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7 Steps to a Winning Book Proposal

Have your pick of agents and editors with a stellar pitch

By Jennifer Pullinger - April 9, 2012



As an author, you know how gratifying writing books can be. Writing book proposals? Not so much.

But if you want a readership wider than just your parents and spouse however, you're going to have to learn how to craft a viable, compelling book proposal that lands you an agent or publisher. Here's how to get started:

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1. Assemble the basics.

The essential components of a book proposal are an overview, marketing plan, competitive book analysis, and author bio and platform. You will also need to include a table of contents, chapter summaries and a writing sample. It should generally follow an intuitive order and structure, with the overview going first, the marketing details in the middle, and the writing sample last. "If you've got the ingredients -- a really fresh idea or a fresh spin on an old idea, good writing, and a platform and a promotion plan -- if a proposal has those things, it doesn't make any difference what order they are in. Editors can skip around, and will and do," said Michael Larsen with Larsen-Pomada Literary Agents.

Depending on the genre of your book you will want to emphasize different sections, but, as a general rule, authors should only approach agents or editors when both the material, as well as the platform and marketing plan are as strong as they can possibly be. Ultimately, however, it's about the strength of your idea or content. "No amount of marketing is going to sell a bad book," said Larsen, who is also the author of *How to Write a Book Proposal*.

2. Make your introduction a page turner.

Think of the query letter as your critical first impression. "The cliché is if they can't write a letter they couldn't write a book," said Larsen. The query letter has to encapsulate the essence of your book and has to make them want to see more. "One of the fundamental things that writers have to do today is to make information scalable, everything from a tweet to a book, from a one-line pitch to a one-hour radio interview. Katherine Sands, a New York agent, once said, 'The writing you do about your writing is as important as the writing itself,'" said Larsen.

Book proposal editor Lisa Tener says authors should also consider including a brief (less than one page) executive summary that draws in a prospective agent or editor with the proposal's major highlights. "Every book proposal is different, so do you have to have it? No, but I think it really helps your cause, because they can look at it in a glance and say 'Oh my gosh, this author has something here,' or 'This isn't for me.' Any time you are saving them time and getting them hooked early on is going to be a benefit," she explained.

"Think of the query letter as your critical first impression."

3. Flesh out your platform.

Today, agents and publishers are putting more emphasis on the author's platform: your following both online and offline. This is a natural development given an increasingly competitive traditional publishing marketplace with dwindling resources, the growth of e-publishing, and the fact that authors have always had to bear the responsibility for a fair portion of their book's marketing. Your platform -- and hopefully you have one -- can be highlighted in either the author bio section, marketing section or as a stand-alone section.

Social media is a key part of an author's platform, and there is no excuse for would-be authors today to not take advantage of free platform-building tools like Facebook or Twitter. Not having that kind of audience engagement or online visibility is a "big red flag" for agents and editors, Tener said.

"Are there books that get agents and even publishers [when] the author is barely on social media? Yes, but I think we are seeing more and more, sort of, 'Well, why aren't you on social media?'" she said. "So, you really have to have some very compelling evidence that you already have this huge following through other channels to really overcome that."

If you don't have a platform or even a simple website that you can highlight in your proposal, you will need to invest in one before a publisher decides to invest in you. "And you don't want to skip either, because nowadays I think there is a certain expectation that websites have a certain degree of professionalism. So, if it looks like that black background with the white writing that you can barely read, or it's just very busy and you can't even figure out what's going on on the page, that's going to work against you," Tener said.

4. Prove your book will sell.

Having that aforementioned platform (a strong social media following, a well-trafficked website, a popular blog) is one way to show agents and editors that you can deliver an audience. "No one's taking risks like that nowadays. They want a sure thing," Tener said.

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The digital revolution, said Larsen, is now forcing authors to prove themselves even before they get to the book proposal stage. "Books used to be the beginning of the information stream. Someone would write a book, you would get it published, and whatever would happen with it would happen with it. That no longer works. Writers today should make books the end of the information stream," he said.

Think of your proposal as confirmation that a market exists for your book and you are the best person to write it. Authors can do that by test-marketing their content or concept, said Larsen. That can be done through the platform-building process: podcasting, blogging, social media outreach, crowdsourcing feedback, or even self-publishing first.

"If you don't have a platform, you will need to invest in one before a publisher decides to invest in you."

Providing evidence that your book will be in demand also applies when it comes to actual sales opportunities. "It used to be you could say you've got this interest in book sales, like doing some training and selling books to companies and they'll order books in bulk. Nowadays, it doesn't mean very much. If you can establish that you speak at those companies regularly it means a little something, but if you had a letter of intent from that company, that would mean a lot more," said Tener.

5. Ready your rebuttals.

Agents and editors have less patience with a book proposal than they do with a finished book, said literary agent and former "big six" editor Jody Rein, so you need grab their attention quickly and sustain it throughout the proposal. "I always say to my clients they have got to head off all objections at the pass," Rein said.

"So, they have to put themselves in the seat of the acquiring editor, and say, 'Okay, what objection could this person possibly have against acquiring my book?' For example, if you know you are writing into a very crowded field, then you would want to say very early in your proposal, 'I'm writing in a very crowded field, and this is why my book will stand out,'" she said.

6. Make it e-readable.

You should also think about how the agent or editor will read your proposal, especially in this digital age. "The one bit of advice that I would have for writers is that when they craft their proposals, they read them on an e-reader and in print before they submit them." The proposal has to work in all formats, she said, because agents and editors, just like everyday readers, interact with the material differently.

Rein also advises against embedding too many links into your proposal. "What my goal always is to keep the editor's head in the proposal. You don't want anything that's going to pull them out of the experience and have them put it down and forget about it," she said.

7. Ask permission to query.

This final tip may seem obvious, but it's an important one that shouldn't be overlooked. Before wasting a lot of time (and possibly postage) sending your proposal, try to establish a relationship with an editor or agent first. This can be done by meeting them in person at a conference, for example, or by way of introduction through a colleague. Then, ask if he or she accepts queries. Unfortunately, many agents are so inundated with submissions that they no longer accept queries from people they don't know.

Once you get the okay, says Tener, "Then mark your envelope 'requested materials enclosed' in the lower left corner. This is important, or it will end up in the slush pile even though they did say they wanted to see it."

Whether your proposal lands you a publishing deal or not, Rein says the work you do on it is never a wasted effort. "If your book is picked up by a publisher, they use the proposal a lot in the publishing process," she said. Alternately, if you choose to self-publish, you are well ahead of the game, because you already have your marketing plan mapped out. And, she added, "It also helps you figure out if you really want to write the book. It's a great way to save yourself a lot of angst."

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Jennifer Pullinger is a writer and editor in Richmond, Va. Visit her at www.jenniferpullinger.com or on Twitter [@JPullinger](https://twitter.com/JPullinger).

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