



WRITING A NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSAL

By June Clark

Book proposals are akin to business proposals—they serve as a sales tool to impress and persuade literary agents and publishers to consider acquiring your book. Each proposal section highlights a different but essential feature or benefit of your book and you as its author.

If you are fortunate enough to get an editor interested in your book, your proposal will be brought to the publisher's editorial board for discussion. The board consists of an editorial team, sales and marketing, publicity, and other key decision-makers, each focusing on a particular section of your proposal. Therefore, including all pertinent sections and completing them to the best of your ability will increase your chances of success.

Before You Begin

Format

The proposal should be double-spaced using Microsoft Word. The preferable font is Times New Roman 12 pt. If possible, number your pages (you need not put your name on each page or put a copyright on it).

Proposal Sections

Title Page

Include the book's title, subtitle (if any), and your name and contact information.

Table of Contents (for the proposal only)

This is optional. Some include it; most do not.

Overview

In this section, compellingly describe the purpose of your book. As you write, convey why the book fulfills a need, poses and solves a problem, and is a timely and important topic. Back up your description with features and benefits, as well as statistics (if there are any that can support your idea). Then, tell us why *you* are the best person to write this book.

Specifications

This short section, often a subsection of the Overview, will detail how many words your book will be (an estimate is fine), how long it will take for you to deliver the manuscript and any special features you may be including with your work, such as photos or illustrations, interviews, or charts/diagrams. The average book runs 60,000-85,000 words and should be delivered within six months of a signed contract.

Endorsements

This section is not mandatory, but if you have quotes/endorsements from notable people in your field or just notable in general (other authors, doctors, political leaders, celebrities, etc.), be sure to include these quotes early in your proposal – they are often impressive and effective. Ideally, the endorsements should be about the merits of your book, but they can also be about you if they focus on your expertise in the area in which you are writing.

About the Author

Like an embellished bio, tell us about yourself as professionally as possible. Focus on relevant information regarding your education, credentials, professional experience, and achievements. In other words, this is where showing your “platform” comes in. Include details about work you have done in your field that relates to the topic of your book. If you have been interviewed by or written for the media, convey that information. If you’ve been on TV or radio, list those appearances. If you have a website or blog, provide addresses/links to those pages. If relevant, touch on your site’s/blog’s popularity, how many hits you get each month, and how large a subscriber base you have. If you’re active on social media and have a dedicated and substantial following, mention it. If you have published any previous books, list them here, along with publication dates and the publisher/s of record. If any or all of your books have had excellent sales figures and reviews or won any awards, add that information here as well. If your book was published abroad, mention the countries of publication. Make an impression!

Target Market/Audience

Who is the audience for this book? Why will they care about this topic and want to buy your book? Research your primary audience and secondary audiences. If possible, include statistics about the types of readers who may be interested in purchasing copies of the book. Be as wide-reaching as possible, even if your target audience is a niche (e.g., parents of children with special needs, vegan cooking, pickleball, etc.).

Competing Books

Check out similar books to yours at your local bookseller, library, or Amazon.com. List 4-6 of the most popular titles in this section. Competition isn’t a bad thing. When a book is successful, other publishers may see merit in doing a slightly similar book on that subject – especially if your book can take that great idea to the next level or you can bring a unique spin to the topic. When listing the competitive books, cite the title, author, publisher, and year of publication. Then, write a brief description of that book, pointing out how your book will offer a fresh perspective. If there’s nothing in the field to compare with your book, demonstrate how this book will fill the void and why it can successfully serve its market.

Promotion

Publishers expect you to be an active participant in promoting your book. Not only do they want to know what you're planning to do, but they also want to see what you are doing now to create a buzz or expand your platform. (These things take time to develop, so it's never too early to start.) If you already have some recognition in your field, pull out all the stops and provide as much information as you can regarding your social media presence, future speaking engagements, professional affiliations, upcoming articles you're writing, media relationships, a database of colleagues, clients, and fans, hits on your website, podcasts, YouTube videos, and the like. Citing numbers is helpful, too. If your social media followers are in the tens of thousands, cite those figures. If you speak or present at industry conferences, how many people are usually in attendance? And can you do "back of room" book sales? If so, how many books can you potentially sell at each venue? What contacts do you have in the media, and what organization do you belong to that you can call upon when it comes time to promote your book? Mention anything and everything you can. If you haven't had much exposure, you'll have to get creative about what you can do. Think outside the box. List innovative ways you can spread the word about your book and commit to promoting it. Publishers want books they know will sell. Whatever you can do to help that process along will be pivotal to a publisher's interest in acquiring your book.

Table of Contents (for the book)

The Table of Contents is an outline that lists all the chapters you plan to have in your book and any back matter you anticipate (such as references, bibliography, appendices, etc.). Most books have 8-12 chapters, but as many as 24. Give the name of each chapter as well. If you plan to include an Introduction or have someone notable write a Foreword, you can list this in your Table of Contents.

Chapter Overviews (or Chapter Descriptions)

Once you've determined the overall structure of your book in the Table of Contents, list each chapter and its title again, and write a paragraph or two describing what you intend to cover in each chapter.

Sample Chapter

Include at least one completed sample chapter with this book proposal package. It doesn't matter which chapter you decide to write or use, but choose whatever you feel is strong and most informative. Include a whole chapter, not a partial or an excerpt. It may be preferable to work on and include the first chapter since it usually introduces the subject or theme of your book and helps prospective agents and editors learn more about the topic you're presenting.

Additional Information

If you want to include photos or charts and can incorporate them into the document, feel free to add them, providing you use them sparingly. If you plan to include articles you've written or interviews you've given, add hyperlinks directly to those articles or websites. If you have a website, add that link in your About the Author section.

Other Tips

- Always focus on how your book will benefit the reader. It's less about what you know and more about what your reader needs that your book can provide.
- Your tone should be helpful to and digestible by any reader of any education level.
- Proofread and spellcheck your book proposal before submitting it to agents. You'll be surprised by the errors you find or typos you missed upon careful reading. Ensure all errors are corrected. It is critical to present this document as professionally as possible.