

# **Power Queries**

**By**

**Beth Ann Erickson**

**Filbertpublishing.com**

**Copyright 2000**  
**Filbert Publishing**  
**All rights reserved**

This article may be reprinted and redistributed freely as long as the entire article and  
byline are included. For more feature articles by Beth that may be reprinted and  
redistributed, contact her at: <http://filbertpublishing.com> or e-mail  
[filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com](mailto:filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com)

## About the Author

Beth Ann Erickson lives in Minnesota with her husband, son, and Rat Terrier. She's written hundreds of articles for publications throughout the nation. Check out her latest projects, subscribe to her free e-zine, plus get some freebies at <http://filbertpublishing.com>.



**Lucy's looking for trouble – again.**

Hi. Nice to meet you! I'm Beth Ann Erickson, an actual working writer. I write copy for businesses, corporations and nonprofit organizations. I've written hundreds of articles for newspapers, newsletters, and nationally distributed magazines. My first novel is in bookstores and is available online.

I hold a bachelors degree in Communications and Sociology. I even attended Sorbonne University in Paris one summer. (Boy, that was an experience of a lifetime!)

Last year my "business partner" died. He was a beautiful black Schnauzer. Today I write with Lucy, my little (and CRAZY) Rat Terrier. She chews a lot and is constantly finding ways to get into trouble. Drives me mad. But I love her lots....

So here's my point. If I can live in the middle of nowhere and make a living writing, there's no reason why you can't. All it takes is a little know-how and practice.

So roll up your sleeves. Get ready to write. Get ready to have fun.

And if you like "Power Queries." be sure to check out "Jumpstart Your Writing Career – and Snag Paying Assignments." And thanks for subscribing to Writing Etc., the bimonthly magazine that will give you tips, techniques, and inspiration to keep your keyboard humming. Tell all your friends about Writing Etc. and send them to <http://filbertpublishing.com>.

# Power Queries

By

Beth Erickson

You're sitting at your desk, wracking your brain, staring at the blank computer screen. A hole forms in your stomach as you struggle to form words to begin that accursed letter. That accursed query.

You've got a article idea but don't know how to get that letter written so you can sell it to an editor.

Well, here are some techniques that will make writing that next query a breeze:

The first sentence of your letter is the most important. By reading your opening, your prospective editor decides whether your query is something of interest or worthless junk. Your first sentence must somehow capture your reader's attention and entice him to read on. Here are a few ideas to help you ...

## Start Your Query With Style

- Jump straight into your story. Cut and paste the first couple sentences of your article directly into your query. Here's an example:

“Mary Olson thought she was sending her child to a safe preschool that morning, but by late afternoon she would find out her perceptions were completely wrong....”

Is your curiosity piqued? Would this example keep you reading? If you're interested, chances are an editor would be.

- Make an announcement.

“For the first time in 20 years, the only eyewitness to the [insert disaster here] tells his story.”

This approach is effective if your editor *wants*, *needs*, or *thinks* your article idea will interest his audience. If you use this approach make sure you've targeted your magazine sufficiently and captured their voice.

- Tell a story. Queries written in a story format has great reader appeal. Everybody loves a good story and usually wants to find out how it ends so they keep reading. How many times have you stopped what you were doing because you didn't want to miss the end of Paul Harvey's “The Rest of the Story?” So shorten your article enough to include a good chunk of it in your query. Perhaps it could begin something like this:

Twenty-five years ago, a man did the impossible. In a harsh economy, he defied the experts, he ignored his accountants, and followed his dream. In the middle of an economically distressed area, he opened a store that sold only men's suits....

This opener went on to tell a rather intriguing story that drew me through the opening, the body, all the way to the close. It was a good query....

- Begin your query with a provocative quote. It should contain news, a startling statistic or fact. It should be like the lead of a news story and make the reader want to read more. An example:

“Hold it carefully and take a deep breath; this little book may well represent the future of literary magazines....”

Or how about this quote?

“Did you know that 75 percent of American homes have a silent killer in their basement?”

These quotes are strong – and intriguing to boot! I don’t know many editors who wouldn’t want to know a little more about these article ideas.

- Ask a question – but make sure your question is interesting or important to the reader. Your question should arouse the reader’s curiosity. And here’s some examples:

What’s your definition of “fun?”

What isn’t the corporate-owned media telling you?

How much do you love your job?

A word of caution here: Be absolutely sure your question is provocative enough to arouse attention or it will fall flat. Try to use open-ended questions. Use yes/no questions carefully. If your reader answers the question and isn't intrigued, they may skip the rest of your letter. However, a well-phrased question will naturally draw your reader into the body of your letter.

- Stress a benefit. A straightforward presentation of a strong benefit can out pull any other technique to get your letter started. Here's an example from a newsletter query:

“READ THIS OR DIE. Today you have a 95 percent chance of eventually dying from a disease or condition for which there is already a known cure somewhere on the planet.”

I know... this one's bordering on hyperbole but you have to admit... it does attract your attention. It would definitely work if you wrote a strong letter after this first sentence....

- Write a good anecdote. An anecdote will pull your editor into your story and showcase your writing capabilities.
- Quotes and dialogue add color to your query. Beginning your letter with a conversation or quote will make it stand out.
- DON'T OPEN WITH dumb jokes, puns, technical jargon, and unsubstantiated claims. Keep your letter brief, to the point, and with an eye towards your potential editor's needs.

- Finally, from the first word you write, until the last word of your P.S., ALWAYS remember to write peer to peer. Write using the language of your reader so your editor knows you'll be able to capture the voice of his publication.

Every magazine has a “voice.” The language used by a publication like the New Yorker is very different than the words used by a magazine like Maximum PC/Minimum BS. READ a few issues of the publication you want to write for. Then write using their distinct “voice.”

When you match your voice to the voice of your reader you're saying, “Look, I'm like you. I know your problem, I've been through them myself, and I've found a solution.” Here's an example:

“One day years ago my writing professor handed back a story I had written, shook her head gravely, and said, “This is so bad it makes me want to quit teaching.”

Writing peer to peer – writing as you would to a friend – is the tone you want to cultivate in every query you write. Imagine you're writing a personal letter or an e-mail and use that language. Attempting to impress your reader with your grasp of the American Language will only succeed in alienating them – and in most of your queries being rejected.

OK. You've started your letter. Let's assume your editor is intrigued enough to read on. This leads me to the next section of your sales letter: You need to write...

## **The Lead**

Your lead is the section of your letter between your first sentence and the body. Your lead needs to be vivid, short, use ultra specific words, and compel the reader to read further.

You can use newspaper-type lead that answers the questions: When, Where, What, Who, Why, and How.

You can also use an inverted pyramid structure where you lead with the most important information and save the details for later. When you use this structure you generally arouse interest in the beginning of your letter, provide specifics in the following paragraphs, then close with your key point. After your lead is complete, you can move on to the body of your letter.

By using ultra-specific words, your lead vibrates with life. Instead of car, use Buick. Instead of dog, say Rat Terrier. Scour each sentence you write and look for words you can make even more specific.

## **The Immaculate Body**

The “body” of your letter contains your sales pitch. And yes... queries are very similar to sales letters because you are, in fact, trying to sell your article to an editor. So your body contains your sales pitch. But don't worry. You won't have to write a long and detailed body because queries shouldn't be longer than two pages unless you absolutely have to make it longer.

The body of your letter tells specifically what you want your reader to do – whether it's to purchase your article, contact you for more information, or read your article on spec. Here are a few tips to make your query more effective:

- Organize your most powerful selling points. Write each point you want to cover on a note card and put them in the order you'll write about them. As you write each point on your note card, emphasize how it will benefit the reader. Also, think about how you'll transition from one point to the next to make sure that your letter will flow smoothly.
- Write with your prospective editor in mind – not you. How will your editor's readers benefit from your article? Will they understand what you're saying? Are you telling them anything useful? If you were reading this, would you be persuaded to buy your article?

One way to build your reader's interest and "hook" him is to use the word, "you" in your copy. Read any magazine on the market and you'll find that 90 percent of the ads contain the word "you." Use of the word "you" will answer your reader's question, "What's in this for me? How does this affect me? Why should I spend time reading this?" Notice the difference:

Me-Oriented writing:

When I first became a writer I hoped I could change my world and make it a little better. That's why I wrote, "Power Queries." Power Queries will help me achieve that goal because it will help other writers get published.

You-Oriented Copy:

I'm sure that *you're* a lot like many of the writers I meet every day. Like them, I'd bet *you* hoped *you'd* make a difference in *your* world. That's why I wrote Power Queries. It will help *you* structure your letter from start to finish... and will get *you* on the road to publication – fast. (Italics added for emphasis.)

- Use interesting facts and figures when you need to. Quote your sources. This establishes credibility and helps the editor realize you know your stuff.

- Let the editor know if you have a sidebar to go with the piece. Also mention any relevant photographs you may be able to include along with graphs and graphics that would complement the article.
- Explain how your piece is relevant to the reader.
- Divide your copy into short paragraphs. There's nothing more intimidating than long blocks of solid text. Break up your body. Use short paragraphs.

Write in crisp, short, snappy sentences. Because we don't always speak in complete sentences, don't be too afraid to write like you speak. That means you can often get away with ending your sentences with prepositions. Sometimes you'll even use sentence fragments.

Always remember your goal IS NOT to write the perfect sentence – your goal is to sell your article. Period. (However, vary your length of your sentences to make your writing flow.)

- Use simple words and avoid jargon. When you're writing a query, you're trying to communicate with your reader, not impress them with your huge vocabulary or boost your ego. Always remember you're trying to SELL – not impress.

- Write in a conversational style. How would you phrase your sales pitch if you were speaking to your reader in person? Write like you speak and you'll hold on to your reader.
- Be credible. You can establish credibility by knowing what you're writing about. This may include providing credentials that make you the best source to provide the article. Mention your education, life experience, publishing credits, and hobbies if they're relevant to the topic. You'll also want to include a short biography to introduce yourself.
- Include a word count of your article.
- Get the editor's name right. Subscribe to Writers Market Online or Write Market Reports so you know exactly who you're sending the letter to.
- Don't use weasel phrases like "I think that..." "The article may..." and "I'll do my best to explain..." You wrote the article. You better know your information. When you write your query, sound like you know what you're talking about. Use phrases like, "The article will..." and "I know...."
- Check all your facts one more time to make sure they're correct.
- **KEEP IT SHORT.** No more than two pages.

- Always send a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (or SASE for short.)
- Know what the publisher needs, then give it to them. Don't send them inappropriate materials or the types of stories they don't print.

## **Closing the Deal**

In your closing paragraph you need to clearly state the action you want your reader to take. Here's a nice "call to action.":

"I look forward to hearing from you." "Let me know what you think. I've enclosed a SASE for your convenience."

Make it short, to-the-point and very clear.

Make it easy for your editor to respond by including a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (or SASE for short.) If you don't include a SASE, in all likelihood you WILL not be contacted by the publication you just queried. Plus you'll look like a rank amateur.

## **The Letter's Done!**

That about covers it! All you have to do is sign your name and add a P.S. if you have something irresistible to add to your query.

P.S. I've just been commissioned to do an article on XXX for the XXX issue of XXXX Magazine. Be sure to watch for it!

Most readers skim your headline, then head straight to the P.S. So if you include a P.S., make it strong. Make it reinforce your credibility.

Now you need to proofread, proofread, and proofread. Look for typos. Look for unneeded words. Are your sentences concise or wordy?

Print the letter on nice white medium bond paper using a quality printer. And never mail your only copy. DO NOT send hand written queries. DO NOT send queries on pretty paper scented with perfume. Remember, queries are business letters and should look like them.

Now all you have to do is send the letter to your prospective editor. While you're waiting for a response draft a few more queries for other articles and send them to other editors. It's helpful to have a number of irons in the fire so you are never caught with nothing to work on.

Fire up your computer and work on a novel or two. Draft a sales letter and try to draw some corporate writing your way. Become a writer for hire and write for people in your community. Get going writing a nonfiction book.

You're a writer. You may as well earn a few bucks while you're working on something you enjoy! The possibilities are endless.

I hope these tips help you write a stronger query that will attract tons of writing assignments. And if you're looking for more guidance on how to

make a living as a writer be sure to check out “Jumpstart Your Writing Career – and Snag Paying Assignments.” I think you’ll enjoy it.

And if you’re a fiction writer, be sure to check out our fiction e-mail list that writes a complete interactive e-serial every year. Details are found at <http://filbertpublishing.com>.

Good luck – keep in touch. Let me know how it’s going! Contact me here:

Beth Ann Erickson

[Filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com](mailto:Filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com)

Subscribe to Writing Etc. the FREE bi-monthly e-mag for writers.

Make your writing sparkle. Write killer queries. Get published.

Subscribe at [filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com](mailto:filbertpublishing@filbertpublishing.com)

# Resources

Writing Etc. is the FREE e-mag that will make your writing sparkle, help you write killer queries, and will get you on to the road to publication – FAST. The Filbert Publishing web site offers a writing tip of the week, freebies, and an ever-changing resource section.

<http://filbertpublishing.com>

Writers Weekly is a free weekly e-mag packed with paying writing opportunities, writers warnings, and e-books that will make you a successful writer.

<http://writersweekly.com>

Writers Market is the granddaddy of databases. For 29.95 a year or 2.99 a month you have access to thousands of magazines and the folks who will purchase your writing.

<http://writersmarket.com>

This bi-monthly e-mag has writing tips and paying markets that will purchase your writing.

<http://www.writingfordollars.com>

# Other Books By Beth Ann Erickson

## **Jumpstart Your Writing Career** And Snag Paying Assignments

Think it'll take forever to earn the big bucks as a writer?

Think again.

With Beth Ann Erickson's newest project, *Jumpstart Your Writing Career*, you'll discover how easy it is to:

- Learn to think like a writer – then think like a businessperson.
- Hone your writing skills until they're razor sharp.
- Attract clients straight to your door.
- Find out how to tackle the most lucrative branch of writing.
- Learn secrets of fiction.
- Organize your nonfiction articles to make them easier to sell.
- Make your queries pull.
- Promote your writing skills for little or no money.
- Find web resources to get you started.
- Get your hands on the best writing resource books.

If you've ever wanted to learn earn great a living as a writer but didn't know where to start, this book is for you.

It's available by download or CDROM. Surf to <http://filbertpublishing.com> for more information.

# The Almach – A Novel

By Beth Ann Erickson

*“The tale grabs my interest from the beginning, and keeps me reading. This is an entertaining story, just real enough to make me think, “Well, I guess it could happen,” and just improbable enough to set my own imagination to spinning daydreams.” AbsoluteWrite.com*

Imagine you’re traveling to a Middle East Country. Imagine that you’re mistaken for someone else and are abducted.

What would you do? How would you get home? How would you adjust to all the differences between your culture and theirs?

In the novel, *The Almach*, Penny Andrews faces that same dilemma.

She never dreamed that when she traveled to the Middle Eastern country of Horab that she’d be embarking on the trip of a lifetime. Abducted by a group of rebels, she discovers a strength she never knew she had. She also discovers how difficult it is to change the ebb and flow of the river we call “life.”

Penny’s life really gets complicated when she meets Jonathan Zadok.

In the golden light of the desert, Penny and Jonathan find a chemistry between them that they didn’t expect. Could this “chemistry” be love? They may never find out because someone’s trying to kill them.

To make matters worse, circumstances beyond their control force them to take part in a bizarre and sensual ceremony, *The Almach*.

*The Almach* is a love story that crosses two continents and two cultures – beginning in the hot sands of Horab and ending in the icy snowdrifts of Central Minnesota. It’s a fast read that will keep you guessing – all the way to the last chapter.

You can purchase your copy of *The Almach* at <http://booklocker.com>.

## **Upcoming Titles**

### **A Writer's Guide to The Almach**

Discover the inner workings of a novel. Find out how it's constructed, where ideas come from, and how each scene is knit together to form a complete story.

With A Writer's Guide to The Almach, you'll be able to dissect a first novel, find its strengths and weaknesses, and use each lesson to form your own dreams into full-fledged books. You'll find out how each scene developed and you'll gain insight into what makes each character tick.

A Writer's Guide to The Almach is a must-have for any aspiring novelist... and will be available early 2002.

#### **HeartSong – A Novel**

Find out what happens to Anne Olson when her husband unexpectedly dies and she doesn't get the chance to say "goodbye."

#### **TGV – A Novel**

What would you do if you discovered your husband was a terrorist?

#### **Murder on Third – A Novel**

A brutal murder in a small town. Things aren't always as they seem....