

The Quintessential Query Letter

By P.J. McIlvaine

You're an executive assistant to an A-list Agent, Manager, Producer or Studio VP. You've just spent the better part of your day trying to nail down a meeting with the newly appointed Director of Development for Cactus Jack Studios in between picking up your employer's dry cleaning and assorted sundry tasks.

You haven't had lunch since Tuesday, your deodorant ran out on Saturday, but while you try to juggle two people on hold (the Receptionist quit on Wednesday) you're still expected to wade through a twelve foot high stack of unsolicited query letters in the hopes of finding that diamond in the rough which will justify your holiday bonus and perhaps propel you onto Michael Ovitz' greeting card list.

The fax machine runs out of paper, you finally put your feet up, grab a stale turkey on rye sandwich and anxiously tear open the first envelope. And you read:

Dear Hollywood Producer Executive Agent Mucky Muck:

I just shelled out eight bucks to see your last movie, *The Final Temptation* with Kokomo Joe. The movie sucked eggs. Lucky for you, I just now this very second finished my thirty-fourth script, LOVE, LUST & RUST IN THE MOJAVE DESERT, which would be totally perfect for Arnold and Sandra Bullock, but only if she wears a blond wig. My kid sister's Harry Potter book club read it and thinks it's da bomb.

It's a thrilling story about a Land Rover breaking down in the desert. Arnold and Sandra are married but Arnie keeps flipping on Sandra because she had an inappropriate relationship with a Maytag repairman. They stumble into a radioactive pit and are attacked by mutant cavemen. (I can't tell you anymore, but it's 265 pages of non-stop rollicking action, romance, blood and gore).

It's a tantalizing mix of *Armageddon*, *Tarzan* and *Night of the Living Dead*. It's really cool. I think it might be PG-13 if I take out some curse words. I already have ten sequels worked out. Oh, and I wanna direct.

I thought I'd let you in on this first because you might be a long lost relative on my mother's side. As for my credentials, I once won a topless T-shirt contest and I played Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer in my third grade holiday pageant.

My film will open at \$80 million the first weekend, no lie. I will send you the screenplay (it's also in a time capsule that I buried in my backyard, so don't even think about stealing my idea) as soon as we agree on how many points I get. Oh yeah, I also wanna have final cut.

If you don't answer with a "yes" within 48 hours this letter will self-destruct and all those who've touched it will die under mysterious and painful circumstances.

This is the opportunity of lifetime! DON'T LET IT SLIP AWAY! This movie is the best thing since *The Phantom Menace*. Just to let you know, I've sent this letter to companies all over LA, so the early bird gets the worm.

Sincerely,

Wanna Be Hollywood Mogul

Okay, maybe I exaggerated. But not much.

The unvarnished truth is, no one likes to write a query letter (and if you do, I know of a wonderful place in the country where birdies sing and men in white coats serve dinner). After many failures, I've come to the regrettable yet unavoidable conclusion that queries are like taxes and Christmas fruitcakes: as long as I have to deal with it, I might as well find the most effective and least painful way of accomplishing my goal. Or in more blunt terms: I have roughly 30-40 seconds to tell my story before it winds up in the paper shredder.

That's right. Seconds. Let's think on that.

If you're like me, you believe that you've written the Great American Masterpiece. You've sweated two years worth of blood, tears and guts over it, and now you have to sell it in seconds. There's no other way around it.

Your script is a product, just like a car, a washing machine or a blouse in Nordstrom's. Lots of shoppers might paw over that blouse or simply pass it by without so much as a cursory glance. But if the blouse is truly fashionable and well constructed, chances are a savvy shopper is bound to come along, fall madly in love with it and snap it up in a heartbeat.

That's what we want. That's what we live for. We want to sell. We don't want to be discovered after we're dead and buried. We want all the good stuff and we want it now.

But hey, you say. I'm the next Quentin Tarantino. I bet he doesn't write these damn query letters.

You're right. He doesn't. But you're not Quentin Tarantino and until you're recognized as such, you still have to write them. Which leads us to:

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I don't think I can stress this enough. Your query letter is your initial -- and in many ways, your most important -- introduction. In short, concise, well structured words; you have to convey not only your professionalism but also your writing ability. To some writers, this can be as daunting as writing a script itself.

Skip Press, screenwriter, on-line guru and author of "How to Write What You Want & Sell What You Want" (www.cmonline.com/boson/nonfiction/howto/howto.html) is of the firm belief that using your own personal stationary is paramount because "it shows ... that you take your writing seriously."

Sound advice. But don't get carried away with fancy illustrations and gimmicks. You're supposed to be pitching your script, not artsy-fartsy graphics.

Less is better, remember?

Let the power of your idea speak for you. And please, forget about bribes or pictures of your curvaceous neighbor sunbathing in the nude. Anything cute you might dream up, I assure you, has been done before.

Of course, it goes without saying you're going to spell/grammar check and proofread the query before sending it out (and make copies). That goes double for e-queries. Why? Because if you're like me, when I get a hot e-mail tip, I act on it immediately and sometimes my fingers type faster than my brain can think and I hit send too soon.

As for the paper itself, it's always white along with a standard business sized envelope, and don't forget to include an SASE.

Unfortunately, most of the time you won't receive the courtesy of a reply, but it's still necessary to include one. Some writers I know go so far as to use bland, no nonsense stamps, but my own personal thingie is to use stamps related to the industry.

One time I sent out a batch of queries with Jimmy Dean stamps. Did it improve my query responses? Not one whit but it made me feel good.

So now you've got a nice, presentable letterhead. Now what?

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Which simply means, do your research. Don't waste your time blindly spewing out letters, faxes or e-mail to faceless, anonymous individuals or companies if you don't specifically know what they're in the market for.

There are numerous on-line and off-line resources for learning such information including but not limited to The Hollywood Creative Directory (www.hcdonline.com), "Who's Buying What" at MovieBytes (www.moviebytes.com), The Spec Screenplay Sales Directory (www.hollywoodlitsales.com) and The International Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

It doesn't make sense (and only shows that you're an amateur) if you pitch your 17th century pirate drama to an outfit that's only considering futuristic action adventures.

Once you've pinpointed your prey, call and ask if they're open to receiving unsolicited queries (some companies won't even touch a query letter unless an established agent, manager or entertainment attorney submits it. Some will insist on a release form along with the query.)

Get a name and if you're not sure of the gender, find out. Trust me on this. "To Whom It May Concern" doesn't ring anyone's bells. If you're a professional (or plan on being one), this is rudimentary.

That's not too difficult to remember, now, is it? Letterhead. Audience. He or she. Then what?

The most difficult, traumatic part of this endeavor.

WRITING THE DAMN THING

Oy. Talk to a hundred writers and you'll get a hundred different responses. What it boils down to is finding your voice and passion and learning how to convey that in an original, compelling and compact fashion. Trial and error will tell you what's comfortable for you.

When I first started writing query letters, I'd launch into a wonderfully written spiel about how noble my script was, the next *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and how only a company or person of their scope, vision and intelligence could do it, blah blah blah blah.

Suffice to say I don't do that anymore.

Now I consider query letters on par with robbing banks. You go in, get the job done and get the hell out before they discover your gun is really made out of soap.

The following is a query to one of my newer scripts that I've had some success with:

Dear Mr. Bleep Bloop:

Everett Sloan and Jill Phillips thought it was going to be a good day.

They were wrong. Dreadfully.

SEX, VODOO & THE BLIND MAN is a quirky, offbeat romantic comedy about being in the wrong place at the wrong time or how luck may not be a lady. Moral: stay out of Dallas strip joints, beware of High Priestesses bearing Dixie Cups and not all phobias begin with an A.

I'm a screenwriter who recently had an original teen comedy optioned by a major cable network. I've also placed in the top ten percent in the Nicholls Screenwriting Fellowship and made the second round at the Austin Heart of Film competition. I've had essays and stories

published in The New York Times, Newsday, The Star and other markets. I have completed, registered scripts in a variety of genres.

I can snail mail the script or e-mail it, however you prefer. If you'd like more information, you can contact me or my manager Susan Hart of Hart Literary Mgmt.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

P. J. McIlvaine

Sure, this query could still be jazzed up, but overall, I believe it's made its point effectively. In well under two hundred words I've conveyed the fact that I've been optioned and that I have professional representation. I've been published in reputable markets. I've scored highly in prestigious contests.

Don't underestimate the value of screenwriting contests.

Fellow net screenwriter Robert Ingraham mailed queries to dozens of agents. Not one agent bit or even nibbled. Eventually Robert revised his script, entered it in Nicholls and made the semi-finals! Then he sent out a batch of new queries trumpeting this good news.

Two agents immediately offered to read his script. Subsequently, based on that query, Robert secured agency representation and not long after made an option deal for a nice chunk of change.

Hopefully, my pitch to SEX will cause the reader to request it (at the very least, they know that I haven't just stepped out of the jungle with only one script to my name).

Note that I don't give away the ending or suggest who should star in it or stuff it with pithy superlatives. By using a few choice words (quirky, offbeat, phobias), the reader should get the hint that my screenplay isn't your typical boy meets girl, happy ever story.

Sometimes, depending on my mood or the circumstances, I might toss a comparison in (in this instance, *There's Something About Mary* meets *Practical Magic* would be appropriate), but this is really a matter of preference and choice and some writers I know object to vehemently.

Terry Rossio, co-screenwriter of *Aladdin* and *Godzilla* points out in his excellent column on this very subject, "Breaking the Ice" (<http://www.wordplayer.com>, a great site for newbies and pros alike), if you're going to pull this off, your example has to "clarify" the point you're trying to make and not "obscure" it. If you have to make the reader go through intellectual hoops in order to understand the comparison you're trying to make, eliminate it.

For example, I once compared a script I'd written, a bio-medical political action thriller, as *Air Force One* meets *Outbreak*. I thought I was so clever. Uh-oh. Well, some people understood what I meant to convey while others derided me.

And chew on this hot tamale: what if the person reading your query absolutely loathed the movie you're comparing yours too? Oops. Not good.

Keep in mind that it's always easier for people to say no than it is to say yes. Don't give anyone, however unintentionally, a reason to say no.

When in doubt, leave it out. My advice is to use comparisons sparingly and wisely.

You need every edge you can get. You think I'm bluffing?

A fellow screenwriter, Bruce Meade, floored me with this statistic: a talent agency reported receiving over 10,000 query letters in 1998. How many writers would you think this agency signed? A hundred? Twenty?

Guess again.

One. Out of all those queries, they signed one writer. Ruminates on that while I continue.

I know what you're thinking (you see, in addition to screenwriting, I'm also a telepath, available at discount rates for birthday parties and other festive events). Yeah, this is great, condense my magnificent opus into one or two measly sentences. Can't be done!

I say it can. The last time you saw a movie that knocked your wisdom teeth out of your mouth, did you waste a half-hour regaling your best friend about plot points and character arcs and protogs?

Chances are you only told him/her the salient points such as "a troop of reluctant soldiers risked their lives to save another soldier trapped behind enemy lines" or "an obsessed guy made a mountain out of mashed potatoes in his living room after he saw a spaceship."

Simplistic, yes, but I've basically described the films *Saving Private Ryan* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

But "your" script can't be so easily categorized, you insist. It's one of a kind. Unique! In order to fully comprehend its intergalactic meaning, you feel compelled to tell the reader everything, in mind numbing detail, down to the brand name sneakers the hero wears.

That may very well be so, and more power to you, but I was once told by a person of vastly superior intelligence that Hollywood is in love with the idea of new ideas ... as long as it resembles something that's already been done before.

Your query is like a bomb. Time is of the essence. You must present your idea in the most powerful, effective way, and quickly, before it goes ker-ploom.

If you're still having trouble, here's an easy exercise: pick ten of your favorite movies and try to condense the plot or theme into two or three scintillating sentences (if you can do it in one, so much the better). Keep at it and soon enough you'll get the hang of it.

Bruce Meade gives an example of another perfectly respectable query letter:

Dear Blah Blah Company:

If you would like to read a funny, WGA registered screenplay, currently being considered by several production companies, including Barnstorm Films (Tony Bill), Steve Tisch Company and Colomby/Keaton Productions (Michael Keaton) please request...

OBLIVIOUS EVER AFTER (a comedy). Sometimes love needs a nudge. Sometimes it needs a bulldozer. How does a lovably oblivious egomaniac find himself married to an endearingly self-loathing woman and not realize he's the groom? Never underestimate the unbridled determination of a trio of women on a mission of matrimonial madness.

A new comical conspiracy by an experienced professional comedy writer. Similar to *Terms of Endearment* and *Moonstruck*.

Credits include: Joan Rivers, standup material performed on The Tonight Show.

Sincerely,

Bruce Meade

Basically, the two queries cited are similar in style and structure. The major difference is that Bruce elected to mention the other production companies currently considering his script.

As Bruce himself points out, this can be dangerous. "I want the reader to feel that if others said yes, he/she should as well. This is a way for a writer to generate a bit of heat. Never, ever, ever, ever lie about this. It's too easy to check if these claims are true or false." Amen to that.

After much deliberation, I've decided to leave that issue out of my queries altogether, mainly because I want to give the reader the idea that they have first dibs on the project (or at least I want to give them that impression). But Bruce's point is well taken. Making the reader believe that your script is hot and desirable might prod them into prompt action. No one wants to be left out of a good thing, right? Especially if it can make them money and their teeth whiter at the same time.

Let's not forget the fact that Hollywood, when all is said and done, a business. A very lucrative business. It's also a beast that needs to be constantly fed. It's also a fact that the

first person to open your query, in all probability, is going to be a doorkeeper, a receptionist or an assistant or some other kind of support person.

The big bosses are too busy taking important meetings, placing calls and stroking egos to read all the queries that dribble in and the receptionist and the assistant, well, they don't want to be receptionists and assistants forever. And when they climb up the ladder, you'd like them to remember you in a pleasant way, wouldn't you? Of course you do. You don't want them to recall you as the writer of a ten page missive who couldn't even spell the name of the agency correctly.

Very well. So you've polished that letter until it shines like the Hope Diamond. It's off. Now what?

Forget about it. Get busy writing your next script. If you do, you and everyone around you will be much happier. Above all, resist the temptation to call the company or agency and hound them as to when they'll get back to you. Most places are flooded with queries.

Think of it like being at a gigantic supermarket and everyone is huddled around the only cash register that's open; groceries in hand, you amble to the end of a very long line and wait for your turn.

How long you must wait is anyone's guess. It used to be that a reasonable amount of time was 6-8 weeks, but longer is not unusual nowadays.

I once sent an e-query to a producer who had made some impressive sales. When I didn't get a reply within a month, I figured that he'd just decided to move along. I kept writing. Imagine my surprise when, months later, one of his representatives contacted me. You just never know.

If you do get an answer and it's in the negative, don't take it personally. Speaking from experience, I know it's hard not to take a pass as the ultimate humiliation, but you'll save yourself gray hairs and ulcers in the long run. A pass means that you simply haven't pointed the arrow in the right direction. Another screenwriting sage once told me that every no brings you that much closer to a yes.

Continue honing your craft and coming up with commercial concepts and perhaps one day you'll be happily relating your own query success story.

And if you just happen to be next the Quentin Tarantino, oh man, have I got a query for you.
- P.J. McIlvaine

P.J. is the screenwriter of Showtime original family film "My Horrible Year!" starring Mimi Rogers, Karen Allen and Eric Stoltz (in his directorial debut). The film garnered a 2002 Daytime Emmy nomination for Outstanding Directing in a Children's Special. PJ has several L.A. based prodcos and agencies considering her projects. Currently, P.J. is toiling away on a talking animal script that she calls "BABE with bite."

