Short Story Submission Tips and Query Examples

by Chuck Sambuchino

Your Cover Letter

Submission Tips
Your cover letter is important for two reasons: It lets the editor know who you are and how you write. This is different than a query because you are submitting the story along with the letter. The best cover letters contain three short paragraphs, in the following order:

• The introductory paragraph states the story’s title, then hooks the editor with a brief description of the story.

• The biographical paragraph explains, in one or two sentences, a bit about yourself that is pertinent to the story, such as previous publishing credits, why you’re sending it to this particular publication or how a personal experience influenced your story.

• The concluding paragraph politely closes the letter.

While publication will hinge on the story itself, a strong cover letter will ensure your story will at least get a close read. Remember to keep it brief and to the point.

Formatting Specs

• Use a standard font, 12-point type. Avoid bold or italics, except for titles.

• Place your name and contact information at the top of your letter, centered.

• Use a 1” margin on all sides.

• Address the cover letter to a specific editor. Call to get the appropriate editor’s name and gender.

• Keep it to one page.
• Use block format (no indentations, an extra space between paragraphs).

• Single-space the body of the letter and double-space between paragraphs.

• Give the story’s exact word count.

Other Dos and Don’ts

• Do mention if your story has been—or will be—published in another publication.

• Do indicate familiarity with the publication. Make a brief positive comment about the publication. Be sincere, but don’t go overboard.

• Do address the letter to a specific editor, preferably the editor assigned to handle freelance submissions. (Call to get the appropriate name and gender.)

• Don’t state that another publication has rejected your story.

• Don’t ask for advice or criticism—that’s not the editor’s job at this stage.

• Don’t mention anything about yourself that’s not pertinent to the story, for instance that you’re a first-time writer, that you’ve never been published, or how much time you’ve spent on the story. Your story must stand on its own merit.

• Don’t bring up payment for the story. It’s premature.

• Don’t mention copyright information.

• Don’t staple your cover letter to your story (a paper clip is okay).

• Don’t fax or e-mail your cover letter and story unless you have permission from the editor or if submission guidelines state it is acceptable.

• Do thank the editor for considering your story.

• Do include an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) or postcard for reply, and state in the letter that you have done so. (Postcards are cheaper and easier. Get them printed in bulk.)

• Do state that you’re able to send your story on disk, CD or via e-mail,
but this won’t be necessary until the editor actually wants to publish your story.

**Electronic Cover Letter**

**Submission Tips**
Before you send a cover letter and story to a publication via e-mail, make sure they accept electronic submissions by contacting the publication directly or checking out their writers’ guidelines in a trusted guide or online. Never send a story via e-mail unless you have permission from the editor or if their submission guidelines state it is acceptable.

**Formatting Specs**
- Include the same contact information in your cover letter as you would in a paper cover, but it is not necessary to include your e-mail address in the body of the e-mail, since the editor can easily click “Reply” to respond.
- Use the subject line to introduce the title of your story.
- Follow the same format you would with a paper cover letter, including the date, salutation, and block paragraph format.

**Other Dos and Don’ts**
- Don’t use all caps or exclamation points in the subject line.
- Don’t insert clip art graphics or other images in your cover letter. Keep it simple.

**EXAMPLE #1**

John Q. Writer  
123 Author Lane  
Writerville, CA 95355  
(323) 555-0000  
johnqwriter@email.com  
December 29, 2009  
Thomas Way
Dear Mr. Way:

Enclosed is my short story, “Spitfire Sunday” (2,500 words). It’s about Pastor Donald White, who spends every Sunday preaching hellfire and brimstone. But his little routine changes when atheist Katherine Condon comes to town. She doesn’t just preach about perpetual suffering—she delivers it. The target of her latest sadistic crusade is none other than the preacher himself, as she kidnaps, tortures and prepares to set him ablaze just before the clock strikes midnight on Easter Sunday.

I am a full-time pastor by day and part-time writer by night. My published stories have appeared in three mystery magazines (Murderously Yours 12/02, Crime Pays 1/03, and Mystery Times, 7/03). You are the first editor I’m soliciting with this story, and I will wait six weeks for your response before I approach another magazine. If you are not interested in the story, feel free to dispose of the manuscript, but please notify me with the enclosed SASE. If, however, you do want to publish it, I can send you an electronic version in a Microsoft Word attachment.

Thank you for considering “Spitfire Sunday.” I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

John Q. Writer

Encl.: Short story, “Spitfire Sunday”

SASE

EXAMPLE #2

TO: tgraham@cimarron.com
CC: johnqwriter@email.com
SUBJECT: Short Story Submission
March 2, 2009
Toni Graham
Cimarron Review
Oklahoma State University
205 Morrill Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078

Dear Toni Graham:

I am submitting my short story, “Things From Which You Can Never Recover” (6,465 words) for your consideration in Cimarron Review. The story is attached in a Microsoft Word document.

I am currently a freelancer for several newspapers and magazines, including the Indianapolis Star. Your website says you are seeking work with “unusual perspective, language, imagery, and character,” and I think my story fits this description.

This is a simultaneous submission. As per your online guidelines, if I do not hear back within three months, I will assume the story was not a fit for Cimarron Review. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

John Q. Writer
123 Author Lane
Writerville, CA 95355
(323) 555-0000
johnqwriter@email.com

EXAMPLE #3

John Q. Writer
123 Author Lane
Writerville, CA 95355
December 29, 2005
Thomas Way
Hey Tommy,

I have been a man of the pulpit for the last twenty-two years and I know about faith and evil and sin and redemption. I am also a published poet and fiction writer. I’ve had numerous poems published in our local paper and I write weekly stories for the church bulletin. I get lots of praise from my congregation for my stories, and other people in the community have made glowing remarks about my poetry.

Anyhow, I’ve been working on this one short story for about five months now that I’d like your magazine to publish. It’s about a minister who gets caught on fire and burned to death by a new woman in town that doesn’t agree with his preaching practices.

I’m sure you’ll appreciate this story as it is based on some real people I have known and therefore it is based in reality but I made a lot of it up too. It’ll scare the heck out of your readers.

If for some reason you do not wish to publish this story, I would appreciate your wise and professional opinion about how to make it better.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

John Q. Writer

Encl.: Manuscript