

Requiem for a Query

Sending a query to an agent is probably the most daunting task a writer will ever do. And knowing this, I still inexplicably choose to do so.

My latest manuscript was in my editor's hands. —He has edited all my manuscripts for the past 20 years. Everything from grammar, sentence structure, paragraph structure and phrasing.

While waiting for the manuscript's return, I began composing my query. Studying up. Following the suggestions. The helpful hints and certainly the rules. Once I felt I had the best version ready to go, I waited for the manuscript to come back from him painted red as usual. I worked through all the changes, took a deep breath, and emailed the first ten queries to the agents I researched.

Since my work was Historical Fiction, I made sure I only queried those agents who listed the genre as one of their interests and were currently open to submissions. I sent out the next ten after a tweak of the query. As rejections came in, I sent out the next ten and the next, continuing to tighten the wording.

Around the 50-agent mark, I read an article suggesting the acceptable word count for a fiction manuscript was between 80,000 to 110,000. Beyond there is problematic. Well, my word count was 145,000. No wonder the rejections were so forthcoming. The first line of the second paragraph (the introduction) of my query stated: *Affaire Intemporelle* is a historical novel of 145,000 words ... No doubt ending my chances right then and there. It didn't matter what my query said, or how it was structured, I had way too many words.

After a lengthy conversation with my editor, I decided to undertake the task of bringing the word count into an acceptable range. Grinding my way through the manuscript I began purging the story from a single word right up to a whole chapter. It took over three months to bring the word count down to 107,000. Often, I would have to rework to compensate what I removed. A never-ending balancing act. 38,000 words is a significant chunk to subtract from the original story. After completing a couple of read throughs to ensure the integrity of the story remained (and had an ending), I sent the [new] manuscript off to my editor for another pass and get his take on the revised story.

While waiting for him to finish, I had significantly reworked the query. Created a new title for this retooled manuscript: *The Hidden American* (my protagonist was born of an American mother and British father but raised British.) Once again, I emailed the first ten queries. The rejections were immediate, with six of those first ten responding almost instantly. Obviously, my query was in serious trouble.

Stepping back and completely reworking the query, I sent off the next ten and waited. Rejections were not so forth coming. But, as a matter of course, I did tweak the query (continuing to get the wording right) for the next ten and the next ten and the next. While I tried to keep the focus on agents listing my genre, I will admit later queries were sent to more general fiction agents simply because I thought I should try a different approach to reach more. I focused on the love story in the narrative (because every story must have a romance angle).

I created a dated, numerical log of queries I emailed and posted their response, if any. It helped me keep track of who I queried and who responded. Rather than dwell on a rejection, I queried the next agent. One in, one out.

After 192 submissions for this manuscript version with no success I stepped back and created another version of the manuscript, cutting it down further and reworking the ending(s) to fit the shorter version, which meant I did this all again. Passed the [new] manuscript by my editor, created a new title: *Sinclair Langdon* (my protagonist, because it is his story) and created a reworked query. Hopefully, this time my message would filter through.

As we writers know all too well, there are many reasons why a query is rejected, including but not limited to genre and subject. My genre is Historical Fiction, which I read was not so hot a subject. It lacks the grab needed to hook an agent, not high on most lists. It must be the right thing at the right time. My subject was Vietnam, which I also read is synonymous with rejection! Vietnam is old news, yesterday's story, who cares anymore kind of attitude. With two strikes right out of the gate, it may not have mattered how my query was worded. Or how it was structured. I had already dug a deep hole.

I really do understand the tremendous number of queries overwhelming an agent these days. How hard their job must be to weed through all those queries before even considering, let alone accepting one. I imagine it would be easy to shy away from those that don't grab their interest immediately, especially, a subject or genre not high on the list. And it isn't the next whatever. Or a subject already done to death (sorry, truly no pun intended).

To be fair, the more realistic answer may have been my query didn't deliver. It didn't have the right hook, or the left jab, or a clean uppercut, because the punch just didn't land.

As a Vietnam Veteran, I thought this story focusing on the American involvement following WWII and ultimate creation of South Vietnam, would bring an important perspective to the "how the hell did we get there in the first place." I created this work as a story rather than a dry recitation of the history behind those events deciding to tell of that period in a more entertaining way.

Obviously, my query did not convey my intent to tell this critical historical event. Or if it did, the concept still did not stir the agent's interest.

In my journey, I also found out the first ten pages of your manuscript need to "pop." Those pages need to open the door and make the reader want to visit for awhile. Right, sure, I get it. Maybe my first 10 pages were not the grab you, slap you around a few times and tie you to the chair kind of grab. But, and a big but here. But what if my query did catch the agent's interest? Then made it past the genre and the subject. But my first 10 pages of the manuscript fell flat? Good grief, how would I ever know which one doomed me? What are the odds of getting all four pieces aligned when the exercise is to reject at first failure? It certainly is a lot to shoulder, especially since I am competing against thousands of other queries for the agent's attention.

First and foremost, I'd like to give a huge shout out to all those agents who made the effort to respond, which usually was a form email rejection. (Most agents require an email submission.) Nothing more needs to be said and most appreciated. I believe it is better to know a no than to hang in there hoping and waiting for a response that will never come.

Secondly, a tip of the hat goes out to those agencies for having a "sell by date" on the submissions page. They may have a line saying something like: "if you have not heard back from us in 2, 4, 6, 8, 12 weeks please consider this a pass. Or we have decided to pass. Or know we are not interested. Although, not a response, at least you can set your "sell by date" and if the date comes and goes you know they have passed on your work. Time to move on.

Lastly, the dreaded no response, you never hear back from the agent. Some agents do say on their submission page: "we only respond if we are interested." Right. I understand, with the overwhelming number of queries they must receive. But, c'mon? My first thought is they didn't receive my query. Maybe I should send it again, and again? But realistically, I'll just wait eight weeks (my rule of thumb) and assume I didn't make the cut? My simple suggestion would be to at least add a "sell by date" to their submissions page which would remove all the guesswork. Knowing a date specific would help relieve the pressure of waiting indefinitely for an answer that may never arrive. It's a thought, just saying.

I can assume my word count doomed me the first time: *Affaire Intemporelle* is a historical novel of 145,000 words ... 50 submissions. But the next version: *The Hidden American*, 192 submissions, and the next version: *Sinclair Langdon*, 126 submissions, let's put the blame squarely on my query:

"A coming-of-age saga follows Sinclair Langdon as he arrives in French Indochina post war 1945, gun running, investigative reporter and Yvonne, an exotic beauty of French Vietnamese mix, who sets in motion a torrid, forbidden love affair."

The opening line. The hook. All my "tweaks" were attempts to get that line just right. The crux of the novel by which the story builds. Obviously, no matter how I worded it, it was still passed over. I truly believe if my query had the grab and hold needed to convince an agent to consider the work, any issues the other three pieces, genre, subject and first 10 pages may have had, would have had less weight in the decision. Of course, I could be wrong. I usually am.

The one piece of good news, sort of: I did have an agent late in the game respond, for which I am forever grateful. She said:

"... I don't see this – almost regardless of how good it may be – as something likely to interest commercial mainstream editors. I say this also in light of working with another book dealing with Vietnam, where response has been tepid at best."

I believe her statement just may have been the Requiem for my query.

The chanting has already begun.