

25 Queries, and Why Janet Said “No” to Them All

1. Memoir: no overarching theme.

The memoir was largely "this terrible but interesting thing happened to us" but there was no sense of how that would resonate with readers.

How you will avoid this: if you're writing memoir, you MUST answer the question "why would anyone else care about this." Your story must have utility for me. I'll read about sad stories on the internet but I'm not going to pay \$25 for a hardcover book if the only thing it's about is your struggle with cancer.

2. Description of the novel is so abstract as to be meaningless.

If your query doesn't have character names you're in danger of this.

How you will avoid this: Read QueryShark. Or any other query critique site. Apply what you learn.

3. Description of a novel I don't want to read. Ever.

How you will avoid this: you can't. Sometimes you're just going to query someone who doesn't want to read your book. Suck it up and move on.

4. Description of the plot made no sense to me

(and because I was doing this list I was NOT skimming.)

How you will avoid this: ask someone to answer the Who What Why questions about your novel based solely on the query. If they can't do it, it's time to revise.

5. One-dimensional characters and a plot that sounds so far-fetched I actually laughed.

How you will avoid this: write better. This is text book bad writing.

6. A juvenile book that seriously misunderstands what kids like to read

How you will avoid this: know the market. If you're writing books for kids, it will help if you've read a lot of them. Also, anything that smacks of "should" is generally a non-starter with kids.

7. All set up (which was rife with stereotypes) and no plot

How you will avoid this: get plot on the page. There's a formula for that at QueryShark. Go find it. Use it.

8. All character described in sexual terms

Profoundly boring.

How you will avoid this: don't do it. If you don't see this problem, you need better beta readers. Yes, beta readers for your query is a good idea.

9. Writing is not publishable

Confusing query, pages over laden with adjectives.

How you will avoid this: write better.

10. Leading with themes that I am not much interested in

What description of the plot that follows can't save this.

How you will avoid this: you can't. Sometimes you just have a book I don't want to read. Query onward.

11. No plot of any kind

How you will avoid this: See #2

12. Unenticing, but decent writing

How you will avoid this: See #10

13. Uninteresting premise

How you will avoid this: See #10

14. No plot.

How you will avoid this: See #2

15. I don't understand the premise of the novel

How you will avoid this: See #4

16. Over wrought descriptions

Lead me to suspect overwrought prose. Yup, I was right.

How you will avoid this: Write better.

17. Events but no plot

How you will avoid this: See #2

18. The answer to the question of who would want to read this book is: "no one I know"

How you will avoid this: You can't. Query others.

19. The premise of the novel is just wildly clueless

How you will avoid this: Read more. Watch how other writers successfully introduce things that may not be realistic but feel authentic in the book. It's harder than it looks.

20. A query that is textbook illustration of what not to do
including answer the question "what is the story about"

How you will avoid this: Read QueryShark

21. Does not understand what "a novel" means

How you will avoid this: I don't have a single clue here other than taking your query to a writers conference and asking an agent what's wrong with it.

22. Category is one I do not represent

How you will avoid this: Don't. Better to query me and hear no than miss out on me saying yes.

23. "Write what you know" assumes you lead more than a mundane day to day

Not a good assumption for most of us.

How you will avoid this: thinly disguised authors-as-protagonists are often hampered by reality. "A real doctor would never behave like House." That is indeed true but this is a story, not reality TV. The whole reason for novels is to transcend and illuminate reality, not endlessly repeat it.

24. Like #1, a memoir with no effort to answer the larger question of why anyone would want to read this.

How you will avoid this: See #1

25. Query letter is entirely about my submission guidelines

How you will avoid this: tell me about the novel. (I've read my submission guidelines. More than once.)