

How to Charm an Editor

1. Read the Writers Guidelines

Before you even send a query letter or submit an article, read the Writers Guidelines. It may be that your chosen publication doesn't accept unsolicited manuscripts -- they may specifically ask you to query first.

Writers Guidelines contain a number of clues as to how you should proceed. What length should your story be? Should your query or story be sent to the editor of a specific department?

2. Know what the publication is about

Don't send submissions or suggestions to a magazine you haven't even looked at. Few editors will take any old thing. Study the magazine's contents carefully. Who is the target audience? If it's retirees, there is little point in submitting a piece on the clubbing scene in Ibiza.

When you're studying a magazine for content, check the style too. Do they use stories written from the personal viewpoint, the readers' viewpoint, or a mixture of both? The Writers Guidelines may tell you this, but only by reading a magazine will you be able to gauge its tone.

3. Follow an editor's instructions

Ignore guidelines at your peril. If the guidelines state 1,500 words maximum, keep it to that. And that's actually quite lengthy. Nowadays publications are more likely to use "snippets": concise pieces that are often only 250 to 500 words long.

How can you cram all your experiences of the Scottish Highlands into 400 words? You can't. But all these snippets add up. Focus on the romantic hideaway hotel you stayed in for one publication. On the \$50,000 cottage you spotted in an Inverness Realtor's window for another. The caber-tossing event at the Braemar Highland Games for a third magazine.

When giving out a longer assignment to a new writer, many editors will invest the time in explaining exactly what kind of material he or she wants outlining in the article. An article on the Scottish Highlands? Just what the editor is looking for, and she explains to the writer the kind of things she wants covered: castles, salmon fishing, food, the Highland Games. What does the poor woman get back? A rambling spiel about whisky distilleries or the dating scene in Kilmarnock...

4. Keep within deadlines

Issues are carefully planned out – often months in advance – and material has to be submitted by the cut-off date. **DON'T MAKE PROMISES YOU CANNOT KEEP.** If an editor asks if you can have an article submitted within four weeks, be sure that you can do so. Yes...even if it means staying up until 3 a.m.

If a real emergency arises, and you know that you won't have your article ready by the submission date, it's common courtesy to inform your editor as soon as possible.

5. Spelling it out – spell-check, proof-read, and fact-check everything you submit.

Checking your spelling sounds obvious, but it's easy to make mistakes. Eagle-eyed editors spot them immediately. Use your computer spell-check – what do you think it's there for? Spelling mistakes make you look sloppy and unprofessional – and if there are errors in your query letter, you will never get a commission to write an article.

Proof-read your copy carefully for errors – at least three times. If you have a willing partner, get him or her to read it through, too. Another pair of eyes often sees something you haven't noticed.

Some magazines employ armies of fact-checkers – if you don't want continuous hassle, make sure you get your facts right in the first place. Other publications expect you to do your own fact-checking. Again, get your facts straight. Even small errors may convey to the knowledgeable reader (or editor) that your words can't be trusted.

A point worth noting – if you're submitting an article to a British or Irish publication, you can change your computer dictionary to produce a "British" English-language spell-check. Although we share a language, many words are spelt differently: color/colour; traveler/traveller; theater/theatre, etc.

6. Stay Positive --- Be happy.

Think about what your target audience wants to read. It doesn't matter if you're writing for teenagers or seniors – travel publications encourage readers to take a trip. Articles are NOT designed to put them off travel for ever. There's room for honesty when the occasion demands, but go easy on the gloom and doom. The vast majority of pieces are upbeat and enthusiastic.

Yes, you might have caught fleas in Morocco, suffered a nasty dose of food poisoning, and even got mugged at knifepoint in the souk. Weigh up your experience. Can all travelers expect this? If not, is it really necessary to tell readers about your mishaps in laborious detail? Inform them about the carpet seller, the snake-charmer, and the camel markets instead.

Most publications carry adverts from travel companies. If your article suggests Morocco is the ghastliest place on earth, it's not going to get published. The editor knows that running a horror story will have repercussions with the publisher. You see, companies offering Morocco vacations are likely to cancel their advertising space pretty damn quick.

Is glossing over the bad aspects of travel fair to your readers? Probably not, but you've got to be hard-nosed about this. You're writing to make money – and travel is expensive. If a trip doesn't result in at least one article, you're committing financial suicide. You're a writer, not a bleeding-heart social worker. And besides, it was undoubtedly a travel writer who gave YOU the notion of going to Morocco in the first place.

7. Submit your articles in the correct format.

Manual typewriters? Handwritten articles? Dream on. We're now in the computer age.

Although some editors ask you to submit stories by snail-mail, all the ones I know request electronic submissions. I usually send my own articles and photos as email attachments, but that is because the editors know me. If you're new to them, they may be unwilling to accept an attachment from an unknown source for fear that it could contain a virus. That's why you'll find Writers Guidelines often ask you to submit your story in the main body of an email.

Regarding photos, explain that you can supply them in your cover note.

You'll often be asked to produce a printed-out article, but this is generally only a back-up copy in addition to one submitted by email or sometimes even on disk.

If the information isn't included in the magazine's Writer's Guidelines, inquire as to how an article should be submitted.

8. Keep your correspondence/cover letters short and sweet.

Editors don't have the time or patience to read letters or emails that almost match War and Peace for word length. Whether you're making an initial inquiry or submitting an article, all correspondence should be brief.

Editors do NOT want a blow-by-blow account of what's in the accompanying article. Nor are explanations necessary as to why this or that was done.

By the way, **make sure you identify yourself.**

ALWAYS include your full name and contact details. Address, telephone number, etc. are easy to forget if you're dashing off an email inquiry, but it's vital to develop this habit. Unless you're a regular contributor, correspondence from somebody whose only address is bob@cheers.com or something similar isn't going to mean a lot to most editors.

It's perfectly acceptable to put "Bob" at the end of your letter or email, but under that include full contact details.

When submitting articles as a print-out, put your name, address, phone number, and email address on the first page or at the top of each page in the header.

9. Don't badger or insult an editor

Editors, like their assistants, are overworked. They don't want to be disrupted by phone calls – if you must get in touch, email or write a short note.

You're not the only writer out there...and editors certainly aren't sitting around twiddling their thumbs, waiting with bated breath for your copy. The office desks are piled high with unsolicited submissions. Hundreds of them. Assistants will get around to looking through them all eventually – if they uncover a gem, it'll be passed on to the editor.

Be patient. If you've been given an assignment and the article is word perfect, you'll be contacted. You may not hear anything for a month or more, but don't worry.

Maybe your editor's slow responses are driving you crazy, but the worst thing you can do is let your frustration show. Come across as a prima donna and you'll never work for that magazine again.

In my experience, most editors are only too willing to help the careers of budding writers. How did I get a contract to write the Live Well in Ireland book for the U.S. publisher John Muir? Simply because my editor at International Living knew the commissioning editor there – my name was suggested. I didn't even have to send a proposal. John Muir approached me.

10. Don't Make Ridiculous Demands

Only celebrity writers can get away with demanding celebrity treatment. Obviously we all want the most money as possible for our work, but travel writing is as much about the lifestyle as the monetary rewards. If a magazine does eventually give you an expense account while you are traveling on their behalf, don't abuse it.