

Taming The Nonfiction Book Proposal

Contributed by Jill Nagle
Sunday, 28 May 2006
Last Updated Thursday, 22 June 2006

Taming the Nonfiction Book Proposal: The Basics

Oh, that most maddening of documents! For so many of us eager to move forward with our nonfiction projects, it looms large like a guard at the queen's castle, blocking the path to publication. Its perfection eludes us yet it stands there teasing, "Complete me, or your manuscript will never see the light of day, mwahahahaha!"

Taming the Book Proposal: The Basics

Oh, that most maddening of documents! For so many of us eager to move forward with our nonfiction projects, it looms large like a guard at the queen's castle, blocking the path to publication. Its perfection eludes us yet it stands there teasing, "Complete me, or your manuscript will never see the light of day, mwahahahaha!"

In truth, that's a lie. Every author has the option of self-publishing. However, there are advantages to writing a book proposal instead of a whole book.

One advantage is that it usually takes less time than writing a whole book. Two, it creates the possibility of getting paid to write your book, perhaps just a few thousand dollars, perhaps tens or even hundreds of thousands. Three, it forces you to get clear about what you're doing with your book, on a number of levels.

Even if you want to self-publish, a book proposal serves as a sort of business plan for your book. The time and energy spent on research, evaluation and comparison of your ideas at the outset pays off down the line many times over. After all, wouldn't you rather find out now that someone else has said similar things more eloquently and have a chance to amend your manuscript, than publish the darn thing only to read terrible--or worse--no reviews?

The process of polishing your book proposal is also an exercise in discipline and focus. It brings the purpose of your book, its scope, depth and message into sharp relief. It will get your thinking muscles into the best shape ever to produce the most marketable book of which you are capable. However, you must dedicate the necessary time and energy to educate yourself, move through multiple drafts and polish this behemoth of a document to perfection, or else hire someone who knows how to do just that.

Here are some answers to questions you may be asking right now:

What is a book proposal?

A book proposal is a document intended to sell a publishing staff on publishing a particular nonfiction book. It is the way

most nonfiction books get published by major publishers. It reads very much like a business plan about the book proposed. It can be anywhere from 10-100 double-spaced, 12-point 8 1/2 X 11 pages--most are 20-60 pages, including sample chapters. It generally uses a very specific format and specialized language to make its case.

What does the book proposal do?

It answers a series of typical questions that different departments of book publishing companies need answered when deciding which tiny handful of proposals, out of hundreds, to take a chance on. It acts on your and your book's behalf to answer questions like, Why this book over all the others in its class? Why now? Why this author?

Who sees my book proposal first, an agent or a publisher?

It depends on whether you choose to have an agent represent you, or go directly to publishers. Many publishers will not accept unagented material, so make sure you check a given publisher's guidelines first.

What does the book proposal contain?

Generally, a book proposal contains a cover sheet, table of contents, along with the following sections: overview, author bio, author's marketing plan, market analysis of buyers, comparative and/or competing books, outline, sample chapters.

The overview contains a hook, or means of enticement, draws the editor in, and gives a general summary of the book's purpose. It's sort of like an article about the book. It should make you want to read the whole thing!

The author bio puts any and all of your experience related to writing the book, in its best light. It's different from a resume or CV. It looks a lot like the "about the author" blurbs you see in the back of published books, below the author's photo.

The author's marketing plan, or "what the author will do to promote the book," shows the publisher that you know what it takes to sell your book, and details how you plan to do it. These days, ironically, publishers don't put much money into publicity, unless you're already famous. An author with a well-thought-out marketing plan will stand out from most of the others who pay far less attention to this section, thinking instead that the publisher will take care of it.

The complementary and competing books section identifies and describes books that both directly compete with and also that complement the proposed book. The purpose of this section is to show the editors what has been done before, and how your book fits in. The reason for this section is twofold: One, many editors are too busy to keep up-to-the-minute records of what's being done in every field, and so rely on the author to educate them about what else is out there. Two, just as many editors know exactly what's out there, and want to know how your work purports to compare.

There's a paradox here: On the one hand, you want to point to X, Y and Z books as evidence that this topic you're writing on is really hot. On the other hand, you want to make a strong case that yet another book--namely yours--is still necessary, and why. So you have to point out strongly yet tactfully--you never know what relationship the person reading your proposal bears to your competition-- what yours will do that others haven't.

The market analysis makes the case for the size of the book's audience. It usually covers a broad view of current interests and buying patterns in the larger culture that bode favorably for the book. It may include recent movies, documentaries on television, facts about memberships in organizations or clubs, social or ethnic groups whose constituents would be likely buyers of the book. For example, a book with an exercise theme might cite the circulation of major fitness magazines, membership in health clubs or recent TV shows on related topics. This approach can be

adapted to whatever the subject: parenting, cancer, gardening, dogs, mental illness, business, or entrepreneurship.

The chapter outline tells chapter by chapter what your book contains, and the sample chapters, usually about 30 pages worth, represent the best samples of your writing.

Why are so many book proposals rejected?

Most book proposals are rejected because the ideas presented in them fail to convince the publisher that the author has a worthwhile (read: marketable) project. Making a project appealing to a publisher is a specialized skill, very different from creating the project itself.

In my experience, authors, whether of fiction or nonfiction are by nature creative people. If you're reading this, chances are at some point in your life, you became enamored of an idea or ideas, and felt the urge to move your thoughts into the world in book form. Your mind is alive. You have something to say.

A successful book proposal, on the other hand, is a specialized marketing document that follows a particular form, and answers very specific questions in a way that gets a "Yes!" from publishers. Unless your field is marketing, and in particular, the marketing of books to publishers, chances are you don't have expertise in creating a book proposal. And why should you? It's nowhere near as much fun for most authors as working and playing with their own ideas.

The majority of my clients who give me book proposals to review, even those who have read books I've recommended and claim to have followed them, give me proposals almost certainly slated for rejection. An excellent book proposal is a tough document for most authors to produce on their own. However, help abounds!

If you are determined to write your book proposal on your own, can really, truly follow directions, and have the patience it takes to polish your work with dozens or hundreds of revisions, I recommend Michael Larsen's book, *How to Write a Book Proposal*, and Jeff Herman's *Write the Perfect Book Proposal*. Read them, study them, write your proposal, rewrite it several dozen times (no, I'm not joking) and have it professionally reviewed by someone who really knows what they are doing. Polish it to perfection--in this business, in which 99% of all proposals will get rejected, good enough simply isn't.

Then, if you want an agent, make sure you find one with a successful track record of selling work like yours, otherwise your polished proposal may gleam, twinkle and shimmer for unappreciative and unqualified eyes. Unless the agent has specified otherwise, query them first via a one- to one-and-a-half page letter. For the query, read and study John Wood's *How to Write Attention-Grabbing Query and Cover Letters*. Then have at it. Spend at least three weeks on this query letter, and get feedback from at least three people, at least one of whom truly knows the field.

Want to get started (or move further along) on your book proposal RIGHT NOW? Check out our classes.

All the best to you in your journey, and keep me posted!

Author Jill Nagle is founder and principal of GetPublished, <http://www.GetPublished.com>, which provides coaching, consulting, ghostwriting, classes and do-it-yourself products to emerging and published authors. Her most recent book is *How to Find An Agent Who Can Sell Your Book for Top Dollar* <http://www.FindTheRightAgent.com>.

