

Queries What purpose

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

Regarding stupid, stupid query letters. Yes, I still remain resolutely opposed to them. I find them to be often my student's excuse for not getting on and researching, interviewing and writing. Frequently students write to me words like: "Simon, it's been five weeks and The New York Times [or whatever] hasn't replied to my query letter yet, so I don't want to put in all that effort until I know they want it." Balderdash! If a publication hasn't replied in five weeks, could they possibly be interested? I don't think so. This is called "kidding yourself". Let's face the truth here. No matter what your journalism journey advises, I've never heard of the editor of a mainstream publication responding to a query letter. The truth is their assistants who open the mail are instructed to throw them in the bin. In the olden days (45 years ago) people felt it important to respond to all mail. But no longer. I urge all my students to "get serious":

1. Decide on an idea
2. Research it
3. Interview people mainly by phone (and maybe in person)
4. Write, edit, re-write, polish
5. Re-read my FactSheet "How to sell your article" (available again by email only)
6. Contact editor by phone and TELL him/her it's coming
7. Snail-mail (or email, but never fax) the article with a short covering letter

In other words, spend your valuable time being a freelance journalist, doing the things a freelancer does to get published, build a reputation and make regular MONEY. Writing query letters is a waste of precious time and energy, and ends up being an excuse for not getting on and doing your real work: reading, creating ideas, researching, interviewing, writing, editing and re-editing.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.