

# Conquering the Dreaded Synopsis: A Series of Ten Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

*This continues this series of ten lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."*

## **Lecture Two: The Query Letter**

The one-page query letter is the first step of the submission process. The majority of publishers require you to submit a query letter before you may send in your manuscript. The majority of agents require the same. The purpose of a query letter is to briefly introduce yourself, your concept, and your background, so that an editor/agent may determine if she's interested in requesting more. The query letter is only one-page in length, and it's one of the most important documents you'll ever create in your writing career. In other words, no pressure!

First we're going to review each element of the one-page query letter. Then, at the end of this general outline, you'll find an example of an award-winning query letter, courtesy of Linda Style. My analysis of what makes her query letter work, follows the example.

Okay, here we go.

### **The Query Letter Outline**

#### *Format:*

Use formal business letter format, with your name, address and phone number centered on the top of the page, followed by the date, justified left, followed by the publisher/agent's name and address justified left. Paragraphs are single-spaced with double-space (two returns) between paragraphs. You do not need to indent the beginning of a new paragraph. You should sign off with Sincerely followed by your name. Please select a standard font such as 10-pt Times and use standard one-inch margins. A query letter isn't meant to be cute. Finally, include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE)

for the agent/editor's reply. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. If you don't include a SASE, you probably won't get a reply.

*Paragraph 1:*

Provide your name and introduce your work, including genre, title, setting, and word count (e.g., my name is Lisa Gardner, and I'm writing to you about my latest 100,000 word suspense novel, THE SURVIVORS CLUB, which is set in Providence, Rhode Island...). Even if you're planning on using a pseudonym for publication, you use your real name for the submission process.

*Paragraphs 2 and 3:*

Provide a brief overview of your manuscript. Some people like to think of these paragraphs as a sort of "back cover" blurb, providing general information about the plot and characters while also sparking interest. The key is to establish voice. If your book is funny, these paragraphs should be light and humorous. If you have a dark, dramatic book, these paragraphs should be dark and dramatic. You want to strive for tone and mood so the editor gets a brief sense of what your writing is like. In other words, these paragraphs are HARD!

Another helpful tidbit is to include "buzzwords" here. Remember our discussion of the market, where we determined the sales hooks in your manuscript? You'll want to include those buzzwords here, e.g., a medical thriller, a legal thriller, in this marriage of convenience story the cowboy finally takes a bride. (Note inclusion of marriage of convenience, cowboy, and bride all in one sentence. What editor from Silhouette could resist?) Then there are phrases such as, "in this gritty suspense tale, reminiscent of Tami Hoag/Sandra Brown..." By nature, however, these kinds of sentences are telling about the book, not showing. Don't use more than 1 or 2 "set up" sentences or your summary is in danger of becoming flat.

*Paragraph 4:*

Close out the query letter with your writing credentials and/or relevant background. Writing credentials include any writing awards you may have won, the fact that you belong to a writers organization such as RWA, and any "professional" writing experience you may have such as journalism, PR work, etc. Having a relevant background also matters. For example, if your book is set at a hospital and you are a nurse, mention it. If you've done anything "above and beyond" for research, include that as well as it increases your credibility. For my first novel, I said that I was news editor of the *Crimson Tide* newspaper. That's my high school paper, but they didn't know that. Plus, I mentioned that I had conducted first-hand interviews with homeless teenagers as part of my research for the novel. These details help show that you are serious about your work and encourage an editor to take you seriously as well.

*Closing:*

Give them the status of the manuscript (full manuscript is available, first three chapters are available, etc.), remind them that you have include a SASE for their convenience, and tell them that you look forward to receiving their reply.

Guess what? You are now done.

**Overall Pointers:**

1. Proofread, proofread, proofread. You want zero mistakes in this letter.
2. Don't forget the SASE.
3. Don't address it "to whom it may concern." Get a name of an editor. If you don't know, call the publisher and ask the name of the editor who is accepting submissions for romance/mystery/etc.
4. DO NOT misspell the editor's name.
5. Don't exceed one page. Brevity is part of the challenge.
6. Mention sales hooks to position your work in an editor's mind.
7. Don't mention aspects of the book that you know are controversial (homosexuality, abortion, rock star hero, a heroine who sleeps around, etc.)
8. Focus on tone, so that the paragraphs provide a sense of your writing voice.
9. Make it POWERFUL.
10. Get a second opinion—a query letter is only one page so have your friends and family read it. See if it makes them want to know more about the book.

Final word of advice: Query letter writing is very different from novel writing so don't be surprised if you're lousy at it. I think I rewrote my query more than my manuscript. In fact, my mother worked on the darn thing with me so many times I think she can still recite it word for word eleven years later.

Think conflict, think drama, think human appeal. Eventually, you will get it right.

**Query Letter Example**

The following is an award-winning query letter for the novel, *One of the Family*, graciously shared by Linda Style. Linda has since sold her first novel to Harlequin SuperRomance. *Her Sister's Secret* was available June 2000. For information on future novels, you can visit [www.superauthors.com](http://www.superauthors.com).

Linda Style  
101 Future Famous Author's Way  
Glamour City, USA 11555

Today's Date

Future Famous Publisher  
101 Buy My Books Blvd.  
Hardwork City, USA 55111

Dear Miss Susie Editor:

Schemes, scams, and scoundrels make Brody Sinclair's job tough as blazes to do. Add one street-smart Irish Colleen, and it's nearly impossible.

That's the premise for my recently completed novel, ONE OF THE FAMILY, an 85,000 word contemporary romance that takes the reader from the streets of Chicago to a cabin in Minnesota.

Raised in a closed society, teacher Shay O'Connor has successfully hidden her adopted family's criminal past. But someone believes they're still involved in scams and cynical private investigator Brody Sinclair has been hired to expose them. To protect her family, her career, and reputation, Shay forms an uneasy alliance with Sinclair. When her dark past threatens her future, Shay leads Sinclair into a pretend marriage that takes them inside the "family" and puts both their lives at risk. The last thing she expected was that she'd need to come to grips with the painful truth about her family--or that she'd fall in love with a man who is off limits in every way.

Brody Sinclair has never failed to get a job done, not in his former work with the F.B.I., or as an undercover cop. Raised by a father who was conned out of his life's savings and who died a broken embittered man, Sinclair learned early on not to be taken by anyone. When asked to infiltrate a nomadic clan who scam elderly homeowners, Brody jumped at the chance. But his desire for Shay, and his acceptance by the family make it tough for Brody to do his job. If he succeeds, he'll ruin Shay's family, her future—and his last chance for a once-in-a-lifetime love.

A little about me. I have personal knowledge of the Irish Travelers, a nomadic clan about which this story is based, and I've researched the subject extensively. My educational background is in behavioral science and journalism, and I'm currently employed as a management consultant. My writing credits include newspaper, magazine and journal articles. I'm a member of Romance Writers of America and have won or placed in several RWA contests with two other completed manuscripts, both of which were finalists in the long contemporary category of the Golden Heart Contest.

I'm an avid reader of Silhouette Intimate Moments and have written ONE OF THE FAMILY with that in mind. I will be pleased to send you a partial or completed manuscript upon request. Thank you for taking the time to consider my work. I have enclosed a SASE and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Linda Style

## Lisa's Analysis

1. All relevant information is provided. While Linda uses a slightly different order, notice that she includes all “required” elements. At a glance, the busy editor can determine the type of story, word length, and location. Linda has also considerately included a SASE. Miss Susie Editor already knows that Linda is a professional, thoughtful author who has done her homework about the publishing process.
2. Starts with a bang. Rather than open with a dry introduction statement, Linda does a great job of inserting a one-line teaser to grab interest. Then she does go straight to the required information so an editor can get the overall grasp of the book before going back to plot and character specifics. Linda shows creativity and thoroughness.
3. Energetic summary. This is the toughest part of query letter writing—creating engaging summary paragraphs. Linda does a nice job of summarizing both external and internal conflict by letting us know about the characters in such a way that we already feel involved with them. It is easy to empathize with a heroine who honestly loves her family, but must face the truth about their questionable activities. And we all have a soft spot for the cynical undercover cop. Linda has also subtly worked in key marketing words—we know it’s a marriage of convenience and an undercover cop, both highly sellable story elements. I think this is the easiest way to set up the middle paragraph—by first doing the heroine’s issue, then the hero’s. If you read the back cover copy of a lot of Silhouette IMs, they often follow that format.
4. Credible closing. Linda ends very professionally, letting the busy editor know that the full manuscript is available, and that she has experience as both a writer and reader of romance novels. Again, this emphasizes Linda is an intelligent, competent writer who has done her homework.

Since there is nothing Susie Editor would like more than to work with a professional writer who has crafted a marriage of convenience story with an undercover cop, she should be pleased to request additional material for consideration.

Which brings us to the next stage of the submission process: The short synopsis.