

Giving Them What They Want: How to Write a Book Proposal and Win a Publisher's Heart

By Margaret Gormley

Unfortunately, many aspiring authors of nonfiction books are clueless when it comes to the actual how-to of getting a book published. A prospective would-be writer assumes that a book must be written before it can be published, and therefore composes his or her entire book before even thinking of approaching a publisher. Another potential author might assume that he or she must sign a contract with a publisher even prior to brainstorming ideas for a book. Alas, neither of these methods is the proper protocol a budding nonfiction author must use in the quest for publication.

Personally, prior to gaining any knowledge of the publishing process, I also assumed that one must write an entire book, edit it, perfect it, and then present it to a publisher with crossed fingers. Although I was quite wrong, the good news is that the procedure one follows to publish a book is much easier than that, and consumes far less of an author's time, effort... and soul!

In order to get a book published, there are a few important steps one must take. The first step in the process is deciding a topic on which to write. Following this decision, the topic must be researched, in order to gain information to compose a general concept and formula for the book. Finally, every publisher will request a book proposal, and therefore the creation of this proposal is essential to any aspiring author. While an author must present something in written form to a publisher, a nonfiction book itself isn't written until much later, making the process much less demanding than would-be writers often think.

A book proposal is written in a specific form, an easy-to-follow guideline accepted universally by publishing houses. There are seven specific sections one must include in a book proposal, including the "book description and hook," the "market and author promotion," a description of the "author," an assessment of "competition," the "book table of contents," and "chapter summaries," as well as one or two "sample chapters." If these seven elements are written and arranged correctly, one is left with a foolproof book proposal ready for submission.

Section #1: Book Description and Hook. In the first section, the concept of the book is sold to the publisher. This description encompasses what the book is about, what it teaches to its readers, and why it is important. However, before the general book description, it is helpful to generate a hook, a clever sentence emphasizing the individuality of the book, to grab the attention of the publishers who may read the proposal. In essence, the hook is a description of the book in the simplest form.

An example of a strong hook comes from Suzanne Bates' proposal for her book *Speak Like A CEO*: "A TV anchor, turned consultant-to-the-CEOs, reveals the secrets for success before crowds and cameras." In this hook, Bates instantly grabs the attention of her reader, and then follows her clever hook with a more detailed and developed description of her book.

The book description can be as long as deemed necessary, but must include specific aspects of the book. If it is



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important to describe the author's experience in relation to the book, how an author's job may relate to their research for the book for example, this information should be included in the book description. It is important to use the third person, and express why the author is qualified to share the data within the book. The book description is a forum to describe the book and how it relates to those who may want to read it. A strong book description provides a general outline of the book, touching on all aspects the book will address, and yet leaving the development of these points to take place in the completed book.

Finally, the first section of the book proposal includes "book specifications" such as book length, book size and type

of binding. Any ideas for "Jacket Endorsements," people who will write promotional jacket blurbs, as well as suggestions for the writer of the foreword should be included in the first section of the book proposal, "book description and hook."

Section #2: Market and Author

Promotion: In this section, the market for the book is described. The book being written must have a specific target market (again, to use Suzanne Bates as an example, her book targeted aspiring leaders in both business and politics, as well as those who merely wish to improve their public speaking technique) and this market must be recognized within the proposal. There can be many different types of people who would enjoy reading one book; all of these different groups must be included as members of the market. After recognizing the group of people who comprise the market, those who would like to read the book, it is important to acknowledge why they would read it as well. A variety of people will purchase and read this book for a variety of reasons, and both who and why must be included in this section of the proposal.

The author is often responsible for promoting his or her own book, especially at first publication, so it is important to include how the author intends to promote his or her book in this section. Does the author have a business that allows him or her to promote a book through work? Does the author speak frequently at events and conferences at which the book can be promoted? In what ways does the author intend to help the book gain exposure and develop a following? Answering these questions, and stating the methods the author will use for promoting his or her book together with an analysis of the market makes up the "market and author promotion" section of the book proposal.

Section #3: Author: The third section is a short biography of the author. This section highlights the author's various successes, gives detailed accounts of the author's business experience, and references background information. The author is sure to include any associations he or she belong to, and any publications already in his or her name. If the author has any experience in public speaking, a list of speaking events is listed under the author description. Finally, if the author's company has been featured in any

publication, it is important to include those references, as well as the author's client list or specific praise for the author if applicable.

Section #4: Competition: The fourth section of the book proposal analyzes any competition the book might face. To provide a comprehensive fourth section, research is required. The author must provide publishers with the majority, if not all, of the books on the market with a similar subject matter. Furthermore, the author must convincingly state why his or her book is better than the competition. Why the target market will buy and read his or her book as opposed to the books of competing authors. A thorough and comprehensive fourth section of a book proposal consists of an outline of all competing books being told currently, a description of each one, and an argument as to why the proposed book will outperform the current competition.

Section #5: Book Table of Contents:

The fifth section of the book proposal is a list of the contents of the finished book. This list includes all chapters, forwards, and appendixes, as well as titles for all.

Section #6: Chapter Summaries: In the sixth section of the book proposal, the author summarizes each chapter included in the table of contents. Along with the summary of each chapter, the author may include an approximate page length for each chapter. It is important to summarize each chapter in a clear and concise way while also including everything of importance within the chapter.

Section #7: Sample Chapters: After summarizing each proposed chapter, the author is well-advised to include at least one or two sample chapters. These chapters will illustrate how actual chapters in the book will read, and thus should represent the author's strongest work. Though these sample chapters may not ultimately end up in the book in their original form, it's essential to provide publishers with a feel for the book's read if one is to compose a nearly-infallible book proposal.

By following these simple guidelines, and 7 required steps, any writer can maximize chances for becoming a published nonfiction author. Publishers require proposal submissions before making a firm offer to publish a new book, and so the seven sections together will help to create a book proposal that a publisher will pay attention to, and perhaps even find impossible to refuse.