

Mastering the Book Proposal

A surprising number of authors find it a great deal easier to write their books than to craft the book proposal that is generally required to sell them. Most of us are poor salespeople. But we are strong writers, and that's what is needed make an agent or publisher hunger for your masterpiece. Those of you who whose pre-retirement careers involved selling have the advantage of tailoring your sales skills to the writing world.

The proposal is the show piece that allows you to move up to the next rung on the publishing ladder.

There are many sources to guide you as you develop your document. Look for Michael Larsen's *How to Write a Book Proposal*, Peter Rubie's *Writer's Market FAQ's* or many of the other guides that you can locate on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

As Michael Larsen points out in the opening of his book, publishers are hungry for new books and new ideas. "The challenge," he points out, "is to get the proposal to the right editor at the right publisher at the right time." I would add that it must be the "right" proposal. One that both describes and entices the agent who reads it

When To Propose

If your book is a novel, a proposal is not required. However key parts of it can be a very helpful selling tools explaining the market for the book and the way you intend to reach those readers. Complete proposals are a must when your book is nonfiction. The reason for this difference should be obvious.

The key to a novel's success is its style, pace and characterization. These cannot be relayed in a proposal. Conversely, the principal element in most nonfiction books is content, and that can readily be demonstrated.

Your nonfiction proposal can be submitted well before you complete your book. You will need several sample chapters to send as part of the proposal, but need no more to convince an agent or a publisher. No fiction manuscript will be finally accepted until it has been read in its entirety, although an agent may ask for a synopsis of your novel prior to receiving the completed book.

Sell, Sell, Sell

In essence, the proposal is really a major expansion of your query letter. Now that the door has been opened, it is essential that you seize this opportunity to give the agent or publisher the confidence that your book will be a profitable investment. After all, they are investing a great deal of time and money when they agree to handle your work. They are business people, and base their judgments on the bottom line.

The key question is always whether or not a profit can be made. Therefore, flowery praises of family and friends have no place in the proposal. Nor do meaningless adjectives. Only hard facts will sell.

Your proposal must offer:

A solid analysis of the market for your book.

An evaluation of the competition your book faces.

The uniqueness of your book.

The effort you will undertake to promote the book.

These are the issues that matter, and must be described thoroughly.

Setting It Up

Like the query letter, the proposal must be crisp and neat. Check meticulously for errors in grammar and spelling and for typos. Hone your copy until it is letter perfect, for the competition you are up against is fierce. Again, Times Roman 12 point double spaced is the preferred font, and the margins should be ragged right. (Justified on the left, with uneven right margins. Ragged right can be set by using the icons in the top bar of your screen.) Pages should be consecutively numbered at the top with a slug (book title or other identifier) included on every page.

What To Include

Opinions vary somewhat among the experts on the sequence of the different segments of the proposal, but all generally agree on the overall content and that the document must be looked upon as a selling tool. The average book proposal runs between 35 and 50 pages. It should be sent with a very brief cover letter that serves only as an introduction to remind the agent who you are.

Title Page: Place your contact information in the top left hand corner. The book's title and author's byline should appear about half way down the page. Use 28 point bold face caps for the title, 16 point for any subtitle and 8 or 10 point for your byline.

Table of Contents There should be a TOC to help direct the reader through a proposal of this many pages.

Hook You should make every effort to develop a powerful hook (also called Tagline) for your book. This should be a short statement about the book preferably in one but never more than two sentences. It should be both punchy and revealing. Very often a publisher will adopt your hook as the promotion slogan to help sell the book.

Overview Here is one place the experts do disagree. Some believe it should be a narrative that discusses the need for the book, its uniqueness and why you are the ideal writer to tackle this task. Other feel the overview should be a detailed précis of the book, offering the reader a real understanding of its content. They argue the selling tools are sprinkled throughout the proposal, each in its appropriate section. Still others combine the two approaches using both a short synopsis and a discussion of the selling tools.

The Author Location of this segment may vary depending upon your credentials. If your track record as a writer is impressive or if your status as an expert in the subject matter has been established, you will want to place this segment directly after the overview. However, if you are inexperienced with modest credentials in the field you are writing about, I suggest moving the segment to a location after Marketing and Promotion.

Again, remember, the agent doesn't care much about your personal, private life. It is your education, professional experience and writing capability that matter here.

Marketing Potential Your challenge is to make the agent agree that a substantial population exists that is waiting, indeed eager, for a book like the one you are proposing. This is key, since both the agent and the publisher will equate potential profit with the size of the market. Leave no stone unturned when you develop this segment. Discuss any group that might have an interest in what you are writing. Perhaps you are well known in your home region or among hobbyists or professionals in your specialty. Think of possible bulk sales to organizations, business or social. Maybe you plan to mount a joint event with a charity or religious organization and donate a portion of the sales price to the group. Your high school and college classmates are another source, as are members of any society, club or other entity to which you belong. This is one of the most important

segments of your proposal. The decision the agent will ultimately make will depend in great part on the information you supply here.

Competition This is a double edged sword. A high number of books published on the general topic you are writing about can indicate the subject has been surfeited or it can substantiate the wide popularity of the subject. However, your book takes on great importance if you can convince the agent that your book and your approach are unique and bring a new level of understanding to the subject matter. Head to the library and check *Books in Print*, published by Bowker. This volume containing more than 5 million books can be found in the reference department, and will give you the list of all books on your subject currently in print. *Forthcoming Books*, another Bowker publication, lists books that are in production, but not yet released.

Promotion This too is a key component of the proposal. No book can succeed without strong promotion, and today that onus falls directly on the author. Only celebrities and highly recognized authors (people who don't really need the help) can rely on their publishers to conduct meaningful promotional campaigns. When selecting books to handle, the level of promotion you, the author, are willing to conduct and finance weighs heavily on a publisher's decision.

As you prepare this segment of the proposal, think carefully about both paid and unpaid possibilities for publicity because every promotional opportunity, large or small, costly or free, will add sales to your book and profits for the agent and publisher. On the "Promotion" page of this web site, you will find articles that will help you promote your book.

Endorsements While perhaps not classified as promotional activities by purists, endorsements and testimonials sell books. If you are unable to list any because you are writing the proposal before the book is finished, include any realistic possibility and the reason why you consider the endorsement from that specific person a strong likelihood. You may be lucky enough to convince an expert you have interviewed during your research to commit to a testimonial or endorsement. If you are writing about the industry or profession from which you retired, you may well be able to garner some comment from your former peers prior to completing the book. Whatever the case, explore every honest possibility, and include it in the proposal.

Chapter Descriptions Done properly, these will demonstrate to the reader the flow and continuity of your book. This should resemble a TOC with the chapter title followed by a very brief, but inclusive, description of the chapter's content.

Sample Chapters The samples you include will give the reader the chance to evaluate the style and quality of your writing, so choose the best and most informative chapters. Include two or three chapters, which do not necessarily have to be in sequence, although frankly, I feel they should to give the reader a better sense of the flow of your book.