

Nonfiction Book Proposal Guide

Ask yourself these questions and as you write your answers, your proposal will develop before your eyes. If you have the time and want more detailed guidelines, get one of the many excellent books on writing proposals from the writer's shelf at your library or local bookstore. We highly recommend Michael Larsen's *How to Write a Book Proposal*.

All good non-fiction book proposals should contain the following, and query letters should contain (concisely) the relevant main points and the most compelling highlights:

I: Cover Page with great title, your name and address, or agent's name and address:

Your work is copyrighted by virtue of having written it. Typically it is the publisher who registers the copyright with the copyright office in the name of the author. You may want to consult a lawyer if you feel you need special protection against infringement.

II: Three to Five Page Pitch:

1) Repeat title.

2) Describe your book in one sentence.

3) Elaborate on that in a paragraph or two. Describe the contents of your book enticingly and thoroughly.

4) Who is the audience? How big is the audience? Who will actually walk into the bookstore or library and request this book? Why will the audience need or desire the

book? It's important that prospective readers won't be embarrassed to buy the book and that they can recognize the need. For example, a book called "Why I'm Such a Stupid Jerk" wouldn't fare too well in the self-help section of the bookstore; however, it might not do too badly in the humor aisle.

5) Where will they find it besides bookstores? General or specialized libraries? Catalogues? Garden supply stores? Gift stores? Hospitals? Hardware stores?

6) What important, enticing and special points and features does this book have? For example, will there be sidebars, interviews, quotations?

7) Ideally, what will the book look like as you see it? Do you see it in paperback or hardcover or both? Does it require a special design? What trim size (width by height)? Number of pages? Number of entries? Number of essays? Will the book benefit from illustrations? If so, how many and what type? Line art? Photos? Do not prepare a cover or jacket to go with your proposal. Be respectful in advance of the publisher's art department. But if your book is about your famous grandmother and you have an authentic reproducible photo of her square dancing with Abraham Lincoln, say so.

8) What are your sources? How do you intend to do your research, if any? If any special permissions or releases are required, think about how you will get them now and what they will cost. Be certain this will not be a problem before you approach publishers, not later.

9) Do you consider the book humorous, touching, poignant? Attribute as many adjectives as you can. Then delete some.

10) Why are you the perfect author to write this book? Include your writing experience, publishing experience, work experience, educational experience, and special experience that makes you uniquely qualified to write this book.

11) What is the book's genre? Visit a bookstore and imagine where on the shelf your book will go (or could go).

12) What are some of the titles that your book will sit next to when it is published? This is the competition. The competition analysis is perhaps the most important part of any book proposal and should be done before you get too far along with your proposal or even before you start. Do a thorough search of books in print and read the books that are closest to yours in subject matter. How is your book different? How is your book better? Ask the bookstore owner or manager how these books are selling and work that information into the proposal in a way that will cast your book in the best light. It will backfire if you say that there is not now nor has there ever been another book that competes with yours. Publishers will usually be wary to publish such a book. They will either not believe you, or they will think that it is therefore not a publishable topic. Perhaps, they may think, it is more suited to a magazine article or a television movie.

13) Are there special times of the year when this book can be promoted in a special way? Does it speak to a growing or renewable trend (such as turning fifty) as opposed to a short-lived fad (remember pet rocks?)? If your book needs to be timed with an event (for example, the new millennium), make sure there is plenty of time to publish it and that you are ahead of the field.

14) Are you a promotable author? i.e. If this is the kind of book that would benefit by a national author tour, do you and can you tour or speak in public (such a statement wouldn't be relevant if, for example, you propose to write a dictionary)? Do you have any other promotion ideas (that are not outlandish)?

15) Have you already cultivated an audience that would buy the book (publishers refer to this as "having a platform"). Do you have other affiliations or contacts that could prove useful when marketing the book?

16) Can you get glowing endorsements from famous writers or experts prominent in the field about which you are writing? If the book is written, it would be useful to get a quote or two in advance of marketing the manuscript to agents or publishers.

17) What is your style? Work it in somewhere. What famous authors, if any, do you think your style can be compared to?

18) Anything else you think is relevant?

III: Detailed Table of Contents:

A short paragraph to describe each chapter or section should do the trick. It is usually more important that the headings be descriptive than clever.

IV: Representative and Interesting Sample Chapter(s) or Entries

V: Attachments, if any, such as recent major magazine articles about the topic or by the author