

Getting Started On Your Nonfiction Book Proposal

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You can't write a nonfiction book proposal overnight. Even if you could, you wouldn't want to, and here's why: The preliminary research you do during the proposal-writing process will help you avoid costly mistakes and allow you to hone in on what you really want to write about. The proposal also helps you zero in on your angle and determine what fresh information you have to add to your book's topic beyond what currently exists in the market. Finally, the finished proposal serves as a roadmap for your writing. Where a novelist has to write her entire novel beforehand, possibly floundering and second-guessing herself, the nonfiction author sells her idea based on the proposal, and begins the writing process armed with a detailed outline.

Although there are entire books and courses designed to teach you how to write a killer book proposal (and you should take advantage of them!) it's helpful to get a rundown of what the process actually looks like through the eyes of seasoned writers, agents and editors.

There is no one "correct way" to write a book proposal, but the essential elements include your title page, overview, chapter breakdown and sample chapters. The other aspects of the proposal, which are arguably the most important parts, are the competitive title analysis, market analysis and author expertise. Though the basics are straightforward, the marketing section is where even the strongest writers may start experiencing a block. For this reason, Brian A. Klems, online editor of *Writer's Digest*, blogger, and author recommends starting the proposal-writing process with your sample chapters. "Not only does that give you the sample chapters you need for your proposal, it will also subconsciously give you a better idea of what you're writing about. You'll also have a better idea of what you need to do when you go into a bookstore or to Amazon to search out comparable titles."

Jane Friedman, industry expert and co-founder and editor of *Scratch Magazine*, suggests beginning with your competitive title analysis "if you're not sure of the market need or demographic." She brings up another important point, "I think it's also helpful to not just consider books as your competition, but also consider websites and free content that's out there as your competition. If people are regularly going to a website for the type of information you want to put in a book, this can hurt the market for your book."

Rachelle Gardner, literary agent at Books & Such also emphasizes the importance of market research. "You have to demonstrate that you know your topic inside and out, and are familiar with all the important books on the subject. Going through that process can actually change your whole book proposal."

So how do you go about your market research? You can peruse Amazon for recently published or very popular titles that are similar to your book, or visit a bricks-and-mortar bookstore and study the titles on the shelf where you imagine your book would appear. Friedman suggests visiting the websites of books

similar to yours to request advertising kits that show a book's demographic target. She also suggests asking a librarian, "'If someone came to you looking for this type of book, what would you point them to? What are the classics?'" That can give you a different angle, if you're talking to a librarian who has been at that location for 10 or 20 years."

Your expertise as an author and your personal marketing plan also play a huge role in your book's desirability to an agent or publisher. Someone who has a brilliant idea for a book but a nonexistent marketing platform will likely be passed over for a better-known professional with a less brilliant idea. Although a social media following is extremely helpful, it isn't everything: an expert with regular speaking engagements or a strong presence in his community may have just as much influence as a viral blogger.

One thing Klems wishes he'd known ahead of time was that writing the proposal, even after having done most of the research, takes a really long time. "I thought the hard part would be writing the book, and that I'd knock out the proposal in one night. A friend of mine said no, don't do that... don't hand it in, give it a couple of days to sit down and start going over it. This is your one shot, you want to get it as right as possible." In light of how we writers tend to be perfectionists, however, he adds, "You always feel like you can improve, but at that point, you do have to cut yourself off and say, it's time for me to put it out there."

Gardner says, in her experience as an agent, the biggest mistake she sees authors make is having underdeveloped "Overview" and "Competitive Title Analysis" sections. Where extensive research will guard against mistakes in the latter section, you can improve your overview by having other people read it and give you honest feedback. "The overview is what you open up your proposal with, and it can make a huge difference in whether anyone even wants to keep reading," Gardner says. "It's very hard to do, and, in many ways, it's harder than writing your whole book."

Friedman highlights two mistakes newbie writers make in their book proposals. "One is expressing in the marketing plan that 'I'm willing to go on Oprah!' or 'I'm willing to do book signings!' It's like, well, of course, that's kind of a given that you'd be willing!" Instead, she advises, writers must focus on their existing influence, and what they can control. For example, she says, "'I have an email list of 1,000 names and I will use it every month after the book release to do X'. Or, 'I have already appeared at these three venues to speak, and I will pitch [them] to speak again during the year of my book's release.'"

The other mistake Friedman observes is when writers claim their target demographic is "everyone." Though your book may have the potential to reach a wide audience, having a more specific demographic, for instance, "moms between ages 24 and 30" or "frat boys between 18 and 21," will make you more attractive to a publisher.

Gardner compares you and your book proposal to a hopeful businessperson pitching his idea on the hit show, *Shark Tank*. "When you bring a book proposal to a publisher, you are exactly that person. You're presenting your business plan and asking for money. So this must be a highly professional, very comprehensive, well-done document." It's true; regardless of your high hopes, that book proposal is all you have to represent your idea, so take plenty of time to write and revise it. However, don't let the

process intimidate you. If your topic has fascinated you for a long time, you may find that when you sit down to write, you've actually been crafting your proposal in your head all along. You may have already done a good deal of research in your joy reading, web-surfing or sharing of interesting content on social media. If you've published articles or made speeches on your topic, you may be able to use some of that content for your book. Whatever the case, your book proposal is your first impression -- and you know what they say about first impressions.