

Writing a Winning Book Proposal

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Overview: The book proposal is both a sales document and a plan. As a sales document, it needs to convince an editor that your idea and approach will appeal to the publishing imprint's readership. As a plan, it needs to look well-thought-out both intellectually and practically, such that the editor can envision what you're going to deliver, and when. The following points will help you think through a proposal.

I. Understand how to appeal to an editor.

- A. Your promise and why an editor wants to believe it.
- B. How to sustain the promise of first contact:
 - 1. Have the proposal ready!
 - 2. Anticipate the editor's needs by using the proposal writing process to learn
 - a. about *writing for a particular audience* in your subject
 - b. about *reaching that audience* with your project--thinking as a seller, not just writer, of books.
 - c. about the difference between trade presses, academic presses, agents and editors.
 - 3. Craft the proposal to excite the editor with your take on your subject, and reassure the editor as to your sales.

II. Deciding whether it's a book, and what kind

- A. Doing Preliminary Research on your own motivations
 - 1. Are you wedded enough to the topic to spend three to five years researching, writing, and promoting it?
 - 2. Are you qualified (or heavily invested in becoming qualified) to write it?
 - 3. How will the writing of this book interact with your long-term career and life goals?
 - 4. Are you committed to learning to write for a particular audience?
- B. Research in the bookstore and books in print
 - 1. Will your book fill a void? Make a contribution? Offer something better?
 - 2. Is there a market for it/where might it be shelved? Reviewed?
 - 3. Is it timely, and will it still be in 2-3 years?
 - 4. Should it be self-published instead?
- C. Research in your social and professional networks
 - 1. Do (the relevant) people respond with enthusiasm to your idea?
 - 2. Are there connections to writers, agents, editors, or publishers (of relevant material) among people you know?
 - 3. Who are the publishers, agents, and editors of recent books in your field?
- D. Research your ability to write your idea
 - 1. Write and publish shorter pieces.
 - 2. Attend writing courses and conferences and familiarize yourself with both style and professional considerations
 - 3. Follow reviews and sales information about books, and interviews with authors.

III. Components of a Proposal

- A. (optional) An opening hook that creates (the right kind of) suspense: Anecdote, impressive statistic, famous quote, startling fact, immersion in significant moment, arresting question, compelling metaphor or analogy.
- B. What is the book about, and who are you? The nutshell, 1-3 sentence *concept statement*.
 - 1. Not just subject, but this book's ***new and significant (or especially useful) take*** on subject.
 - 2. Why it matters--what are its underlying questions/problems, and why an ***audience will care***.
 - 3. Who you are to be writing it. (Your single most compelling connection to the subject.)
- C. "About the Book"--a fuller (1-2 page) statement about the book, emphasizing what's exciting about the book:
 - 1. the problems/questions it solves
 - 2. the greatest benefits it provides readers
 - 3. the newness and uniqueness of its approach
 - 4. why *now* is such a good time for it
 - 5. the specific power of its stories and information and examples
 - 6. Production Details (if this is longer than a sentence or two, make it a separate section toward end of proposal)

- a. Anticipated length
 - b. Delivery date (usual range: from 3-15 months from receipt of advance)
 - c. Special formatting considerations: sidebars, photographs, illustrations
- D. "About the Author"--a fuller (half page or more) statement about you, emphasizing why you're the one to write the book:
 - 1. Professional experience, credentials, evidence of commitment or presence in a field.
 - 2. Prior publications and other evidence of writing/communications competence.
 - 3. Public platforms from which you've spoken, or can speak, on subject.
- E. "About the Market"--a lengthy discussion of the conditions that will make your book a success.
 - 1. Evidence of an Audience for book
 - a. demographics, quantifications of memberships in relevant associations, societal trends
 - b. prior publications (your own and others') and media attention to subject (with sales figures if possible)
 - 2. A discussion of other books on subject (6-10 examples) showing how your book complements or supersedes them
 - 3. Evidence of your being able to effectively promote the book
 - a. Your ability to get blurbs from well-known figures (in field)
 - b. Your connectedness to organizations professionally (or recreationally) interested in the book's subject
 - c. Your ongoing presenting and teaching in the field
 - d. Experience, connections for commenting in the mass media
- F. Table of Contents, and *brief* chapter summaries in active, exciting language.
- G. Sample Chapter(s)
 - 1. Length: average 1-3 chapters, 30-60 pages.
 - 2. Choose material that is not merely introductory, and showcases your original thinking and strongest writing.
 - 3. Do not have to be real, final-form chapters; can be constructed of most compelling materials

IV. Respecting your own purposes, processes, and limits.

VI. Resources

- A. Recommended books on Writing Proposals:
 - Thinking Like Your Editor*, Susan Rabiner & Alfred Fortunato (Norton).
 - Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*, Elizabeth Lyon (Perigee).
- B. Research resources:
 - 1. Subject area specialists, reference librarians
 - 2. On publishing trends:
 - a. Publisher's Weekly, www.publishersweekly.com
 - b. Publisher's Marketplace: <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com>
 - c. Bookwire (books in print), www.bookwire.com
 - d. Workshops and articles on writing for the media: www.mediabistro.com
 - e. *Books in Print*, *Books Out of Print*, *Forthcoming Books*—publ. by R.R. Bowker.
 - 3. On promotion:
 - a. John Kremer, *1001 Ways to Market Your Books*
 - b. Marilyn and Tom Ross, *Jump Start Your Book Sales*
 - 4. Finding an agent and/or editor:
 - a. Writer's Market, www.writersmarket.com
 - b. Literary Marketplace, www.literarymarketplace.com
 - c. Book Wire, www.bookwire.com
 - d. Publisher's Marketplace, www.publishersmarketplace.com
 - 5. Improving Your Writing
 - a. HKS classes, Harvard Extension, Grub Street (www.grubstreet.org), MediaBistro
 - b. Joseph Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*
 - c. (for popular writing) Arthur Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite*, Cheney *Getting the Words Right*