

Writing A Book Proposal (From *Telling the Story* – HarperCollins, Fall 2003)

The proposal is a description of, and sample of a proposed book. It's primarily a sales and marketing tool – for you, and for your book. It needs to be focused, accompanied by supporting materials, and above all dynamic. You need to impress the editor and the sales and marketing staff, make them feel they must have your book at all costs – but do it without being too cute, or arrogantly obnoxious, or obviously trying to make a silk purse (the proposal) out of a sow's ear (the subject of the proposal.)

You should start with these four thoughts in mind:

- What's the book about?
- What's so important and special about this book? Why should a publisher want to publish it? (Aren't there enough books out there already without adding another to the pile?)
- Why are you the best person to write this book?
- Who's the core audience for the book, and why will they care about it?

Jim Srodes said, “The book proposal is a separate item from the book. You can't be too enthusiastic in a book proposal, you can't gush enough to an agent or a prospective editor because if you don't show your enthusiasm why should they. I [once] lost a sale because an agent was diffident with what I thought was a great proposal. It doesn't really matter, (all you agents close your ears now and all you editors also) if it looks anything like the final book. Sell the book, then write the book.”

Proposals not Manuscripts

Almost all nonfiction books are sold on proposal. It's unusual for a nonfiction book to be written on spec and then sold, and for that reason crafting a proposal requires a skill that is

separate from, but not independent of your ability to write the book. You may think that the work you've begun on your book should be enough to sell it – but publishing, as you've probably gleaned by now, is a cooperative venture between author and publisher, and your job as author is to provide an editor with the ammunition he needs, at least initially, to get this book into the marketplace and sell the hell out of it.

The upside is that the more you become involved in this process, the more control you can exert on how well – or how poorly – you'll eventually be published. A word of warning: the more you rely on your belief that your skill as a writer alone should be enough to get you that book contract, the more you put yourself in the position of being just another pretty face in a line up of many other pretty faces. If you refuse to take the time to practice your audition pieces and do the equivalent of step forward from the line to sing, dance, act and otherwise demonstrate what you have to offer, you are unlikely to successfully grasp the brass ring – be it a role in a play or movie, or a book contract.

This may sound harsh, because many authors tend to struggle with the concept and principles of writing a book proposal. It seems unnatural, false, a con job in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. No proposal is, or should be cast in stone, but you would not consider building a house without blueprints, or prepare a particular dish without a recipe that you can refer to from time to time in order to keep yourself focused and on track. So a book proposal, in part, is the blueprint of the book.

There's a common argument I hear from authors who are unhappy about beefing up a usually meager proposal for their book. "How can I commit to paper something I won't know about until I've done the research? It'll obviously change as I start writing it, so won't I be misleading the editor? Cheating her in some way?"

Editors hear this all the time, and it's not something they worry about unduly. Most editors expect a book to change as you write it. Books are, after all, organic creatures. Editors form and maintain a confidence in a writer based on the strength of his or her proposal regardless of difficulties the author may have during the writing process. An editor anticipates problems. It's part of their job, as it is part of the agent's to help fix these problems. However, a book will improve from the original proposed idea, not deviate completely. If you get into trouble you always have your blueprint to fall back on. In a worst case scenario, you and your agent and the editor can discuss writing another book, and abandoning the one they bought on proposal. But it will be a joint decision, based on discussion of a better, more commercial idea and the difficulties you're having with this book, not a unilateral decision on your part; and the new book will still need to have an outline and description for you to work from.

What's more, the better the proposal, the more likely you are to get a higher royalty advance. The reason is obvious: the more something is an unknown quantity, and therefore more of a gamble on a publisher's behalf, the smaller the amount of money they are going to risk on the project, if they decide to risk any money at all.

Publishers long for authors who write well, and who have strong concepts that the author knows what to do with. They will pay much more for that author, than for one who may have more innate talent, but who is less confident about what he selling and his ability to produce it. That is not to suggest you need to fake it – it is to suggest that you get enough of a grasp on your material that you become so confident of your mastery of it and its appeal, editors immediately pick up on that fact. When an editor picks up a proposal and is immediately drawn in, you can bet your bottom dollar he realizes that other editors seeing that same proposal will no doubt feel the same way.

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Brendan Cahill, then a senior editor at Grove Atlantic Press, was asked how it was possible for a writer to create an effective proposal that would lead to a book contract. “. . . there are essential things that need to be in any proposal,” he said. “Generally it's got to be about a topic that's broad enough for a general readership. The writer needs to be, if not expert, then well informed about the given topic and to have done the initial thought work, legwork, that it takes to be able to render that experience in a thoughtful and intelligent way. And also to have the narrative techniques, skills, and be able to express the story in a way that will appeal to readers. There are books out there on how to write a book proposal that hone in on the specifics, but generally, once you have some sort of journalistic bylines under your belt, use the people who you know: agents, friends, friends of friends; and try to get your proposal into the hands of the right people who will be interested in it. Look at the books of the writers you admire, see who publishes them, find out who their editors and agents are. Find them and try to pitch them.”

The basic philosophy behind writing a book proposal is to describe to the editor the book you want to write, and provide the editor with sufficient facts and figures that will give her enough ammunition at an editorial board meeting to convince colleagues in both editorial, and sales and marketing, that this proposed book is not only a quality piece of work, it will make money for the publishing company.

What I'm going to do is outline some basic principles you should apply to writing a book proposal. Obviously, each proposal should convey the uniqueness of the particular book it's representing so there is no formula that can or should be applied.

One of the things writing the proposal can do is help a writer focus and organize a book idea. It should have the form of a story or narrative, and be between 20-40 pages, no longer, depending on the sample material included.

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A commonly accepted structure for a nonfiction book proposal broadly follows this outline:

Page 1. Title Page. Name of book, name and contact info for the author

Page 2: A one paragraph, in-a-nutshell description of the project or idea. That is, the project in a hook format.

Page 3: A one to two page overview of the project in a dynamic narrative style.

Page 5: A marketing analysis of perhaps half a page, explaining who the audience is for the book, and why the book will appeal to them.

Page 6: A brief description of competing books, with emphasis on recent commercially successful books in the field (if there are any), and why your book fills a need not currently filled in this field.

Page 7: A half page biography of the writer(s), emphasizing writing experience, any expertise on the proposed subject and why he/she/they are the best people to write that book.

Page 8: A Table of Contents (TOC) that is quite literally a list of chapters and their subheadings. (In other words, an at-a-glance description of the book.)

Page 9: A half page-one page narrative description of each chapter listed in the TOC.

Page 18 (approx): A sample chapter or two from the book.

Accompanying material such as reviews of previous books, supporting documentation for the book, copies of photos that might be used in the book etc.

Make sure that every page of the proposal is bylined and tagged in some fashion and easily recognizable with continuous numbering (except for the first page). If an editorial assistant drops the pages by accident he or she should be easily able to reconstruct the proposal. Keep pictures and graphics to a minimum and don't include them if the quality is poor.

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This structure can be divided into two broad categories: Features and Benefits. Simply put, Features are concerned with what an object is; Benefits are concerned with why you need it. Many writers put together proposals filled with features, but they forget to include any of the benefits. To be effective, a proposal should be balanced with both.

The Features part of a Proposal. (The “What” of your Proposal).

The Cover Letter. This should be brief, warm, and probably contain the Hook, ideally a one or two sentence summation of your story and why it’s so compelling. It should include your address and phone numbers, relevant information such as that you’re a prize winning writer, a member of this or that group, an expert in the topic you propose, that you were referred by or mentored by someone significant, whatever. Mention the book’s title and what kind of book it is, then let the proposal do the rest of the work.

Always include a stamped self addressed envelop (SASE).

The Title Page. Center your title and the subtitle of the book proposal. Under that add your name, and an address, email, and telephone number, voice and fax if you have that. Make yourself easy to reach. Does your answering machine work? Is there a professional message on the machine when an editor or agent does get through? All these things count.

The Table of Contents. A TOC provides an at-a-glance guide to the book’s content and organization, and perhaps a glimpse of the wit or seriousness you intend to bring to the project through your subtitling of each listed chapter. (E.g., Chapter 1: I am miserable and broke; Chapter 2: I meet Elvis, the man who will change my life; Chapter 3: I attend astronaut school, Chapter 4: Elvis is accused of murdering my sister etc.) At least 75 percent of a book proposal’s success lies in its organization. You may have a great idea, but if you present it poorly it shows not only a poor writing ability, but also poor thought processes. In nonfiction, beyond the

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originality of the idea in question, what you're offering is a logical exploration and understanding of the importance of your subject. Agents and editors look for books that are logical, well written, and organized. It's a good idea to work on the TOC early on. As you develop the proposal you'll find you'll continually revise it, but it will provide an excellent overall map to the project while you're working, as well as a guide to its final form when completed.

Chapter by Chapter Descriptions. Once you've nailed down the overall structure of your book in the TOC, you should write at least a couple of paragraphs, if not more, expanding on what you plan to cover in each chapter. The key here, as throughout the proposal, is your ability to write succinctly, yet dynamically about your subject.

Sample Chapters. This is pretty self explanatory. A nonfiction book needs a mixture of narrative, emotion, and logic to work well. It doesn't matter what chapters you include, but you should aim at about a sample of 15-20 pages. No more than two chapters need to be included. If you use partial chapters make sure everyone knows this is not the complete version of the chapter.

Author Biography. Who you are is important in selling the project. Why are you the best person to write this book? It's less true in narrative nonfiction, but it's worth bearing in mind that it's better to be an expert on something, or work in collaboration with one, than not because you will be competing with others who are experts even if their books aren't very good. Establishing your credibility may mean getting articles published in magazines on the subject you propose before you start querying editors and agents with your book idea. Try and write this bio in the third person, rather than first person, unless you have a life experience that makes your view particularly valid.

The Benefits Sections of the Proposal. (The "Why" of your Proposal.)

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The Hook Overview. The Hook should be a one or two sentence in-a-nutshell description of the book that nails it. (In fiction, this can often be determined by thinking “What if . . . “ or “Suppose . . .”) It helps the editor sell the book to colleagues in 30 seconds or less. Down the line it may end up helping the sales rep sell your book to a bookstore buyer. In general, make sure that as in your overview your passion and interest for your subject comes through. An effective second person voice can work here: E.g., “Have you ever thought about how you would survive if you were attacked by modern day pirates and set adrift at sea? Joe Bloggs didn’t, until it was almost too late. And it cost him his family, and a leg.”

The Larger Overview. This overview is an expansion of the first. If, after hearing the Hook, colleagues say, “That sounds interesting, tell us more,” you can now provide the editor with broad facts and figures (if applicable) and a general overview of the project. This overview is a much stronger sales tool than your manuscript because it allows you to state not only what the book is about (Features), but also why it’s important (Benefits).

Here are some general things to think about in an overview:

- What’s the book about?
- Why is there a need for this book? What’s the hole in a genre or topic that this book can fill?
- Who’s going to read it?
- How will your readers be entertained by this book? State your case as dramatically as you can without being overly sensational. Startle us from the outset and make us consider your topic with fresh eyes.
- How is your book different from others in the field?
- Why are you the best person to write this book?

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- How long will the manuscript be, and how long will it take you to write it?

Don't answer these questions with hype or rhetoric. Nobody's interested in your opinion on how great this book idea is, what you have to do is convince us with solid content summed up in a paragraph of two.

Close your overview with something that sums up the benefits or merits of the book, reminding the reader of the book's importance.

Try and do all this in no more than 4 double spaced pages, and ideally two.

Marketing Analysis. In this section you need to explain who the audience is for your book. That's is, who's going to go into a store and plunk down \$7 for a paperback (or \$14 for a trade paperback, or \$25 for a hardcover) version of your book. What evidence can you offer that your assessment is accurate? Use facts and figures you have researched here. How many people belong to organizations or subscribe to magazines that deal with this topic? What other books out there have proven there is a successful and eager audience for your proposed book? Why will these people still be interested in reading about your topic in two years time, or five years time (what publishers call a book's backlist life). Give us statistics about groups who may be interested in buying copies of the book. It won't help to be sloppy or too general in your assessment. If you have experience or knowledge in selling, marketing or promoting mention that here. Do you have a seminar that you take around from place to place, or do you lecture to groups of people regularly? What can you do to translate your experiences into book sales? Are you a member of organizations who will help publicize your book, and ideally, buy lots of copies? Could you help sell bulk quantities of your book to organizations that might want to give them away as gifts to members? Do you have a connection to well known people who

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might endorse your book and help increase book sales that way? A strong marketing plan accompanying a book proposal will go a long way in helping to sell it.

Competing Books. What I mean is a list of a half dozen or so of the most successful and most recent books published in the field or on the topic you propose to write about. Nothing breeds success like success, particularly if you have a new take on a successful idea. When listing the books give title, author, year of publication, publisher, a one or two sentence description and a line pointing out the difference between your book and the published book. Every competing book gives you an opportunity to make a new point about your book idea, so take advantage of the opportunity. Use the library, and the Internet for your research. Browse the bookstores in your area; befriend bookstore owners; chat with book people in general. If there's nothing in the field to compare with your book, make certain you convince editors and agents that there really is a market for the book, and you're just the first person to have spotted a "hole" and decided to fill it.

Some Closing Thoughts

Here are some closing thoughts on writing a book proposal:

It's worth remembering that on average it can take perhaps two years from a nonfiction book contract being signed to the book appearing on the shelves, so your book idea must be appealing enough that in two or three years time, people will still be excited about it.

Your proposal should be tightly written, with style and verve. It should offer just enough information in an accessible and hopefully entertaining manner to convince an editor you know your subject and can write well about it. It should also be well organized in a logical progression of ideas and facts, and ideally reflect the tone and style of the final book.

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Research the competing books section as soon as possible because what you discover may save you a lot of work, disappointment, and aggravation if there's no viable market for the book for one reason or another. (E.g., Someone with better credentials has just published a book exactly like the one you propose.)

Another book recently published on your subject may not necessarily be a fatal blow to your book idea, because you may find once you've read the published book that the author treats the subject differently from the way you intend to treat it. It is very useful, however, to apprise editors and agents of the fact that you know this other book is in the marketplace and why it won't be a problem for your book idea. If an editor, in ignorance of this other book because you failed to mention it in your proposal, puts forward your idea in an editorial meeting and someone around the table says, "But so-and-so just published a book exactly like this," that editor will have been made to look foolish and ill-prepared. Your chances of getting published just plummeted.

Propose one idea at a time. Don't inundate an editor or agent with a shopping list of ideas at one time, on the basis of, "If you don't like this, then try that." It's unprofessional, and shows a lack of commitment and passion to the project.

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