



Week 3 Audio Transcript

Sally Collins Pitching To Publishers

What Is A Query Letter?

There are a hundred or more different ways of presenting your submission: you might want to include some information about yourself in the query letter up front, or you could choose to put it at the end of the proposal. The same goes for all of the other ingredients in your submission. It mostly depends on how important, striking and unique each element is, and the way you feel it all works best for your book.

So firstly, the **Nuts and bolts**: in your query letter make sure you give the basics – your name, your phone number, your email address. This may sound really obvious, but it's easy to get caught up in the nuances of your story outline and forget to put your phone number in! And don't make it difficult for a publisher to contact you by specifying particular times and days when you're available – you don't want to play hard to get at this point in the game.

Next is the **pitch**: here's where you catch a publisher's attention. As with everything to do with writing, from your first sentence in your book to the first sentence of each chapter, first impressions count. If you don't grab a publisher now, you've lost your opportunity. Your pitch needs to be 100 words or so at most. Think of it as your elevator pitch, the couple of sentences that you use to "sell" your idea to a publisher when you happen to step in a lift with them. Even if you're putting your pitch in writing

rather than earbashing them in an elevator, you still have about the same length of time before their attention wanders.

Think of agents or publishers as having the shortest attention span imaginable – in fact they don't have short attention spans (well not usually!), but they act as though they do because there are so many other calls on their time. Remember that most publishers and agents don't spend all day every day looking at submissions – in fact most of their time is spent managing the authors and books that are already on their list. Acquiring new books and reading proposals is only a small part of what they do, often wedged in between other more immediate demands, so time is tight.

Don't think of your pitch as a plot summary. Think of it as of a tagline, a few sentences that create interest in the book. Imagine the billboard for your book (it may never exist, but it's a handy way to visualise what the pitch is for!) – and imagine the one sentence on it that will make drivers pull over and pedestrians stop in their tracks.

After your pitch you need to give a brief **overview**: This should read a bit like back-cover copy. It should be exciting and make someone want to read your book. It tells the publisher in a very succinct form what the book is about. It needs to be only two or three paragraphs. If you get it right, this overview will form the basis for the publisher's presentation when they in turn pitch your book to the other key members of the company (sales, marketing, publicity and so on). It will later become the building blocks for the actual blurb that appears on the back on the book. It will also, in the first instance, tell an agent or publisher whether they want to read your manuscript. However, the overview is different to the pitch - the pitch is the one- or two-sentence outline that tells the agent or publisher why they should snap up your novel. The synopsis is the follow-up to the pitch, giving more depth and detail about your plot and characters.

You need to include a brief **author biography**: this sums up your writing credentials, plus any relevant background about your work and life. This is where you get to say why you are the best person in the world to tell this story – but with a little restraint and humility. If you're an enormously successful blogger or columnist, say that. (This is part of what we call "author platform".) It should be one paragraph long. This is not the CV you send out when you're applying for a job, it is brief, snappy and alluring. Again, think of the author blurb that you read on the back of a book. Your biography

here might contain a little more background detail than that – it might mention writing courses and prizes for example. It's got to build confidence, or confront, or amuse – whatever is appropriate for the kind of book you've written.

You might also mention **market** – but only if it's relevant. This is the place to explain who you believe will want to buy your book. (And please, don't just say "everyone", or "all women everywhere"!) General comparisons to other titles are good, because it gives the publisher a point of reference. But don't get too bolshy about it (lines like "my novel will blow Stephenie Meyer out of the water" are hard to deliver well without sounding arrogant and delusional ...).

Wrap up your query letter with a polite note thanking the agent or publisher for their time and saying that you look forward to hearing from them. Don't make demands for detailed feedback: it is unusual to receive, and should be viewed as a gift rather than a right if you get it.

And remember, before you send anything to a publisher or a literary agent, check it, check it again, and double-check their guidelines to make sure what you are sending them is what they are asking for.

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