

AgentInsight: How to Get an Agent to Ask for More by Nupur Tustin

At some point in the query process, an agent will ask you to submit a writing sample. Some ask for anywhere between the first five to the first 50 pages to be sent along with a query. Others ask to see a partial—usually the first 50 pages—only if the query appeals to them. But what is it that agents look for in a writing sample, whether it's the first five pages or the first 50? What compels an agent to ask for the rest of the manuscript?

That's the question I put to our panel of agents for this issue's column: **Jessica Faust** and **Kim Lionetti** of the BookEnds Literary Agency, **Gina Panettieri** at Talcott Notch, **Stephany Evans** at FinePrint Literary Management, and **Doug Grad** of the Doug Grad Literary Agency.

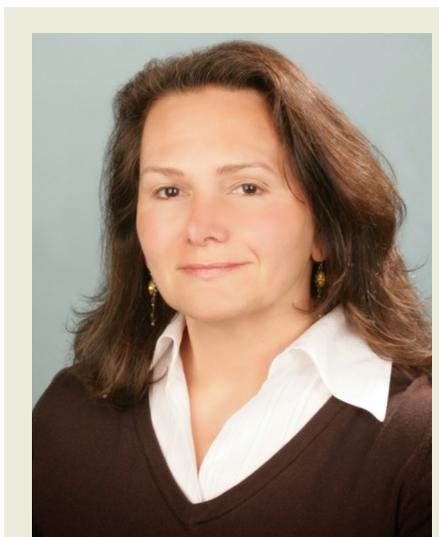
"Every agent and every editor," says Doug Grad, "looks for a great story matched up with great writing. You can be a great technical writer, but if you don't have a great story to write, you're going to bore me. If you have a great story to tell, but you can't write it well, I'm going to stop reading."

Tell a good story, and tell it well. Sounds like a simple enough prescription to land an agent. But, as both Grad and Gina Panettieri admit, what constitutes a good story is very subjective, varying not just from one agent or editor to another, but from one reader to the next.

"Many readers," Grad points out, "love books that are clearly not great. And many readers love books that are wonderful, but don't sell."

Yet, despite this wide variation in tastes, all agents, Panettieri explains, look for the same elements in a writing sample. "Get the mystery plot up and running," she advises. "Give us a character we can hook into; keep a brisk pace while painting the setting and scene; whet the mystery appetite, and hone your voice so the story and how it's told fold hand-in-hand to make it memorable."

As you might imagine, the significance of each element and its relative importance in determining the merit of a proposal was different for each agent on the panel. For Jessica Faust, voice



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is the most important element.

"It's not just the author's voice," she explains, "but it's whether the author's voice is suited to that genre." A mismatch between voice and genre, Faust goes on to say, is especially common with authors trying to branch out into YA. "But it also happens fairly frequently with authors writing suspense with a cozier voice or vice versa."

Faust's colleague, Kim Lionetti, on the other hand, looks first for a great hook in a cozy submission. "It's the first thing I know editors are looking for," she says. "It's a crucial tool for attracting readers."

"Even if I don't think your hook is strong enough or different enough," she goes on to say, "I'll be impressed if you pitch it in a way that shows you understand the cozy audience. Oftentimes, if we love a proposal at BookEnds, we'll find a way to tweak the hook."

But a great voice and a fantastic hook are not the only ingredients that will sell a proposal. Faust looks for an "engaging plot that moves the story forward" and compelling characters. "If there's one thing *Gone Girl* has proven,

it's that likeable isn't always necessary."

Lionetti needs to be pulled in by a "warm, interesting voice," too. A good cozy, she says, needs to charm the reader "with a protagonist they'd like to befriend, quirky secondary characters that make them smile, and a setting they'd like to visit on their day off."

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A former journalist, Nupur Tustin now divides her time between composing and writing mysteries. Prior publications include work for Reuters, CNBC, diverse freelance articles, short stories, and academic research. She is currently looking for a home for *A Minor Study in Murder*, the first in her Joseph Haydn mystery series.

AgentInsight, continued

Both agents also look for evidence that the writer can concoct a good plot. “Since cozies are often sold on proposal,” Lionetti explains, “I often look for good plotting in your synopsis. Is there a dead body in the first three chapters? Are there enough red herrings? Is the whodunit a stumper? Does our amateur sleuth track down the killer in a systematic, logical way? All of these things are necessary to keep a cozy mystery series credible. If the crime-solving doesn’t feel authentic, you’ve lost readers.”

Panettieri suggests that the opening pages present a compelling character, whether it’s the protagonist, the villain, the victim, or an important secondary character. Additionally, she advises authors to satisfy the “mystery sweet tooth” fairly quickly.

Stephany Evans was the only agent on the panel who said she doesn’t really think about what she’s looking for. “What seems to draw me in,” she says, “is part voice, part character, part circumstance, all combining to form something novel and fresh. I love being caught sideways by something unexpected.”

Evans describes the opening of Susan M. Boyer’s *Lowcountry Boil* as an example. The novel opens with P.I. Liz Talbot chasing a rabbit, the action described with the energy one would expect. “We follow along,” Evans says, “until we come to the line, ‘Naturally, the rabbit pulled a gun.’ And, like that, she’s got you!”

In Suzanne Chazin’s *Land of Careful Shadows*, even though we know detective Jimmy Vega was only “almost killed” when he shows up to a recent homicide, the writing holds enough tension, Evans says, to keep the reader on the edge of the seat until Vega escapes. And in Maia Chance’s *Snow White Red-Handed*, Ophelia Flax’s prevarications as she tries to land a position she’s never held before are sufficiently entertaining for the reader to expect a fun read.



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—Stephany Evans,
FinePrint Literary Management

“I do want to feel I’m in good hands (the author’s) and in good company (the character’s),” says Evans. Whether the author compels her to feel surprise, extreme anxiety, or amusement, it is crucial that “they get me emotionally involved, if I’m going to keep turning the pages.”

What Doug Grad looks for is writing that engages him. “If you have exciting action, interesting characters, a unique setting, natural-sounding dialogue, and well-crafted narration, you’ve got a good start.” He also especially enjoys cliff-hanger chapter endings for mysteries. Pet peeves include foreshadowing, amateur mistakes, rehashed plots, indecisive authors, poor grammar and syntax, and the use of the word “auburn” to describe a woman’s hair.

Five different agents. Five different perspectives. So, what’s an author to do in a market that’s this subjective? Here’s Grad’s advice: “Forget about what the ‘market’ wants, what’s hot, and write the best story you can in the best way you can.” That is about all an aspiring author can do.

Acknowledgements: In addition to the agents, all of whom readily and promptly shared their expertise for this column, the author would like to thank *First Draft* editor Lourdes Venard, without whom

this column would not have been possible. A huge debt of thanks is also owed to Guppies Terrie Farley Moran, Kaye George, Ellen Bryon, and Krista Davis for contacting their agents for this column. A big thank you to Web Guppy Cori Lynn Arnold for creating URL links to previous editions of *First Draft*. Last, but not least, the author would like to thank the very many Guppies who wrote in with their excellent questions and suggestions for topics to cover.

If you have questions for upcoming columns, email Nupur Tustin at nupursen@gmail.com.