

Querying magazine editors in late 2014

Here's the scenario. You have a great idea that you think X magazine's readers would love to read about on its pages. But you don't know the editor and you don't know how to break the ice or make the suggestion. What do you do in what order?

Things haven't changed much in the past decade—and everything has changed! I've had way more than 1,700 articles in print, maybe half in magazines, scattered over the past 40+ years, including recently, so here's what I'd do (and do) right now.

There's a gatekeeper for every magazine. It's usually the managing editor (or for smaller publications, the editor). Go to *Writer's Market 2014* (it's an annual so find the newest edition). Check your library; since it's a reserved book you will have to use it there. If the magazine is listed, it will tell you to whom you query: name, title, address. Unless it says to query by email (and gives that address), you will have to snail mail the first time.

While you are there, read everything it says about the publication: its wants or hates, article length, slant, lead time. Those are the parameters within which you will query—and write. If you want to write about skiing in Saudi Arabia and it says it only circulates in the United States, don't try to set new paths. Query elsewhere, I guess.

What if the *Writer's Market* doesn't include your target magazine? Go to Google and see if the publication has a website that gives you roughly the same information. If that's a no-go, you might write or call the magazine and explain that you'd like to query the articles editor and do they have a format or information sheet about how that's done that you can read or they might mail? If all else fails, get a couple of

recent copies of the magazine (see if the library can get them through interlibrary loan), find the articles closest to your idea, and do the best you can to ferret out what you think the editor may use...

Then you need to send a query letter, preferably a page long but two maximum, that introduces you (very briefly) and asks the editor if he/she would be interested in an article about.. Don't beg, don't plead. The best frame of mind is that the editor has only one need you can help meet: providing accurate, interesting, exciting, and tightly written copy to delightfully fill his/her pages (soon). Write at least two dynamite paragraphs about the topic that make it obvious why the magazine's readers would shriek with delight if your whole article was on its pages. In your query, in a few sentences, also tell about your publishing background. If none, say nothing. Or list articles in publications as close to the same topic or theme as the target editor's publication.

Don't forget that the editor can tell a lot about your writing skill and savvy by the very way you write the query letter. If words are misspelled, you sound goofy, your topic paragraphs are flatter and duller than a brown lawn, or you tell the editor exactly how long the piece will be or how much you expect to be paid (and when), you aren't getting through that publisher's gate. (The average article length is usually in the *WD* write-up, as is a payment range; let the editor address both in the response if they will differ much. Don't worry about digital use or copyright here, or much at all.

Also, don't tell the editor what his/her readers want or need or what you would include if you were the editor. Surprisingly, editors have a survivor's grasp of their readers' wants and needs. And you aren't the editor. Rather, a solicitor with hat in hand.

Write a letter like one you would want to receive, tight, pleasant, suggesting an article idea that will make the

editor's task better performed, and one that answers all of the immediate questions that the editor has: are you sane, how do you know about the topic, were you there or part of it, do you bring special insight to the field, who will you interview, are you yet to visit the locale (and when can you have the copy in the editor's hands—figure six weeks after you are back), and so on.

Be sure to include your name, address, email link, and phone number. If you snail mail, include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a reply. Yes, I know it's old fashioned and the editor will probably return the envelope, stamps unused, and email you, but protocol is important.

Make your idea so appealing and clearly explained it would be hard for the editor to say no. (Alas, they often figure out how to do it anyway.) Be an articulate nice guy or gal eager to help. Also look at and follow the explanation about query letters in the *Writer's Market*.

Finally, query one editor at a time about each idea. You can find half a dozen other, distinct ideas in the same realm and query other magazines, one each, simultaneously. And when one or several editors are so enraptured with your writing and subject that, in a mad moment, they say "yes, let me see it," write each what your query to them promised. (Then sell second rights, and rewrites too. But those are other blogs.)

Keep at it.

Gordon Burgett