Once you’ve finished writing your proposal, and before you seek feedback on it, use this list to make sure your proposal is ready for you to push the send button. Use this list alongside *How to Write a Book Proposal, 4th Edition* by Michael Larsen to create the strongest possible proposal for your book.

**YOUR PROPOSAL ON A PAGE**

You will write the first page of your proposal last. Only after you finish your proposal can you provide the following hooks for the first page of your proposal.

___ Your subject hook

___ Your book hook, including

___ your title and subtitle, if you have one.

___ a selling handle that makes your book sound compelling.
___ your model(s) hook: the book(s) or author(s) you’re using as the model(s) for your book.

___ an optional list of benefits .

___ the length of your manuscript, including optional back matter, and the number of illustrations, also optional .

___ when you will deliver the manuscript .

___ The markets hook: the groups of people who will buy it, the channels that can sell it, and its subsidiary rights

___ Your optional niche-craft hook: titles of up to three spin-off books

___ Your optional foreword hook: the name of someone who will write a foreword or give a quote, along with the person’s book, business, institution, or credentials

___ Your optional credibility hook: the credentials that entitle you to write your book

___ Your optional platform hook: the most important things you have done and are doing to give yourself and your work visibility online and off

___ Your promotion hook: the most impressive two to four ways you will promote your book

___ Your optional test-marketing hook: the most powerful ways you will test-market your book that you don’t mention in your platform

___ Your optional mission statement: your commitment to writing and promoting your book
___ Your optional career hook: the stature you want to achieve in your field

___ Your craft hook: the number and qualifications of readers who’ve given you feedback on your proposal

THE REST OF YOUR OVERVIEW

Complete versions of the information you provided above.

___ Your subject hook

___ Your book hook

___ Your book’s special features, including back matter

___ The markets for your book

___ Your optional platform

___ Your optional test-marketing campaign

___ Your promotion plan

___ An optional list of competing books

___ A list of complementary books

RESOURCES NEEDED TO COMPLETE THE BOOK

___ An optional list of expenses, other than office expenses, of more than five hundred dollars

___ When you will deliver your manuscript
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

___ What editors need to know about you that’s not in your platform, listed in descending order of importance and relevance

THE OUTLINE

___ A list of chapters on the first page of your outline, with the number of the page in your proposal on which each chapter outline begins

___ The length of each chapter, flush right on the line with the title or subtitle

___ After the page count, the number of links, illustrations, or other visual elements

___ Choosing the right structure for your chapter outlines

___ Having about one line of outline for every page of manuscript you will write, a list of the entries, or a list of the parts of each chapter

___ Using and varying outline verbs

___ Beginning each chapter outline with a subject hook

THE SAMPLE CHAPTER

___ The most exciting, representative chapter(s)

___ Twenty to twenty-five pages of sample text

___ Photos or artwork scanned into the sample chapter with captions
CRAFT

___ Formatting your proposal
___ Using the sample proposals in Appendix E and at www.x.com as models
___ Making sure your proposal avoids common writing problems
___ Using the advice about variety, repetition, words to avoid, numbers, and punctuation
___ Optional links to sample clips
___ Optional cover art

SELLING YOUR PROPOSAL

___ Choosing the right publishing option for your book and yourself
___ Submitting your proposal
___ Including the optional ideal review of your book

The more professional you are at preparing, sharing, and submitting your proposal, the better reception it will receive. The author Dorothy Parker once said, “The two most beautiful words in the English language are ‘check enclosed.’” Using this list will help ensure you see those words more often.
The following three sentences are children’s answers to questions they were asked in Sunday school. What do they all have in common?

- The fifth commandment is “Humor thy father and mother.”
- Christians can have only one wife. This is called monotony.
- It is sometimes difficult to hear what is being said in church because the agnostics are so terrible.

These innocent blasphemies show how even two letters in a word can transform the meaning of a sentence.

Every word you write counts. Editors are delighted to find fine writing, and it takes only one wrong word for them to tell the difference. You want editors to read your proposal without stopping and
with a growing rush of enthusiasm. Your book will only have two basic elements: your idea and the execution of it. The challenge is to make them equally strong.

Craft comes before art and before commerce. You must learn to write before you can wring beauty from words. To sell your work, your writing must rise to a professional level. Craft leaps off the page instantly, and because editors and agents reject more than 95 percent of what they see, they will be delighted if, after reading your first paragraph, they can say, “My God! This one can really write!”

**PLAYING FOR KEEPS**

It’s been said that if at first you don’t succeed, skydiving is not for you. But writing may be. Writing is a forgiving craft that pardons all sins except one: not doing as many drafts as it takes to make your work 100 percent. Your final draft must be your best if it’s going to hold the attention of editors.

Ernest Hemingway rewrote the last page of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* thirty-nine times. When someone asked him what the problem was, he replied, “Getting the words right.” If you’re serious about being a writer, strive to make your writing as lucid, flowing, creative, brilliant, moving, engaging, entertaining, passionate—in a word, irresistible—as you want your reviews to be.

“Wondering irresolutely what to do next, the clock struck twelve.” This gem is from the indispensable guide to the prose of pros: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. It inspires as it teaches by example. Put its thirty-two golden nuggets on composition and style on the wall where you write. The relative calm before starting your proposal is a propitious moment to summon your muse by (re)reading *The Elements of Style.*
My favorite rule in *The Elements of Style* is “Omit needless words.” The key on your keyboard that will do the most for your writing is the delete key. If you delete all the words you don’t need, the only words you have left are the words you do need.

READING AND WRITING AT BULLET SPEED

Agents, editors, media people, and consumers receive a deluge of information; they want to go through the reams of paper they confront as quickly as they can. Help them by using bulleted lists. You can’t have list after list (which I may be guilty of), but when you discuss more than one thing in your proposal, manuscript, and publicity material, consider presenting the info as a list.

Mention the number of items in a list, but don’t feel you have to use a number before each part of the list unless it’s a long list or you have a reason to include it, such as using the number in your title. *Guerrilla Marketing for Writers* describes one hundred weapons, so the numbers were the organizing principle for the chapters as well as the book.

LESS IS MORE: MORE IS A BORE

Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis once said, “I always listen to what I can leave out.” This approach to his art is one reason why *Kind of Blue* is the greatest modern jazz album. First-time authors may find it difficult to believe, but less is more. Good writing is simple, concise, not unnecessarily flashy; direct, not flowery.

After you have the information down to your satisfaction, enhance your prose with grace notes—humor, passion, inspiration, felicitous turns of phrase—anything that will add feeling and beauty to your prose. Grace notes are the value you add to your information.
They are an essential element in building the humorous, dramatic, spiritual, inspirational, intellectual, persuasive, even life-changing impact you want your book to have.

Make your writing sing to an editor, who should be your toughest yet most sympathetic critic, and, if you have a salable idea, your proposal will sell. Rely on your instincts and reliable readers to know when your proposal is ready to submit. Then, and not a moment sooner, it is time to see if you are right.

THE PATIENCE FACTOR: A WARNING AND A PROMISE

Writers often make a costly mistake. They have a book’s worth of information they can write, so, naturally, they want their book published ASAP. What they’re often willing to sacrifice is taking enough time to build the platform, create the promotion plan, test-market their ideas, and fine-tune their prose as much as all writers need so they can maximize the value and impact of their book.

Their impatience is costly; it affects their ability to find an agent and publisher, the offer they receive, and how the publisher publishes the book. Sending anything less than your best work may increase the time it takes to interest an agent or sell your book yourself. Like book buyers, editors are looking for solutions, not problems. The further your proposal is from being 100 percent—as well conceived and crafted as you can make it—the less enthusiasm editors will have for it and, even if they buy it, the less they will pay for it.

You may be forced to sell the book to a less-than-ideal editor and publisher. You may have to settle for thousands of dollars less in your advance and less commitment from your publisher. A deal is destiny. How publishers buy a book determines how they publish it, and a
small initial sale lowers the prices paid for subsidiary rights and the next book.

Speed is the enemy of quality. If you let yourself get caught in a speed trap, you may doom your proposal. Agents and editors can tell when writers are more anxious to sell their books than to write them, a sin punishable by a speedy rejection. Doing your proposal right is far more important than doing it fast, so heed the following advice.

• Don’t send drafts.
• Don’t send the proposal in pieces.
• Don’t submit work before it’s ready.

Trust your instincts and reliable readers to know when your proposal is as good as you can make it. Then it’s time to see if you are right. The preparation process takes as long as it takes.

Here’s why being an author is something you will be proud of for the rest of your life.

• Writing a book is the Mount Everest of writing. Proving you have the craft, creativity, knowledge, stamina, perseverance, and professionalism to complete a book will set you apart from writers who haven’t.
• The world will respect you as an authority, an expert on your subject.
• Relatively few writers get their books published by houses that pay for the privilege.

HOT TIP

It’s easier than ever to be an author without being a writer. If you have a book’s worth of salable information in you, and you can promote it, but you’re not a writer, you can use an editor, book doctor, col-
laborator, or ghostwriter if you need help. You may be able to greatly increase your writing and promotional productivity by teaming up with a collaborator. The ideal collaborator

• adds to your body of information about your subject.
• writes well.
• has a platform.
• will be a demon promoter.
• is someone you will enjoy having a working marriage with.

If all the person does is promote the book like crazy, that would justify the arrangement.

What’s essential is that when your proposal reaches editors, it’s unassailable. How you accomplish that is your business.
**Hooks, Outline Verbs, and Continuity: Three Keys for Effective Outlines**

**THE GOLDEN RULE FOR BEGINNING AN OUTLINE**

Hook editors to your outlines with a quote, event, revelation, anecdote, statistic, idea, surprise, or joke.

**CREATE HOOKS THAT KEEP READERS READING**

If it suits the kind of book you’re writing, begin each chapter by outlining the most captivating anecdote or copy from the chapter. For example, you can write a one-line synopsis of an anecdote: *The chapter begins with a story about . . .*

Make one of your goals to entice readers into reading the next chapter by making the end of your chapters as seductive as their beginnings.

Consider these factors in choosing your hooks.
• Quotes can draw readers into a chapter, but make them fresh, concise, and enjoyable to read. Avoid quotes from Plato, Shakespeare, and the Bible; readers and editors have seen the old standbys too many times.

• You can use a short passage from a memoir, biography, history, or other kind of narrative book for which the quality of the writing will be essential to its success.

Beginning your outlines with the strongest slice of prose from each chapter will help

• prove you can write the book.
• make your outlines enjoyable to read.
• show editors how your style complements the subject.
• excite editors about your book.

If your hooks are strong enough, editors may just skim the outlines. They’ll believe that if you can write well enough and zoom in on the strongest parts of your book, you know how to structure and outline your book.

**USE OUTLINE VERBS**

Another way to make your outlines read well is to use outline verbs that tell what each part of the chapter does. For instance, instead of writing a description of the Left Bank in Paris, write The next part of the chapter describes the Left Bank in Paris.

To give you a better feeling for outline verbs, here’s an alphabetical potpourri. You don’t have to read the list now, but keep it handy as you do your outline.
address, defend, form
advance, define, give (voice to)
advise, deliver, go
advocate, demonstrate, guess, guesstimate
affirm, deplore, hammer
agree, describe, harmonize
analyze, (is) designed (to), help (readers)
appraise, develop, highlight
argue, discuss, identify
assert, dispel, illuminate
assess, dissect, illustrate
assist(s) readers in, distill, include
associate, document, incorporate
attack, dramatize, integrate
attests to, drive home, introduce
balance, elaborate, investigate
blast, emphasize, join
blend, enable, judge
broaden, encourage, justify
build (on, up), establish, lay out
center (on, around), evaluate, lead (readers) to
challenge, examine, link
chart, expand, list
clarify, explain, lock horns
complete, explore, look
confirm, expose, maintain
confront, express, mark
continue, focus on, marshal
convince, follow, mention
debunk, forge, mobilize
motivate  recommend  sum up
move on to  reconnect  summarize
name  reconstruct  supply
narrow  recount  surprise
note  refer (readers to)  survey
observe  refute  tackle
offer  reinforce  take
orient (readers)  reject  talk
outline  relate  tease
paint  remind  teem
pepper  reply  tell
persuade  report  thrill
pinpoint  resolve  tie (together, up)
place  respond  uncover
point out  reveal  undertake
portray  review  unearth
predicts  say  unify
prescribe  scrutinize  unmask
present  set (forth, up)  unravel
probe  shake up  unveil
proceed (with, by)  share  urge
prod  shift  use
prompt  show  venture
propose  sort out  vindicate
prove  specify  voice
provide  speculate  warn
puncture  stimulate  wax
put  stress  weed out
question  strive  widen
raise  suggest  work out
To expand the list, try adding the prefixes dis-, re-, or un-; see if the opposite of a verb fits or if you can use it as a noun.

To keep your outlines from reading like formulas, avoid using the same verb twice in the same chapter or more than four times in the outline. If you use a verb more than once, vary it: discusses, discussing, discussion. Vary your verbs as much as accuracy allows.

You can use verbs that involve readers or characters, such as the following.

- The chapter opens by encouraging [warning] readers to . . .
- The following section takes [leads] readers to . . .
- In the last part of the chapter, readers learn [discover, find out, meet, see] …

If you’re writing about people, you are free to use verbs that describe their actions. In a biography, however, avoid a string of sentences beginning with he or she.

Avoid the passive voice. Wrong: The issue of drunk drivers is examined in the chapter.

Right: The chapter examines the issue of drunk drivers.

I know, I’m using formulas to tell you how not to write in a formulaic way. But do as I say, not as I do!

**HOT TIP**

Because your book doesn’t exist yet, write about it in the future tense, but write your outlines in the present tense. Your chapters don’t exist yet either, but your outlines use many verbs, and they will (oops) read better without all those wills.

**PROVIDE CONTINUITY**
Maintain continuity within and between chapters so there is a natural flow of ideas, incidents, and information. If you’re writing a narrative that unfolds over time, include enough dates so readers can understand the progression of events and see how each chapter advances your story. If you can divide your book into periods of time, consider indicating the time period at the beginning of each chapter.

If you’re writing about a person, historical period, issue, system, or endeavor, the subject will have a past. Put its past into context by providing a historical perspective. By the end of the outline, an editor should have a clear sense of continuity in the subject’s past, present, and future. This doesn’t mean you have to start your book at the beginning. Start with a powerhouse first chapter that hooks your readers with as much intensity as you can deliver. Then you can backtrack to fill in the backstory readers need.

Placing your subject in the context of time establishes its relevance, if any, to what is happening in the field elsewhere in the United States and the world. This will expand the perspective you provided in your subject hook.

To help provide unity and continuity within the entire outline, begin and end chapters with introductory and concluding remarks. For the same reason, books often require bookend chapters, which are either an opening chapter that excites book buyers about reading it or a concluding chapter that summarizes the book, looks ahead, or inspires readers to act on the book’s advice.

Your outline should be so teeming with ideas and facts that editors will easily be able to visualize the proposal expanded into a full-length manuscript—and therefore be delighted at the prospect.

YOUR FIRST CHAPTER
If you want the book to start with an introduction about what you want your readers to know before launching into the text, make that the first or second chapter. Outline it just as you would a separate chapter. Because the introduction may be a shorter chapter than others, make the outline for it shorter.

Just as the beginning of your proposal needs to hook the editor, the first chapter of your book must be the subject hook for your book and must convince readers to read your book. If it doesn’t, why would they continue? Would you? Your first chapter may be short, but make it as enticing as you can. Think of it as an ad, a brochure, or the proposal to readers for your book. Like your title, it must tell and sell.

When I revised my book about literary agents, our assistant Antonia Anderson read the book and asked, “Why do readers have to wait until chapter five to find out how to get an agent?” You learn more by not being able to answer a question; my silence was instantly enlightening. Now readers learn how to get an agent in chapter one.

Your first chapter has three goals.

1. To excite your readers about what your book will do for them
2. To show readers how enjoyable reading your book will be
3. To start delivering the benefit of your book so your readers get immediate help (if it’s a how-to book)

The next chapter will help you solve potential problems when outlining your book.
THE GOLDEN RULE FOR CHOOSING WORDS

Make every word count.

Stephen King once said, “The road to hell is paved with adverbs.” This chapter is a guide to avoiding adverbs and common mistakes that keep writers from getting the responses they want from editors. The two best times to refer to it are before you start your proposal and after you finish it.

ADDING VARIETY TO YOUR PROSE

Just as you can tell if a musician hits wrong notes, editors can tell if writers aren’t using the best words to express their ideas. Every word you write is an audition for the next word. For this reason, avoid

- long words. Keep them simple, but if a long word is the best one to use, do it.
• long sentences. Long or complex sentences slow the eye. But don’t go to the other extreme by using sentence fragments or a succession of short sentences.

• long paragraphs. The mind revolts when confronted with unbroken, page-long blocks of copy. If you’re writing for a wide audience, aim for three or four paragraphs on a page. And unless comps indicate otherwise, avoid paragraphs longer than about a third of a page.

Variety is as essential a virtue in prose as brevity. An endless succession of short words, sentences, and paragraphs will read like ad copy or a formula approach to writing. The art of writing is the ability to express and structure your ideas so every word counts. Stick with the standards set by the best books in your field.

Here’s more advice to keep in mind as you write and edit your book.

• Between your overview, outline, and sample chapters, an editor may read the same information three times. Avoid repeating yourself, if you can. If you can’t, change the wording.

• Assume editors know only what average Americans know about the subject. Terms, concepts, and explanations must be clear.

• Avoid cuteness and gratuitous humor.

• Excite your readers’ senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—to breathe life into the people, places, and events you depict.

• Dialogue is action—it breaks up the narrative and enlivens your prose as it develops the story, characters, and atmosphere.
• Readers want to be informed by an authority, so write like one. The more forceful your statements, the better, particularly in the overview when you’re trying to sell your idea and yourself to an editor. Don’t pussyfoot around. Be accurate, but be bold.

TELLING COMPELLING STORIES

People enjoy reading about people more than about ideas or facts, so use stories to help you say what you need to say. The biggest challenge in writing anecdotes is cramming maximum impact into the minimum number of words. The longer a story, the more impact it needs to justify your readers’ time. If you want your book to read like a novel, write it like a novel by doing the following.

• Use telling details to bring people, plots, and places to life.
• Make readers care about what happens to the people you write about.
• Give your prose the distinctive voice that only you have.
• Accelerate the pace of your story by jumping from scene to scene as movies do.
• As William Goldman advises in Adventures in the Screen Trade, start scenes as late in the action as you can.

OVERCOMING REPETITION WITH RESTRAIN T

Using one word, sentence structure, or punctuation element once, and then using it again—and then, because it comes to mind quickly, using it again, is a nasty habit to which unwary writers fall prey. The repetition makes the word stand out like a writing tic, a literary hiccup. Given the richness of the English language, this suggests either a lack of writing skill or an unwillingness to find the most felicitous way to express a thought.
If you lapse into the repetition of a word, sentence structure, or punctuation, avoid the offending usage altogether so you won’t be tempted to succumb to it, or limit yourself to using the culprit only once every twenty pages (it’s an easier cure for hiccups than drinking a glass of water with your head upside down).

If you use two or more nouns or verbs together, make sure all of them fit the rest of the sentence. An example of this mistake: *For a more professional look, greater protection, and the possibility of resubmitting the proposal elsewhere, insert it...* The preposition *for* has three nouns as objects: *look, protection, and possibility*. Unfortunately, you can’t say the “for the possibility of.”

**HOT TIPS**

- To keep your words and sentences as smooth as you want them to be, read them aloud to hear how they sound.

- If you give talks, you may take acceptable liberties with words and grammar that, when read, may sound improvised rather than carefully chosen. Be aware of the difference.

- Speakers can add tone, volume, gestures, and facial expressions to words to enhance them. As a writer, the challenge is to create the impact you want with only words on a page.

- If you’re blessed with a distinctive voice or style, make sure your prose captures it.

**WORDS TO AVOID**

- Avoid being writerly. Don’t reach for long or unusual words when short, direct words will do.
• Avoid the adverb *obviously*. Don’t tell an editor what is obvious.

• Avoid adverbs and adjectives. Write with nouns and verbs.

• Avoid *this chapter* or *this book*; use the.

• Avoid weak, indefinite words: *maybe, probably, perhaps, few, some, something, anything, thing(s), many, a lot, lots of, plenty of, numerous, almost, quite, little, a while, and several*. Be accurate, definite, and specific without using the word specific.

• Avoid obscure, out-of-the-ordinary words unless they are part of your style and you use them throughout your proposal.

• Avoid the word *recent*; it won’t be for long.

• Avoid *three years ago* or *three years from now*; it will date your proposal. Give the current year.

• Avoid weak verbs. Instead try using *can* for *could, will* for *would, is* for *seems to be*, and *is* for *may be*. But avoid sentences that begin *It is* or *There is/are*. Avoid the verb *to be*, if you can find a stronger verb.

• Avoid too many *ands*. Many writers succumb to stringing words together that are redundant or do not fit the sentence.

• Avoid negative words or expressions. As The Elements of Style says, “Put statements in positive form.”

• Avoid sexist words or phrasing. Use *humanity* for *man* or *mankind*.

• Avoid the *he/she*; change to plural and use *they*, or alternate *he* and *she* in the singular.
• Avoid utilize for use.

• Avoid impact for affect.

• Avoid due to; use because of.

• Avoid ongoing for continuing.

• Avoid prior to for before.

• Avoid different ways or various ways. Enumerate the ways or tell how many ways there are. If you’re discussing more than one way, they must be different or various.

• Avoid jargon or define it. You may be a psychologist or a computer hacker, but not all your readers are. Don’t make your vocabulary a barrier to communication.

• Avoid the prefix inter- in interrelated and interconnected; it’s redundant.

• Avoid exaggerating anything. Use one hyperbole, and your accuracy will be suspect.

• Avoid superlatives unless they are warranted.

• Avoid all-encompassing words like all, every, or never unless they are accurate.

• Avoid creating new words or bulky word combinations united by hyphens or slash marks.

• Avoid citing a dictionary and defining terms; it comes across as academic.

• Avoid imprecise words.
• Avoid clichés like the plague. Don’t use quotes or expressions you often hear or see in print; be original.

• Avoid etc. You will slow editors down by forcing them to think about what etc. refers to. Use either the whole list or part of the list, and preface it with like, such as, or including.

• Avoid abbreviations such as i.e. and e.g. that are suitable for business memos—unless, like p.m., they are accepted in formal prose.

• Avoid putting words in capital letters for emphasis; it looks amateurish. Let your choice of words and how you position them create emphasis.

• Instead of upon, use on.

• Delete current or contemporary if the context makes it clear you’re discussing the present.

• Avoid throat-clearing prefaces to sentences such as It is interesting that . . . or I truly believe that . . .

• Change make sure that to will.

• Change over to more than when dealing with numbers.

• Change critical to crucial or essential.

**Numbers**

• Avoid the words replete, plethora, numerous, hundreds, and thousands. Unless a precise number is needed, use a round but accurate number. If necessary, preface it with almost, nearly, or more than.
• Precise numbers may slow readers down. Use your judgment in deciding whether to use twenty-two rather than more than twenty, or twenty-four instead of almost twenty-five—or just twenty-five if absolute accuracy isn’t necessary. Round numbers are easier to read and remember.

• *The Chicago Manual of Style* guide for writing numbers recommends using words for the numbers one to ninety-nine and for numbers at the beginning of sentences. Otherwise, digits are fine. Follow the usage in comparable books. If you’re writing a how-to book in which numbers are important, use Arabic numbers.

• Don’t mention cents. Use round dollar figures.

**Punctuation and Italics**

• Don’t use two spaces after a sentence.

• Avoid extra spaces between paragraphs.

• Avoid underlining for emphasis.

• Print the names of books, CDs, periodicals, and movies in italics.

• Avoid exclamation points; unless needed, they look like you’re trying to force an emotion out of the reader.

• Avoid parentheses in your introduction and outline. If something’s worth saying, say it; if not, leave it out.

• One dash mark is a hyphen for linking words or dividing them into syllables. If you wish to use an em dash to set off a word or phrase, type two hyphens with no spaces between the dashes.
and what surrounds them. On a Mac you can make an em dash using “option + shift + -”.

• Use quote marks if you’re quoting someone, and always make it clear whom you’re quoting and why. Otherwise, avoid quote marks.

• Use a single quote mark for a quote within a quote. For example: He smiled and recalled, “She said, ‘You don’t say!’”

• It’s is short for it is; its is the possessive of it.

Do yourself a favor: Scan these suggestions again after you write your proposal.