

Chapter 3

Pitching Like a Pro Versus Pitching Like A Shmoe

Minding Your Business

Writers who think themselves “artists” should probably stick to poetry and diary entries. If you intend to sell what you write, and to make a living from it, you need to convey an image that does NOT gel with the eccentric, tortured, starving artist cliché. You need to become a businessperson.

What does this entail? Well, if you’re thinking about Cash, then everything associated with your name must be nothing less than 100% Clean, Clear, Crisp, Commercially viable, and Company-minded.

Clean

Your letters should be neatly typed, neatly signed, neatly folded, and neatly sealed into a neat envelope. Be sure you’ve spell-checked—not just with a machine, but with your eyes, too. Spell-check won’t pick up on a single typo in this sentence:

Eye canned sea any thing wrong whiff these sends tense.

Double-check to be sure names are spelled properly, spacing has held up in printing, nothing has smudged, and you’ve signed the letter. Using bright, floral stationary and envelopes with fun seals will make you look like an artist. Using white or cream-colored matching envelopes and stationary with noticeable, frill-free letterhead will make you look like a businessperson. Believe me; when you receive your check, you’ll be very thankful if you’ve come across as the latter.

Clear

Your ideas must be expressed in an organized and easily understandable manner. Whenever you send a letter or make a phone call, you should have

all potential questions already answered in your mind. Do not propose a dozen half-baked article ideas. Stick to one or two at a time, and do enough research and thinking ahead of time to be able to explain all the basics without stammering.

Crisp

Part of an editor's job is to make sure you tell your stories in as few words as possible. Let this editor see that his/her job won't be an uphill battle. Be very concise in your correspondence. Never write query letters over a page long for features—considerably shorter for short pieces. And remember this rule of thumb: when speaking to an editor on the phone, always hang up first. You know the feeling in your own life; when someone is chewing your ear off on the phone and you really need to get back to your life. Don't be one of those callers. Editors are busy people; respect that. Get to your point quickly, say "thank you," and get out of there.

Commercially Viable

It's all well and good that you have the power of language on your side. Fabulous that you know lots of big words, remember to punctuate properly, and write sensuous, flowing dialogue. But can you write for a mass market? Can you adapt to the magazine's style and tone? Can you write pieces that will sell magazines? Can you find service angles in your stories?

Whenever appropriate, mention how your story will appeal to the publication's target audience. It's great to get statistics if you can. If you're proposing an article about 'smarter dieting' to a publication that targets women in their thirties, it's smart to mention that "according to Such and Such Big Study, 40% of all women between the ages of 29 and 39 are currently on a diet, and an additional 25% have dieted or plan to diet this year." This tells the editor that at least 65% of her readership will be interested in your article.

Company Minded

When the editor calls you, are there kids crying in the background? Is there an answering machine message including your five year-old singing the "Star Spangled Banner?" When the editor offers to fax you a contract, do you ask her to send it through Kinko's? When she asks you to send it as an

e-mail attachment, do you go to the library and send it through your “Yahoo” account?

Stop it.

These are all signs that you’re a person, rather than a business. When you call your car mechanic, you expect to hear machines working in the background, and a person answering, “Dave’s Auto Repair. Can I help you?” When an editor calls you, she should be able to expect to hear a business environment, too. If you can’t afford (or if it doesn’t make financial sense now) for you to have a dedicated business line, at least be sure that when you answer the phone during business hours, you’re in a quiet room. Alert your family that when you’re on the phone, they are not to pick up, nag you, or turn on loud music. If you have call waiting, be sure that everyone knows that if the other line ‘beeps,’ the call must be answered professionally and turned over to you right away.

Freelancer Jeffrey Zbar says, “I have caller ID, voice mail, a second line for fax... there's no excuse for anything less than professionalism in this line of work. I have no tolerance for home-based workers who tell me, ‘I have to go-- my husband needs to use the phone.’ If you want to get paid as a professional, you have to act like one. It behooves no one if you do this ‘little thing on the side.’ If you don't take yourself and your work seriously, you're destined to fail.”

It’s not necessary for you to have a separate fax line, but it is wise for you to have a fax machine that you can turn on when a caller requests it. There are two reasons. First, once an assignment has been made, both you and the editor should want to complete the contract as soon as possible. Why not e-mail? Well, that’s the second reason. As of now, the legalities of contracts via e-mail are not clear. Since you can’t effectively “sign” anything via e-mail, it’s a much better idea to use a fax.

If you decide to freelance full-time, you may wish to incorporate or register your business as an LLC (limited liability company) at some point. This protects your assets by separating your business from your personal properties. If you choose to do this, be aware that it’s not always necessary to incorporate in your home state—and it’s usually cheaper to incorporate in Nevada or Delaware. You can find out more about this by clicking the links at the end of this section.

Before that point, you may wish to simply register a business license using an “official sounding” name. For example, I use the name “Absolute Write” for all of my writing work. This serves me a few different ways—first, I establish a corporate identity, which commands more respect and higher pay. When an editor receives a proposal from me, it doesn’t look like it comes from Suzy Homemaker who is moonlighting as a freelance writer. It looks like it comes from a company like theirs. Heck, I might even have assistants and designers and secretaries. I don’t, mind you, but I might. After all, I do have a company name.

I can also have them write checks to my business, rather than personal checks in my name. It's a simple rule: businesses prefer dealing with other businesses. It makes perfect psychological sense—if you were buying wedding favors, for example, would you more readily trust that they would be ready on time and in good condition if they came from West Coast Wedding Planners, or from Jane Myers? Which one invites an image of a professional team of workers with quality control, and which conjures thoughts of a woman sitting in her living room, accidentally spilling juice on a favor, wiping it off and throwing it in your box, letting the dog lick a few, and showing up an hour before your wedding ten favors short?

To get a business license in most U.S. states, all you have to do is visit your county’s government offices (call your local town hall if you’re unsure), head over to the desk marked “business licenses,” and fill out an application. Bring photo I.D. They will check to make sure your business name is unique (that no one else has registered it), then your application must be signed in front of a notary public. The whole enchilada cost me about \$33.00 and took about 15 minutes. Then I went to my bank with a copy of the certificate, and opened up a business account.

To find out more about incorporating, visit these websites:

- <http://www.delawarecorp.com/>
- <http://www.delawareintercorp.com/>
- <http://www.nvinc.com/>
- <http://www.corpamerica.com/>

Out of the Starting Gates

Now you'll need to learn proper protocol for writing and submitting the Killer Query.

The query letter serves two functions:

The primary job of the query is to entice an editor to say, “Hey! I’d be interested in learning more about that.” Therefore, you don’t want to spill all your secrets and research yet. You want to tease and tantalize. Now that you’ve got your fabulous Big Idea, your job is to condense (or expand) that idea into two to three paragraphs.

The second job is to convince the editor that you are a professional writer who is capable of turning in a great article on time, in proper format, and without hassle. You do this via your words, your letter’s appearance (fonts, letterhead, paper, neatness), your organization, your credits, and your clips.

When writing a query, it’s smart to mimic the tone of the magazine in your letter. Pay attention to the articles—are they humorous? Touching? Academic? Filled with facts, anecdotes, quotes? Light? Irreverent? Impersonal? Take all of these things into consideration, and tailor your query to that targeted publication.

To illustrate the components of a killer query, here is an example of one of mine (using fictitious contact info—sorry!) that landed me the assignment at a “smart” college magazine (read: big words, but conversational tone):

Jenna Glatzer

(Always use proper formal letter format)

Absolute Write

123 My Address

My City, State, Zip Code

(555) 555-5555

Mr. Joe Shmoe

(Make SURE to get a name of the appropriate department College Life 101 editor. Never address a letter to “editor” or “submissions.”)

College Life 101

123 Their Address

Their City, State, Zip Code

Today's Date, 1999

Dear Mr. Shmoe:

(Colons are used in formal letters. Commas are used in friendly letters.)

Think company cars, expense accounts, and a spacious office with bay windows. Who do you picture running a business this successful?

(Start the letter with a zinger that captures the essence of your proposed article/story. Raise a question that will cause the reader to think, or give a visual image... anything that will make him/her want to read on and find out what you're talking about.)

Think again. This company was the brainchild of three Boston University sophomores whose ambitions led them to thriving careers before they had diplomas to hang on the wall.

(The rest of the first paragraph should give a concise description of the focus of your proposed article. Remember to tell why it's appropriate to the publication you're querying. In this case, I was targeting a college magazine, so I made sure to emphasize the relevance to their subject matter early in the letter.)

Charles Strader, Richard Skelton, and Pablo Mondal run Net One, an Internet Service Provider. The three met in the freshmen dorms, then moved into an apartment together. Opportunity knocked when Strader, who worked for the university's computer center, took a phone call from the owner of a hair salon. She sought help designing a website; Strader volunteered, and Net One was born.

(Again, concisely, get a little deeper into the content of the article. What is special about your story? In this case, I wanted to emphasize that these guys were college buddies who started a booming business by branching out from their humble beginning.)

"Working closely with friends to build something we believe in" is Mondal's favorite perk. Skelton agrees. "We have great trust in each other, and feel that we're all in this together."

(Quotes aren't necessary in a query, but it's nice to give something specific to show that you have done some research into your topic, and that you have access to resources that will enable you to write the article well. I wanted to show that I had already spoken to these guys—they happen to be friends of mine—and that they would be upbeat and inspirational people to interview. You can accomplish the same effect by including a few quirky facts or survey results you've found out about your topic.)

Considering that their only capital was a computer and a small loan from Strader's father, the guys feel very successful. "We're not millionaires, but we have goals, and we're following them," says Skelton. "I think that's true success." By any definition, Net One's roster of over 50 clients ranging from colleges to Fortune 500 companies attests to their hard work and talent.

(Look, editor. These guys are big up-and-comers! Notice I mentioned "Fortune 500 companies." This lets the editor know quickly that these college guys aren't small potatoes. It neatly ties up the opening sentence, which promised an article about guys who have a spacious office, expense accounts, and company car. Now the editor has a reason to believe that these guys actually are that successful.)

I propose a 1,000 word profile for your "Students At Work" section.

(Shows I've researched their magazine. I know which section this should fit, and I've read their guidelines to determine an appropriate word count.)

I am a full-time freelance writer, and my works have been recently featured in such publications as *201 Magazine*, *College Bound*...

(Notice I mention the most relevant magazines first. Anything you've had published that might relate to the content, tone, or audience of the proposed publication belongs here.)

...Bliss!, *Working Women*, and *Adaptz.com*. Clips are enclosed.

(If you've never had anything published, don't distress. Just shut up about it. Do NOT tell anyone, "Though I've never been published yet, I'm a real go-getter." Less is more. If you keep quiet, they may not even think about the

fact that you didn't mention your credits. Also, do not get into a diatribe describing how you edited your high school newspaper. Just a quick list of relevant writing background. See below for info about clips.)

I can provide documentation and interview notes for easy fact-checking, and could submit the completed article within two weeks.

(Optional. Some people like to suggest a time frame, others let the editor do it. In general, the editor will tell you when the article is due, regardless of your preferences. It's a nice touch to mention how you will research your article. Since mine was a profile, it was primarily dependent on interviews of the subjects, but you may wish to include the names of journals/experts you plan to quote or use for information.)

I look forward to your response.

(Obligatory polite ending. Use any variation you wish. No pleading. If you dare type, "I promise to write a realllly, realllly good article! Please hire me!" you will incur my wrath. I will hunt you down and yell at you. A lot. Just a simple, dignified ending requesting a response.)

**Regards,
Jenna Glatzer**

(Oh. Substitute your name and preferred signature ending. Unless you feel like sending your paycheck to me, in which case, you can feel free to use my name. Grin.)

Karen Roman, editor of a computer technology/small business magazine, suggests that it helps to list your resources when querying for non-fiction articles. She explains that she is much more likely to hire someone if she knows she can count on accurate information and quotes.

Further, she notes that if queries sound at all self-serving (coming off like a press release for a company or individual), she would never assign the piece.

"My advice is to be honest about what you can provide, when it will be available, and be sure it fits the format of magazine," she says. "In short, what I find irresistible is a sense that I can trust the writer to make good on his or her clear promise to deliver relevant content in a professional manner.

Vague (or misspelled!) queries always send up a red flag.”

Finally, clips! If you’ve had anything published—or even if you haven’t, but you have a few good writing samples appropriate for this type of market—include them. These samples are called “clips,” and they are used to show the editor that you are an intelligent, insightful, funny, clever, and/or excellent writer. Photocopying straight from the publication is okay. Just 2-3 clips.

If you’re sending via e-mail, paste your clips into the body of the message at the end, or give the url where your work appears.

Query Format

A simple checklist:

- top: your name, address, and phone number
- name of editor, address of publication
- date
- salutation
- your “hook” sentence
- up to three short paragraphs about your proposed article
- one blank line in between paragraphs
- no more than one page in total
- 12 point font
- standard font like Times New Roman, Arial, or Courier
- signature
- clips
- self addressed stamped envelope (S.A.S.E.)

Yeah, you still have to enclose an S.A.S.E. It’s a bit of a pet peeve among writers, since many publications never bother to respond, regardless of whether or not you include one. However, it’s just a matter of politeness. Think about how much of an expense rejecting writers would be for a publication if no one included a stamp. Adds up fast!

When querying publications in other countries, you must instead use an International Reply Coupon (I.R.C.). These are available at your post office.

If you don't have and can't afford to get nice letterhead yet, it's very easy to make your own. Using any standard word processing program, make yourself a template. Center your name and address in a nice, bold font on top. You may want to use a line break or simple line graphic under your heading. Use good quality paper—not Xerox quality.

More examples of query letters that landed me the assignments are in the appendix of this e-book.