

Hello, fellow writers!

Many writers wonder just what the coaching and editing work I provide is like. How detailed it is, and what sort of critique do I offer?

With that in mind, novelist Will Sander is allowing me to share one of his queries with you. Here, you can see how I “marked up” his work, including comments about grammar, punctuation, style, and format, as well as advice on how best to approach the job of getting his novel published.

The original document was in Word format, and therefore allowed the author to view all my comments (shown in the pink boxes along the right hand side of the document) in their complete form alongside his text. Since this document is a .PDF, you can view parts of my comments in those pink boxes, but will need to scroll to the end of the document to read them in their entirety.

I hope this gives you a good idea of the sort of help I provide. If you have any questions about my services, please don't hesitate to email me.

Kind regards,

Kristina

www.KristinaSeleshanko.com

3 January 2008

Dear Mrs. Seleshanko,

I am writing a fantasy novel set in historic times entitled *"The Book of John."* The intended market is tweens and the young-adult population.

Set in first century, on the edge of the Sea of Galil, three young friends find themselves participants in events that will change the world. When we first meet John, he is a twelve year-old boy from a lower class family in the city of K'far-Nachum. His life is one of hard work, and he longs to find something better. He has two friends, Philo, the son of the Cohen hagadol in K'far-Nachum, and Myriam, whose parents are drifters, following one would-be prophet after another.

John's whole life changes when his stepfather places him into apprenticeship to become a Scribe. Due to John's remarkable ability to memorize scripture, he soon finds himself part of the inner circle of priests that are dealing with a man named Yochanan the Immerser, who is causing trouble for them by baptizing townspeople in the local river. Our hero is there as the priests take on this crazed man. As the story continues, Philo's father, Kayafa, is named president of the Sanhedrin. Philo becomes a messenger between his father, the P'urdishim in Yerushalayim and the priests in K'far-Nachum that are training John. Into their world comes a new threat, a stranger from Natzeret named Yeshua. Myriam causes John even more trouble as she becomes convinced that this Yeshua is the mashiach prophesized in their scrolls.

The book will follow John as he accompanies the priests on many of the stories we are familiar with from the Gospels. The reader will see firsthand accounts of the baptisms at the Yarden River, we will visit the palace of Herod, the tetrarch of Y'udah, and we will witness the capture and beheading of Yochanan the Immerser. We will witness the healing of John's younger brother David from possession, and the healing of Myriam's mother from an issue of blood since Myriam's birth. And we will be there for the capture, trial, death and resurrection of Yeshua of Natzeret.

These stories will be told in a fresh way, from the perspectives of the Priests and non-believers. By choosing this approach, I feel that children who have already accepted Jesus may gain a new insight on why some of their friends may not easily accept Christ, while those who still have questions can relate to John's story, as he slowly evolves from someone committed to silencing Christ, to a true believer.

My goal for this book is to create a Christian alternative to the fantasy books now popular with teenagers. To accomplish this, I will use the character names, places and phrasings from a Jewish perspective. Thus John the Baptist becomes Yochanan the Immerser. When a particular Gospel scene is being created, the dialogue is actually quoted verbatim from the Complete Jewish Bible, copyright © 1998 by David H. Stern. Published by Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. The pacing of the book is such that this link to Scripture is not clear until several chapters in, so the non-believer will by then be comfortable enough in the narration to continue reading. I wanted to create a fantasy world for children, a world where they could see historic characters come to life. The characters in this book are written as contemporary people, using these events as a backdrop.

While this is my first attempt at becoming a published author, I have written a number of small stories and articles for various secular associations and church Bible studies. You are the first and only person with whom I have discussed this story. I have finished three quarters of the book, having left John after witnessing Yeshua's cleansing of the Temple. I am about to start chapter 21, and I have already completed approximately 63,000 words.

I am writing to you now because I have reached the point that I am excited about finishing the book, as I get into the part of the story I always wanted to tell, Yeshua's arrest, trial, death and resurrection. I anticipate a total of twenty-eight to thirty chapters, with an approximate word count of 85-100,000 words. I expect to have a complete first-draft by the end of March 2009.

Comment [ks1]: Be sure your query is on letterhead, with the name, title, and mailing address of the particular editor or agent you're contacting. (To see a sample of this format, visit this ... [1])

Comment [ks2]: For women, use "Ms.," since you'll almost never k... [2]

Comment [ks3]: Use a comma, not a semi-colon

Comment [ks4]: Your first sentence – and your first paragraph – should ... [3]

Comment [ks5]: You really don't need to include all the background... [4]

Comment [ks6]: This would be a good opening sentence. It gets us ... [5]

Comment [ks7]: "who" not "that"

Comment [ks8]: Stronger writing: "...dealing with Yochanan the Imm... [6]

Comment [ks9]: A query letter is not the place to synopsize your novel. ... [7]

Comment [ks10]: Comma after "Yerushalayim"

Comment [ks11]: "who" not "that"

Comment [ks12]: Stronger writing: "The book follows John..."

Comment [ks13]: Stronger writing: "...as he witnesses many of the far... [8]

Comment [ks14]: For stronger writing, put this in the present ter... [9]

Comment [ks15]: As written, this needs to be a new sentence.

Comment [ks16]: You need to add some commas: "...John's younge... [10]

Comment [ks17]: Can you find a better way to phrase this? Assur... [11]

Comment [ks18]: Insert a space between sentences.

Comment [ks19]: "Will be" is passive voice. You've used it several tim... [12]

Comment [ks20]: Passive voice again. But this whole sentence n... [13]

Comment [ks21]: I'd cut this entire paragraph. Your query is too lon... [14]

Comment [ks22]: Cut this paragraph. It's unnecessary. If you want to €... [15]

Comment [ks23]: A major taboo. Never state outright that you're ... [16]

Comment [ks24]: Cut "small." If you mean "short stories," then use t... [17]

Comment [ks25]: Generally editors and agents refer to them as ... [18]

Comment [ks26]: Almost all agents and editors realize it's not practi... [19]

Comment [ks27]: For a first time novelist, it's *much* better to have... [20]

Comment [ks28]: As per my last comment, you should cut this pa... [21]

I envision this as the first of a four book series. Subsequent titles will include *The Book of Peter*, with our hero and his friends following after the Apostle Peter, *The Book of Paul*, where John meets the apostle at his conversion and accompanies him during his church planting, and *The Book of Mark*, where we follow John as the writer of the Gospel of Mark.

Comment [ks29]: Good. Many publishing houses love series.

If this is something you would like to pursue further, I would be glad to submit a book proposal and sample chapters. If you would prefer to pass on this opportunity, thank you very much for taking the time to read this query.

Comment [ks30]: Passive voice and overly wordy. How about something like: "Would you like to see a book proposal and sample chapters?" Do not mention that someone might "pass on this opportunity." Again, why be negative? Instead, you might write: "Thank you for your consideration." Also, you'll need to tailor this part of the query to whatever house or agent you're submitting to. Some may want the complete manuscript.

In His Love,

Will Sander

Independence, MO

wsander1@gmail.com

816-719-6643

Comment [ks31]: Leave room for your signature above your printed name. Do not list your contact information here. It should appear on your letterhead.

KRISTINA'S FINAL NOTES:

I like the idea behind your novel. It sounds like something that will appeal to your targeted audience and may be quite marketable. However, you do need to strengthen your query letter.

First, make sure your letter is only one page (with at least 1 inch margins). This is true even if you email the query. As I've mentioned in my above comments, there's lots you can cut here. Your biggest mistake is feeling you must give a synopsis of your novel. That's not the job of a query letter. So cut, cut, cut until you have just enough information to intrigue your reader and whet his or her appetite for more. (Don't make the mistake of including too little information, either. Your query should give a basic idea what the book is about and what the major conflict is.)

Your query is best formatted this way:

- The "hook," which should be two (or possibly three) paragraphs long, and similar in style to the back copy of a novel.
- This is followed by a paragraph telling the novel's title, length, type, and the market it's targeted toward.
- Next, tell us about you, always emphasizing the positive.
- Finally, ask for what you want. For example, if you're writing to agents, tell them you're seeking representation, and ask if you can mail them your proposal and sample chapters.

Also, watch the passive voice, which appears repeatedly in your query. For more information on this, check out these websites:

"Passive Voice" at About.com: <http://esl.about.com/library/grammar/blpassive.htm>

"Active and Passive Tenses" at English-Zone.com: <http://www.english-zone.com/verbs/pssvchrt.html>

"The Passive Voice" at The Guide to Grammar and Spelling: <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>

Keep up the good work! And if you have any questions about this critique, please don't hesitate to email me.

Kristina

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Page 2: [1] Comment [ks1]	kristina	1/18/2009 11:27:00 AM
Be sure your query is on letterhead, with the name, title, and mailing address of the particular editor or agent you're contacting. (To see a sample of this format, visit this website: http://anotherrealm.com/prededitors/pubquery.htm) Use standard U.S. format for the date: "January 3, 2008"		
Page 2: [2] Comment [ks2]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:43:00 AM
For women, use "Ms.," since you'll almost never know their marital status.		
Page 2: [3] Comment [ks4]	kristina	1/18/2009 11:28:00 AM
Your first sentence – and your first paragraph – should "hook" the editor or agent. The information you've provided here (type of novel, novel title, and intended market) is good, but you should include it only after you've "hooked" the reader. The first paragraph should be like the copy on the back of a novel. It should introduce us to the storyline right away, and make us want to read more. The website I mentioned above gives an example of this.		
Page 2: [4] Comment [ks5]	kristina	1/18/2009 11:29:00 AM
You really don't need to include all the background information. Instead, take us to the meat of the story in a compelling way. Study the copy on the backs of novels for ideas.		
Page 2: [5] Comment [ks6]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:47:00 AM
This would be a good opening sentence. It gets us into the conflict of the novel right away.		
Page 2: [6] Comment [ks8]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:50:00 AM
Stronger writing: "...dealing with Yochanan the Immerser, who ..." How is he causing trouble for them by baptizing? Either leave out the "causing trouble" part, or rewrite to briefly explain.		
Page 2: [7] Comment [ks9]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:51:00 AM
A query letter is not the place to synopsise your novel. For a query, you need only give the basic gist of the story...again, very much like the back copy on a novel.		
Page 2: [8] Comment [ks13]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:53:00 AM
Stronger writing: "...as he witnesses many of the familiar stories from the Gospels..." Always cut unnecessary words and find the most economical way of stating things.		
Page 2: [9] Comment [ks14]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:54:00 AM
For stronger writing, put this in the present tense: "Readers see firsthand the baptism at the Yarden..."		
Page 2: [10] Comment [ks16]	kristina	1/18/2009 10:59:00 AM

You need to add some commas: "...John's younger brother, David, from possession..."

Page 2: [11] Comment [ks17] kristina 1/18/2009 11:30:00 AM

Can you find a better way to phrase this? Assume the reader isn't familiar with the biblical story. They won't know what an "issue of blood" is. Be more specific.

Page 2: [12] Comment [ks19] kristina 1/18/2009 11:31:00 AM

"Will be" is passive voice. You've used it several times in this letter. See my notes about passive voice at the end of your letter.

Page 2: [13] Comment [ks20] kristina 1/18/2009 11:31:00 AM

Passive voice again. But this whole sentence needs to be cut. Never tell an editor or agent how great your writing is. They'll judge for themselves when they read your query and your sample chapters or full manuscript. In this case, readers already know what perspective the story is told from, so there's no need to repeat yourself.

Page 2: [14] Comment [ks21] kristina 1/18/2009 11:31:00 AM

I'd cut this entire paragraph. Your query is too long, anyway (more on that later), and editors will judge for themselves whether this approach is a good or not.

Page 2: [15] Comment [ks22] kristina 1/18/2009 11:07:00 AM

Cut this paragraph. It's unnecessary. If you want to explain why you wrote the book, do it in a single sentence. Editors and agents don't need to know up front why you wrote something. They just want to know what that something is, and whether it's any good for their publishing house.

Page 2: [16] Comment [ks23] kristina 1/18/2009 11:32:00 AM

A major taboo. Never state outright that you're not published. This is a sales letter and shouldn't highlight your weaknesses.

Page 2: [17] Comment [ks24] kristina 1/18/2009 11:32:00 AM

Cut "small." If you mean "short stories," then use that phrase. Otherwise, write: "I've written a number of articles..." If the number might be impressive, tell us how many articles. And for which magazines?

Page 2: [18] Comment [ks25] kristina 1/18/2009 11:09:00 AM

Generally editors and agents refer to them as "mainstream," not secular.

Page 2: [19] Comment [ks26] kristina 1/18/2009 11:13:00 AM

Almost all agents and editors realize it's not practical for writers to submit to one person at a time. It often takes many months to get a final answer from an agent or editor (and sometimes you'll *never* hear

back from them), so I highly recommend you submit to more than one agent or editor at a time. In that case, it's best to write something like: "I'm submitting this material to a small list of select agents..." Or something similar.

Page 2: [20] Comment [ks27]

kristina

1/18/2009 11:11:00 AM

For a first time novelist, it's *much* better to have a complete, edited and polished manuscript in hand. *Very few* first time novelists find success with a partial manuscript. You'll greatly increase your chances of success if you finish your manuscript before you begin the querying process.

Page 2: [21] Comment [ks28]

kristina

1/18/2009 11:33:00 AM

As per my last comment, you should cut this paragraph. It's great that you've included the word count, however. Just make sure that it's appropriate for the type of novel and the type of publishing houses you'll submit to. A common reason for rejection of novels is a manuscript that is either too long or too short.