

You're the Expert

How to write a nonfiction book proposal
that sells.



inkdrop
lit

by Sarah Welch



What's your expertise?

When you're ready to share it with the world, start with a book proposal.

The first step to a traditionally published nonfiction book isn't the book itself. Instead, it's the *book proposal*.

This is the document that explains what your book is about, why it's important, who will read it, why it will sell, and why you're the best person to write it. You'll use this to secure an agent and sell your book to a publisher—before you write the manuscript.

The book proposal includes eight key components, and we'll unpack each one in this e-book. Ready?

Eight Elements of a Successful Book Proposal

1 Book Overview

2 Target Markets

3 Competitive Analysis

4 About the Author

5 Marketing & Promotion

6 Chapter Outline

7 Chapter Summaries

8 Sample Chapter

Book Overview

"Your overview must prove that you have a marketable, practical idea and that you are the right person to write about it and promote it."

- Michael Larsen, *How to Write a Book Proposal*

The book overview should be the first item in your proposal, but it should be the *last* piece you write. That's because it takes every other element of the proposal and synthesizes it into one powerful, compelling sales pitch.

Think of this as the executive summary of your book. It should run two to three pages and include the following elements:

- **A hook** to pique agents' and editors' interest. Think anecdotes, statistics, controversial statements. Something relevant to your book (obviously) that will capture attention right away.
- **Your book's elevator pitch.** What's it called? What's important about it? Which books or authors served as models for your book, and how does your book differ from their work? Why is this book necessary *right now*, and why are you the person to write it?
- **Specs**—or proposed specs, at least—such as expected word count, planned visuals, special features, and time frame for delivery.

Target Markets

Who is your book for?

This section details who you are writing for, what kind of person you anticipate will buy your book, and how large the market is. As you consider your target market, remember one very important thing:

NO BOOK IS FOR EVERYBODY.

Got it? Good.

The goal of this section is to help agents and acquisitions editors begin to envision how they will market and sell the book, so it's your job to get hyper specific here. Is this a book for leaders? That's a good start, but narrow it down. Are you talking about first-time managers? Fortune 500 executives? Startup founders? Community leaders? Politicians? Student council presidents?

Get specific about your target reader: consider their age, gender, income, occupation, interests, geographic locations, values and beliefs, family status, etc. Where do these readers hang out online? What organizations are they part of? What publications do they read?

To the extent it's possible, find data that shows how large your audience is (for example, the audience for a leadership book for young adults might include counsellors at the 7,000 sleep-away camps and members of the 12,000 fraternity and sorority chapters in the United States. That's a big audience.

Also consider bulk sales opportunities, such as organizations that would likely purchase copies en masse for every member, or companies that would be likely to buy them as client gifts.



Competitive Analysis

"You should be able to clearly differentiate your title from the competition, and show why there's a need for your book."

- Jane Friedman, *Start Here: How to Write a Book Proposal*

In this section, you select five to ten competitive or comparable titles in order to demonstrate that **a)** there is interest in your topic, but **b)** you are presenting a unique take that hasn't been explored in depth.

It will be tempting to say there are no competitors for your book. Don't do that. There are. And if there aren't, that may signal to agents and editors that your topic is too niche to sell.

Include your comps' titles, subtitles, author, publisher, year of publication, page count, price, format, and ISBN. Then, give a brief summary of each comp's approach versus your own. Stick to 100 to 200 words, and *do not bash the competition*.

Try to find books published within the last five years, indicating that your topic is still relevant. Additionally, to the extent that you can, stick with authors whose platforms are similar to yours. If you're a debut author, find successful books from other debut authors. This helps show that your topic or angle will sell, regardless of your platform. No matter how similar your subject matter to his, Malcolm Gladwell's latest bestseller is probably *not* an effective comp for your very first book.

About the Author

This is the section where you establish why you're the best person to write this book. Feel free to start with a bio you already use for work or on LinkedIn, but don't stop there.

In your "About the Author" section, your goal is to build credibility around the topic you're proposing to write about. This isn't the time for humble bragging, either, so don't be coy! Put it all out on the table. Dig deep, and let readers know how your education, professional experiences, personal accomplishments, etc. make *you* the best voice to be telling this story.

Additionally, highlight your platform. If you are planning to write a gardening book, go ahead and let readers know your @mulch_is_life Instagram handle has 10,000 followers. If you want to write about managing great teams, talk about the leadership conferences you've spoken at and panels you've been on. Brag on your email list, your customer base, your YouTube following, your well-connected industry friends...anything that will show agents and editors you have the perfect platform from which to address your target audience—and from which to sell books.



Marketing & Promotion

Writing is 10 percent; marketing is 90 percent.

- Jack Canfield

Publishers will do some marketing and publicity for books they publish, but they also want assurance that their authors are able and willing to move copies. In fact, one of the most common reasons for rejecting a manuscript is because the author doesn't have a strong enough platform.

In this section, you're responsible for demonstrating your commitment to promoting the book via any channels you have available to you. Be sure to include both the online and offline activities you plan to engage in.

If you have or plan to hire a publicist, include that. If you have a promotion budget, include that. If you travel extensively for work, note which cities you're in frequently and where you'd love to set up PR opportunities while you're there.

Include book club visits, virtual tours, speaking engagements, and anything else you're willing to do (that's within your power) to promote and sell your book. If you don't have an extensive network (or even if you do), list your well-connected friends who will promote your book on their platforms or are willing to cohost events with you.

No need to write an essay for this section. Instead, put all your proposed and planned activities into a bulleted list so agents and editors can see your plans at a glance.

Get creative here, but remember one important rule: **don't exaggerate**. You're liable to be on the hook for what you promise here, so make it sound impressive, but plan to abide by the old standby, "underpromise and overdeliver."



Chapter Outline

This one is simple: it's essentially a table of contents showing readers the structure of the book at a glance. Include intro and foreword (and their authors) if applicable, as well as proposed titles for each chapter and subchapter.

Chapter Summaries

Your chapter summaries are a meatier version of your outline, allowing readers to dig deeper into each section of the book. Write a brief summary of the main idea, key points, and stories presented in each chapter, aiming for 100 to 200 words apiece.

Be careful, here, that your chapter summaries don't read like an article on your topic. You don't want agents and editors to think it can all be covered on a few pages. If that's the case, why buy the book?

Rather, use a structure that stays focused on what the chapter covers and what readers will learn—not the information itself. Think "The goal of this chapter is..." or "Readers will learn how to..." If the chapter is divided into parts or some other unique structure, let readers know, and feel free to provide sneak peeks of any key visuals or charts.





Sample Chapter

Give agents and editors a sneak peek at the unique brilliance you have to offer.

The sample material is your opportunity to bring everything you've told agents and editors about in the rest of the proposal to life. Many agents will include specifications in their submission guidelines for how much material they want to see with your proposal. If that's the case, follow the rules. Sending in more (or less) won't give you a leg up. If an agent or editor doesn't specify, a good rule of thumb is to submit about 10 percent of the book.

Which chapters you submit is up to you, but there are some guidelines to consider. If your book follows a narrative structure—a memoir or a biography—send material from the beginning or close to it. If your book isn't a narrative—if it's a how-to book, for example—you want to send the meatiest, most interesting chapter. Which part of the book best demonstrates your expertise, your unique perspective, and your style? (Hint: it's probably *not* the introduction.)

Agents and editors will want to see a full "slice" of the book so they can understand its structure. So, rather than send excerpts from several chapters, send full chapters. If you send multiple, they don't necessarily need to be consecutive, but do be sure they showcase different aspects of the book—different structures, different styles etc.

You've created a framework for your book with every other piece of the proposal, and your sample chapter is your opportunity to show off what the finished product will look like. Be sure to put your best foot forward!



Let's Keep in Touch!

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You are the expert in your field, but that doesn't necessarily mean you're an expert in translating what you know into a strong book proposal. Fortunately, I am!

I'm available to ghostwrite, edit, and consult on book proposals in a variety of nonfiction fields.

I'd love to learn about the stories you have to share and talk about how I can help!

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