

How to Write a Proposal That Excites Agents and Editors

Sell Your Book Before You Write It

You can sell your nonfiction book before you write it with a proposal that provides editors the information they need to buy your book. Your proposal is an expression of your literary and publishing goals for your book. It has to show that there's an audience for your book and how well you can research, structure, write, and promote it. Every word must help answer two questions: Why the book and why you?

Most proposals range from 30 to 60 pages and have four parts: **Sales and Marketing Information**, an **Outline**, **Sample Writing** and **Supplemental Material** (optional).

The first page of your proposal is the title page. It has the title, and subtitle if you have one, and your contact information, including social media.

Sales and Marketing Information

This section *must* prove that you have a salable book and that you are the right person to write and promote it.

- **Pizzazz:** After the title page, include a page that will grab editors' attention--a blurb from a well-known writer or authority OR a mission statement OR a photograph OR an intriguing fact OR, for narrative nonfiction, killer writing from the manuscript OR the title and up to fifteen words that captures the essence of why your book is fresh and salable OR a combination of a few of these elements.
- Your proposal's **Table of Contents:** The third page of the proposal is the table of contents for your proposal.
- **Overview:** One-to-three pages about why your book will appeal to book buyers who will want to buy it. Lead with your strongest suit, perhaps a quote. If you have 100,000 opt-in email addresses, that's your lead. If you're the world's foremost expert on your subject, that's your lead. If your subject itself is its own best argument, that's your lead. Mention two recent, successful books (not bestsellers) that are models for your book. If you self-published your book, provide impressive stats or quotes from reviews.
- **Specs.** List or describe important thematic, research and production elements:
 - * If you're writing in first person
 - * If the structure is unconventional
 - * How many color or black-and-white illustrations, if any, you will provide
 - * How many words, including back matter, if any, the book has or will have
 - * How many months after signing the contract you will deliver the manuscript (and illustrations).

Audience. Your proposal *must* convince editors that there is an audience for your book. Use numbers to identify, in descending order of size, groups of consumers who will buy your book. In descending order of impressiveness, list the proof that there's an engaged potential readership for your book: magazines they buy, websites they visit, events they attend.

Become an expert in your field by investigating websites, digital content, and online experts serving your audience. Find out what books and other sources experts and librarians send people to for information.

(Optional) A bulleted list of **Sales Tips** to help editors buy the book. A how-to proposal may include a list of your book's **Benefits**--the reasons consumers will buy it.

Comps: a list of up to ten competing and comparable books published within five years that will help editors position your book in the field. Include books that will be on the same bookstore shelf as yours or discussed with your book in articles on your subject. Include author, publisher, year of publication, format, price, ISBN. Explain briefly why each book's similarities prove there is a market for yours, but your book still fills a need.

- **Bio:** up to a page, in descending order of importance, about your credentials for writing your book: your academic, professional, and publishing experience and awards. Start with your most impressive credentials. Then add personal and professional information in descending order of impressiveness and relevance.

Include a link to a one-to-two-minute video of you speaking, doing a media appearance, or demonstrating the skill your book teaches, and a video query showing how well you share your passion for the value of your book. If your links don't include an image of yourself, paste a small headshot at the beginning of your bio.

If you're writing a professional or academic book for which your credentials, experience, and publications will be important, include your CV or resume at the end of the proposal.

- **Platform:** To show your continuing visibility with potential book buyers, include a bulleted list with round numbers in descending order of size proving your ability to reach your readers.
 - * **Online:** numbers of blog subscribers, classes, talks, website visitors, your social media presence. Editors will check on how engaged you are with your fans on social media.
 - * **Offline** (before or after Covid):
 - The number of articles that appear regularly in magazines and newspapers with links to the most impressive articles
 - The number of talks or classes you give a year with the number of people you speak to a year and where with a link to a speech
 - Continuing media presence with links to your most impressive interviews
- **Promotion:** Start with: "To promote the book, the author will, at her/is expense:" Follow this with a bulleted list in descending order of ability to sell books what you will do before, on, and after publication to share your passion for the value of your book. Begin each part of the list with a verb, and if possible, use impressive round numbers. End with: "The author will coordinate his/er plan with the publisher."

(For a promotion-driven book you want to published by a big or midsize house, your proposal has to show editors how you will use your visibility to sell books. Your platform and promotion plan will determine the editor, publisher and deal you get for your book.)

- **(Optional) Special Markets:** a list of opportunities like:
 - * **Special-interest markets**, on- and offline: retailers, organizations, institutions, schools, and businesses that might buy your book
 - * **Companies** that are likely to, or have committed to, buy bulk quantities of your book
 - * If you have an audience **abroad**, mention it.
 - * **Buyback commitment:** Business authors buy books to sell at speeches. Chefs sell them in restaurants.
- **(Optional) Foreword and Blurbs:** a foreword or the commitment to write one by someone whose name will give your book credibility and salability in fifty states two years from now. One or more cover quotes endorsement from well-respected, well-known authors or authorities will also help; perhaps as much as a foreword and they may be easier to obtain.

Outline

The first page of the outline is your book's complete **Table of Contents**, as it will appear in the finished book. The following pages include the chapter titles with an outline. Provide one-to-three present-tense paragraphs about each chapter, using outline verbs like *describe*, *explain*, and *discuss*. For an informational book, you can use a bulleted, self-explanatory list of the information for each chapter.

Sample Writing

About twenty-five to fifty pages of sample chapters or writing, between one and three chapters. Choose material that will most excite editors by fulfilling your book's promise to readers and by making your book as enjoyable to read as it is illuminating.

If your work is prescriptive--a cookbook, diet book, how-to book, include writing from the book's introductory chapter, if needed to explain your idea, and a how-to chapter. Agents and editors need more chapters for narrative nonfiction and memoirs. Follow the guidelines on their website.

Supplemental Material

(Optional) Articles, reviews of previous books, platform-related lists, or other supporting material that would disrupt the flow of reading the proposal.

Agents and publishers' websites have submission guidelines, so you can tailor your proposal to their needs.

From *Writing Success Guaranteed: How to Build a Career Online* by Michael Larsen (in progress).

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