

Chapter



Three

## No-Fear Querying

Now Turn Those Ideas Into Assignments

**N**o part of writing is as rife with misconceptions as querying. Would you believe that you can write two- or even three-page query letters, ditch the self-addressed stamped envelopes, query magazines you've never read, and even land assignments without querying at all? Well, believe it, because it's all true.

**BREAK THIS RULE: Buy six back issues of magazines before querying.**

Here's a paradox: Editors expect writers to read the last six issues of their magazine before querying – but what magazine writer can afford back issues of every publication she's targeting?

If you really feel compelled to read six issues of your target magazine like all the other books say you should, spring for a year's subscription, since that will be cheaper than six newsstand copies. Even better, check bill inserts and membership reward programs for special deals. American Express, for instance, sometimes lets you use membership points to "buy" subscriptions to magazines, and Diana has used these points to subscribe to *Glamour*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Town & Country*. (Be aware, however, that renewals may be

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automatically charged to your credit card. Keep good records!)

If you're really too cheap to spring for a magazine subscription, do what Linda did. When she first started freelancing, she stuck a note in her neighbors' mailboxes asking them to drop used magazines on her front porch instead of into the recycling bin. In addition to learning about her neighbors' tastes in reading materials, Linda learned about magazines she never knew existed. She also has a deal with her hairdresser to periodically cart away the piles of magazines that threaten to take over the shop.

If you, like Diana and Linda, quail at spending hundreds of dollars on magazines to land assignments worth hundreds of dollars – thus breaking even – check out these other ways to score reading material on a budget:

- Visit your town's recycling center. Freelancer Sheilagh Casey's town has a trailer dedicated to recycled magazines and slick junk mail.

- Look for "magazine swaps." Before relocating, Kelly James-Enger frequented a library that had a "magazine swap." "People could leave magazines they no longer wanted and take whatever ones caught their eye," she says. You can also start a swap with your freelancing friends.

- Get up really early on Saturday mornings and haunt yard sales. Writer Beth Lee Segal relies on tag and garage sales to buy back issues of magazines.

- Ask friends, co-workers, and relatives for recent magazines. When Diana was working full-time in an office, she asked co-workers to bring in old magazines from home. She asked specifically for the types of magazines she wanted to write for and received stacks of pubs in return.

- Work out or get checked out. Freelancer Iyna Bort Caruso has good luck browsing trade and consumer magazines at the gym. Or if you're due for teeth cleaning or a cholesterol check, ask your dentist or doctor if you can clean out the waiting room.

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■ Sign up for a free trial. Magazines entice readers with offers of no-questions-asked free trial subscriptions, which writers like Don Hinkle take advantage of.

■ Hop aboard planes, trains, and other vehicles. Writer Arline Zatz swears by airport terminals. “If you go through the main Continental Airlines terminal building at Newark Airport, you’ll find at least a dozen magazines with subjects unknown to many – and good outlets for various work,” she says. “They’re free for the taking.”

■ Browse the bookstore. Diana and Linda make frequent trips to their local Barnes & Noble and Borders to check out what’s new on the racks. (Strange men, in turn, make trips to the bookstore to check out *their* racks.)

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Keep queries to one page.**

For her first two years of freelancing, Linda sent one-page queries to top women’s markets like a good little girl. Then, one day, an editor from *Woman’s Day* called and said she preferred to see more research in queries. Within two months, two- and three-page queries landed Linda assignments with *Redbook*, *Woman’s Day* and *Family Circle*. For her part, Diana landed her first freelance assignment with a two-page, single-spaced query. She continues to ignore the one-page mandate and has happily made many sales despite her naughty behavior. Freelancer Roxanne Nelson recently sent a three-page query to *The Atlantic Monthly* and received an encouraging response from the editor. And, as she points out, “With online queries, you can’t really see the page breaks!”

Other editors agree that bigger is better. “Since ours is a health magazine, I’d rather see a longer, better-researched query that gives me some indication the writer knows what he or she is talking about,” says Denise Foley, deputy editor of *Better Health and Living*. “Actually, most queries I get reflect a lack of depth and sophistication about health issues.”

We’re not saying that every query has to rival *War and Peace*. If you’ve worked with the editor before, a quick outline of your idea

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may be all that she needs to give you the go-ahead. Diana, for example, sends informal one-paragraph queries via e-mail to her editors. And as she was writing this chapter, Linda won a \$600 assignment from *Writer's Digest* from a two-sentence pitch. Not a bad return from a query that took a minute to write!

Some magazines do prefer shorter pitches. When she was interviewing editors of men's magazines for an article in *The Writer*, Linda found that they liked queries to be as short as possible. "Women tend to be more chatty, so you can write longer queries for women's magazines," one editor said. "Men are more blunt and to the point."

The moral of the story: Tailor the length of your query to your topic and to the type of magazine you're pitching. If you need two or more pages to include all the research you think is relevant, go for it. Don't fret if your query spills onto a second or even a third page; length won't be a dealbreaker if your query rocks. On the other hand, if you have an idea for a men's mag that takes one short and snappy paragraph to explain, then write one paragraph – no more.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: No simultaneous querying.**

Let's get this straight. You mean you're supposed to send your query to one magazine, wait up to 12 weeks (or longer) for a response – by which time your query might be out of date – then send it on to the next magazine on your list? If magazine editors can't report back in a decent amount of time, then they'll have to accept that in order to buy groceries and pay the electric company, writers must send simultaneous submissions.

When Linda was starting out, she'd mail merge her queries with the contact information from up to 15 magazines on her database program. She'd examine the resulting letters on her monitor to make sure the merge worked and to personalize the letters as needed. She'd then set up an assembly line of letters, clips, envelopes, SASEs, and stamps, put together the packages, and drop them in the mail. Linda sold a good number of her queries this way.

Now, we're not advising you to write generic queries and send them out en masse; you should absolutely add customized details to

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your letters. You'll need to change the names of the departments you're pitching to, the word counts you're proposing, or anything else that's unique to the magazine. We suggest keeping a checklist at hand so that you don't overlook any of these important details.

What if two magazines accept your query at once? Unlikely, but in all the cases we've heard about, invariably the editor of the second mag curses herself out for being too slow to respond rather than cursing the writer for sending the same idea to multiple mags. If your idea is so great that two editors come knocking on your door, accept the assignment from the better magazine and suggest a different topic twist to the other title. You can also offer first serial rights to one magazine and second serial rights to the other.

Still afraid that the gods watching over Madison Avenue will smite you in your sleep if you send out simultaneous queries? Then try slanting the same idea for different types of publications. For example, Linda sent a query about "How Your Lifestyle Affects Your Dog" to dog mags, then turned around and sent "How Your Lifestyle Affects Your Cat" to cat rags, one of which accepted the idea. She could reslant the query for magazines about horses, birds, crocodiles – whatever. If two magazines accept the query, you can take on both assignments, as long as you're careful not to hand in the same article to each one.

We recommend simultaneous querying when you don't have a personal connection with the magazines you're pitching. However, once you have a few editors on speed dial, you'll probably want to give the editors you've worked with an exclusive on your idea before mailing it out to the magazine industry at large. Now if Linda has a great idea for an article on saving money, she'll send it to her editor at *Family Circle* and wait for her response before sending it on to *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and so on. Why? First, out of loyalty to a magazine that has given her work in the past. Second, she'll probably get a faster response from *Family Circle* since she's a known quantity to the editor.

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**BREAK THIS RULE: Always include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) with your query.**

Most books, and many professional writers, insist that you include an SASE in your query. To not do so, according to these sages, is to proclaim your unprofessionalism, your boorishness, your amateurism, ad nauseam. But do you hear that grumbling? That's the sound of professional writers who have dutifully included SASEs with their queries and submissions only to have their envelopes seemingly disappear into the ether. Or, like Diana, they notice the rejection letter comes to them in the magazine's own envelope.

"When I was a barely published beginner, I always included an SASE unless the magazine's guidelines advised not to," says freelance writer Karen Dove Barr. "I got a rejection slip back in my SASE about two-thirds of the time. The rest of the time I sent my work and my unused stamp and good envelope into outer space." Linda may not be a beginner anymore, but her experience matches Barr's: A full 30 percent of her SASEs never return to her ink-stained hands. We suspect unresponsive magazines are part of an underground stamp ring that peels the postage off writers' SASEs and sells them on the black market. Pretty tricky!

Outside the fantasy world of underground stamp rings, SASEs (and the queries they're attached to) may go AWOL for any number of reasons:

■ The editors prefer to go cyber. Did the Internet kill the SASE? E-mail has become *de rigueur* for sending rejections and acceptances. "I never use snail mail to correspond with writers whom I employ," says Kaja Perina, editor-in-chief at *Psychology Today*, who prefers to correspond via e-mail. "Including an SASE probably increases your chance of receiving a rejection notice as opposed to nothing at all, but it has no bearing on whether or not a writer obtains a commission." Dick Baumer, vice president and general manager at Imagination Publishing, also says that even if he receives a print submission with an SASE, he finds it easier to respond by e-mail. (So be sure to include an e-mail address on any snail-mailed proposals!)

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■ SASEs are to editors as socks are to the dryer. Editors, for the most part, are human – and as humans, they sometimes do things like drop SASEs behind the coffee machine or separate them from their queries. Diana once sent for *Glamour's* writers' guidelines and received a form rejection letter in her SASE. Talk about being knee-capped at the gate!

■ You screwed up. Common snafus include discrepancies between the address on the cover letter and that on the SASE; an illegible address on the SASE; insufficient postage; and no postage at all.

So the question remains: Should you follow the advice in all those writers' books and send an SASE with your query?

Despite the sad response rate for SASEs, some writers and editors insist that the SASE is the way to go. "It seems like the right thing to do, like hand-writing thank you notes and wearing pantyhose even on really hot days," says freelance writer Mary Kennedy. And freelancer Simone Carter says that she would rather spend 50 or 60 cents for an envelope and stamp and have the editorial staff toss it than risk offending an editor.

In the other camp are the stalwart SASE opponents. Some writers decry the cost of the SASE habit. "I send simultaneous submissions to regional parenting publications," says freelance writer Renée Heiss. "With so many manuscripts going out at once, it is not cost-effective to include an SASE with each one. I tell the editors to e-mail me if they are interested so I can send them an electronic copy. That saves me money and saves them time."

Other writers contend that the SASE is a dead giveaway of an amateur. "In what other business does one include an SASE with a proposal?" asks Arnold Howard, a technical/advertising writer who earlier edited *Martial Arts Professional*. "An SASE indicates that the writer is too shy to follow up the written query with a phone call." And Evan Harvey, former editor of Careerbuilder.com, thinks the SASE may indicate a stubborn adherence to publishing rules of the past.

Our take on the whole SASE/no SASE debate? It depends on your comfort level with ambiguity. Eric recently sent out a bunch

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of queries without SASEs. The result? It drove him crazy. When he didn't hear back from a magazine, he wondered whether they didn't want his idea, they hadn't read it yet, or they never received it. If you're the kind of person who needs to know the fate of every query, we suggest including an SASE, keeping in mind that you still may not get the courtesy of a response. If you don't care, don't bother.

If you choose not to send an SASE, however, you don't have to leave a response totally up to fate. Ask the editor to respond to your e-mail address – which she may or may not do – and remember that you can always follow up with a phone call. (See “Never call an editor,” p. 69)

You can also downscale your SASE: Try a self-addressed stamped postcard (SASP) instead. You can preprint SASPs with options that the editor can check off, such as “Thanks but no thanks,” “We're keeping your submission on file,” and the ever optimistic, “We're seriously considering your submission and will get back to you by (insert date).” Says Nancy LePatourel, editor-in-chief of the Canadian magazine *Glow*, “I really like SASPs. All I have to do is check a box and toss it in the mail.”

Of course, the ongoing SASE or no SASE discussion is moot once you've made the decision to work electronically. That means all of your queries are sent via e-mail: no SASE required. But even then, you often won't get a response, and in those cases you'll need to bite the bullet and call the editor.

**BREAK THIS RULE: If you don't hear anything about your query, assume the magazine doesn't want it and move on.**

Just as SASEs get lost or misplaced, so do queries. Call or e-mail the editor to find out the status of your query if you haven't heard back within a certain time period, say four to six weeks – just don't make it two hours. When Linda was starting out, she sent a query to a career magazine and didn't hear back for two months. When she called to follow up, the editor told her that he had never received her query – and that the publishing group had started a new magazine that would be a perfect home for her story. Success! If Linda had given up on the query, she never would have made that sale.

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Eric has also learned not to let his queries die a quiet death in the hands of editors. Whenever he sends a query to *GAMES* via e-mail or snail mail, he gets no response – even though he’s written a dozen pieces for the mag. He waits a week or two, calls the editor, and often ends up getting the assignment by phone. Why doesn’t the editor respond to the queries if they’re good enough to warrant an assignment? We have no idea, but Eric has gotten smart to the editor’s modus operandi and scored many dollars.

Other potential reasons your query has gone unanswered:

■ The staff is too busy. If you think you have a problem with deadlines, imagine trying to put out an entire magazine – every 30 days! The stress of the publishing world can cause major query response delays. The stuffing of SASEs is understandably a low-priority job.

■ The staff is nonexistent. Sometimes there’s just no one to get the job done, which means your query is sitting in a to-be-answered pile somewhere in the editorial office. “I am inundated with e-mail, phone, and snail-mail queries,” says Kathleen Furore, editor of *El Restaurante Mexicano* magazine. “Since I am the only editorial employee, they usually go to the bottom of my to-do pile, especially those that are not specifically targeted to my audience.”

■ The economy stinks. A mushy economy means editors are more careful about handing out assignments, which can leave your query languishing in a pile of unread submissions. “There’s a definite relationship between the speed of acceptance and the overall financial outlook for publishers,” says Evan Harvey, former editor of Careerbuilder.com. “You don’t want to commit \$400 to an article that may be worth \$200 in a month.”

■ Your query is on file. Sometimes, an AWOL response spells good news for the writer because it means your query is still under consideration. “I have things that have sat in my file for a year or more that I’ve eventually purchased,” says Daniel Kehrer, an editor at BizBest Media. “I think there’s a lot of material that ultimately falls into that kind of twilight zone at a lot of publications.”

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### **BREAK THIS RULE: Check Writer's Market for the name of the editor to query.**

By the time *Writer's Market* hits the shelves, many of the publications they list have had staff changes. Pick up a copy six months after it hits the shelves, and you can bet most editors listed are no longer at that publication or in that same position. And here's something even scarier: We have it on good authority that some magazines supply *Writer's Market* with made-up contact names. Why would they do something so deceptive, you ask? So the magazines can tell who hasn't done their research, that's why. Any queries that come in with the *Writer's Market* contact name go right into the recycling bin.

Checking the magazine's masthead (the section in the front that lists the staff) ups the odds of finding the right editor to target. However, magazines are prepared months ahead of time, so this may also be inaccurate. Your best bet: Call the editorial department and ask them to name names.

You can find a magazine's telephone number in the masthead, in *Writer's Market*, or on the publication's website. Don't be shy about this. Most likely, when you call you will reach the editorial voice-mail. If they have one of those systems where you can dial a staff member by name, dial in the name of the editor you wanted to query to make sure she's still there. (You can also do this after hours if you don't want to risk having the editor pick up the phone.) If the phone system doesn't offer this option, leave a message asking for the name of the person you should query for an article on such-and-such.

Sometimes you'll get a human being on the line. Rarely, you'll reach the actual person you want to query. And even more rarely, that editor will ask you to pitch your idea over the phone. You may want to practice pitching your idea in less than 30 seconds so that you don't sound like a complete wuss.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: You have to query to get an assignment.**

With many magazines, especially small and online publications, an impressive introduction letter will open the door to new assignments. "These days, an intro letter or a personal e-mail that shows

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some prior experience writing about our magazine's topic matter will do," says Bob Neubauer, editor of the trade magazine *In-Plant Graphics*. "Accompanying clips will really improve the writer's chances."

Diana sent the editor of a trade magazine for IT (information technology) contractors an e-mail about her technical writing background and asked whether he needed freelancers. The editor wrote back to request her resumé and clips. A month later, he wrote to assign her an article at a buck a word, and for two years she had an assignment from the publication nearly every month – usually major features and cover stories.

Linda has a template introduction letter she uses mainly for online magazines. When she learns about a new magazine, she pastes the letter into the body of an e-mail message, changes details where necessary to reflect the magazine she's writing to, and sends it off. Almost every online magazine she's written for was approached this way. Here's the letter she sends:

Dear Ms. Hireme:

I enjoyed the Boring Business Magazine website!

Do you need a business writer? As a freelance writer based in the Boston area, I've written for more than 100 magazines, including such business publications as eCommerce Business, Wired, Entrepreneur's Business Start-Ups, and Nation's Business, and such non-business magazines as Men's Fitness, Psychology Today, and Redbook. I also wrote irreverent marketing columns for 1099 magazine ([www.1099.com](http://www.1099.com), "Getting Work") and Entrepreneur's HomeOfficeMag.com. You can see a full list of published articles, editor testimonials, and clips at [www.twowriters.net](http://www.twowriters.net).

Thanks for taking the time to check out my clips and credentials. I look forward to discussing with you how my skills can benefit Boring Business Magazine!

Best regards,  
Linda Formichelli

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Also, there's no need to rack your brain to come up with ideas to query trade mags, no matter what the other books or magazine articles say. If you have an idea to query, go ahead and query it, but know that it's not difficult to be invited into a trade magazine editor's stable of freelancers with a simple introduction letter. Trade magazines usually have their editorial calendars scheduled a year in advance, so they know exactly what they're going to cover and when they're going to cover it. Moreover, trades are plugged into the industry they cover; rarely will they meet a freelancer over the transom who knows their readership better than they do. They usually have files full of great ideas, and their only problem is finding writers to report and write interesting copy.

Linda has written for dozens of trades, and she's never proposed a single original idea to them – except that they should give her an assignment. Once she sent her intro letter to 24 trades and received eight assignments within the next two weeks! Eric has landed articles with more than a dozen trades with his introduction letter. Here's the letter he uses:

Dear Mr. Bigshot:

I enjoyed the Noodle Maker Fortnightly website!

Do you assign articles to freelance writers? As a writer based in the Boston area, I've written for dozens of trade magazines, including Indian Gaming Business, In-Plant Graphics, and Modern Reprographics. I've also written for such non-trades as GAMES, Psychology Today, and Woman's Day.

May I send you some clips?

Best regards,  
W. Eric Martin

If you don't have any publishing credits yet, find trade magazines that relate to your job or hobby and tout your impressive credentials in your letter. You can find trades for every (and we mean every) industry or hobby. Case in point: Linda recently read an announcement for a new trade magazine dealing in dung management. And when Diana wrote advertising copy for a bandage man-

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ufacturer, she subscribed to *Journal of Burn Care and Rehabilitation*.

Whether you're writing to trades or newsstand magazines, if you're sending an e-mail, use an attention-grabbing subject line. For example, Eric's subject line will read, "Writer for Woman's Day, GAMES, Psychology Today, & more." If you don't have a lot of writing credits yet, do what another freelance writer does: Use the subject line "Do you need a business (health, kids', etc.) writer?"

Sometimes you can even skip the query letter process with a major publication. Freelancer Jennie Phipps landed her first consumer magazine piece simply by sending a note to a magazine for a reader-participation feature. One of the editors liked what she read and called. Phipps told the editor about her background and gave some ideas; as a result, she got an assignment and has been writing for the publication ever since. "I think having good ideas and being able to demonstrate that you can write them is the only thing that's important," she says.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Never call an editor.**

Forget query letters and e-mail. Many writers land assignments with moxie and a phone call. Take Elissa Sonnenberg, for instance. When she got a form rejection from a national glossy, she called the editor to try to change his mind. "The point of my calling an editor of a great magazine for which I aspired to write was to establish a rapport with the guy, to become something more than a name on a letter he could easily reject," she says. "So I asked him why he rejected my idea and made some small talk, until I laughingly told him I thought he made a mistake in rejecting my story idea." The editor laughed, too – and gave her the assignment.

But you don't have to wait for a rejection to land in your mailbox before calling an editor. Freelance writer Judy Artunian recently placed a cold call to the managing editor of *Computerworld* magazine. "I didn't have any particular topics in mind for her. I just wanted to know if she was open to using new freelancers," she says. "I intended to leave a voice mail and follow up with an e-mail, but no dice. She answered the phone." The editor said she didn't need any freelancers at the time, but invited Judy to send clips. A few months later, the editor e-mailed Judy to say that things had changed and

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she was now open to using new writers. “She asked for a query. I sent one and got an assignment the following week,” she says.

When Diana was starting out and still working full-time, she noticed that her local chain of weekly newspapers published an endless stream of feature articles written by freelancers. The subjects were usually bridal, parenting, and gardening – the types of stories Diana wanted to write. So during her lunch break she called the newspaper’s main office and asked for the assigning editor. When she got her on the phone, she quickly pushed her credentials and asked for an assignment. And guess what? The editor, who was not at all perturbed about taking a phone call, asked Diana to fax over her résumé and clips, then gave her two assignments the next day! Diana eventually became an ongoing feature correspondent for the newspaper until she gave up the gig for higher paying assignments.

If you want to write for a local paper or small newsstand magazine, we say go for it. Even major newspapers like *The Boston Globe* or the *Los Angeles Times* can be receptive to a quick phone call. With their crazy schedules, it’s easier for a newspaper editor to give you a quick “yea” or “nay” than to slog through a query letter.

You can also use the phone for follow-ups. If you sent a query and haven’t received a response in a reasonable amount of time, it’s perfectly okay to call and ask about the status of your proposal. Call the editor and say something like, “On September 20, I sent you a query for an article called ‘Please Hire Me.’ I haven’t heard back from you, so I’m calling to make sure you received it.”

“Writers should absolutely follow up on queries, or on any other correspondence, for that matter,” says Matthew Alderton, an editor at Imagination Publishing. “In my experience, editors get so bogged down by their day-to-day activities and deadlines that low-priority business, such as correspondence with writers, often falls off their radar. Follow-ups function as excellent reminders and keep the writer, and his or her query, top-of-mind for the editor.” Alderton suggests starting out with an e-mail and then following up with a phone call.

Don’t worry about all that advice you read that you should never call the editor. If you’re smart enough to pick up this book, we’re pretty sure you’re not some slobbering idiot who’s going to call an editor to shoot the breeze or pitch a story about the sex life

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of frogs to a home decorating magazine. Magazine editors are human beings, not rapacious writer-eating fiends. If you're courteous, professional, and quick to the point, they won't hang up on you – we promise. *Shape's* editor-in-chief Anne Russell says that she recently got a phone pitch from a writer who had a "hot story" about a championship boogie boarder. "It was totally wrong for us," she says, "but I have to give her credit that she called from Chile."

Then there's the flip side. Many writers we know admit to getting sweaty when an editor calls them – to offer an assignment, at that! What's with this fear of the phone? Whether you're afraid of initiating a call or terrified of answering, you need to get over this fear – fast. As freelance writer Jennie Phipps reminds us, "Being a freelance writer means being a salesperson as much as 50 percent of the time. Good salespeople know how to work the phones. Good freelance writers have to learn how to do it, too."

### **BREAK THIS RULE: You need to be timely.**

Time is relative in the magazine world, and timely doesn't mean "right now." In July, what are all editors vetting during staff meetings? If you said patriotic articles, go to the back of the class. Most magazines work six to nine months ahead, which means they filled their Fourth of July issue by January. When Eric e-mailed a Valentine's Day idea to his *Woman's Day* editor in September, he was told that they were already wrapping up the March issue!

Get a cheap wall calendar and set it six to nine months ahead. Come May or June, when you're looking at the calendar, you'll be reminded that it's time to start brainstorming for Christmas ideas, and in March you'll see that it's not the time for pieces on Easter egg decorating tips, but for articles on how to carve the perfect Jack-o-lantern.

Diana keeps a "tickle file." Like most people, she gets her best ideas while in the thick of things. For example, she had to plan a couple of holiday gatherings right after her son was born, which gave her a good story idea for a parenting magazine. She wrote the idea down and stuck it into a file marked "February." When February rolled around, she had this and a handful of other holiday-focused ideas to pitch to her editors.

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Need ideas to stick in your file? National holidays are always a great tie in. Every month is chock full of holidays you can glean ideas from, such as Organize Your Home Day and National Pet Week. Check out websites such as [www.earthcalendar.net](http://www.earthcalendar.net) for other holidays you probably haven't heard of that can lead to great article ideas.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Write your query according 'The Formula.'**

It has been drummed into our heads that every pitch should include the hook, the pitch, the body, the creds, and the close – in that order. But sometimes “The Formula” gets a little stale.

“I’m not a huge believer in formulas, per se,” says Alderton. “I think there is always room for flexibility and creativity. I’m not going to dismiss a query because it’s not structured in the traditional format, nor am I going to accept one just because it is. It’s about catching my attention and getting me interested in your story idea. The traditional format, beginning with a lede, is designed to do that. But there are, of course, other ways to get my attention. I’m open to them all, so long as you get it.”

Why not start your query with a compelling quote from one of your sources? Or stick your credentials in the first paragraph, especially if you’re trying to sell yourself to the editor versus your idea? For example, whenever Linda pitches an article about stopping spam, junk faxes, or telemarketing, she mentions up front that she’s the creator and co-owner of BadAds.org, a website about intrusive advertising. When Diana pitches to technology magazines, the first thing she tells the editor is that she’s a former technical writer who worked in the IT field. This sets her apart from writers who don’t know Java from JavaScript. For another query to a women’s magazine, she started off by mentioning some of the magazines she has written for because she’d learned that this editor liked to work with writers who’d “been around the block.”

Another idea: If you’ve written for the magazine before, you can start off by reminding the editor how well received your article was by readers. For example, when Linda queried *Nation’s Business* for an article about business travel, she used this lead-in:

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My article on micromanagement in the November 1997 issue of *Nation's Business* seems to have hit a nerve in small business owners: I was interviewed on the topic for the radio show "Small Business Focus," gave a talk at a Chamber of Commerce, and have had several trade magazines ask me to write about micromanagement for their industries. Here's a query for another article I think will have a strong impact among your readers.

As you can see, you don't need to stick to the same old same old when writing your query. Be creative! Let your personality show! That's what most editors are looking for anyway.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Save your interviewing for after you've sold the article**

Believe it or not, professional magazine writers interview sources BEFORE they even get the assignment. Compelling quotes not only give your query some zip – they also show an editor you know how to find good sources and get good quotes.

The problem is this: How do you get expert sources to give you the time of day when you don't have an assignment in hand – that is, when you can't guarantee them a media placement?

Many experts (especially experts that bill themselves as media-friendly sources, such as those listed on media services like ProfNet [see Appendix 5, p. 206]) understand that writers need a few good quotes to convince editors to give them an assignment, and they're generally happy to oblige. When you call or e-mail these experts, let them know which magazine you're pitching and stress that you'll need only a few minutes of their time. For example, here's the e-mail Linda usually sends to prospective expert sources:

Dear Source:

I'm working on a proposal for Family Circle magazine about how to save money without feeling the pinch. I see from your bio that you're an expert in this subject. Would you be available to talk for a few minutes via e-mail or phone so I can get some good quotes for my query? If I get

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the assignment, I'll let you know and we can arrange a date and time for a more thorough interview.

Thanks, and I look forward to your reply!

Cheers,  
Linda Formichelli

Diana writes a lot of stories that quote parents of young children, so with these queries, she includes two or three “real people” quotes to show her editors the topic is truly something on parents’ minds. Sometimes it’s easier to get these “moms on the street” because you can turn to your neighbors, friends – even relatives – for anecdotes and quotes.

All this may seem like a lot of work for a query you’re not even sure will land an assignment, but not to worry – as you get more experienced, each step will take less and less time. You’ll have a file of editors you like to pitch to as well as a file of sources who are willing to talk. You’ll be able to whip out a query in no time, and more and more of your queries will get accepted.

**BREAK THIS RULE: Send your query to the managing editor/the articles editor/the janitor/etc.**

Check out the mastheads at right from two different magazines. Managing editor, assistant managing editor, associate editor, deputy editor, senior editor ... you can go bonkers trying to figure out who does what. Making a habit of always sending your queries to, say, the managing editor can get you in trouble. The managing editor at one magazine may be the editor who calls all the shots, while at another magazine the articles editor runs the show. And with smaller magazines, it’s not uncommon to find the editor-in-chief panning through the slush pile for freelancer gold.

At times it’s easy to figure out who should receive your missive. If you’re pitching a story on the latest advances in lice control and your target publication lists a “health editor,” voila! But don’t sit around scratching your noggin if you’re confused – pick up the phone, call the magazine, and ask whom you should send your proposal to. If you’re too much of a wimp to do that, then it’s a safe bet

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to send your query to an editorial assistant. She'll get it where it needs to go, and may be flattered that you trusted your gem to her.

**BREAK THIS RULE: Don't e-mail your query unless you've worked with the editor before.**

Many a writer has landed an assignment by zapping off a query via e-mail when they were lucky enough to get their hands on an editor's e-mail address. In fact, that's our M.O. If we see that a magazine's e-mail addresses are always formulated as, say, `firstname.lastname@magazine.com`, we'll figure out our target editor's e-mail address and shoot off our queries. Other times, we find an e-mail address on the magazine's website. Sometimes we get an editor's e-mail address from a friend, usually with the warning, "Don't tell my editor where you got her e-mail address!" Usually, the editor responds with a nice reply; we know of no writers who

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have been interrogated by an editor about how they divined her e-mail address! "I prefer e-mail queries above all others," says Kaja Perina, editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*.

Diana sends e-mail queries almost exclusively. She has never had an editor admonish her for making first contact this way, even if the editor hasn't made her e-mail address public. The way Diana sees it, a strong proposal is a strong proposal, and since editors complain about getting so few of them, why would they be upset if one comes through e-mail? Should an editor throw a hissy fit over an e-mailed pitch, Diana would see this as a sign from the gods that this editor is probably someone she should avoid at all costs because of the PITA factor.

E-mail queries are not only acceptable but are the only way to go with tech and online magazines, which often turn up their noses at mailed queries. Linda broke in with e-mailed queries and introductions to such techie pubs as *Wired News*, *eCommerce Business*, and *Techtarget*; Diana cracked *The Next Big Thing*, 1099, and *Contract Professional* with e-mail pitches.

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Come up with ideas to pitch to editors.**

Rather than sprain the brain coming up with ideas, why not ask the editor what she's looking for and pitch away? Diana had lunch with two of her editors at sister technical publications, and they spent a half-hour listing all the stories they wanted to do in the future. Diana sat there and took copious notes. Linda asked her editor at *Woman's Day* what she was looking for and received a list of ideas via e-mail. Editors will sometimes also use this opportunity to tell you about changes in the magazine such as new sections you can target. It doesn't hurt to ask.

However, this works only with editors you've written for before; editors don't have time to give hot tips and insider information to every writer who wants to break in. "More established writers, and those I've worked with, will e-mail or call me to talk about what subjects we're interested in," says Denise Foley of *Better Health and Living*. "I don't return phone calls from people I don't know – I'm not being rude, I just don't have the time."

If you've got an especially supportive networking group, you can

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ask your peers to share this kind of information. Recently, Linda received an e-mail from one of her editors at a women's magazine who was desperate for story ideas in certain areas, which she outlined in her letter. Linda passed this information to several writers in her network, who were then able to target their pitches based on this editor's need.

**BREAK THIS RULE: Putting a deadline in your query will ensure a quicker response.**

Good luck with that! The reason it can take so long to get a response is not because the editor is carefully contemplating your query for two months – it's because your query is sitting underneath a pile of hundreds of other proposals from other writers. Your deadline could come and go without an editor ever having set eyes on your query – and when she finally does get to it, she may toss it in the bin because that date you insisted upon is long past.

Your deadline may also give the editor the idea that you're dying to circulate the query to other pubs – not a good thing. "A deadline would tell me he was going to offer it to my competition, which would mean that he and we are likely to soon part," says Brian Alm, editor of *Rental Management Magazine*. "I am selfish with the few writers I use. I spend a lot of time teaching them about the industry and working over story plans with them. I do not expect to see them take all that knowledge and grooming to the other magazines in the industry and have their byline show up there after I have made them known in this industry." Yikes!

Now, if you have an idea that will go stale fast, feel free to write something like, "Because this is a timely topic, if I don't hear from you by [five seconds from now, October 1, whatever], I'll assume you're not interested in the story." This "sell by" date won't guarantee a faster response, but it will allow you to circulate the query to other editors guilt-free. (Unless you, like Linda, are a proponent of the simultaneous query – in which case you won't have any guilt to begin with.)

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### **BREAK THIS RULE: Tell the editor how long it will take to write the article.**

Many books and articles on querying suggest that you put in your proposal, "I can have 'My Great Article' finished in three weeks." We guess the writer's underlying assumption is that the editor is going to say something like, "Wow, three weeks! The idea is just okay, but the delivery date can't be beat. I'll take it!" Fat chance. And what if the editors at this magazine like to have their articles in two-and-a-half weeks, or they like to give writers two months to ensure well-researched pieces?

If you're lucky enough to land an assignment, the editor will tell you what the deadline is. "For me, it's not necessary for the writer to say how soon she or he can have the article to us," says John Stark, deputy editor of *Body + Soul* magazine. "In some cases it sounds as if the writer is a machine who can churn out a generic article in X amount of time. Because we plan our editorial calendar so far ahead, a writer usually has plenty of time to do a story."

By stating a finish date, you may be pulling yourself out of the game before it starts. "[It's] not a make-or-break issue normally, but it could be," says Alm. "If the writer has no background in my industry and claims he can produce 1,000 words in three weeks on an esoteric or difficult topic that is very industry-specific, I know he's blowing smoke and doesn't know himself well enough to trust."

### **BREAK THIS RULE: Be familiar with the magazine before querying it.**

Guess what? Even this rule can be broken, although editors will probably put a price on our heads for saying so. In fact, Linda's first assignment (for which she received \$500) was for a magazine she found listed in *Writer's Market*; she had never actually seen the magazine before she queried. If you don't believe us, maybe you'll believe these writers who have sold ideas to magazines they've never read:

My first two writing assignments were from magazines that I had never heard of, let alone read. In fact, the second

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writing assignment was with a magazine that I couldn't get a copy of even after I had landed the assignment. The first time I read the magazine was when they sent me my complimentary copy after publishing my story in their publication.

I think with both of these articles the thing that hooked the editor was that I was offering a completely different view on their topic. I had no preconceived ideas about what should go in the magazine and just queried with what I wanted to write about.

—Freelance writer Liz Palmer

I'm almost embarrassed to say that I wrote an article for the official "Babylon Five" magazine having never watched the show or read the mag. It's not something I'd recommend, but it got me a nice paycheck.

Basically, I had interviewed an actor named Robin Sachs and during the interview I found out that he had appeared in "Babylon Five" a number of times, so I pitched the interview to the magazine. They wanted it, but they wanted it skewed toward his experiences on the show, of course. At the time I had no idea that the show was full of different kinds of aliens with a variety of agendas. I survived by hitting up my Internet friends until I found one who watched the show regularly. He gave me a crash course and the article was a winner!

—Freelance writer Cynthia Boris

I have written for several magazines without ever having seen them, mainly parenting regionals outside of my region, such as *Atlanta Baby* and *Minnesota Parent*. As far as I'm concerned – and this could be completely inaccurate – they all seem to be very similar in their content needs. I've also written for a couple of subscription-only e-pubs that I had never seen. In one particular case, I knew the one assistant editor rather well, and she gave me more details about what they wanted than were in the guidelines, so that was very helpful.

—Freelance writer Lisa Beamer

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*The Canadian Writer's Journal* carried a market listing for *NeWest Review* which stated that the magazine covered politics and entertainment for West Canada. I pitched them a story about housing shortages in British Columbia, but little did I know that they focused solely on the Canadian Prairie provinces. They accepted my query anyway on the condition that I tailor the article towards people moving from the prairie provinces to BC. It was my first sale!

– Freelance writer James D. Thwaites

If you can't find a magazine on the stands but you've read the guidelines or its listing in *Writer's Market*, you can usually get a pretty good idea of what the editors are looking for. Besides that, if you can't find a magazine on the newsstand, that means it's probably not a very big publication – and it may be much easier to break into. Editors might not like the idea of a writer querying a magazine he's never read, but in the competitive world of freelance writing, speed and efficiency are what it's all about. The more you query, the more work you get. All it costs is an SASE or SASP for the possibility of an assignment – even less if you use e-mail – so why not take the risk?

Still want to read the magazine before querying, but you can't find it anywhere? Write to the magazine requesting their guidelines and asking how you can get a sample issue of the magazine (include an SASE). Many publications will send you a copy for free. If not, they'll tell you how much it costs to order a copy from them. You can also check out the articles in back issues through online databases. (See "Assume you can't afford database access," p. 109.)

However, if you can find the magazine on any newsstand, you really should take a look at it. "A lot of freelancers are lazy," says *Shape's* Anne Russell. "They won't spend \$3.99 to do some market research that will help them tailor their pitch." For example, Russell regularly fields pitches for 3,000-word profiles of professional sportswomen. "It's clear that these writers haven't even looked at our magazine," she says. "We don't do 3,000-word profiles." Considering that a magazine in this league probably gets hundreds of pitches every week, you're probably writing yourself a rejection if you don't check out the magazine before sending a query.

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**BREAK THIS RULE: Make sure your query letter is perfect before sending it out.**

No, we're not saying you should decorate your letterhead with sticky coffee rings or skip the spell check. Your queries should be as pristine as possible, and your quotes and stats accurate. But we know too many writers who get hung up on the picayune details of their proposals, which either takes the juice out of their writing or prevents them from sending out their work at all.

Perfectionism is deadly and we think it kills more beginning writing careers than grammar accidents and etiquette gaffes. Diana almost fell victim to this pernicious plague, but through self-help and experience, she's nearly eradicated perfectionism from her writing life. She studied other, more successful, freelancers and watched how they worked. They didn't fret for days over a query; they did the best they could and got the work out there. Diana began keeping a file of all the wonderful things her editors said to her about her writing and her work habits, and whenever she began to feel paralyzed by the need to be perfect, she'd take those notes out and relish them. She also keeps a checklist handy and uses it before sending a query out to ensure she's using the right editor name and address.

The best cure, however, is to just do it. No obsessing, no worrying. Write the darn thing, let it rest, proof it, and hit the "send" button or pop the query in the mail.

*Shape's* Anne Russell understands that even the best writers make mistakes, and this usually comes about because the writer is trying too hard. She, in fact, has done it herself with her own correspondence. "I'll run back to grab the letter from the outbox, convinced that I've misspelled a person's name," she says. "Your brain starts playing tricks on you." Her solution? Let the query sit for a day, and when you come back to it, the errors will glare at you. "It's like buying a gun. There should be a waiting period before you send your queries out," she says.

Even if after all your efforts a mistake does rear its ugly head in your query, it doesn't have to be a dealbreaker. Both Diana and Linda have sold to major newsstand magazines with queries that were missing words in the first sentences. And once Linda put a query for Magazine X into the envelope addressed to Magazine Y.

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The query was rejected, but Linda also got a very nice note from the editor assuring her that such mistakes are common and forgivable.

Many times we've seen panicked posts from writers on on-line bulletin boards who wonder whether they should call editors to fess up to boo-boos in their query. We say, "DON'T!" Three-quarters of the time an editor isn't going to notice a missing word or a typo, especially if the rest of the letter shines. And even if they do notice it, most editors will forgive a minor editorial transgression. Calling attention to it makes you appear insecure and anal. Russell agrees: "You'll just appear to be a complete psycho." Consider it a learning experience, hope the editor doesn't notice, and move on to your next query.

On the other hand, Russell is not so forgiving of major mistakes. She finds it offensive when a writer misspells her name ("I have a very simple name") and woe to the writer who sends her query to the magazine's subscription processing center ("It happens more than you would imagine.") When she was an editor at *Working Woman*, Russell read a query that included, "And I know dentists will love this article." Clearly, the writer of this gem sent out queries willy nilly, hoping for any old bite. All these things are deal-breakers for her – and many other editors, too – so if you've made this kind of mistake, don't bother apologizing. In Russell's words, "You've blown it."

But there is a bright side: With editors getting so much mail, rarely will they remember that you were the writer who misspelled Mississippi in your query letter!

**BREAK THIS RULE: Your goal is to land a big assignment with your query.**

Several things can happen with a great query. You may get the assignment to write your story – or the editor may reject your idea, but be so impressed with your writing that she assigns you her own idea. A query that doesn't sell an idea can still showcase your writing and get your name in front of the editor, and therefore lead to big bucks.

Brian Alm of *Rental Management* has rejected queries but given the writers of these queries assignments from his own pile of ideas

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based on the writers' obvious talent. "And a number of times I have taken the query and revised the assignment the writer had proposed into something specific to our industry, with quotes and industry interviews and examples, and paid the writer twice what he had originally asked for in order to have this exclusivity," says Alm. Denise Foley of *Better Health and Living* has also invited writers of rejected queries into her stable. "Absolutely! Several of our regular freelancers came to us that way," she says.

**BREAK THIS RULE: Never send the same idea to the same editor twice.**

Once you get a rejection from a magazine, that's the final word – right? Not if you're a renegade writer.

Linda once submitted an idea to the editor-in-chief of a writing magazine, who rejected it. A few years later, Linda sent the same query to an editor lower on the masthead – and he accepted it! One of Diana's editors asked her to write up a proposal about a parenting topic they'd discussed over lunch; unfortunately, the editor's EIC didn't think the story was "fresh enough," so the idea was nixed. When Diana met her assigning editor for another lunch in February, she mentioned how much she had wanted to write this article. After some thought, her editor said, "It was a great idea. Why not add [this] and [this] to the proposal, and we'll send it through again?" This time, Diana scored a \$3,000 assignment. What may have made the difference? Diana now had a body of work with this magazine. The editorial regime simply had confidence in her ability to tackle this topic with an oh-so-fresh spin. (Dang, do we hate that word "fresh"!)

Magazines change, editors change, needs change – even writers change! Maybe your idea wasn't timely enough when you originally sent it, but some news hook has come up that makes now the perfect time for your story. Maybe the magazine didn't have a health department back then, but now they do. Maybe a new editor-in-chief came in and reorganized the magazine to include more essays. Or maybe your editor didn't feel you had the chops to tackle the topic when you first pitched it.

If your target magazine suddenly looks like a much better mar-

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ket for your work, don't be afraid to resubmit. You can even write in your query, "I submitted this idea to you in 2002, but see that you've revamped *Eraser Manufacturer's Quarterly* and are running more articles on eraser collecting. My profile on a collector of Disney-themed erasers looks like a good fit, and I thought I'd resubmit it for your consideration." The editor will likely be impressed that you read the magazine so thoroughly and understand her needs.

If a new editor-in-chief comes in and shakes up your target magazine, you can resubmit your idea to the new editorial team. For example, maybe that edgy health idea that *Men's Fitness* rejected in 2002 would be a hit with the editors of the newly revamped, *Maximized Men's Fitness*.

Sure, no means no – except when it comes to magazines. In the publishing world, "No" sometimes means "Not now."

### RENEGADE RULE-BREAKER: Jennifer Lawler

Jennifer Lawler is a martial arts expert and the author of *Dojo Wisdom for Writers* (Penguin, 2004).



**Q.** How did you get started as a writer?

**A.** I've always wanted to be a writer, and when I was in graduate school I did some academic writing that was published. Of course, I wasn't paid anything, but it made me believe I could get published. So I started sending out some queries and I ended up doing contract work for McGraw-Hill – working for their textbook department researching. When they felt I could write small sidebars, etc., I moved up to that, eventually writing teachers' guides and art history textbook chapters.

At the time, I thought I'd be a university professor and write on the side, so I wasn't too concerned about bylines or pay. It was just breaking in.

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But when I earned my black belt in Tae Kwon Do, I realized that I could do practically anything I set my mind to. So if I wanted to be a writer, why didn't I go be a writer? I thought for about ten minutes, then chucked the teaching job and started sending out queries. I decided I wanted to be a full-time freelancer and I wanted to write books and magazine articles, and nothing was going to stop me. So I started writing about things that interested me and eventually published a lot of books about the martial arts (among other things) and the martial arts related writing really took off – which was fine by me because it's something I'm still passionate about, years and years later.

**Q.** What rules did you break as you broke into books? Into magazines?

**A.** I broke the “you need an agent” rule. The first four agents I had were worthless, so I repped myself for sixteen books. Not a big deal. When my current awesome agent came along, I was happy to hand over the job to her, but I would have had no problem repping myself forever (as it happens, I didn't look for her, she found me – I really had no intention of going the agent route again).

For magazines, I broke the “don't start at the top” rule. With some encouragement from Linda E., I submitted an essay to *Family Circle* and they snapped it up, even though my clips included such national titles as *Martial Arts and Combat Sports* and *Inside Karate* and *Kung Fu*. After that, it was easy to get other assignments from *FC* and others.

I also ALWAYS break the no multiple submissions rule and have all my writing career. That's the most asinine rule ever foisted upon writers by editors and agents. If agents and editors always responded in a timely fashion, it might be different, but I've had some of these people never respond or take months to respond – once I got a rejection something like 18 months after I sent three sample chapters to the agent. He didn't really think I was giving him an exclusive all that time, did he? Get a grip.

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**Q.** What's the biggest rule you think writers should break, and why?

**A.** Break the "I'm a writer so I must be poor" rule. That's the one I hate most. People simply don't believe you can make a living as a writer. Well, if you start out thinking, "I'll never make any money," then you won't. In an interview, I once told a reporter I made a six figure living as a writer and people wrote in absolutely unwilling to believe this could possibly be true. Think how limiting that is for people! And how it dooms them to taking little pay for their efforts and not valuing their work. If you believe you can do it, you can.

**Q.** What's *Dojo Wisdom for Writers* all about?

**A.** *Dojo Wisdom for Writers* is an inspirational, motivational and practical book for writers. It contains 100 essential lessons from the martial arts that I (and other writers) have used to build our careers – and which will help writers everywhere. The book contains anecdotes, advice and exercises for beginning and established writers. It was eye opening to write – hearing from so many accomplished writers who had been down the same path I had.