



RACHEL THOMPSON

Writing Courses

HOW TO WRITE A COVER LETTER FOR A LIT MAG

THE BEST WAY TO INTRODUCE YOUR WRITING SUBMISSION (ACCORDING TO LITERARY MAGAZINE EDITORS).

Whenever you are writing for business—and, surprise, cover letters are business letters—the first thing to consider is your audience. Ask yourself: What kind of person is reading this letter? What's their state of mind? For cover letters, the answers are busy editors, tired after reading a lot of submissions, far too many for them to publish. This means that your cover letter needs to be clear and to the point.

What happens is that a lot of writers think the cover letter is their big chance to stand out in a slush pile. They are wrong. I've asked countless editors about this, and not one has said it was a well-written cover letter that won them over on a submission they accepted. Many, however, said a cover letter put them off before reading a piece. (Uh-oh.)

What are the ingredients of an effective cover letter that set up your submission to be well-received?

I dissect sample letters from a few of my lovely students (Deborah, Sarah, and Renée), below, and take them from good to great, highlighting some of the common errors I've seen in cover letters that you can now avoid.

DEBORAH'S FIRST DRAFT

Don't address an editor by first name unless you actually know her or have corresponded before.

Dear Liliana,

Attached is my short fiction story, "Iris With Mermaids" for consideration in Clockhouse Literary Magazine.

Canadian by birth, I now make my home in New York City where I teach college writing.

Don't give an overly long list of publications.

My work can be found in Ducts, Still Crazy, Liars' League, The Weeklings, Reader's Digest, Salon, Medium, and more. I completed my MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College and maintain an active blog at [The Deliberate Muse](#). I also serve as editor for The Poor Ledger.

Don't list publications that are not literary.

Don't use links in your letter, and really consider if your blog relates to literary writing before including it.

This is a simultaneous submission, and I will notify you immediately if my work is accepted elsewhere.

Thank for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Deborah Johnstone

DEBORAH'S GREAT COVER LETTER

Do address editors by first name when you know them and have corresponded before.

Dear Liliana,

Attached is my short fiction story, "Iris With Mermaids" for consideration in Clockhouse Literary Magazine.

Canadian by birth, I now make my home in New York City where I teach college writing.

My work can be found in Ducts, Still Crazy, Liars' League, and The Weeklings. I completed my MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College.

Do make biographical notes really short like this one.

Do list up to four journals most related to where you're submitting.

Do mention if it's a simultaneous submission.

This is a simultaneous submission, and I will notify you immediately if my work is accepted elsewhere.

Thank for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Deborah Johnstone

SARAH'S FIRST DRAFT

To Whom It May Concern:

**Don't be vague
in your praise of
the journal.**

I am a huge fan of Cicada; I fondly remember reading it in my high school library.

**Don't bury key
details.**

I am submitting "Visible Fears" for your Hauntings issue. It comes in at 7,899 words and is a simultaneous submission.

I am a freelance writer and editor living in Washington D.C. I have published an edition of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, and I am a regular contributor for Quirk Books' blog.

**Don't compensate for
not having published
in lit mags with too
much non-literary
writing credits.**

My blog, The Bookish Fox, was just listed as one of The Best Writing Blogs for Writers by Positive Writer.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Warm regards,
Sarah Fox

SARAH'S GREAT COVER LETTER

Do take the time to learn each editor's name.

Dear Anna Neher,

I am submitting "Visible Fears" for your Hauntings issue. It is 1,500 words and is a simultaneous submission.

Do give editors the most important facts first.

Do keep details brief and mention nonliterary writing only if there's some prestige, like an award-winning blog.

I am a freelance writer and editor living in Washington D.C. My blog, The Bookish Fox, was just listed as one of The Best Writing Blogs for Writers by Positive Writer.

Reading your interview with Nalo Hopkinson in my high school library is a fond memory.

Gratitude is a key ingredient to a successful writing career.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Do mention specific writing you enjoyed in an issue.

Warm regards,
Sarah Fox


RENÉE'S FIRST DRAFT

Dear Ms. Hales:

Please consider the attached 17-line poetry submission, "Candy Making", for publication in The Normal School Literary Magazine.


This work has been simultaneously submitted and I will notify you immediately if it is published elsewhere.

Don't be too wordy in your bio..



I am a trades journalist, currently hailing from the Greater Toronto Area in Canada, and my creative work has been published by Standard Criteria, The Squawk Back, Three Line Poetry, and The Poetry Institute of Canada.

I also write a weekly blog for the Women's Inspirational Poetry Contest. I placed third for this contest in June 2016 with my poem, "He can break your heart for \$30 at the Nordegg general store".



Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any comments or questions.


Don't bury a contest win! And think twice about listing even literary blogs.

Sincerely,
Renée Francoeur

RENÉE'S GREAT COVER LETTER

Dear Ms. Hales:


Please consider the attached 17-line poetry submission, "Candy Making", for publication in The Normal School Literary Magazine.



Do mention the line-count of a poem, like you would the word-count for a story.

This work has been simultaneously submitted and I will notify you immediately if it is published elsewhere.

I am a trades journalist in Toronto. My creative work has been published by Standard Criteria, The Squawk Back, Three Line Poetry, and The Poetry Institute of Canada.



Do highlight literary contest wins, if you have them.

My poem, "He can break your heart for \$30 at the Nordegg general store" placed third in the Women's Inspirational Poetry Contest.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any comments or questions.

Sincerely,
Renée Francoeur

NEVER EXPLAIN YOUR WORK

The most common mistake I see in a cover letter is an author attempting to explain what the piece means—either its grand themes, how it ties into the cultural climate, or simply where and how they wrote it. None of this is important to an editor. We want to be able to read your piece without knowing anything about it apart from the title and word count. We love the joy of discovery when we read creative writing and that is the experience we want to give readers. I can't stress this enough, And I drill this into students, so they don't make that mistake even in their first drafts. Let's look again at how each of the letters above describes the writing itself:

I am submitting "Visible Fears" for your Hauntings issue. It is 1,500 words and is a simultaneous submission.

Attached is my short fiction story, "Iris With Mermaids" for consideration in Clockhouse Literary Magazine.

Please consider the attached 17-line poetry submission, "Candy Making", for publication in The Normal School Literary Magazine.

- Sarah did not say, "Visible Fears" relates to your Hauntings issue because it's a spooky ghost story I wrote while at summer camp.
- Deborah did not say, "Iris With Mermaids" is an allegory about drowning.
- Renée did not say, "Candy Making" describes a cherished family tradition.

(I'm making these up because I do not know anything about these pieces yet—just as I like it.)

Unless you're writing a pitch to a journal that has asked for this, do not explain your work in any way.