

Pen the Perfect Nonfiction Book Proposal
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How to Write a Compelling Book Proposal
Strategies and Tips for the Novice, Expert, and Anyone In Between

Leslie's note: people often become stuck over the structure of a nonfiction book proposal. Over the years a particular format—with some variation—has become the standard. Below is an outline—the essential components—plus several tips for creating a solid and marketable proposal, one of which you will be proud and one that will, hopefully, propel you toward success. The information is culled from general research as well as from my own personal experiences with publishing. As always, good luck!

Title Page

- Make it compelling—grab the reader's attention.
- Don't set it in stone.
- Test market several titles.
- Scan the competition.
- Stay on target.

Table of Contents (of the proposal)

- Create an easy reference tool.

Overview

- What your book is about—the concept.
- Why the book should be written.
- How you will research/write the book.
- Why you should write this book.
- Create a powerful lead paragraph with an anecdote and/or significant statistic.
- Consider this your book's "calling card."
- This could clinch or diminish the sale of your proposal.

Why I Am Writing This Book

- Demonstrates immediately why you're the one to write this book; connects you with the concept.
- Can be one to two pages.
- Gives you the chance to universalize your concept; connect with the reader.
- Opportunity to tell a story.

About Me

- Describes why you're qualified to write the book.
- Include any experience related to the book.
- List prior publishing credits.
- Include your professional / personal life when relevant.
- Briefly include your career experience even if it's not directly related to your topic.
- List your professional credentials and any affiliations you have that support your topic.
- Be light if it works.
- Highlight, but don't boast; strut your stuff, but be subtle and professional.
- Lightly reference your ability to sell this book once it's published.

Table of Contents (of the book)

- Shows that you have thought out the structure of the book.
- Will help you to write the book once your proposal has sold.
- Not set in stone; can make changes in the book writing phase (work w/ editor).
- Look at other T of C's from similar books for reference purposes.
- Use logic as your barometer.
- Don't be too clever; clever breeds cliches; cliches are a turn-off.

Chapter Summaries

- Let's an agent/ editor know that you've thought this book through.
- These will help guide you as you write the book text.
- Should be brief and sometimes illustrative.
- The summaries are not set in stone, but write them as if they are.
- Try to include at least one salient fact in each summary.

Sample Chapter

- This will demonstrate to the acquisition editor that you have what it takes to write and FINISH this book.
- Gives the agent/editor a sense of your writing style.
- This is like a teaser and will, hopefully, further attract the editor to your work.
- This will help an editor sell your book to a committee.
- As a first-time author, consider including two sample chapters to double the effects of all of the above.
- Write this chapter as if it's going to be included in the final draft . . . because it probably will.

The Format

- An important, but by far, the easiest part of a book proposal.
- Do this when you can't focus but want to work anyway.

- Includes number of words, tone of writing (text), number of and structure of chapters, a bit about what readers can expect in general.
- Share your vision for the physical appearance of the finished product.
- If you see illustrations, say so.
- Include the method you will use to send the manuscript; i.e., disks, email, hard copy.

Who Will Buy Your Book?

- As much as you believe in your book, not everyone will want to buy your book.
- This section helps to justify the need for your book.
- Here, you demonstrate your intimate understanding and knowledge of the target market.
- This section will be your sales pitch, so make this section as efficient as possible. Use bullets, for example, to make a point without burdening the reader with too much text.
- Use statistics whenever possible; reference associations, U.S. Census Bureau, various studies, etc. Hard to argue with statistics. Gives you credibility, too. Shows you're doing your homework. This is not the agent's/editor's job. Referencing statistics and other facts will demonstrate your expertise in the subject. This will also help educate the agent/editor, notorious quick studies. You want to become known as the expert.
- Don't include your friends and family as potential readers.
- Don't claim facts you can't stand behind.
- Never lie; the big fib ghost will come back to haunt you; someone will see through the deception; it'll destroy your credibility.

Competition

- 1) Opening paragraph or two summarizing your research.
- 2) Include title, author, publisher, cloth/paperback/# pp., \$price.
- 3) ***Write It Down, Make It Happen: Know What You Want — and Getting It by Harriet Anne Klauser (Scribner, 2000, cloth, 288 pp., \$20.00)***
- 4) Acknowledging books that are similar (competitive titles) to yours—about 13-15 titles (in print, recent and/or popular)—and how your book is different (better).
- 5) Be selective; don't include everything in print.
- 6) Knowing the competition will enhance your proposal AND help you write your book.
- 7) Editor will appreciate a succinct and relevant list.
- 8) Imitation may be the highest form of flattery, but it won't get you very far in your proposal.
- 9) You need something unique—approach, style, hook.
- 10) Be professional and straightforward.
- 11) Deal with specialized markets creatively; instead of indicating no competition (red flag) explain how and where your book will fit in the marketplace.
 - Use Amazon.com, Books in Print, local bookseller (wealth of info).

Marketing and Promotion

- 12) Articulate your wish list.

- 13)** Indicate what you're enthusiastically willing to contribute.
- 14)** May or may not help sell your proposal.
- 15)** Consider an elaborate plan with backup.
- 16)** List your assets as they relate to the book's potential to sell.
- 17)** Include advance praise from VIPs if you have them.
- 18)** Go beyond the routine—maybe a contest, align yourself with a company/product/school/cause.
- 19)** Demonstrate determination.
- 20)** Include prior publicity successes.