



KNEERIM & WILLIAMS

HOW TO WRITE A BOOK PROPOSAL

A proposal is a sales tool to demonstrate to an overworked editor that a book is irresistible; that it presents strong ideas well told and it offers something no other book available does. Its form can change to suit the subject, but wherever placed the following elements should appear in the proposal.

1. A brief description of the book, touching on:

- the book's subject and its importance
- the author's editorial approach and style
- the book's market or readers--how many are there?
- competing or similar books, and how this one differs from them
- proposed length (in approximate number of words) and delivery date

This "brief description" section can range from three pages to 20. Use subheads unless the description is extremely short. The purpose is to get an editor's attention fast and never let it flag.

With this in mind, try to include, early on, a one-sentence description that sums up what this book does and distinguishes it from all others. ("The only popularly written aerobics manual for people under seven.") Make sure to mention the strongest points early on (e.g. the subject unlocks a key area of contemporary life for the first time; the author is a nationally known expert on this or a closely related field; the U.S. Army has already committed to buying 10,000 copies). If there's a gripping story involved, the proposal could open with a vignette. Best advice: don't write this engaging introductory section until you have thoroughly developed your chapter outline (see below).

2. A chapter-by-chapter summary: A few paragraphs, or even several pages, detailing the content of each chapter. (A narrative description is better than bullets or an outline.) In the aggregate, this is the longest section of your proposal, and the heart of it. If there are going to be twelve chapters, and each one gets a page of description, the section will

be twelve pages. The chapter summary should convey a clear impression that the book is completely thought out. (However, it is generally understood that the outline may change and develop as the book is actually written.) Though it's called an outline here, the chapter outline should feel and read very much like the style of the book. If the book is going to be dramatic and suspenseful, the chapter outline should be, too, only in brief. If the book will be moving, or funny, make the outline moving or funny. If the reader is likely to cry while reading the book, the editor should be moved to tears while reading the proposal.

3. A short profile of the author(s), stressing qualifications for writing (and promoting) this book, especially past writings and accomplishments in the field the book covers. Write this section (one to two pages) in the third person and be sure to mention any history with national media, as well as prizes and distinctions.

4. Sample chapter(s). Ideally, include the most interesting or exciting chapter(s) in the book. Go for your favorite writing here.

5. Other writing samples by the author. This is optional but can be a good supplement.

A typical proposal (items 1 through 3 above) can be as brief as 20 pages, or as long as 70 or even more. Of course the sample chapters and other examples of the author's writing, which form additional sections, may be considerably longer.

In sum, a book proposal should be engaging, readable, and representative of the book it describes. One agent has suggested that a good proposal will provoke a progressive response something like this in any editor reading it: "Interesting. . . . Actually, not bad. . . . Hmm. This may be a book. . . . Wow! This is going to be a *big* book. . . . [*Jumping from chair and reaching for telephone*] I hope no one else has seen this proposal!"

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