

Query Rejections, 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.)

26. Grammar mistakes I haven't seen since 4th grade.

How you will avoid this: If you know you're weak in the fundamentals of sentence construction, take a class. Proper grammar is essential. You don't have to use it, but you have to know it. And if you use bad grammar it should be on porpoise. Like for a laugh. Or to make a point. Or to convey a character's voice.

27. The premise of the novel was so distasteful I wouldn't even want to know the writer, let alone work with him/her.

How you will avoid this: Hard to say. You might run the idea past some readers and watch their reaction. Otherwise resign yourself to Lysol-scented replies.

28. You flat out told me you disregarded the query guidelines.

The problem isn't that you did so; I get queries every day that do. It's that you added "I don't have time to do this kind of folderol" which tells me you're impatient and convinced you're right about everything (including stuff you don't know anything about.) This bodes ill for your career path in a new industry. Make no mistake about it: being published is a job. Being a writer might be about art, but once you want to be published, it's a business. Would you hire a person

who flat out told you the job application was beneath them?

How you will avoid this: if you don't follow the directions, keep it to yourself. If you think agents are witless, mercurial, and savage beasts, put here on this earth solely to torment writers, well you're right of course, but keep it out of your query. In other words, pretend to be a polite person I'd want to work with.

29. Misused words/homonyms

I literally stop reading your work if I see more than three of these in the pages you include with your query. I've ranted about this at length in other blog posts. No matter how good your story is, I can't read it if I'm frequently drawn out of the narrative by thinking "wait, she means alley here, not ally."

How you will avoid this: Have a beta reader who could double as a grammar velociraptor. Pay someone if you have to. Spell check Will Not Help You!

30. Pages are not compelling

Your pages need to entice me to read more. It doesn't have to be with some sort of wildly dramatic event, although that usually works pretty well. This is more like you create a world I want to see more of, a world I want to explore with you. Dennis Lehane is a master of this.

How you will avoid this: study a novel that you love. When I say study, I mean close study, as in typing it out in its entirety or reading it aloud yourself. Watch for how the writer entices you to read more. Then do that. All great artists learn from those who came before. What you're doing is the equivalent of art students sitting in museums re-creating the paintings of the great masters.

One of my favorite pieces of writing advice is from Elmore Leonard: Take out everything that sounds like writing. Here's an example "his gaze wandered to the television."

31. Your query was brilliant; your pages not so much.

A good query entices me to read the pages you include. Those pages have to be as good or BETTER than the query. I don't request a manuscript if the pages don't entice me, no matter how good the query is.

How you will avoid this part one: Have someone read your pages. If they ask to read more, you're on the right track. If they don't, you know you need to do some work.

How you will avoid this part two: don't ever send a prologue if it's markedly different in tone and voice from the book you describe in your query. It will just confuse me. Send it ONLY with a full manuscript request.