

CHAPTER 3

NONFICTION BOOK QUERIES

If you've been toying with the idea of writing a nonfiction book, you'll be happy to know that unlike novels, nonfiction books can often be sold on not much more than an idea. Much like the article queries discussed in the previous chapter, the first step in selling a nonfiction book idea (usually) requires a query letter. In some cases, you'll be advised to just skip the query and submit an entire proposal, though that's not as common. For the purpose of making you the most informed writer on your block, this chapter will cover both.

QUERY VS. PROPOSAL

As with an article query, a book query is a one-page, single-spaced pitch. In this case, however, you're pitching to get an agent or editor to request your book *proposal*, not your entire book manuscript.

Your query will break down into a format similar to that of the magazine query discussed in the last chapter:

1. The opening hook (one paragraph)
2. The supporting details (two or three paragraphs)
3. Your qualifications (one paragraph)
4. The summary (one paragraph)
5. The thank-you and request to send the proposal (one paragraph)

The Opening Hook

This will be very similar to what you might write on a book flap to get readers to buy your book. It should set the tone for your book's voice and style using something fascinating, controversial, hilarious, or newsworthy.

Example: Just as I've been explaining to Christians in my congregation for more than thirty years, being gay is not a "choice." In fact, as of August 7, 2008, we have proof: Scientists have just discovered the "gay" gene. With proof that homosexuality is as genetic as skin color or hair texture, the anti-gay community has a lot of thinking (and apologizing) to do. As a minister, writer, and brother to an openly gay man, I've got some ideas on how to get started.

Fascinating? Check. Controversial? Oh yeah. Newsworthy? Definitely. (Hilarious? Not so much.)

The Supporting Details

Much like a magazine query, the supporting details paragraph (or two) of your book query will provide information on how you'll research and gather information for your book. It's the time to mention the generalities of your resources, such as who you'll interview (conservative Christian and Jewish clergy, gay and lesbian ministers, leaders in the gay community); what you'll discuss (how they feel about the news and what this means to the Christian and gay community); why the book will make an impact (will it change the way Christians view homosexuality?); and how it will be used (a book of opinions from both sides—and those in the middle—to foster conversation).

You don't need to go into specifics (like the number of people you'll interview or their names—unless it's Rev. Jesse Jackson!) but there should be little room for the agent or publisher to guess how you'll gather your information, what approach you'll take, or how the book would be categorized. (Is it a religious personal opinion piece? A political how-to book for church groups? A pro-gay biography with resources?)

Don't worry about things like marketing, detailed readership demographics, or competitive books. Save that for the proposal.

Your Qualifications

This is the time to impress, if you can, or fake it till you make it, if you can't. If you don't have a lot of published pieces, don't worry. Just focus on why you're the perfect person to write this book. In my case, *The Writer's Digest Guide to Query Letters* had my name all over it (figuratively) before it had my name on it literally. With more than a thousand published pieces (about a quarter of which required queries), years of experience being pitched article ideas as a magazine editor, and two previous books for McGraw-Hill (which required agent queries and book proposals), the acquisitions editor knew I was familiar with several types of queries (including bad ones). It didn't take much convincing on my part, making the process both ironic (no query for a book on queries?) and relatively easy.

Don't lie about your experience—focus on your sources. (Do you have access to a lot of ministers in a wide variety of denominations because you live in a metropolitan area? Are you networked with leaders in the gay community? Have you spoken on the topic at national conferences?) Feel free to include a bit more about your education or career, if it's relevant, or any awards you've received (if they're specific to writing or the topic you're pitching). Mentioning that you won the Edward R. Murrow Award for your exposé on the Vatican is impressive. Mentioning that your haiku won best place at the PTA meeting might be best kept a secret.

The Summary

The information in your final (or near-final paragraph) can vary greatly. It could include possible spin-off ideas (i.e., a book on pet-friendly restaurants and hotels in San Francisco could easily branch out into tour books in other cities); a few sentences about which groups of readers will enjoy—and buy—the book (“Pet owners are willing to spend gobs of money on their animals. Surely they'll shell out \$12.95 for this!); or even how the book will fit perfectly with that particular publisher's new line (“Your new line of travel books has yet to include a piece for animal lovers.”).

A good book query takes a sandwich approach: strong lead, filler details, and strong finish. You might lose the editor a bit in the middle filling, so be sure to end strong. Mention the name of your book again and the (large)

readership that's waiting for it. ("I hope you'll agree that the ten million baby boomers are ready for *The Senior's Guide to Dating Etiquette*.")

Remember, the only job of your query is to get the editor to request a full proposal. You don't have to sell her the book with this letter—just leave her wanting to learn more. Then deliver.

The Thank-You and Request to Send the Proposal

This is the time to not only thank the agent or editor for her time, but also mention that you have a full proposal available upon request. Don't expect that you can whip up a great proposal if it's requested. Have a polished one ready to send so you can respond while the editor or agent is still enthusiastic about your query.

BOOK PROPOSALS

A book proposal is a much more detailed and therefore much lengthier (usually thirty to forty pages) pitch. It covers more ground than just a basic idea, including additional components to what you covered in your query, like:

- Your competition
- What you'll do to market the book
- One or two sample chapters

But again, most agents and publishers want you to start with the query letter, asking you for a proposal only if the query sparks their interest.

While it may seem redundant to require a three-step process (query, proposal, manuscript), the method actually expedites the process for you and the agent or publisher. That's because it's much faster for an agent or publisher to review thousands of one-page queries to choose the few that hold promise than it is to review thousands of thirty-page proposals.

Take note: Getting a bite on a query will send you to the front of the class (or at least the second row) when you *do* send your proposal. That's because the agent or editor will most likely remember your name and that he's requested the proposal—unlike the hundreds of unsolicited (not queried) proposals that he has yet to review—if he does at all. (Some agents and

publishers are very strict about unsolicited proposals if their guidelines specifically state to send a query first. In the case of the big publishing houses, they generally only accept agent-pitched proposals.)

Key Components of a Nonfiction Book Proposal

Now that you've mastered the art of query writing, you'll need to perfect the craft of writing a genius book proposal. The good news is, you get more than one page. The bad news is, you need to kick butt for fifteen to thirty pages. The query was the sprint. The book proposal is the endurance challenge. (The book will be the marathon.)

There are five basic components to a nonfiction book proposal:

1. The synopsis (one to two pages)
2. The table of contents (one page)
3. Chapter summaries or sample chapters (ten to twenty pages)
4. The market analysis, including competition, platform/promotion, demographics (two to four pages)
5. Your qualifications (one page)

While there are sometimes additional components (e.g., supplements of published clips on the proposed topic, relevant news articles about you, copies of your self-published book), none of the original five should ever be omitted.

The synopsis

Think of the synopsis as you would the hook of your query. Although it's not exactly the same (a hook might be just a paragraph while a synopsis is typically a page or two), it serves much the same purpose. It's your (second) sales pitch to the acquisitions editor.

Unlike your hook, which will be more of an enticement than full summary of your book, the synopsis will detail your book's content, structure, tone, and design (if needed). You'll have a bit more room to talk about the unique elements of the book, examples you'll use, the solutions the book will provide, the reader takeaway, the voice and tone (serious, funny, helpful), and the timeliness or timelessness of the topic.

Your best bet is to start your synopsis strong *immediately*, then fill in the details later. Starting slowly and building momentum may cause the editor to toss your proposal into the rejection pile before he even reads the second paragraph. To understand a successful synopsis, imagine the news, sports, and entertainment story links you get on your homepage when you sign on to check e-mail or if you subscribe to any electronic newsfeeds. If you're like most of us, you'll skim the headlines and only click on the link to read more if something sounds intriguing—otherwise you'll just go about your day. Surf news sites on the Web and dissect these little article blurbs. What makes them enticing? What do they all have in common? Start your synopsis with a similar punchy grabber and use the rest of the paragraphs to support the opener.

Remember the advice from your article query: Open with a question, anecdote, interesting fact or fascinating comparison, e.g., “Dolly Parton and Pamela Anderson have more in common than their cup size. Both attended Harvard Medical School before pursuing careers in entertainment.” (My sources tell me this is not true. They do not have the same cup size. The Harvard part is a bit questionable too.) Your synopsis is no place to drone on about how it took you ten years to get up the nerve to query.

Because your synopsis will only be one or two pages, you'll need to cover the important elements in order to show that your book has both readability—and salability. Mention its relevance to a hot topic or current movement. (Current trends are okay if they're not likely to be headed out before your book gets published.) Discuss its value to the reader. (This isn't necessarily the same as demographics, which we'll cover soon.) Use the writing in the synopsis itself to demonstrate—rather than tell—what your voice will be throughout the book. Will you be entertaining? Funny? Informative? Authoritative?

Although my synopsis for this book was mostly verbal, my discussion with the acquisitions editor at *Writer's Digest* was similar to what I would have put in a written version. We talked about the readership for this book (mostly beginning and intermediate writers), what it would cover (article, agent, and publisher queries), why it was needed (last *Writer's Digest* guide to queries was a decade ago), and what would make the book stand out

among a shelf of other query how-to books (humor and plenty of examples of real queries that landed agents, articles, or book deals).

My synopsis probably would have focused on the fact that things have changed since *Writer's Digest's* last book on queries came out a decade ago. A lot more agencies and publishers accept e-mail queries, for example, which require special sections on electronic submissions. Self-publishing has become easier and cheaper than ever, making it necessary to at least touch on the issue. There are also many more online publications, requiring a book on article queries to examine electronic rights. And with the ever-changing writing-related books, Web sites, and e-zines, it's vital that *Writer's Digest* have a book with updated resources.

Not everyone is doing an updated version of a book that's already out there. Your selling point might be timeliness, a true niche, humor, entertainment, or controversy. Don't just know *what* you're pitching in your synopsis—but *why*.

The table of contents

While it's tempting to crank out a simple table of contents by listing mere chapter subjects, most editors would prefer to see a more detailed one. This might include one to two sentences per chapter, explaining what will be covered. In addition, the book proposal is the perfect place to let your creativity shine with more engaging chapter titles. Just look at the difference between these chapter titles and summaries for a book on horse care:

Chapter Seven: "Caring for your horse's teeth"—dental care

Or

Chapter Seven: "Straight from the horse's mouth"—This chapter will cover the basics of horse dental care, including how to brush a horse's teeth, removing objects from between teeth, spotting a dental infection, identifying jaw and tooth pain, post dental-care issues, and removing baby tooth "caps."

Chapter summaries or sample chapters

If you're writing fiction, your book will be complete, making it easy to include sample chapters in your proposal—if required. There are varying opinions

as to which chapters to include (first and second, first and last) but perhaps the best advice is to include a chapter that showcases your best writing. Of course, many agents or editors won't give you a choice, specifically asking for "the first fifty pages" or "the first chapter only."

If you're writing nonfiction, you'll need to include chapter summaries or, more likely, sample chapters. The bright side of this is that of all the components required for a book proposal, your chapter summaries (or sample chapters) will be the most useful to you later. They'll serve as an outline of sorts and will help keep you on course as you write the book.

It's important to note that sample chapters are not rough drafts. They are actual chapters that you'll be turning in as part of your manuscript. Take your time to make them stellar; they can make or break your shot at a book deal.

Competition. Why would you want to list your competition? Because you want to show that there's a market for your work. Granted, you don't want to show that a book *exactly* like yours sold well (unless the book is old and you're doing a much-needed updated version). You want to convey that there is indeed a *readership* for your work, but your book takes a slightly different twist on what's already out there—and you're just the person to write it.

Your competition should include at least four or five books. If you can get sales numbers (good luck—these are hard to find!) or at least mention that the books hit a best-seller list or went into a second (or third) printing, all the better.

Be cautious about mentioning books that didn't sell well. Trying to persuade an editor that your book on the same topic will "do better because it's better written" is like saying that your lead boat will float better than your competition's lead boat because it's better built. If there's no readership, there's no book.

Platform. Your author platform is your immediate visibility. This includes things like speaking engagements (to writers' groups and conferences), newsletters, blogs, or workshops. If you don't already have these things, you'll need to begin building them immediately—preferably before you cre-

ate your proposal—because these demonstrate your ability to target potential buyers.

There are a lot of great resources out there to review *before* you work on your book proposal's marketing plan, including:

- *Get Known Before the Book Deal* by Christina Katz
- *1001 Ways to Market Your Books* by John Kremer
- *Guerilla Marketing for Writers* by Jay Conrad Levinson, Rick Frishman, and Michael Larsen
- *The Complete Guide to Book Marketing* by David Cole
- *Publicize Your Book!* by Jacqueline Deval
- *The Savvy Author's Guide to Book Publicity* by Lissa Warren
- *The Frugal Book Promoter* by Carolyn Howard-Johnson
- *The Web-Savvy Writer: Book Promotion With a High-Tech Twist* by Patrice-Anne Rutledge
- Fiction Factor (www.fictionfactor.com): This Web site has a great piece by Lorna Tedder called "Your Book Promotion Countdown Checklist."
- Author & Book Promotions: (www.freewebs.com/authorpromotion): This Web site has a great collection of promotional resources, book reviewers, marketing tips, and articles on promotion.

Promotional plan. Your promotional plan is a list of things you intend to do to market your book. This could include radio and TV appearances, book signings, sending press releases to the media, attempts to get columns or articles on the subject published in newspapers, magazines, and Web sites, audio/Webcast interviews, teaching online classes, attending book expos, direct mail promotions, etc.

You'll need to be very specific, mentioning how many newspapers you'll contact, who you'll ask to write your book flap blurbs, how much money you'll invest in your promotion efforts, how many talks you'll give (and to whom), and any partnerships you'll try to build with other authors, businesses, colleges, and/or nonprofits.

The promotional plan should be written in third person: "Author will contact forty national radio shows that specialize in parenting-related topics" and should be realistic. Mentioning that you will contact your cousin

who produces *Good Morning America* is believable. Stating that you'll *be* on the show is not.

For a great example of how to write a promotional plan, visit Michael Larsen's Web site at www.larsen-pomada.com.

Qualifications

For new writers, this is often the most worrisome component of a book proposal. There's a fear that not having a lot of published pieces will automatically cause an editor to decline. But as with your initial query letter, you can focus on other qualifications that might lead an editor to believe you're the right person to write the book. These could include your expertise on the topic, your personal experience with the topic, your education (degrees in the field), your "following," public speaking, and media or industry contacts.

If you do have published pieces—especially if they're relevant to the topic—mention them. Pertinent clips (such as articles or columns on the subject) should be included with your proposal. These can be copies of tear sheets or articles printed from Web sites.

Remember: Publishing houses are in the business of selling books to make a profit. Use your proposal to help the publisher see why your book will sell, and you'll both make money.

EXAMPLE 3.4 BAD NONFICTION BOOK QUERY

March 13, 2008

Attn: Publisher
Try Again Books
555 Notachance Pass
Reject, MN 12345

Dear Sir, **A**

Tired of reading through the slush pile of boring book ideas? I'm here to break up the monotony! **B** As the author of *Laughter Makes Everything Better*, **C** I've been called "the male Erma Bombeck of the twenty-first century." **D** Just check out the reviews of my book on Amazon.com—all five stars! **E**

The book teaches people the importance of laughing every day and gives them tips on how to heal their hearts with humor. **F** I've already sold 50 copies **G** myself, but because I'm so busy with my job, **H** I'm looking for a publisher who is ready to make this a bestseller. **I** I could also see this turning into a morning TV show, similar to the Dr. Phil format, **J** in which I would help people heal broken hearts (from divorce, loss, depression) by teaching them to add more humor to their daily lives.

If you think you'd like to publish my book, I'll send you a copy immediately.

Thank you for your consideration.

Neil Noway

FunnyMan@email.com **K**

WHAT'S WRONG: EDITOR'S COMMENTS

A If he had taken the time to look up the acquisitions editor's name, he would have learned that he was a she. **B** This is presumptuous. **C** Horrible title. Generic and boring. **D** Who compares him to Erma Bombeck? His mother? I'd love to see proof of this from a reputable magazine or he could mention the publication in this query if it's true. **E** Amazon reviews don't tell me much. They could be written by friends and family. **F** This is cliché. "Healing their hearts" is tired and overused. He doesn't seem to have any awareness of established books on the topic, like Norman Cousins's *The Healing Heart*. **G** Fifty copies isn't much at all and there's no way to verify these sales. **H** He's got a job, so he's not a full-time writer. It's not a requirement, but it helps. **I** It's not our job to make his book a bestseller and we couldn't if we tried. **J** Now he's comparing himself to Dr. Phil and he thinks he deserves his own TV show. **K** He only lists his e-mail, no phone number or address.