

Writing an Irresistible Book Proposal

by Michael Larsen

The Golden Rule of Writing a Book Proposal is that every word in your proposal should answer one of two questions: Why should a publisher invest in your book, and why are you the person to write it? If a word doesn't help answer one of those questions, delete it.

There are many reasons why, at least at the beginning of their careers, nonfiction writers are luckier than novelists:

- More agents handle nonfiction.
- More publishers publish it.
- More book buyers buy it.
- It's easier to write, sell, and promote.
- It's easier to resell in other media.
- It's easier to build a career out of by writing articles, giving talks, and selling CDs and other products.
- Most nonfiction books sell on the basis of a proposal (not finished work).

If you prepare a salable proposal, you can get paid to write your book. And I believe that what you're about to read is the fastest, easiest way to get the best possible editor, publisher, and deal for your book.

Putting Together Your Proposal

Proposals have three parts: an introduction, an outline, and one sample chapter. Most proposals run thirty-five to fifty double-spaced pages. Here's what goes in those pages.

THE INTRODUCTION

The goals of the introduction are to prove that you have a solid, marketable, practical idea and that you are the right person to write and promote it. The introduction has three parts: an Overview, Resources Needed to Complete the Book, and About the Author. These elements give you the opportunity to provide as much ammunition about you and your book as you can muster. Your introduction may take a lot of time to prepare and may only run five to ten pages, but the fate of most books hinges on it.

OVERVIEW

The basic elements your overview must contain are:

Your subject hook. This is the most exciting, compelling thing that you can say in as few words as possible that justifies the existence your book. It can be a quote, event, fact, trend, anecdote, statistic, idea, or joke. For example, your subject hook could combine an anecdote about someone using your advice to solve a problem that leads to a statistic about the number of people with the problem. If it's a narrative book like a memoir, it could be a compelling paragraph from your book (but only use it once in your proposal).

Your book hook includes three pieces of information: your title, your selling handle, and the length of your book. Unless it's a serious or reference book, your title must tell and sell. It must announce what your book is and give browsers an irresistible reason to pick it up, which is said to be half the battle for selling it.

Your book's selling handle is a sentence that ideally begins: "[The title] will be the first book to ..." You can also use Hollywood shorthand by comparing your book to one or two successful books, authors, or movies: "[Your title] is The Secret meets How to Win Friends and Influence People."

The length of your book is the number of 250-word, double-spaced pages your manuscript will have, and the number of illustrations it will have if you will use them. You can arrive at this magic number by outlining and estimating the length of your chapters and the number of pages of back matter (glossary, index, bibliography, appendixes, etc.) your manuscript will need.

There are also several things you should include in the overview to strengthen the case for your book, but consider them optional if they do not apply to your particular project:

- Your book's special features: tone, humor, structure, anecdotes, checklists, exercises, sidebars, and anything you will do to give the text visual appeal. Use competing books as models.

- The name of a well-known authority who has agreed to write a foreword, giving your book credibility and salability. If this isn't possible, write: "The author will contact [Famous Authority A, B, and C] for an introduction."

- What you have done to answer technical or legal questions. If your book's on a specialized subject, name the expert who has reviewed it. If your book may present legal problems, name the intellectual property attorney who has reviewed it.

- Your back matter: Use comparable books as a guide.
- Markets for your book: Starting with the largest ones, list both the groups of people who will buy your book and the channels through which it can be sold.
- Your book's subsidiary rights possibilities, such as film or foreign rights. Start with the most commercial one.
- Spin-offs: If your book can be a series or lends itself to sequels, mention up to three other books.
- A mission statement: If you feel a sense of mission about writing and promoting your book, describe it in one first-person paragraph.
- The author's platform: a list (in descending order of impressiveness) of what you have done and are doing to give your work and yourself continuing visibility in your field and with potential book buyers.

If you are doing a book that you will promote with talks around the country and you want a big house to publish your book, you need to have continuing national visibility through talks, the media, or both when you sell your book. The promotion plan that follows must be a believable extension of what you are already doing.

- Your promotion plan: In descending order of importance, list what you will do to promote your book. For books with a large nationwide audience that writers want to sell to big publishers, this list is at least as important, if not more important, than the content of the book.
- Lists of books that will compete with and complement yours. For competing books, include the publisher, year of publication, number of pages, and the price. Then use two sentence fragments that start with verbs to describe the book's strengths and weaknesses. For example, "Includes x. Fails to cover y."

End with a list of the ways your book will be different and better than the competition. You may use information presented earlier in the overview, but reword it. Don't repeat anything in your proposal. If you're lucky and creative, there may be no competing books, but you must list complementary books, because these books (on your subject that don't compete with yours) prove the marketability of your subject.

Resources Needed to Complete the Book

List of out-of-pocket expenses for \$500 or more such as permissions, travel, illustrations, or a foreword with a round figure for how much each will cost. Your agent may prefer not to include these costs when submitting your proposal, but having them there helps prove that your idea makes sense and is well planned and that you're professional.

End your resource section with: "The author will deliver the manu-

script X months after receiving the advance." If time is the only resource you need, just add this sentence to the end of your overview.

About the Author

Your bio is your opportunity to prove that you are qualified to write this book. On one new page (most of us have led one-page lives), tell editors everything you want them to know about you—in order of importance to the sale of your book. Write your bio in the third person to avoid a page full of "I's."

Include any media experience. If you have an audio or videocassette of any appearances you've made, mention them. If you will meet with interested editors at your expense, write, "The author will meet with editors interested in the book." These add to an editor's sense of your commitment to your book.

At the end of your bio, either scan or affix a photo of you that makes you look media-genic and like a successful author and, if possible, relates to the book. This won't be necessary if you will be including an article or brochure that includes a photo of you.

THE OUTLINE

To prove that there's a book's worth of information in your idea and that you have devised the best structure for organizing it, write from a paragraph to a page of prose outlining every chapter. Aim for one line of outline for every page of text you guesstimate, for example, twenty lines of outline for a twenty-page chapter. This doesn't have to be exact, but it will help you make the length of your outline relate to the length of your chapter. The Golden Rule for Writing Outlines is: Write about the chapter, not about the subject.

Start your outline with a page called "The Outline," skip a space, then type "List of Chapters," and list the chapters and the page of the proposal that each chapter outline begins on. Make your chapter titles as effective as the title for your book, like headlines for ads that compel readers to read what follows them.

At the beginning of each outline, center the number of the chapter at the top of the page, then give the title on the next line flush left. Flush right on that line, indicate how many pages the chapter will be, and the number of illustrations it will have if you're planning to use them.

Give your chapter outlines a sense of structure in one of two ways:

1. The first way is to start an outline like this: "This chapter is divided into X parts", and then provide about a paragraph of copy about each part.

2. The second way is to begin successive paragraphs like this:

- a. The chapter opens, starts, or begins with ...
- b. The next part, section or segment of the chapter ...
- c. The chapter ends, concludes or closes by ...

Use outline verbs like describe, explain, discuss, analyze, examine. (My book *How to Write a Book Proposal* lists more than one hundred of them.) Vary the verbs and how you use them as much as you can to avoid repetition and so the outline doesn't read like a formula.

You will get the knack of doing this. It's not hard, just a new skill, and the examples in the book will help you.

A SAMPLE PAGE OF OUTLINE

Here's an outline for a chapter for what became my book *How to Get a Literary Agent*.

Chapter 12

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: How to Handle Agency Agreements

19 Pages

This chapter starts by balancing the pros and cons of agency agreements. Then it covers eleven essential points that should appear in any agreement, as well as clauses for writers to avoid. Four representative agreements follow, including the author's, which appears on the next two pages.

The discussion of agreements concludes that since no agreement can encompass every potential contingency, the most important basis for any agreement is the good faith of the people who sign it.

The next part of the chapter presents separate bills of rights for authors and agents stating their responsibilities to each other whether or not the agents have an agreement.

The chapter ends by analyzing the causes for changing agents and the three-step procedure for doing it:

1. Try to find a satisfactory solution to the problem.
2. If that is not possible, notify the agent in writing of the change.
3. Find another agent.

THE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Choose the strongest representative chapter that will best show how well you write and what is freshest and most exciting about your idea. Agents and editors usually like to see about 10 percent of the text, twenty to twenty-five pages. Include the illustrations for the chapter if you will use them.

A narrative nonfiction book, such as a memoir, that you want to have the impact of a novel may have the greatest impact if editors see all of it,

so be prepared to submit the entire manuscript, along with the first part of a proposal, and a two-page synopsis instead of an outline.

The parts of a proposal are listed in the order that you will submit them. But you can write them in whatever order you wish. You may, for example, find a proposal easier to write if you start with the easiest part of it to write, perhaps your bio, and then do the other parts in order of their difficulty.

O Happy Day

If luck is ability meeting opportunity, you are part of the luckiest generation of writers who ever lived. Information is doubling every eighteen months, and the age of information is also the age of the writer. There are more:

- Subjects for you to write about
- Ways to get your books written
- Options for getting your books published
- Ways to promote your books
- Ways to profit from them than ever

And technology is a genie on a chip, an amazing tool for writing, researching, selling, and promoting your books, and for building and maintaining the networks you need to meet those challenges.

There are also more ways than ever to test-market your book throughout the writing and publishing process. One is writing a blog or one or more articles about the subject. An article that is long enough and strong enough will substitute for a sample chapter. In fact, the right article in the right magazine at the right time can sell a book. Agents and editors read media, online and off, to find ideas and writers.

The simplest recipe for happiness I know is to create your perfect book—the gift that only you can give, the song that only you can sing—and send it out into the world. And it's easier than ever for the right book to change the world. So read what you love to read and write what you love to read. The passion that you want all of the gatekeepers between you and your readers to have starts with you. So make passion illuminate everything you do.

Susan Taylor, the editor of *Essence*, once said, "What you love to do is exactly what you were put here to do." I urge you to put your gifts for speaking and writing in the service of your ideas, your books, and your readers, and don't just do it for yourself, do it for all of us. Good luck!