specific on the sub-genre (military sci-fi, romantic comedy, grimdark fantasy, etc)
- Word count - research what's expected for your genre
- Comparable titles - strong-performing titles from the last 2-3 years with similar premises, style, tone, audiences ("X meets Y")
- For non-fiction: Who is the target audience? What need is this book fulfilling?

Plot Overview

- What are the stakes, the major conflicts?
- Who is your main character and what is their objective?
- Be careful not to get overly detailed
- Think about your typical cover copy - don't give everything away
- Same goes for non-fiction and fiction

Bio

- Brag about yourself - past publications, awards, sales records, endorsements, prior workshop attendance, platform (if non-fic)
- Especially for narrative non-fiction, you need to sell why you are the authority here
- For memoirs/essay collections, you want to show off your published credits
- Show off your personality - hobbies, interests
- Share what else you're working on - might be a chance to connect

Do's and Don'ts of Query Letters

Dos and Don'ts of Query Letters

DO

- Include essential info - basic info, plot, bio
- Keep it short - 250-500 words is ideal length
- Double check spelling and who you're addressing
- Feel free to be creative with the structure
- Mention your platform - social media following, bibliography, etc.

DON'T

- Tell agents about the book, show instead! ("My book is about...")
- Spend too much time talking about why you wrote this book ("I wrote this to do...")
- Trash other books/authors
- Rely on gimmicks

Drew Nolan knew cooperation could make his life easier, but only if he betrayed everything that mattered to him. Day after day, he entered an interrogation room and faced Ceket Mirko. Day after day he sparred, verbally and mentally, with that cold, arrogant bastard. Then the interrogations got worse, then the torture began. How long could he, or his shipmates, hold out?

Drew had visited a dozen star systems as a young officer, but nothing prepared him for the bitter reality of Kasdech. He knew the cramped confines of starships, not the mud of planets. Yet, after the Kasdech attack, that is exactly where he finds himself; locked in a frozen prison camp beside his fellow survivors.

War between Kasdech and Earth is coming, and Mirko knows it. Interrogation is his business, and he will stop at nothing to extract the information his superiors require. Drew has learned much in war, but one lesson stands above the rest: you take care of your crew. He isn't ready for command—he is too young, too unproven—but his crew needs him, he is all they have left.

In the camp, under Mirko's ungentle hands, is only suffering and misery. In escape is the smallest hint of hope, the tiny chance to save this crew and bring home a warning. Even if escape's likeliest outcome is death, some things are worth dying for.

THE VOLGA INCIDENT is science fiction, complete at 120,000 words, and is my first novel.

What's Wrong With It?

- Don't know what the actual plot is - What is actually at stake? What are the character's goals?
- No comp titles - hard to get a picture of what this is similar to
- Word count - 120K is usually pretty long for SF, comp titles would help contextualize

It's 1994 in Oklahoma City: the Waco siege is over, the OJ Simpson trial isn't.

A young Choctaw boy named Caleb has just been orphaned by the criminal justice system, both parents jailed on separate murder and drug charges. Investigator Dean Goodnight's job at the Public Defender's office is to save the life of Caleb's father at all costs. But the more Dean understands about this particular killer's crime, the less he understands about himself - and his own Choctaw heritage.

Dean enlists four seemingly unrelated strangers into the investigation. There's Aura Jefferson, the murder victim's older sister and perhaps the angriest physical therapist in Payne County. Her borderline-bigot patient, Cecil Porter, who broke his spine in a car crash nearly fifty years ago. Cecil's brother, "Big" Ben Porter, who's not above bribing a few councilmen to bag the construction contract that will determine the city's future. And Becca Porter, Ben's wife, who discovers a link between the orphaned Choctaw boy Caleb and her own traumatic past.

Together, these five people might just be able to offer Caleb a new kind of life. But they had better hurry. Because now it's 1995. On April 19 a bomb is going to go off, and life will never be the same.

At 105,000 words, AMERICAN PRAYER is my first novel. It might appeal to fans of suspenseful, character-driven fiction such as Don DeLillo's "Libra" or Colum McCann's "Let the Great World Spin".

What's Wrong With It?

- Again, we need a BASIC overview of the plot - we don't need every character, every character, or every part of the worldbuilding
- We need to know only the most essential parts in order to get invested in the story
- Don't create "character/plot soup"
- Needs more recent comps

Queries That Became Clients

Dear Susan,

It was lovely talking to you at the Writer's League of Texas Conference this weekend and sitting in on some panels you were a part of. You asked me to send you the first 50 pages of my manuscript, so I've attached them as a doc.

I am seeking representation for my 86,000 word YA thriller, NOT DEAD ENOUGH. It may appeal to readers who enjoyed Stephanie Perkins's *There's Someone Inside Your House* or *Famous Last Words* by Katie Alender.

Charlotte struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the car accident that killed her boyfriend, Jerry. When someone claiming to be Jerry begins texting her, she has to figure if it's his ghost, if she's finally lost her mind, or if someone is actually stalking her.

No one knew that Jerry was abusive. At least, she didn't think anyone did. But the texts say things like "I told you I'd never let you go," and she realizes that for once, maybe he was telling the truth. When the stalker escalates and more dangerous things start happening, she realizes that her stalker might not want to just drive her crazy; he might want her dead.

This manuscript was a finalist in the Writer's League of Texas Manuscript Contest in the YA category. I have had short fiction published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Spinetingler Magazine*, *On The Premises*, and several other small anthologies under my pseudonym, Doree Weller. I have a Masters degree in Mental Health Counseling and have worked with people struggling with anxiety disorders.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Queries That Became Clients

Dear Susan,

Thanks so much for the introduction James!

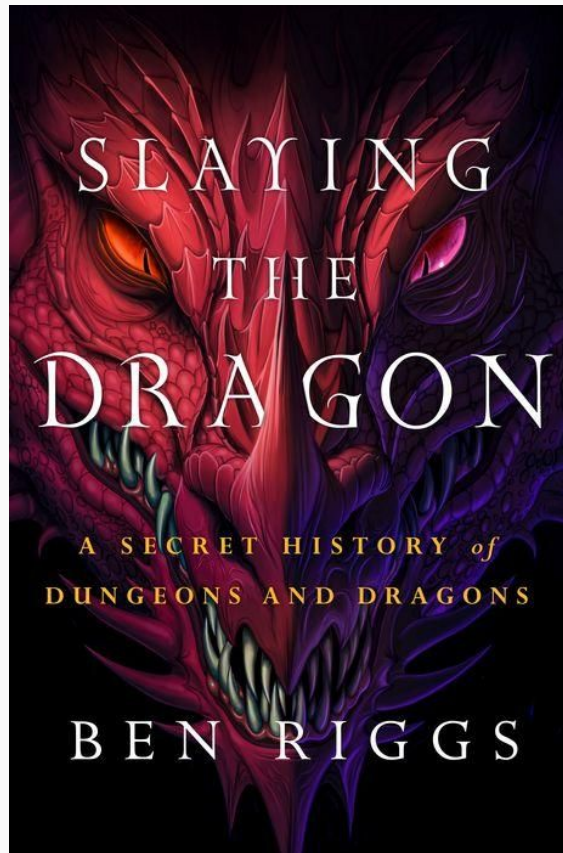
To summarize my project for you, in 1997, Dungeons & Dragons almost died. Disastrous management decisions brought the company that created it, TSR, to the edge of bankruptcy. For the past two years, I have been interviewing eyewitnesses to answer one question: Why did this happen? The company had it's best year ever in 1996, yet mere months later it was sold to its fiercest competitor. These interviews led to secret tranches of documents and data being given to me. The true story of what happened to D&D in the 1990s is one that no one knows, but which every D&D fan will want to know. My book, *Slaying the Dragon: A Secret History of Dungeons & Dragons* aims to tell that tale.

As for me, I'm a journalist, writer, and podcaster. My work for Geek & Sundry has been read by hundreds of thousands, and my podcast, Plot Points, has been downloaded over 300,000 times and was nominated for an ENnie.

If you're interested, I of course have a complete book proposal I can send your way. My book itself is currently 100,000 words long, and the first 95,000 words are pretty polished.

Let me know how to proceed, and thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,
Ben Riggs



Opening Pages: Agent's POV

Agent's POV

- What am I looking for as I'm reading?
 - Strong voice
 - Strong hook
 - A reason to keep going
- Opening pages are very subjective but there's basics that propel a reader forward vs stalling them

Do's and Don'ts of Opening Pages

What Do Opening Pages Do?

- Set up the world - time period, physical surroundings, the current status quo
- Set up the characters - Who are we rooting for? Who are we not? Do I want to follow these people for the next 100 pages?
- Set up the voice/style - usually connected to character
- Hint to the big stakes - but you can also show the smaller stakes too

Setting Up the World

- Especially for genre settings, you need to bring what's in your head onto the page
- Whatever the world/style/aesthetic is, make sure you are leaving cues for your reader in the way the characters dress, the technology they use, their methods of transportation, the way they talk, etc.
- Game of Thrones vs Shrek

Setting Up the Characters/Voice/Style

- Characters are your mouthpiece - you're telling the story through them
- What is their personality?
 - Snarky, anxious, bitter, optimistic, etc.
 - You can show this off in dialogue, inner monologue, etc.
- Writing unlikeable characters
 - Very tricky to do, but there needs to be something mesmerizing about their unlikeability
 - Are they hilariously self-delusional? Do they have a sympathetic backstory or goal? Are they funny?
 - The Larry David

Dos and Don'ts of Opening Pages

DO

- Start as close as you can to some sort of compelling action or tension point
- Ground the setting
- Show characters' personalities
- Propel action forward
- Trust yourself and your voice

DON'T

- Give too much exposition
- Linger on unnecessary details or digressions
- Micromanage the reader's visual eye
- Don't overload with characters/plot/etc

What Now?

Why Aren't You Getting Requests?

- Does the query/opening pages/story still need work?
- Does this book fit within the current market?
 - Don't concern yourself with following trends but you may need to adjust your comps if people are struggling to think about where it could fit within the existing market
- Maybe still looking for the right agent?

Q&A