

How to Write a Cover Letter for a Literary Journal Submission

Why you shouldn't try to "stand out" in your cover letter



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As the publisher of [Fiction Attic Press](#), which publishes flash fiction and essays by new and established writers, I receive a few dozen submissions each month, more if I put out a call for submissions. Over the years, I've read thousands of cover letters. Some are good, some are bad, many are forgettable. It might surprise you to know that the most forgettable cover letters are often the best.

What Not to Do in Your Cover Letter

Cuteness

A cover letter is never a place to be cute, as in, “I live with my seven gerbils and love Swedish Fish!” That’s great if you’re submitting to a middle school or high school writing contest or venue, but for most literary magazines, leave the Swedish fish out of it, unless you know that the editor is a huge fan of Swedish Fish.

Explain, praise, or summarize the story

Your cover letter isn’t a place to sing your own praises — “This story is a riveting journey into the mind of a madman. It offers a unique perspective on mental illness and will be sure to wow your readers.”

Praise Oneself

Your cover letter definitely shouldn’t vaguely mention publications and awards without backing them up. I recently received a submission with a cover letter that began:

PUBLICATIONS & AWARDS: To date, 30+ short fiction publications in print and online and 12 writing awards. Details on request.

The first problem with this letter is that it isn’t a letter. There’s no

salutation. The second problem is that it comes off as arrogant. The writer assumes that this single submission is so important that the editor will take the time and effort to contact the writer requesting “details” of the writer’s publications and awards.

It would be far more impressive to name one or two good publications and one or two real awards. “12 writing awards” could mean that the writer won best essay in a college writing contest — which is irrelevant to an editor. The fact that the writer doesn’t specifically name the awards or publications makes me think they’re not worth mentioning.

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Your cover letter shouldn’t try to explain your story, it shouldn’t be arrogant, and it shouldn’t quote Amazon reviews of self-published books or include phrases like, “Jane Writer’s work deftly plumbs the intricacies of the human psyche.”

What your cover letter *should* do is indicate your professionalism so the editor can get past the cover letter and on to the story. It should be a gateway, not a barrier.

Whether you have zero publications to your name or an impressive bibliography, if your cover letter is professional, most editors will eagerly set the letter aside and begin reading the story. If the letter is unprofessional, on the other hand, editors will approach the story warily, expecting it to be as poorly executed as the letter.

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A Good Literary Magazine Submission Cover Letter

I wanted to share with you a cover letter in which the writer does almost everything right. This letter came in “over the transom” (publishing speak for unsolicited) through [Fiction Attic’s Submittable page](#).

Dear Fiction Attic Press,

Thank you for considering my work. I am an emerging writer with only a small scattering of published pieces. I appreciate all the time and attention my work receives. I look forward to hearing from you.

This is a simultaneous submission. I will withdraw the piece immediately if it is accepted elsewhere.

*I am a writer and graduate student in the MA English program at *** University. My work has been published in *** and ***, and is forthcoming in ***. I live in *** with my fiancée, Jane.*

Sincerely,

Joe Writer

Why the letter works:

- The tone is genuine and not boastful.
- The writer expresses appreciation for the work that goes into reading submissions (not necessary at all, but it's certainly a nice gesture).
- The writer uses a phrase that is a common courtesy of professional letters in any industry: *I look forward to hearing from you.*
- The writer acknowledges that it is a simultaneous submission. This is not only courteous; it also indicates that the writer has done his homework, understands the world of literary magazines, and knows that most stories are submitted to multiple publications before they are accepted.

- The bio is brief and lends credibility: He is working on an MA, which means he is a serious reader and writer. It's certainly not necessary to have an advanced degree in English, but if you have one or are pursuing one, you should include it in your letter.
- If you don't have a creative writing background, no worries. Briefly state what you do. *Writer Person is a truck driver living in Modesto.* Your profession is probably part of your identity. I am always interested in what a submitter does for a living, and if the writer is a truck driver/park ranger/astrophysicist/hot dog stand owner (pretty much anything other than just a writer), I'm instantly intrigued.
- In the bio, the writer names three publications in which his work has appeared and is forthcoming. Three to four is the maximum number of publications you should name, unless every publication you name is impressive (*Glimmer Train, The Paris Review, The New Yorker*, etc). I get a lot of letters in which writers name a dozen publications I've never heard of. It's great if you've published in very small journals (after all, Fiction Attic is very small!), but you don't need to name all of them. The proper way to list publications is this: *My work has appeared in ***, ***, ***, and other magazines and anthologies.* Or *My work has appeared in or is forthcoming from ***, ***, and ***, among others.*
- Three sentences is the perfect length for a bio. If you have won

literary awards, you can add a sentence after the list of publications stating, *My short story, ***, won the *** Emerging Writers Prize*. However, resist the temptation to include a long list of third-runner up prizes. I repeat: resist.

- Although it's certainly not necessary to name your fiancé, including a third sentence provides a nicely rounded biography. Saying where you live is a perfect way to construct that third sentence. In this case, I found it sweet that he named his fiancé.
- The one thing Joe Writer should have done differently is address the letter to a person instead of to Fiction Attic Press. In the case of Fiction Attic, I am listed on the About page as the editor, and there is also a list of readers. If you know one of the readers, address the letter to that person. Otherwise, address your letter by name to the person who is listed as the Fiction Editor, Poetry Editor, or Nonfiction Editor.

So, there you have it: the perfect cover letter for a literary magazine submission.

One more tip: although you don't want your letter to be overly familiar, if you share a genuine connection with the editor, mention it. For example: *On a personal note, I noticed that you attended The University of Alabama. I was a student there from 2002 to 2006. Roll Tide!*

And just one more: Another thing you might mention in your letter is a recent story or two from the publication that you admired, to show that you've done your research and understand what kind of work the journal publishes.

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Michelle Richmond is the New York Times bestselling author of five novels, including The Marriage Pact, which has been published in 30 languages. She mentors writers through Fiction Master Class and helps writers complete their first novels through the online novel writing master class.

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