

The following are excerpts from "The Creative Nonfiction MFA Student's Playbook: How to build your CV/resume, teaching portfolio and list of published works throughout your graduate-school career and beyond." Produced by the Creative Nonfiction Writers' Professional Development Society, University of Pittsburgh.

## querying by rebecca skloot

(compiled by elaine vitone using handouts by and a phone interview with rebecca skloot)

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### **overview**

When I first started freelancing, I was constantly trying to expand my client base, so I sent out a lot of blind queries. It's important to think of a query letter not just as a story pitch, but as a pitch of you and your writing. I've sold many stories this way, and sometimes queries that an editor didn't want still got me work with that magazine: I've had editors reply saying they liked the query but couldn't commission the story for one reason or another, but that they'd like to hear other ideas from me and I didn't have to bother with a whole query next time. From that point on, I queried those editors with a quick email saying, "Would you be interested in a story about blah," and if they said yes, we talked about the idea over the phone. Some of these turned into good relationships where ideas now come from both directions.

Aside from the obvious (the ability to write and a story idea) I think the most important requirements for writing successful queries are persistence, thick skin, pre-query research, more thick skin and more persistence.

Developing the idea and writing the query sounds like more work than it actually is. I got my queries down to a kind of formula, which includes a basic paragraph about who I am and why I should write the story. I cut and paste that, then tinker to fit the publication and story. I often write on related topics, so background information and basics of the story can work via cut-and-paste too.

I used to spend hours and hours doing pre-query research

and writing the letter, but after doing that a few times and having the query flop, I decided it was best to not go overboard. I do enough to make sure there's a story there, then if an editor replies with interest, I go back and do more research.

### **tips**

- Don't try to break into every magazine at once. It's a lot more effective to pick one and do a good job with it. Editors know when you're blanket pitching—it's obvious.
- Know the publication so that in your query you can show them that you've done your homework and are right for them. Don't pitch a profile to a magazine that doesn't do profiles; don't pitch a news story to a magazine that does mostly literary or historical stuff.
- Make your blind pitch as far from blind as possible (see "the query letter/email" section, page 3).
- Pitch to an associate, assistant or senior editor instead of the editor-in-chief, executive editor or managing editor, who truly are too busy to read queries from new writers and aren't always as on-the-lookout for new talent.
- Try to have at least two queries in circulation at all times.
- Never let a query sit on your desk for more than a day—once it's been rejected or ignored, pitch it somewhere else, so you always have something out there.
- Don't feel like you *have* to live in New York if you're going to be a writer. Non-New York writers are actually very desirable. Editors depend on them to tell readers what's going on in the rest of the world.
- One way to make connections with editors no matter where you live is to volunteer to organize and moderate panels. Then you get to hand-pick who you want to meet.
- Loyalty really means something to editors. Keep coming back, let them know you're pitching just to them. The fact that you actually know something about the magazine

and care about it is important.

- If I'm interviewing somebody, I always let them go off on tangents. New stories often come from digressions in stories I'm already writing.

### **pre-query research**

I recommend never calling an editor. They're busy and fielding phone calls from countless writers and PR people wanting their attention. And, if you call to pitch a story, the only answer they can give you is, Write a pitch and send it — they can't tell whether you can write over the phone. Pitching over the phone makes you appear inexperienced and runs the risk of annoying an editor to the point where he/she won't read your ideas once you send them. If you want to get in touch with an editor you don't know, call the reception desk at the magazine and ask for his or her email address.

I use Internet searches and databases (like Lexis Nexis) to read what's been written on any subject I'm hoping to write about. And I make quadruply sure no one has already written the story I'm pitching (I learned this lesson the hard way after pitching a story to a big national magazine days after the exact story ran in their competitor's magazine, which made me look like an idiot). I do this by reading at least the table of contents and leads from zillions of magazines on a regular basis so I can keep up on what's being covered by which publications. I also ask friends who follow the media, because they'll often know whether my story — or something like it — has been done recently.

I always do a preliminary interview (these are usually very short) to make sure I have access to the story I'm pitching, and to get quotes and character details I can use in the query to (a) show my access and (b) give the pitch some life. since I often get story ideas while doing interviews for other stories, when anything grabs my attention, I'll ask enough questions to find out if there's a story there, which serves as my preliminary interview if I pitch the story in the future. That makes the whole process easier, and much more efficient.

### **the query letter/email**

To make your queries as far from blind as possible, I

suggest a three-part approach: First, plant your name in their heads in a short email introducing yourself, saying who you've written for and something about how you know them (either "so-and-so recommended I contact you," or "I saw you speak at Blank Conference, and was struck by what you said about Blah, which inspired me to contact you," or "I read this piece you wrote or edited in *Blah Magazine*, which inspired me to contact you" ... or something along those lines). From my experience as an editor, and from talking with editors, I say this can help you get in the door without landing in the slushpile.

Second, after introducing yourself and making it clear you've done your homework about the editor and/or the magazine, explain that you have a story idea you think they'd be interested in, and ask how they prefer to receive queries: email, fax, snail mail, etc. In my experience, editors usually respond to this preliminary email within a day or so, because it's easy for them to fire off the information. This is good for several reasons: you don't end up sending a query by email to someone who despises email queries, and most importantly, *you've planted your name in their brains*. Chances are they'll then open your query when you send it (BTW: I can only think of one time an editor didn't respond to say email queries were fine).

Third, write your actual query. Keep in mind that queries aren't just about showing that you have a good idea; they're about making yourself stand out by showing that you can write. Try to keep your actual queries to one page, and structure them as you would structure a story: make sure to have a lead, a nutgraph, and an overall structure to the whole thing (like coming back to the lead in the end, or something like that) to show them you know how to put a story together. The hardest part of the whole thing is usually finding the lead.

It's good to throw at least one line in the query to indicate that you know their magazine and/or audience, like *Since readers of Blah Magazine are primarily women of blah age, this story would appeal to them because of blah*, or *Like the story you did last month on Blah, this story will do Blah for you readers* ... something like that. At the end of my queries, I say if they'd like to see samples of my writing they can do so on my website, which I provide a link to (they often don't look for it in the sig line so I give it in the text of the email). Then I say if they'd

like hard copies of clips I'd be happy to send them if they provide me with a mailing address. I've only had one editor reply and ask for hard copies of clips.

### **following up**

The kind of follow-up I do depends on the timeliness of the story. If I'm pitching a story that needs to be acted on quickly, I say so in my query and end with something like, "Given the timely nature of this story, I hope to hear from you soon so I can market it elsewhere if you're not interested." I've found this to be effective, partially because editors are people too and it's good to remind them that you're trying to make a living, and also (I think) because it gives a hint of competition, like if they don't grab it someone else will, but that may just be in my head.

On a timely story, if I haven't heard back in a week (or a few days, depending on the story), I'll send an email saying I wanted to check to see if they got it, and I'll paste my original email at the bottom so they don't have to go digging for it. (The more you can do to show an editor you understand and respect how busy they are, the better) If I don't hear after a week (maybe less, depending on the story), then I'll call. If I call and get no reply, then I move on to another publication and don't waste my time with that editor any more. If it's a less pressing story, I'll give them several weeks to reply (this is usually about four weeks—my rule of thumb is, resist the temptation to nag an editor until you can't stand it any more, then wait another week). Then I follow a similar path (email, call, move on).

Usually the follow-up email gets some response, even if it's a simple "We're not interested." Don't follow up on these to try to find out why they weren't interested, just send it to someone else.

## strategies for breaking into national markets

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### **start with institutional publications**

One of the best ways to get started with writing in any area, especially science writing, is alumni magazines. The

pay is good, and they often give writers the space and freedom to develop stories that can really show writing style. Almost every major university has an alumni magazine, most have more than one: usually the medical school has its own magazine, as do the schools of public health, business, etc. You can usually find them by doing a little research online, or contacting university public relations offices. Oftentimes these magazines have their own story ideas that they use with freelancers, but it doesn't hurt to have a story in mind when you contact them. If you're located in another country, your best bet is to find an American scientist who's doing interesting work, then find out what university he/she went to, and pitch a story about that person to their alma mater. Alumni magazines are a great way to get clips, but they're also a perfect way to get into labs where cutting-edge research is being done, which provides material you can then pitch to national magazines. Also, as a way of paying the bills while freelancing, writing for public relations offices can be a very good thing. They hire freelancers to write newsletters, guidebooks, press releases, you name it.

### **pitch a book review**

Book reviews are a great way to break in. Book-review assignments are much easier to get because the pay is awful, and there's not as much riding on it for the editor. (If you turn in a review and it doesn't work, they just rewrite it or don't run it. Their production schedule doesn't usually depend on it.) I started with *The San Francisco Chronicle*. The day my first review ran, I emailed the editor of *The Chicago Tribune* book section to pitch a review, introducing myself as a reviewer for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, even though I only had one clip. I got that assignment, then the day it ran, I turned around and pitched *The Boston Globe* saying, I review for *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *Chicago Tribune*. I kept repeating that until I had five national publications on my bio from only five reviews. My motto: If you've got one clip from a publication, say "I write for *Blah Publication*." Who cares if you've only done one review. So much of breaking in has to do with having the guts to be the writer you want to be.

### **be curious**

The key to breaking into the national market is having good original ideas to pitch—these don't come from press

releases, they come from living life as a writer. Find ideas no one else has. Notice everything around you, follow every curious statement and bend in the road as if it might lead to a story. My favorite example of this is the story I did on fish medicine for *The New York Times Magazine*. I was at the vet with my dog; a doctor came into the room pulling off his exam gloves, and another vet asked how his surgery went. His response: "Great, patient's up, swimming around." I walked across the room and said, "Excuse me, did you say your patient is swimming?" I proceeded to interview him about fish surgery for nearly an hour with my dog standing next to me while I scribbled notes on my vet bill. Don't be afraid to eavesdrop and be curious. talk to strangers, follow your instincts.

### **get clips**

Once you have good story ideas, the other key is good writing samples to back them up. If you can't get freelance work or a paid staff position for any reason (such as missing clips), magazines are usually happy to take interns on a volunteer basis. Doing that for a short period of time is a good way to break in and start getting the necessary experience and clips to move forward. Also, a well-written query letter can serve as a good writing sample. And finally, writers today are fortunate: If you don't have clips, you can make your own if you...

### **start a blog**

Write little stories once a week and viola, you've started your own magazine. Editors I know are happy to look at blogs as clips—in fact, I know many who prefer it, because there's no editor changing your work, so they can see how you really write, which isn't always the case with published clips. (And, on a cautionary note, editors *do* look at blogs, so make sure the stuff you're blogging is stuff you'd want an editor to see and judge your writing by. Don't treat it casually.) Before jumping in to blogging, read several by writers you respect to see how they're doing it and to come up with a style of your own.

### **post your own site**

Having your own web site helps. I put a link to mine at the bottom of all my emails. People usually click because they're curious. It shows editors that you're serious and

makes your clips easily available. Eventually people find you and seek you out because of your site. It's also useful when I contact people hoping to write about them—it shows I'm legit and gives them a way to get to know me a bit. Ditto for a blog. (Again, be careful: people you contact wanting to write about them will Google you and find your blog. So make sure your blog postings are in keeping with the way you want both your editors and potential sources to see you.)

### **be brave**

Much of a writer's success has to do with having the guts to just walk up to an editor and say, "Hi. I'm a writer. I'm gonna email you sometime." Then you contact them, say you met at conference, that you liked what they had to say on a panel discussion, or in a presentation. Have the moxie to call editors whether you've met them or not, ask them to lunch, show them that you have the enthusiasm do whatever it takes for a story.

### **use the buddy system**

It's very important to have a network of writers you can depend on. My friends and I send each other stuff all the time. I know what they like to write about, and vice versa. We help each other keep up with the reading ("Oh my God, did you see the piece on blah? You've got to read this!"). One of my best friends is a wonderful writer I met in grad school—he and I read every one of our big magazine stories out-loud to each other over the phone as we write them (we've been known to talk more than 12 times in a day, sometimes calling to read each section of a story as we write it if we need feedback). We also read every finished piece before we submit them to our editors. This is invaluable. It's also good to just get together and whine, because writing is hard. You help each other through it. Both psychologically and financially. The freelance mantra: Never turn down work because you never know how long you'll have to go between assignments, but if something comes your way that you can't possibly do, you pass it on to a friend whose writing you know and trust, and they'll do the same for you.

### **organize**

For people interested in science writing, I suggest getting

involved with the National Association of Science Writers. Among other things, they have several email listservs that are an amazing resources (for members and nonmembers). Two, which are called NASW-freelance and NASW-talk are great ways to network and meet other science writers (both established and beginners), and editors, who often pass work on to each other. Make sure to look at all the online tips for beginning science writers, and peruse the list archives before diving in and asking the list, "How do I become a science writer?" since that question has been answered at length on NASW's site. You can find a lot of helpful information in the list archives. Another list, NASW-jobs, is essentially a job board that sends out announcements of magazines needing employees and/or freelancers, and places looking to make staff hires. You can check out NASW's website at [www.nasw.org](http://www.nasw.org). There's a job board page on there (I don't think you need to be a member to peruse it), and there's also a link to NASW's freelance site, which is full of helpful information.

If you're interested in something other than science writing, there are plenty of other similar organizations you'll find helpful: The National Writers Union ([www.nwu.org](http://www.nwu.org)), the American Society of Journalists and Authors ([www.asja.org](http://www.asja.org) ... My personal favorite) has a wonderful online community, which is great for meeting other writers and editors, and they do one of the best annual conferences (it's in NYC every year in April, full of great editors and writers). The National Book Critics Circle ([www.bookcritics.org](http://www.bookcritics.org)) has a similar community.

### **read up on the biz**

As an online resource, with links to sites for research, copyright information, finding grants, and everything between, you can visit the "Links" page of my website at [www.rebeccaskloot.com](http://www.rebeccaskloot.com).

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