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Writing a Non-Fiction Book Proposal
A Primer for the First-Time Nonfiction Book Writer

by
Scott Mendel

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It will probably seem obvious to you that the nonfiction book proposal is a tool your agent will use to sell your work at the best possible terms, and to secure the strongest possible commitment from your publisher to promote and sell your book. What many first-time writers for the trade publishing market do not usually appreciate is how much the book proposal is a tool for the interested editor who wants to acquire your book. That editor is in the difficult position of not only choosing those projects she is convinced her company should publish, but also of making the case to her colleagues who, in many cases, must collectively authorize her to make an offer for your book. Among these colleagues are fellow editors, her editorial director, possibly her publisher, and an array of other people in the sales, marketing and publicity areas of her company. In addition to answering questions about the inherent value of your as-yet unwritten nonfiction book, she needs to make the case that you understand what the publisher needs from an author when it decides to commit substantial capital and professional resources to publishing that author's book. She needs to be able to make the case that you will deliver a great manuscript on schedule, that you will be an effective spokesperson for your own book, and that you have already done substantial preliminary work to establish yourself as an expert in the subject areas relevant to your book and its potential readers.

To help an interested editor in making this case, you need to present your agent (or prospective agent) with the best book proposal possible.

What follows is a short sketch of the components of a complete book proposal, and some comments about the importance of good formatting and presentation. In most cases, you should have this proposal in hand before approaching a prospective agent about your project.

Every complete proposal should include all of the following components:

1. A short abstract of your proposed book, which must include a summary of your premise, main arguments, and conclusions: This abstract should not be longer than three pages, and if it is longer than one page its first paragraph should be a very concise "elevator pitch" for the book. The abstract should make the case for your book's original ideas or approach, and it should itself be a good read. Don't describe your book in passionless, bureaucratic prose but, on the other hand, don't engage in breathless hyperbole.

2. The proposed book's Table of Contents and a chapter-by-chapter description of its contents: Usually, a description of 150-400 words per chapter is sufficient to cover the proposed book's contents and make clear to the reader how your presentation will proceed.

3. A description of the shape and format of your proposed book: You should estimate the length of the completed manuscript, by word count. If they are necessary to the project, you should include an estimated number of pictures, diagrams, figures, etc. Should you have particular illustrations in mind, the samples of those illustrations you provide should be very clear, high-quality reproductions that are integrated into the text of the proposal itself. If these particular illustrations are not in the public domain, you should include an estimated budget for clearing permission to use these images.

4. A schedule for completion of your project: Every agent or editor who reads your proposal will need to know how long it will take you, once the book is under contract, to deliver your complete manuscript. This estimate of time from contract to delivery can range fairly widely, from just a few weeks to more than a year. You should give a timetable that seems reasonable to you. You might decide to explain how quickly you could deliver the manuscript if time were of the essence and the financial terms of the offer made by the publisher enabled you to work full-time to complete the manuscript.

5. Market research on competing titles: There is no book that might be published by a trade publisher, no matter how innovative its approach or new its subject matter, which will not meet competing titles in the marketplace. You will need to present a realistic list of already-published books and that are currently in print against which yours will compete for readers. This section must include a brief note explaining the ways in which your book differs from each of these other books. In what ways does it treat its subject matter differently? How is it positioned to reach a larger or more motivated readership? How will its tone or organization better address the concerns of its potential readers? If one of the competing titles is a runaway bestseller, why does that bestseller's success indicate there is an appetite for another equally-successful book, rather than that the market for books on the subject is sated? For each competing title, you should include full publication information (publisher, date of publication, page count and price).

6. Prospective endorsements from colleagues: This is terribly important, as it establishes that your agent is not the only person besides yourself who supports this project. You should ask professional colleagues, especially colleagues who are published authors and whose names will be known to book editors, for short prospective endorsements to include in the proposal. These endorsements need be only a few sentences long. This may sound like a strange thing to do, as you have not yet written your book, but most published authors are used to being asked by friends and colleagues for prospective endorsements. And most are happy to do it. The number of endorsements you should collect has a great deal to do with the stature of the people giving them. Three endorsements from major figures will be more helpful to you than will be ten endorsements from people whom most editors will not recognize as particularly impressive.

7. At least two highly-polished sample chapters of the book you will deliver: These sample chapters are the main evidence that you will be able to deliver a publishable manuscript. It must be the best writing you are capable of creating, and you should have read and re-read

these sample chapters – as you have read and re-read the rest of the book proposal – for grammatical and spelling errors. One of these sample chapters will be, in almost all cases, the first chapter of the book you propose to write so that editors can decide whether your writing might capture the interest of a more casual book browser.

8. Author information and platform: Many book proposals include the author's current resume or professional curriculum vitae. This is a fine and sometimes necessary thing, but you should also write a short narrative passage of no more than two pages that clearly establishes your expertise in the subject area of the book you propose to write. It should also discuss what, in the publishing world, is known as your "platform." The platform is the breadth and degree of existing public acknowledgement of your expertise on these matters, as evidenced by, for example, the number of people who enroll in your seminars, purchase your self-published materials, watch your regular television show, and/or read your regular column in a major newspaper or magazine. It also includes the size and level of regular engagement of your followers on social media. An author's platform is especially important, particularly for prescriptive nonfiction books like cookbooks, or books on subjects like nutrition, health, do-it-yourself, hobbies, self-help, relationships or parenting. For these kinds of books, the author's platform is the starting point for a publisher's book launch. It is what the author brings to the table around which the publisher's publicity and sales forces will coordinate their efforts to draw attention to the book. This description of your platform should include an account of your personal and professional contacts in the relevant segments of the media, a clear description of your track record making public appearances, and a description of the public record of your unimpeachable, long-term commitment to the ideas motivating the book you propose to write.

NOTE: *If your description of your platform strikes even you as slight, this is probably a sign that you have put the cart before the horse. In this case you should spend more time and resources building your platform before circulating your book proposal for the simple reason that, even if an editor falls in love with your book and convinces her colleagues to publish it, the most likely scenario for your book would be a small advance, and a quiet launch with very modest resources for promotion and publicity, resulting in part in unimpressive sales. Such mediocre or poor sales will be an albatross around your neck the next time you want to circulate a book proposal for another book. They will deflate the perceived value of your future projects, and could trap you as a so-called mid-list author when what you may want to be is a front-list bestseller. Unfair? Maybe. But today's market-driven nonfiction publishing is driven by sales and inventory numbers available to almost everyone in the book business. These numbers are used to predict how an author's next book will sell. The main predictor is the gross sales figure of that author's previous book or books. Now, we all know that we can find very obvious exceptions to this scenario – there are a couple of first self-help books by unknown authors published every year that spend many months on the bestseller lists and became international blockbusters, and every year brings another celebrity autobiography that rockets up the charts. But these are very much the rare exceptions that prove the rule. They are not examples of a strategy available to most authors. In the first case it is a matter of rare good fortune; in the second case, of pure celebrity-driven sales. No agent or editor can afford to depend on good fortune in building a career, and neither should you. Proceeding strategically is still the best way for non-celebrities to succeed in publishing, and – unless you are already a celebrity – you should be strategic about building your platform before presenting a book proposal.*

9. Formatting the Book Proposal: When it comes to the presentation of your book proposal, your goal should be to make this document the most meticulously written and closely proofread thing you have ever created. Proofread this document. Then proofread it again. It is almost always a good idea to have someone else with good reading and writing skills copy-edit your writing, as that person's "fresh eyes" will not read over small mistakes that your eyes may see as already-corrected. All the pages of the book proposal should be numbered sequentially (including the sample chapters), and the entire document should be 1.5-spaced or double-spaced, with standard margins, and following all the conventional rules of manuscript formatting. Even a minor mistake of formatting, punctuation, grammar and usage can provide an agent or editor with the justification he seeks for rejecting your project and moving on to the next proposal in his forever self-replenishing "to-read" pile. (Always remember that there is never enough time in an agent's or editor's life to catch up on his reading, so the onus is always on you to keep the reader's interest and attention.) The length of the main body of a completed book proposal usually runs from 10 to 40 pages, not including the length of the sample chapters.

Sending queries or manuscripts to the Mendel Media Group LLC

You should email your work to **query@mendelmedia.com**. We no longer accept or read submissions sent by mail, so please do not send inquiries by any other method.

- Fiction queries: If you have a novel you would like to submit, please paste a synopsis and the first twenty pages into the body of your email, below a detailed letter about your publication history and the history of the project, if it has been submitted previously to publishers or other agents. Please do not use attachments, as we will not open them.

- Nonfiction queries: If you have a completed nonfiction book proposal and sample chapters, you should paste those into the body of an email, below a detailed letter about your publication history and the history of the project, if it has been submitted previously to any publishers or other agents. Please do not use attachments, as we will not open them.

If we want to read more or discuss your work, we will call or email you directly. If you do not receive a personal response within a few weeks, we are not going to offer representation. Please do not call or email to inquire about your query.