

**Getting Published: The Query Letter**  
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A few years ago, when I first began marketing my work, one of my pie-in-the-sky dreams was being published in Outdoor Photographer magazine. I knew the odds, I knew they received many submissions, and I knew that there were two chances: slim and none. But I figured it was still worth a try. After all, what was there to lose?

As you may already know, the best way to get your images published in a magazine is to write an article to accompany them. This gives the editor a good excuse to use your pictures. Once you've come up with a good article idea and have a magazine in mind, you need to convince the editor. The way to do that is with the query letter.

The query letter is your chance to make a good first impression. It should accomplish three things:

- 1) Get the editor's attention
- 2) Serve as an example of your writing skills
- 3) Outline your article idea.

The first few sentences of any article should hook the reader, convincing them to read the rest of the article. Your query letter needs to do the same thing with an editor. I'll often include the opening of the proposed article. This can accomplish two things. It gets the editor interested and it serves as a sample of your writing. Regardless of how you begin the query, it needs to grab the editor's attention.

Follow the opening with a short description of your article idea as well as a reason why such an article would interest the magazine's readers. This will also show your familiarity with the magazine. (You have read a few issues, haven't you?) If you're approaching a magazine for the first time, be sure to mention any publication credits you have. If you don't have any yet, that's OK. Just let your idea, images, and writing speak for themselves.

Your query letter should be short and to the point, no longer than one or two pages. Don't give the editor your photographic philosophy or go into page after page of awards you've won. Editors are busy people and you don't want to annoy them with an overly long query.

You also need to give the editor an idea of the kind and quality of images with which you'll illustrate your article. Before the advent of photo-quality inkjet printers, this meant sending slides, tear sheets, or both, and including a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the return of your sample materials. Tear sheets are samples of your published work taken directly from the publication, and if you're yet to be published, you won't have any. Just include a page or two of images on letter-size photo quality paper to support your idea. The editor can then keep these samples on file for future reference.

Until you've established a relationship with an editor, your query letter should probably be on paper (check the magazine's guidelines) and sent through the mail. Once an editor gets to know you, he/she may allow queries by email.

As mentioned earlier, when approaching an editor with an article idea, you need to make an impression. Misspelled words, wrong words, bad punctuation, and bad grammar are one way to make a lasting impression. But probably not the one you wanted.

So let's talk a little bit about writing. Writing can be hard work. Actually, good writing can be very hard work. For those of us for whom writing doesn't come naturally, that means taking classes, reading books on writing, and practicing. A good strategy to follow in learning to write is to read good writing. Think about it. How did you become a good photographer? My guess is that one of the ways was by looking at good photographs and then trying to emulate them. So if you want to write travel articles to go along with your travel photos, read a lot of travel writing. If you want to write how-to articles, read a lot of those.

Be extra careful in proofreading your work. Don't rely on spell check, as it doesn't check for wrong word usage. A few common misusages are:

Their/there/they're  
Then/than  
Hear/here  
Except/accept

In fact, it's a good idea to get someone to proofread your writing. That extra set of eyes will often find things you overlook. Here's the very first query letter I sent to Rob Sheppard, the editor of *Outdoor Photographer* (OP). This letter resulted in the publication of my first article in OP.

January 18, 2001

Outdoor Photographer Magazine  
12121 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1200  
Los Angeles, CA 90025-1176  
Rob Sheppard, Editor

Dear Mr. Sheppard,

I have an article proposal for your consideration:

"The only thing that happens when I push my depth of field preview button is that the viewfinder gets too dark to see anything. This button is useless!!" How many times have you heard a photographer, whether beginner or experienced, say this?

Well, I can give you about 10 practical uses for the depth of field preview button.

I've been reading *Outdoor Photographer* and other photo magazines for many years and I've yet to read an article on this topic. The most I've ever seen are statements about needing a depth of field preview button to see what the film sees, and to let the eye adjust to the darkened viewfinder.

I propose an article listing several practical uses of the depth of field preview button. These include: detecting hotspots, finding the f-stop that will give the most pleasing background, placing a graduated neutral density filter, detecting distracting dark spots that may require the use of fill flash or a reflector, locating intruders (out of focus elements at the edge of an image), detecting possible lens flare problems, and a few more.

I've begun teaching photography locally and with Bill Fortney's Great American Photography Weekend workshops, and the use (or uselessness) of the depth of field preview button is a topic that often comes up. I think an article on the subject would be of great interest, and of great use, to your readers.

My publishing credits include *Northwest Travel* magazine and calendar, *Nature Photographer* magazine (articles and photos), *Backpacker* magazine, *National Parks* magazine, *The National Park Service*, "American Vision" by Amphoto Books, and others.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience. I've enclosed a page of inkjet printed images that could help illustrate the article and will serve as a small sampling of my work. Please feel free to keep it for your files.

Enclosed is a SASE for your convenience.

Sincerely,

This query covered all the basics. It gets the editor's attention; it outlines the idea, and it gives a small sample of writing. I also include a few publishing credits and teaching credentials to make the editor's job of "hiring" me a little easier.

Because they wanted to use the article, this told me a couple of things. First, editors really do read query letters, and secondly, you don't have to be a well-known photographer to get into OP. You need a good idea, good images, and competent writing skills.

Here's another query letter, this one to a regional magazine. This magazine had already used several of my pictures so I had an established relationship.

June 25, 2001

Northwest Travel Magazine  
Northwest Regional Magazines  
Judy Fleagle, editor  
PO Box 18000  
Florence, OR 97439-0130

Dear Ms. Fleagle,

I have an idea for a short article on the magnificent view and breakfast one can find at the Many Glacier Hotel in Glacier National Park, MT. Historic Many Glacier Hotel sits on the shores of Swiftcurrent Lake in the Many Glacier area of the national park and the sunrise light on Grinnell Point, which is across the lake, can be spectacular. But the best part just might be the buffet breakfast in the hotel's dining room. What a great morning it can be: rising early for the sunrise and then having a wonderful breakfast with a view. I can supply images for this article and include directions, time of year to visit, etc. This article could be around 400-500 words, or more if you would like.

My previous photo publishing credits include *Backpacker* magazine, *Northwest Travel* magazine and calendar, the *National Park Service*, *National Parks* magazine, and *American Vision* by Amphoto books. I have also had photos and articles published in *Nature Photographer* magazine and am scheduled to have an article published in *Outdoor Photographer* magazine this coming September.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Encl., SASE, sample image (feel free to keep for your files)

This query resulted in a short feature about the Many Glacier Hotel. I used the same basic "Breakfast with a view" idea later the same year in a query to *Outdoor Photographer*. That article appeared in OP in 2002.

Query letters open doors; they're your introduction to an editor. Keep them brief and to the point. Clearly outline your idea and above all, make sure your idea is appropriate to the magazine and will appeal to its readers.

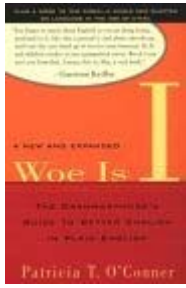
It doesn't matter if you have great images or article ideas if you don't get them in front of an editor. The well-written query letter is the way to do that.

### Writing Resources

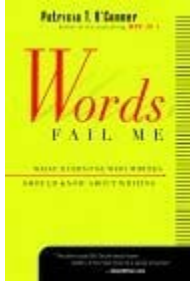
There are plenty of resources available to assist you in every aspect of writing. A few I recommend are:

## General Writing and Grammar

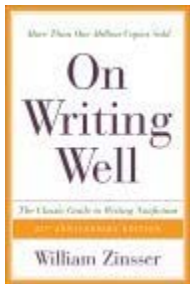
(Click on the book cover image to find it at Amazon.com.)



**Woe Is I** by Patricia O'Conner



**Words Fail Me** by Patricia O'Conner

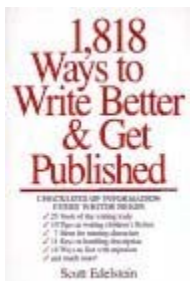


**On Writing Well** by William Zinsser

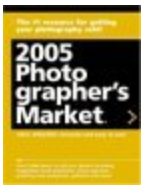
## Writing for Magazines



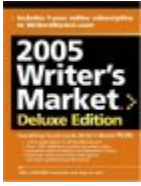
**Handbook of Magazine Article Writing** by Writer's Digest Books  
(contains a whole chapter on query letters)



**1818 Ways to Write Better & Get Published** by Scott Edelstein



**Photographer's Market** and **Writer's Market** from Writer's Digest Books. Both of these have contact information as well as guidelines for submissions.



The natural beauty Rod Barbee discovered during backpacking trips into Olympic National Park led him to nature photography. A NatureScapes.Net columnist, Rod is a professional nature photographer and writer with numerous publishing credits. He has taught nature photography through various organizations and currently serves as the Assistant Director of Olympic Mountain School of Photography. Please visit his website at [www.rodbarbee.com](http://www.rodbarbee.com).

Feel free to send your comments on this article to the [editors](#) at NatureScapes.Net.

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