

# **THE NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSAL DEMYSTIFIED**

AN EASY-SCHMEASY GUIDE TO WRITING A BUSINESS PLAN FOR YOUR BOOK

**NINA AMIR**

Pure Spirit Creations

Los Gatos, California

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## CHAPTER 1

### WHEN AND HOW TO WRITE A BOOK PROPOSAL

Any aspiring author who has ever wanted to become a traditionally published author asks two important questions:

1. How do I find a literary agent?
2. How do I attract a literary agent and publisher to my work?

It's not enough to just get a list of agents and contact them. You need to find an agent appropriate for the types of books you write and with whom you can develop a good working relationship. Even if you randomly select five or ten to query—or you do so in a more selective manner—and a few contact you in return, you must have a project they find interesting and viable and you must have the necessary qualities to make them want to take you on as a client. You need a marketable book idea and you need to be ready for authorship.

An agent wants clients who are good business partners. The same is true of a publisher. Agents work on a commission basis and make no money unless a book sells; therefore, you must have a convincing argument to prove you have a great book idea and that you can write it and help sell it, so they eventually make some money.

Large and mid-sized publishing houses rely on agents to send them potential book projects. They take only “agented work” in most cases. Small, independent publishing houses, those not affiliated with the large traditional publishers take “unagented work,” or proposals sent directly from authors as well as those sent by agents.

For help finding an agent, check out these resources:

[\*2014 Guide to Literary Agents\*](#) edited by Chuck Sambuchino

[\*How to Get a Literary Agent\*](#) by Michael Larsen

[\*2014 Writer's Market\*](#) by Robert Lee Brewer

[\*Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, & Literary Agents\*](#)

## NECESSITIES FOR GETTING YOUR NONFICTION BOOK PUBLISHED

Every day I speak to nonfiction writers who want to get published. They ask me about writing a book, editing, finding an agent, and writing a book proposal.

They all need the same things to get their nonfiction work published:

1. A Great Idea
2. A Great Pitch
3. A Great Market
4. A Great Platform
5. A Great Proposal
6. Chutzpah

A great idea seems self-explanatory. However, that great idea by your standards also must be great by the standards of an agent or an acquisitions editor, the person who actually acquires the manuscript, or book, for a publishing house. A great idea is unique and necessary when compared to other books in its category. It is also a book with a large enough market. Agents and acquisitions editors apply those standards to every book idea they consider. If, after a competitive analysis, you can actually say your idea is unique and necessary by their standards, and it has the potential to sell an above-average number of copies in a target market, it may, indeed, be a great idea.

A great pitch allows you to tell agents, acquisitions editors and readers what your book is about and why a reader will find it beneficial, or of value. It allows you to sell them on your idea. Plus, if you can hone your book idea to 25-50 words or less, that means you know what you are writing about. That's necessary to write a good book and get it published, too. If potential readers find your pitch interesting and attractive, that means you know your market as well as your subject—you know what readers want or need.

As mentioned, your book must be targeted at a large enough market. A publisher won't take on your book unless they perceive that it will sell enough copies. That means there need to be enough people in the world who might want to read it—a target market. If your book idea is unique and necessary—it addresses the needs of your audience (target market) and is unlike existing books in the category—then it will sell in your market. Only with a large enough market

or a specialized enough niche market can you make any money with a book, and a publisher wants to make money.

You need a large author platform because having one means you've created a built-in readership for your book. In other words, you have created a fan base of potential readers in your target market who are ready and waiting to purchase your book when it is released. This also implies that you will have a great promotion plan and be willing to promote your book. (This is part of number 5.) You must know how to sell to those readers once the book is published. Your platform guarantees that your promotional efforts work. First, you have someone interested in your product. Then you sell to them.

A great proposal convinces an agent or acquisitions editor that your idea is marketable—salable. It also convinces a publisher that you are a good publishing partner. After all, when a publisher offers you a contract, they become the financial backer for your project. You become business partners. This one document convinces an agent, first, and a publisher, second, that you make a good business partner and your “product,” your book, makes a good investment. If you plan to self-publish, a book proposal serves the same purpose, only you use it to reassure yourself of these same things—that your idea is salable and that you have what it takes to become a publisher and to produce a successful book. You then use the proposal as a business plan for your book (and for your new indie publishing company). The proposal contains your pitch, your competitive analysis, your market analysis, your promotion plan, and all the details on you and your book idea.

*Chutzpah.* This Yiddish word means nearly arrogant courage, gutsy audacity, brazen nerve, over-the-top self-confidence. You must be willing to do whatever it takes to get your book published. You must be shamelessly bold when touting your book. No one else is going to do it for you. Yes, an agent will help, but you are the one initially who will make that agent passionate about selling you and your book. You are the one who will convince an acquisitions editor via your proposal. You are the one who will sell your book to readers via your promotional efforts. You must have chutzpah, which also includes willingness, optimism, objectivity and tenacity, the foundational characteristics of Author Attitude. (Learn more about this in [\*The Author Training Manual: Develop Marketable Ideas, Craft Books That Sell, Become the Author Publishers Want, and Self-Publish Effectively.\*](#))

Now good writing helps a lot. A good editor, or even a ghostwriter, can help you with that, however, if you are not a natural writer. That's why good writing does not appear on this list.

## YOUR BOOK'S BEST BUSINESS PLAN

As a writer, you need to approach your book projects as a business person. You need a business plan, a strategy not only for the way you will write your book but for the way you will promote, or sell, it. This means you need to know who your readers will be and in what markets you will find them. Then you need to know how to infiltrate these markets.

This planning—and work—is best done prior to completing your book. In fact, it's best done prior to starting your book. That's why writers hear so much about "building author platform." It entails having a business strategy for your book from day one—from the conceptualization of your idea.

When that idea first pops into your head for your book, begin analyzing it, evaluating it, and figuring out whether it makes good business sense to pursue. Even if it simply feels like your passion and purpose to pursue that idea, you still should have a sound business plan to carry it out and to make it as successful as possible—to ensure it is marketable.

Writers often don't like to hear this "business talk." As artists, they prefer to stick to tasks they feel are more creative, although business planning can be a creative endeavor and prove quite inspiring. If you are like most aspiring authors, after reading this far you may have suffered from what award-winning television journalist Ted Koppel calls the "MEGO Factor": My Eyes Glaze Over. If you are not suffering from the MEGO factor, you may be destined to achieve success with your book. Why? Because I'm now going to tell you about the best business plan any writer or author can acquire: a book proposal.

That's right. A book proposal has all the elements of a great business plan for your book, which explains why every publisher expects you to have one—and to present a great one when you propose your book to an agent or an acquisitions editor. In fact, the publisher will, in large part, use your business plan—your book proposal—as their own when it comes to your book.

You don't have to write a formal book proposal if you plan to self-publish your book. You can just go through the process of accumulating all the information required for a book proposal. Then you will have what you need for a business plan for your book. Put this in a binder and refer to it often. The steps required to produce a book proposal produce the best business plan any author can compile. (Learn all about using the book proposal as an Author Training Process in my book, [\*The Author Training Manual: Develop Marketable Ideas, Craft Books That Sell, Become the Author Publishers Want, and Self-Publish Effectively\*](#).)

There are lots of books available about how to write a book proposal, such as agent [Mike Larsen's \*How to Write a Book Proposal\*](#) and Jeff Herman's [\*Write the Perfect Book Proposal: 10 That Sold and Why\*](#). If you are interested in a workbook that will help you go through the "proposal process," or "Author Training Process," so you can train yourself to evaluate your idea and yourself for successful authorship, [\*The Author Training Manual\*](#) contains one. If you want a product to help you easily insert the information you accumulate into a more formal book proposal or for a business plan, use my [\*Easy-Schmeasy Book Proposal Template\*](#). It offers you an



easy-to-follow format with instructions. Or check out [the book proposal template](#) created by agent Michael Larsen and Joel Freidlander, which is quite similar.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT GOES INTO A NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSAL?

I work with a lot of aspiring authors and published authors on their nonfiction book proposals and business plans. Despite the many great books written on how to write a book proposal, I'm always amazed at how little these clients actually "understand" about how to write a book proposal. Most proposals that come across my desk contain little or nothing of what they need to sell the great idea the writer has in mind.

Let's look at what goes into a nonfiction book proposal, which by the way, also can be used as a template for a fiction proposal or as a simple business plan for a self-published book. These days agents, editors and publishers want novelists to provide much of the same information.

This ebook discusses each section of a nonfiction book proposal to help you understand what actually goes into writing it. However, it covers only the basic information you need to include. It does not tell you how to evaluate whether that information can convince an agent or an acquisitions editor your book idea is marketable. ([\*The Author Training Manual\*](#) teaches you the evaluation process.) Proposals that sell books convince agents and editors of the marketability of a book idea and show that an author will make a good business partner for a publisher.

Historically, a nonfiction proposal consisted of two parts, the *Introduction* and the *Outline*, but over the years the standard format has changed. Below you will find a list of the sections to include. You no longer need to break your proposal into these two sections by using the titles "Introduction" and "Outline." It does, however, help for your own understanding to look at the proposal as two distinct parts—the introduction to your book and the outline of your book.

Introduction

Overview

Markets

Spin-offs

Promotion

Competing Books

Complementary Books

About the Author

Mission Statement

Author platform

Outline

List of Chapters

Chapter Summaries

Sample Chapters

When you write your book proposal, it will suffice to begin with the Overview. If you use the Introduction as your first section, provide some additional information there to introduce your idea and hook a reader, thus making them want to read on. There is no need any longer to distinguish the Outline in your proposal. Most proposals today will have a table of contents that reads more like this:

Overview

Markets

Spin-offs

Promotion

Competing Books

Complementary Books

About the Author

Mission Statement

Author platform

List of Chapters

Chapter Summaries

## Sample Chapters

Agents have different preferences when it comes to proposals. Some prefer to have About the Author and Author platform come right after the Overview, for example. If they take you on as a client, most agents will have you alter your proposal. Don't worry about it. Just put together a well-written proposal that makes a convincing argument for a marketable book and prove you can help a publisher sell that book. If you do that, you'll be fine.

Be sure to include a cover page and a table of contents for your entire proposal.

Let's now take a look at each section. If you know what goes into each section, writing your proposal becomes easy-schmeasy, rather than hard.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE OVERVIEW

The first section of a book proposal, the *Overview*, includes a lot of information in a short space and condensed format. Basically, the Overview provides a concise description of your book. This section has a hook (similar to a magazine or newspaper's lead paragraph), which could run several paragraphs in length, and a pitch, a short statement that describes the subject, target market and benefit of the book. This is followed immediately by details about the number of pages and illustrations (if any), as well as the back matter (glossary, appendix, etc.) you expect to include in the book. It also includes information on your book's unique features, if there are any. The Overview might discuss the timely nature of your topic as well. You accomplish all of this in no more than three pages—preferably in two pages.

The Overview for your book proposal covers the full scope of your concept and helps an agent or acquisitions editor see your book in totality. It offers a big-picture view of the project. Also, just as the lead to an article or the first chapter of a book entices a reader to continue reading, the overview of a book proposal must compel an agent or acquisitions editor to read the rest of the document.

It also is a sales document; be very clear on this fact. When you write your Overview, you create a document to sell your book “idea” to an agent and a publisher. That means it must convince the reader that the project is viable, or marketable, right from the start. That's why all the material in these two or three pages must point to the fact that your idea is unique and necessary and has a market.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MARKETS

The second section in a proposal is called *Markets*. This part of the proposal describes large groups of ideal readers who would purchase your book—actual target markets. Some people call this a book’s audience. The point of this section is simple: Prove enough readers exist to purchase your book so that publishing it appears to be a profitable venture.

To determine your market or markets, answer the question: *Who would be interested in my topic? Who will buy my book? and Who needs or wants my book?* Include demographic information in your answers if you can.

Do your research! Use Google or Yahoo and find statistics and information on the size of these groups.

If your book deals with women’s issues, for example, your primary market might be women. Thus, you might be tempted to write, “Women read the majority of books and are interested in women’s issues. Some statistics say there are 150,000,000 women in the U.S. and 3,301,112,087 women in the world.”

Instead, get more specific about the types of women who will read your book. Are they working women? Divorced women? Parents? Women who just graduated college? This narrows your market. Provide numbers that describe your specific market.

If your book is about Egypt, you could say your market is the international Muslim community. You could then write, “Muslims in general will be interested in reading this book, and, they will comprise more than one-quarter of the Earth’s population by 2030, according to a study released in January 2011 by the The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Muslim men and women will find [My Book Title] a compelling read and will be this book’s primary market.” If your book is directed at Muslim women, find out how many Muslim women live in the United States, for example, or describe what type of Muslim women would read your book and how many of them exist.

Big markets are great. Sometimes targeting a specific, small market can be good, though. Niche markets can be quite profitable.

## CHAPTER 5

### SPIN-OFFS

The *Spin-offs* section helps make you, the author, more enticing to the publisher by showing you have more to sell, or to write, than one book idea.

Spin-offs include other books you might write as follow-ups, including a series or sequels. Does your book naturally lead you to write others on similar or related topics? Maybe you can entice a publisher into a multi-book deal. If you think so, list these follow-up or book series ideas in this section with a 50-word or less pitch for each. You also can say right on the cover page or on that optional Introduction page your book will be the first in a series.

Additionally, some proposals have *Subsidiary Rights* section. When you sell your book to a publishing house, the publisher acquires primary book rights. As Mike Larsen explains in *How to Write a Book Proposal*, primary rights include publishing the book as an ebook, hardcover, trade paperback, and/or mass-market paperback; book club rights; selling permission to excerpt part of the book within another work or second-serial rights to excerpt the book or condense it or serialize the whole book in a periodical after publication; reproducing the text in other forms and media; reproducing the text in large-type or a royalty-free Braille edition; selling school editions; photocopying rights to all or part of the book for internal use by a school or business; selling the book through direct-response marketing channels; selling the book as a premium to businesses or nonprofits as a promotional tool; selling the book in bulk to customers outside the book industry; and granting the right to use part of the text to promote the book.

Subsidiary rights include things like television and feature film rights, foreign rights, first serial rights to excerpt the book before publication, translation rights, rights to produce abridged, unabridged and dramatized audio and video versions of your book, merchandising rights, and software rights (including the now popular phone “apps”). If your book has potential for subsidiary rights, you might want to include a list of them in your proposal with a short description; however, usually an agent will handle this section for you.

Having subsidiary rights or spin-offs to sell shows you are a good business person and more than a one-book author. This can make you more enticing or appealing to a publisher and help you sell your book idea. Publishers (and agents) like to know they can count on you to develop a readership over time. It takes more than one book to do so.

## CHAPTER 6

### PROMOTION

The *Promotion* section of the proposal can make or break your chance to land a traditional book publishing deal. It equates to your strategy for selling your book once it is published. Although a traditional publisher may do a small bit of promotion for your newly published book, the majority of the work falls to you. The publisher and sales and marketing team want to see your promotion plan to know if you are a good business partner. They want to know if you will help sell your book.

Your promotion plan should include promotion in cyberspace, such as via social networks, blogging, blog tours or virtual book tours, and through involvement in online forums. It also should include promotion in traditional areas, such as radio, television and print media. You also will want to consider speaking. A promotion plan includes all the things you promise to do to help sell your book, including sending out press releases to the media, publishing articles on your book's topic, teaching workshops and teleseminars, publishing a monthly newsletter, using e-zine article marketing techniques, hiring a publicist, taking out advertising of some sort, or even starting a radio show of your own.

Plus, your promotion plan should include maintaining a website that attracts visitors and readers. It can have a media kit or author's page to help you get media attention and speaking engagements.

When it comes to promotion, think and act outside the box. Your promotion plan will become the publishing house's promotion plan. A publisher will add to your plan a bit, but primarily they will rely on you to promote your own book in your own way.

Don't skimp on the Promotion section. Be creative, and consider how much money you can spend on promotion. Might you spend your whole advance? More than your advance? If you don't earn back your advance, you can be sure you won't get a second book deal from your publisher. Selling books is what it's all about, and promotion sells books.



## CHAPTER 7

### COMPETING BOOKS

The next section, the *Competing Books* section, deals with books your readers might purchase instead of yours if given the choice because the two are similar in subject and scope. To write this section you complete a competitive analysis, which means you study what books have been written and published on your topic and how your idea compares to these books.

A competitive analysis convinces a publisher that the book you plan to write will be unique and add something new to existing titles. In the publishing industry we say, “Make sure your book fills a hole on the shelf.” That means, find a place among the already published books on the appropriate shelf in a store where yours would be stocked and where a title appears to be missing. That’s where you want your book to reside. It should fill that gap in that particular category by providing something that doesn’t yet exist—something readers want but can’t yet find. Your book idea should be angled so it covers the information that hasn’t yet been covered or written about in the category.

In the Competing Books section of your proposal, simply write a short introduction saying, “The following books are closest in subject matter and, therefore, represent the most direct competition to [Title of Your Book].” Include up to five books with the best-selling books first or by date of publication (no need to include books published more than three to five years ago or self-published titles). Conclude with a paragraph comparing these books to your book or you as an author to these authors. In his book, *How to Write a Book Proposal*, Michael Larsen suggests you set up this section in this manner:

Title, Subtitle, by Author (Publisher, copyright year, # pages, format, price). Two incomplete sentences joined by a semicolon; first one says what is positive about the book and the second one says what is negative about the book.

If you don’t think your book has any competition, move on to the next section, Complementary Books, but don’t make light of the importance of this section. I once had a publishing house reject my proposal because of my Competitive Book section...not because I hadn’t done it well but because they felt the books I listed hadn’t sold enough copies. (This, to them, meant the market wasn’t big enough and my book represented too big a risk.).

Also, know that agents and acquisitions editors get suspicious of authors who say their books will have no competition. So do your research for your competitive analysis carefully.

## CHAPTER 8

### COMPLEMENTARY BOOKS

*Complementary Books* are titles someone interested in your book might purchase because they are related in subject matter. These books do not represent competition per se. They may be similar but don't fit into the same exact niche as your book. You might not find them on the same shelf, but, on the other hand, they could exist in the same category. They wouldn't offer the same information, advice or tools. For example, a book on how to write a query letter complements a book on how to write a book proposal. Two books on how to write a book proposal, however, are competing titles.

Look for complementary books in much the same way you look for competing books—in both online and physical book stores. If you look at Amazon.com, you might take notice of the books Amazon notes as other books purchased by readers of a particular title. These could well be complementary books.

List about five to ten complementary books beginning with a sentence that reads: "Readers purchasing the following titles might also purchase [Title of Your Book]." Include the following information for each item: Title, Subtitle, by Author (Publisher, copyright year, # pages, format, price). Conclude with a paragraph that compares your book to these books or you as an author to these authors.

## CHAPTER 9

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At this point in your proposal, explain why you are the best person to write your book. This section is called *About the Author*. Sounds pretty simple, right? It actually is as long as you have the ammunition to convince someone you do, indeed, have the credentials to write your book.

Write a biography that includes your expertise and experience. Write in the third person. Include the most important facts first, such as anything that makes you the expert on your topic, your educational degrees (if they apply to the topic), work experience, etc. Include all your achievements. See this as your resume in prose written specifically for your book.

Include a professional head shot if you have one.

## CHAPTER 10

### MISSION STATEMENT

These days many book proposals include a *Mission Statement* after the About the Author section. Occasionally you find it on the first page, as the Introduction. Sometimes it appears before the Promotion section if the author wants to show their enthusiasm for helping the book succeed. The Mission Statement answers the question: Why do I feel compelled to write this book (and to help it succeed)? Your Mission Statement might also answer these questions: What's my purpose in writing this book? What's my mission in writing this book (or how does writing this book fit into my mission in life)? What do I want to accomplish by writing this book? Why do I feel compelled to make this book a success?

The answers to these questions constitute much of what goes into your mission statement, which consists of one paragraph (at most two—but no more than about half a page) written in the first person present tense. It tells an agent or an acquisitions editor why you must write your book.

## CHAPTER 11

### AUTHOR PLATFORM

The *Author platform* section proves you have done what it takes to create a built-in readership for your book—that you have pre-promoted your book (and yourself) prior to publication. Like the Promotion section, the Author platform section can make or break an aspiring nonfiction author's chances of getting a publishing contract. Be sure you not only have built a platform prior to submitting a book proposal but also do a great job of preparing this section.

Think of building author platform as pre-publication promotional activities in which you engage to ensure your post-publication promotional activities work. In its simplest form, platform equates to how many people you know or know you and potentially will buy your book. These people can be followers on Facebook; tweeple on Twitter; connections on LinkedIn; blog or newsletter subscribers; podcast listeners; people reached via print publications, e-zines and online publications for which you write; attendees at your talks and workshops; publicity partners; and fellow members of online and offline associations. You build a platform through speaking, writing, social media activities, networking, media appearances, etc. All of these activities give you visibility, reach, authority, and influence in your target market. That equates to platform.

The platform section of your book proposal is comprised of a list of bullets. This list contains all the things you have done to date to develop an author platform. It includes statistics, such as how many unique visitors visit your blog each day, how many page views you get daily on your website, how many places you have spoken in the last year or six months (and how many you have scheduled for the next 6-12 months), where you have appeared as a guest blogger, how many followers you have on Facebook, how many tweeple you have on Twitter, how many connections you have on LinkedIn, how many people are on your mailing list, how many articles you've written for major publications or where you've been quoted or featured as an expert in your field, what radio or television shows you've appeared on as a guest, what awards you've received, and the organizations to which you belong.

## CHAPTER 12

### LIST OF CHAPTERS

Inside every nonfiction book proposal you find two tables of contents. The first one appears on the second page of the proposal; it helps an agent or an acquisitions editor find the different parts and sections of the proposal. The second appears as the first part of what used to be called The Outline, or the second section of the book proposal. It functions as a table of contents for your actual proposed book, or book idea, and is called the *List of Chapters*. It is actually your book's table of contents, which is, in fact, a list of chapters.

Seems simple enough right? Basically it is. This section needs only some attention to detail on your part. On this page you place the heading, "List of Chapters." Follow this with your book's actual table of contents.

Now comes the tricky part. For each chapter title in your table of contents, create a tab that is flush right and include the page number within the proposal where the agent or acquisitions editor can find the chapter summary, or synopsis, for that particular chapter. Obviously, to complete this section you need to complete the next section of the nonfiction book proposal, called Chapter Summaries. You then need to go through your proposal and be sure you have the correct page written down here.

If and when you make changes to the Chapter Summaries (much like with the first table of contents for the whole proposal), you need to update the List of Chapters to reflect any changes in page numbering. Proofreading the two tables of contents should be the final thing you do before submitting your proposal.

## CHAPTER 13

### CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The section called *Chapter Summaries* is also known as the chapter-by-chapter synopsis. Indeed, that is what this tedious section really is: a synopsis of each and every chapter. And, yes, you need to complete this section even if your manuscript is written. The reason for this is simple: An agent or an acquisitions editor may not want or have the time to read your whole manuscript as they go through the initial process of deciding if they are interested in your project. Your chapter summaries allow them to scan the content of the book and determine if it is meaty enough; if it is unique enough; if it flows; if it makes sense; if there appears to be enough for a book; if it carries through on the description in the Overview; and if it makes good on the promises you made in the Overview—both to the publisher and to your readers.

The worst chapter summaries are those that simply say, “In this chapter readers will...” The best ones are creative and give the reader a sense of what the book will be about as well as what the author’s voice sounds like. Try to use active sentences and put some real work into this section.

Keep your summaries to a paragraph or two, if possible.

By the way, memoir writers also need Chapter Summaries in their book proposals—even if the memoir is done. You can submit a proposal for a memoir without it being finished, but it is not recommended. Most are actually complete when sent off to an agent or publisher.

Once you’ve finished the Chapter Summaries section of the non-fiction book proposal, all you have left to do is attach your sample chapters. That’s the last section.

## CHAPTER 14

### SAMPLE CHAPTERS

This final section of a book proposal is pretty self-explanatory. You simply attach two or three of your best chapters to the end of your book proposal.

As I said, you want to attach your best chapters. More often than not this will include your first chapter, since it should entice readers into the book and offer a good sense of what the book is about. But you may also want to include chapters farther into the book.

Include about 25 pages of content.

Number these pages as a continuous part of the proposal. As such, they also get a heading that says “Sample Chapters.” Also include the heading and each sample chapter in your table of contents for the proposal so an acquisitions editor can easily flip to the section or to an individual chapter.

You may want to have your sample chapters professionally edited if you plan on having the whole book professionally edited prior to sending it off to an agent or an acquisitions editor, which I recommend. This way you put your best work forward. If you don’t plan on doing so, don’t edit some and not all. The publisher will see the discrepancy later.



## CHAPTER 15

### HOW TO WRITE A PROPOSAL THAT MAKES AGENTS AND EDITORS TAKE NOTICE

As the number of books published each year increases, the number of people who buy them decreases. The average nonfiction book sells less than 250 copies per year and less than 3,000 copies over its lifetime. Yet, millions of aspiring nonfiction authors continue to dream of traditionally publishing a nonfiction book. Therefore, it behooves you to see the truth about publishing and to discern the steps necessary to ensure you come up with the idea for not just any book but for a book that sells more than the average number of copies per year.

That's the key to writing a successful book proposal. The idea behind the proposal must be one that agents and acquisitions editors feel will sell more than the average number of copies per year. They are looking for bestsellers. Barring that, they want books that earn back their advances and then some, which most books never do.

How do you guarantee you write a successful nonfiction book? By using what I call the proposal process, or the Author Training Process, to craft successful book ideas. You don't need to actually write a nonfiction book proposal. You just need to put your idea through the evaluation tool provided by each section of a proposal. In other words, compile the information required for a nonfiction book proposal and then look at your idea objectively to determine if you need to retool your idea to better target your audience or make your book stand out in its category. Read your own proposal from a business standpoint. [\*The Author Training Manual: Develop Marketable Ideas, Craft Books That Sell, Become the Author Publishers Want, and Self-Publish Effectively\*](#) takes you through each step of this process and offers you a workbook with training exercises as well as sample proposals and business plans reviewed by publishing professionals so you can see through their eyes.

You can go through the process without [\*The Author Training Manual\*](#) by constantly asking yourself if the book idea you have represents a marketable product—one that will sell. If so, take the material you've compiled, craft it into a finely honed book proposal, and submit it to agents. You stand a higher likelihood of success after going through this process.

### WHY ARE SOME BOOK PROPOSALS BETTER THAN OTHERS?

Any aspiring author who has ever written a book proposal—or considered writing a book proposal—has wondered what might set theirs apart from the hundreds that show up on an agent’s or an acquisition editor’s desk each day. I’ve heard about all sorts of new tactics used to gain attention. Most agents tell me they prefer the tried and true formats and methods.

I’ve written my share of nonfiction book proposals, and I’ve edited quite a few for my clients as well. Each is different. But one thing remains the same: The idea must be unique and necessary and have a big enough target market.

The best proposals argue for marketability...every step of the way. Every paragraph, every page, every section speaks to the reasons this book is a viable product that will sell. That’s what makes your book proposal better than the next.

A book proposal is not about you, although it must show the publisher why you are the best person to write the book and why you are a good publishing partner. It’s about why the book idea is a great business proposition. Your proposal is a business plan meant to convince a venture capital partner to invest in your idea, or product. Beyond that, it must convince the publisher that you can produce the product and help sell it. If your proposal can do that, especially in a well-written, creative and compelling manner, yours will stand out.

## HOW TO GET YOUR QUERY OR PROPOSAL ACCEPTED

If your queries and proposals come back rejected, consider changing something before you send them out again! Even if your work gets rejected without specific reason, it might be time to try something different.

In the world of personal growth and self-improvement, there’s a common saying: Don’t do the same thing and expect different results. The same holds true when it comes to sending out a query letter or proposal that isn’t winning you a contract.

That’s why many agents don’t send out a proposal in bulk. A simultaneous submission may mean you lose the chance to submit a different—better—query or proposal to additional agents or publishers after you discover what you had originally prepared didn’t work with the first two or three (or 10 or 15) to which you sent it. Take every chance to rework your query or proposal if what you have been doing doesn’t achieve the result you desire.

I'll say it again: Don't do the same thing and expect different results. If your query or proposal isn't getting the results you want—a sale—rewrite, reangle, find a new pitch, play up the benefits, change something! Then see if your results don't change as well.

But what if you don't know what to change? What if all you get back are form letters?

Go to a writers' conference and pitch to agents in person. Ask them to give you real feedback.

If that fails, or you can't do that, use my agent review service to get a real, live agent to give you feedback on your proposal. (This is not to find out whether they are interested in your book, but just to get a proposal review so you can discover whether your idea is marketable, whether you are a good business partner for an agent or publisher, or whether your proposal simply needs reworking.) If you are interested, [click here](#).

## CHAPTER 16

### HOW TO MAKE A GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION

Most of you have probably heard the adage, “You get only one chance to make a first impression.” Well, sometimes someone gives you a second chance, but in the world of publishing, when you send a query letter or book proposal to an agent or an acquisitions editor—especially one who doesn’t know you—you really do get only one chance. So, you better make a good impression.

That means your query letter or book proposal better:

- meet industry standards
- be polished and professional
- have no grammatical errors or typos to catch their attention

You can make sure you meet industry standards by reading some of the great books out there on how to write a book proposal ,which I’ve mentioned earlier in this book.

You also can drop your information into a template. Try my [The Easy-Schmeasy Book Proposal Template](#), or [the template created by author and agent Michael Larsen](#). Or join [Writers, Agents & Editors Network](#) and use the free BP (Book Proposal) Wizard offered there by Deborah and Jeff Herman.

Once you have your book proposal written—once all the blanks have been filled in using whatever book, template or plug ‘n’ play model you choose—spend the money on a great proposal editor. Why? Because this ensures that you will, indeed, make a good impression.

It’s possible that despite your best efforts you may not have:

- formatted your document well
- written clearly
- included all the necessary information or sections
- provided an enticing lead
- detailed the benefits to the reader
- given all the details of the complementary or competing books

- offered a thorough enough promotion plan
- done enough to attract a publisher

The last point is the stickler.

You may not have spent the time prior to writing your proposal to build a platform; thus, you may need to wait three to six months (or longer) while you build one.

A good proposal editor will not only edit your book proposal for grammar and punctuation, he or she will make sure it has everything an acquisitions editor is looking for—and that you are everything a publisher wants in a business partner. After all, you are asking a publisher to back your book project financially, and your book proposal serves as your business plan for that business venture. So, it must show you off and present your book in the best light.

## HOW TO WRITE A QUERY LETTER FOR A NONFICTION BOOK

At this point, you've got a great idea for a nonfiction book. You've written a killer book proposal. Now you need a fabulous query letter to grab an agent or an acquisitions editor's attention so they actually ask for the proposal. This is the first step before you send out your book proposal. If the query letter gets the agent, or an editor at a small publishing house, excited, he or she will ask you to send your proposal for review.

To write a killer query, you need a one-page letter with three basic sections or paragraphs. Thus, tackle writing your query letter in three steps.

### STEP 1: WRITE A LEAD OR HOOK.

Much like the first paragraph in a magazine or newspaper article or even the first page in a book, your introduction needs to hook the reader—a literary agent or an acquisitions editor at a publishing house. This first paragraph—or even the first sentence or two—must grab the reader and make him or her want to read on. I suggest you include the most compelling idea, attractive benefit or emotionally charged solution you will provide in your book. You might also tie the topic of your book into a statistic that proves the market for your book. Or you could use an anecdote.

## STEP 2. PITCH YOUR BOOK.

In this paragraph of your query letter, write a pitch for your book. This should be 50 words or less that describe the essence of your book. (You don't have to count the title of your book in the word count, and you may find the subtitle actually works well as a description.) Try to fit in the benefits of your book and indicate the market you are targeting. If possible, include the special features your book will offer, if any. Michael Larsen says this first description of your book actually should be just 15 words and be considered the selling handle for the book—something that convinces booksellers to stock it. Think about including a comparison to one or two books, movies or authors you feel are similar. Include your book's largest market, as well as the book's actual or estimated length. You also can mention if someone has agreed to write the foreword, if you have cover quotes, the titles of additional books (if this is one in a series), and information on a self-published version (if you have sold enough copies to make the numbers attractive to a publisher).

## STEP 3. EXPLAIN WHY YOU ARE THE BEST PERSON TO WRITE THIS BOOK.

Paragraph three contains a short bio explaining why you are the perfect author for this particular book. Include information on your education, expert status, credentials, experience in your field, etc. Also, briefly describe what you are doing or have done to create an author platform, and include numbers if they're impressive. You can add links to pertinent sites and information online.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

These three paragraphs make up the foundation of a query. Traditionally, a query should be one page in length; however, I've also heard good reviews for longer queries that offer more information and shorter ones that take a quarter-page "cannonball" approach.

You can include other specific information in your query that might convince an agent to ask to see your proposal. For example: If you are approaching an agent with your query, sometimes your letter may include a brief paragraph prior to the actual lead that mentions why you are contacting this specific agent or the name of someone who suggested you contact the agent. You can also mention an author who acknowledged the agent in a book, where you heard the agent speak, or a conference where you might be able to meet the agent in the future. (You also can do this in the last paragraph of the query letter.) If you met the agent at a pitch session and were told to submit a query, be sure to mention that fact right up front.

You can include a brief list of the top things you will do to promote your book online and off as part of your third paragraph, especially if it highlights specific platform elements.

I like to add a concluding paragraph in which I thank the agent for his or her time and say my proposal is available upon request. If you like, you can mention the proposal's length and how many pages of manuscript currently are completed.

Of course, be sure you edit and proofread your query letter; you might also decide to have it professionally edited.

Choose your agents and publishers carefully. Send simultaneous submissions only to those who allow it, and consider whether or not this practice is one you want to pursue. By utilizing simultaneous submissions, you will spend less time waiting to send your query to the next agent. However, if you send out one query letter at a time, you allow yourself to get valuable feedback you can then implement. It could be your query letter needs tweaking to actually land an agent.

## THINGS TO DO WHILE WAITING FOR A RESPONSE

Writers spend a lot of time waiting for responses from agents and acquisitions editors. Waiting can leave you immobilized. You can find yourself twiddling your thumbs in front of the computer anxiously instead of eagerly tapping your fingers on the keyboard.

What can you do while you wait? First, it's best not to just wait—or to put your life on hold thinking any minute now you will be very busy writing that book. You may then turn away some profitable work or waste a lot of time doing piddly things that don't amount to much in the end.

So, here are 11 productive things you can do while you wait:

1. Start on a new book idea.
2. Start on a new query letter.

3. Start writing a new book.
4. Start on a new book proposal.
5. Start a new exercise regimen (while you have time).
6. Read a book (or two or three).
7. Write e-zine articles and news releases.
8. Create your online media kit.
9. Start or continue a blog related to your book.
- 10 .Answer media requests or pitch the media.
11. Build your platform.

In this way you will stay busy, feel like you are accomplishing something and not focus too much on the fact that you haven't heard anything yet. Too much dwelling on the silence leads only to negative thinking, which does not help in any way, shape or form. In fact, it typically hinders you from creating what you want—an acceptance letter or call. That's why it's much better to stay busy. You'll find the time passes more quickly that way as well.

## THINGS TO DO WHEN A PUBLISHER WANTS TO SEE YOUR PROPOSAL

One thing better than getting a call from an agent saying they are interested in representing you is getting an email or call from your agent telling you an acquisitions editor at a publishing house wants to see your proposal. (Of course, the very best thing is getting a call from your agent saying you received an offer from a publisher on said book.) What do you do next? Here's my list:

1. Jump up and down and do a little dance for joy...and then quickly sit back down at the computer to work.
2. Put all other work on hold for the day.
3. Open up your proposal document.



4. Reread the whole proposal again to check for errors, ways to tighten sentences, typos, etc.

5. Update any statistics or facts.

6. Review the Complementary and Competing Books sections, and then go to Amazon.com to see if you've missed any books or if any new books have hit the market. Add any books you feel might show good sales of books similar to yours.

7. Check your platform section to make sure your speaking engagements, media appearances, etc., are up to date. Add anything that is missing.

8. Check that nothing you changed caused any funky page breaks or changes in numbering.

9. Proof your changes.

10. Write a nice note to your agent and remember to attach the revised edition of the proposal to the email.

When you have done all ten of these things, I suggest you do two more:

1. Do another happy dance, and think very positive thoughts. Visualize that phone call coming from your agent...what will you feel like when you are told you've landed a traditional publishing contract? Relish the feeling. Imagine signing the contract, writing the book, getting the published copy in your hands.

2. Then sit back down at your desk and go on to your next project or the work you put on hold. Do not sit and watch the phone or your inbox. Get to work on something else that excites and inspires you.

## ABOUT NINA AMIR



Nina Amir, author of [\*How to Blog a Book\*](#) and [\*The Author Training Manual\*](#), transforms writers into inspired, successful authors, authorpreneurs and blogpreneurs.

Known as the Inspiration to Creation Coach, she moves her clients from ideas to finished books as well as to careers as authors by helping them combine their passion and purpose so they create products that positively and meaningfully impact the world. A sought-after speaker, as well as a book, blog-to-book, and results coach, some of Nina's clients have sold 300,000+ copies, landed deals with major publishing houses, and created thriving businesses around their books. She writes multiple blogs, self-published 12 books, and founded National Nonfiction Writing Month, aka the Write Nonfiction in November Challenge.

To learn more about how to create a business plan, or book proposal, for your book or your indie publishing company, check out Nina's popular course, [Author Training 101](#), which is based on [\*The Author Training Manual\*](#). Used in conjunction with the [Easy-Schmeasy Book Proposal Template](#), the course helps make it easy-schmeasy to write a proposal or create a business plan for your book.

You can learn more about Nina at [www.ninaamir.com](http://www.ninaamir.com).

Read her blogs at:

[www.howtoblogabook.com](http://www.howtoblogabook.com)

[www.writtenonfictionnow.com](http://www.writtenonfictionnow.com)

[www.asthespiritmovesme.com](http://www.asthespiritmovesme.com)

Connect with Nina on:

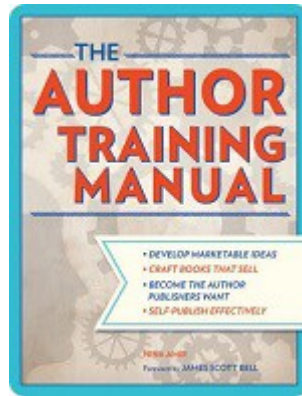
Twitter at [@NinaAmir](https://twitter.com/NinaAmir)

Facebook at [www.facebook.com/InspirationToCreation](https://www.facebook.com/InspirationToCreation)

Google+ at <https://plus.google.com/u/0/+NinaAmir>

LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/ninaamir/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/ninaamir/)

ALSO BY NINA AMIR



*The Author Training Manual: Develop Marketable Ideas, Craft Books That Sell, Become the Author Publishers Want, and Self-Publish Effectively*



*How to Blog a Book: Write, Publish, and Promote Your Work One Post at a Time*

