

Tuning your book proposal

non-fiction reports

THE CUCKOO VILLAGE – Cover Letter and Full Proposal report

May 1, 2009

Cover Letter - Layout and presentation

- The overall feel is professional, but stick to left justified text and no more than two fonts – one for the headings (if any) and one for the rest of the text.
- There isn't a huge amount of white space – increase the margin sizes and consider 1.5 spacing on the text.
- Don't include a photo of yourself in the cover letter. It's fine in your biography, but is out of place here. Make the photo (where appropriately placed) as professional as possible – a beach shot is not ideal.

Cover Letter - Text

Dear sir/madam,

- Not a good move in a cover letter. Address your letter to an individual. If you can't get a name by researching online or from a directory, phone the company and ask for a name. Otherwise it looks like a) you haven't tried, and b) you are sending identical letters to many people.

After publication of articles in History Chronicle and Discovering History magazines, and seven years researching local history as a lecturer at Harpenden College, I was struck by the huge response I had to a recent article I contributed to BBC History Magazine.

- Don't use underlining for emphasis – this is a manuscript convention to indicate italics. Use italics. If you are going to use emphasis on titles, use it consistently – it should be applied to the BBC History magazine too.
- Quantify your huge response – your idea of huge might not be someone else's.
- Starting with a sentence that establishes your qualifications to write this book and a sign of interest from potential readership is fine, but make sure this isn't too long. We want to know what the book is about.
- Watch your spelling (response) – it will be noted.

This is a topic that interests me deeply. Ever since a child I have been told stories around the subject and they fascinated me. It's like a foundation stone of my past. This is what links me to my grandparents.

- Why should we care? If you were famous, this might be of interest, but you need to engage the reader's interest, and knowing about your fascination with the topic doesn't really tell us anything.
- Ditto your family history. An editor/agent is likely to say 'so what?' with some justification.

The village of Hartley lies around 20 miles from Halifax, as the crow flies. Situated in West Yorkshire, it is a bleak ruin. What is left of the streets is covered in weed and moorland gorse. But each of its empty buildings was once a home to a family, until 1847 when they were torn from their birthplace – the Cuckoo Village relives the heart-breaking true story of those families and traces them 5,000 miles across the Atlantic.

- This is quite a good expansion on the book's contents, but it would be better if you had the title and a one line summary of what the book is about before it. You could afford to tell us a little more about why these people were removed, as long as you don't slow down the pace.
- Telling us Hartley is 20 miles from Halifax as the crow flies doesn't really give us useful information, and distracts, reducing interest and slowing the pace. You need to keep the reader's attention. I'd drop that and run the first sentence and the second together (with appropriate phrasing).
- Short sentences like your 'weed and gorse' sentence work well.
- The final sentence is a little long – consider splitting it.
- It's conventional to identify your book's title by putting the name in capitals.
- Is there any resolution, or key revelations? Just tracing them across the Atlantic doesn't sound too exciting. Just like a novel, conflict helps in non-fiction storytelling.

The result - THE CUCKOO VILLAGE – Yorkie Tykes Abroad

- Put this (without 'The result –') before your summary of what's in it.
- The title catches our attention, which is good – it's memorable and effective.
- Where the title is primarily an attention getter, the subtitle or tagline should explain what the book is about. I still don't have much idea from this. 'Yorkie Tykes' is going to be meaningless to many readers, and 'Abroad' could mean anything. Give it a tagline that explains and draws us in.
- Also include here (unless the tagline delivers this) a one line summary of what the book's about. This is very difficult to do, but essential.
- A one liner that could also be the tagline would be something like '**the true story of an entire Yorkshire village, forcibly transported to a Caribbean island.**' – but phrased better in your own words.

Is there a useful comparison?

- Either here or in your marketing summary in the main proposal it is worth making any useful comparisons. Don't make ludicrous comparisons, just because the book you want to compare with is a huge seller ('it's like Harry Potter meets Last of the Summer Wine'), but if it provides a useful hook for the marketing people it can make the book easier to sell.

I have enclosed a detailed proposal, an addressed envelope and an International Reply Coupon for reply.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours etc.

- Well done for keeping the letter short. When editing, keep it to a page.
- It's fine to say that you've enclosed an addressed envelope, though it should be obvious. If you do want the proposal back, make sure there's enough postage on an SAE for it – and don't send it out again to someone else unless it's pristine. Alternatively, just include an SAE for reply and say that the proposal need not be returned.
- If sending to another country, international reply coupons are a real pain for the person on the other end, and many just won't bother with them anymore. See if they take email submissions, or try to get hold of local postage stamps.

Overall a very promising cover letter – but would benefit significantly from the fine tuning suggested.

Proposal – Layout and presentation

- A cover page isn't essential, but doesn't do any harm. It looks good, and there's no problem having a dramatic font, but make it readable: at the moment the font is too fancy. The picture is too big.
- The contact details page could be incorporated into the title page as you haven't a great deal of information. Too many bits of paper get to be a pain. Remember to include your email address as well phone and mailing address.
- Technically there's no reason to put the copyright symbol – work is inherently copyrighted – but it doesn't do any harm to put All rights reserved on the cover page.
- Keep the one page synopsis to a single, separable page. This may well be sent around the company.

Proposal – One page summary

THE CUCKOO VILLAGE – Yorkie Tykes Abroad

- Make it clearer that this is the title – imagine the summary page being handed round on its own. Get your name in here too. See cover letter comments re a better tag line.

The village of Hartley lies around 20 miles from Halifax, as the crow flies. Situated in West Yorkshire, it is a bleak ruin. What is left of the streets is covered in weed and moorland gorse. But each of its empty buildings was once a home to a family, until 1847 when they were torn from their birthplace – the Cuckoo Village relives the heart-breaking true story of those families and traces them 5,000 miles across the Atlantic. What made them leave? Why was just one man left behind? All will be revealed.

- This is almost the same text as in your cover letter. Don't be lazy – yes you will need to put across the same details, but do it in a different way. The cover letter could be as concise as possible, here you've a bit more room to expand – but you have to keep the interest.
- Start with something to grab our attention. Consider opening with the mystery of why this has happened, rather than the location of the village.
- In about half a page, go from that opener to give us the basics of what's in the book. This isn't a blurb, trying to sell yet conceal, we need to get across the key points of what the book is going to tell us, and why it's such a great story.
- Make sure your key thesis comes through. We need to find out why the families left the cuckoo village (and be interested in it). You can leave some 'Oh, that's interesting, I'd like to read more' points, but they should be secondary ones, not something as central as 'what made them leave?'
- The man referred to in the penultimate sentence is a neat touch, but again this isn't the place to leave us hanging. Pose the question – but make sure you also answer it somewhere on the page. It's good to leave the reader wanting more, but the one pager should work as a standalone piece.
- Drop that 'All will be revealed.' It sounds corny and doesn't add anything.

- If your story has a lot of surprising factoids, you can hit us with them in bullet points, otherwise it's probably best making this flow. But those factoids should really grab the attention.

Proposal – market analysis

This is a book that will appeal to every reader.

- The analysis is almost entirely missing at the moment.
- Tell us *who* is going to be interested in buying this book, and *why*. Your statement is too general, and there's no justification.
- It's not enough that you are telling us the book will appeal to everyone, you need to give reasons.
- Consider making a comparison with other books which also helps identify the market.
- Do you have a platform? – Anything you can use to sell the book: access to media, regular talks given to people who match the target audience etc.? Include this here.
- This section should be a full paragraph.

Proposal – delivery details

I will deliver this 800 page book in 6 months.

- Delivery details need to be realistic – can you really write a book of this length in six months? (Make it six, not 6 for numbers under 11.)
- It is very hard to justify a book of this length. It makes it expensive for the publisher and vastly reduces potential readership. If you really feel it needs to be this long, explain why.
- Give your estimate of length in words, not in pages.
- Many non-fiction books are 80,000 to 100,000 words. An 800 page book would be more like 200,000 to 250,000 words. Phrasing it this way also makes it easier to get a feel for the realism of your timescale. How many words per week does that imply? Remember time for research. Is that sensible?
- Give serious consideration to reducing the length.

Proposal – biography

- Your biography as it stands is mostly irrelevant. You can put in some small detail or details of your personal interests if it captures the imagination, but not great screeds. Cut the details of the hobbies.
- It's fine to indicate one or two key books or authors who have strongly influenced you, but this is not the place for your favourite books list.
- It's fine to have a single, good photograph of you, but don't make it a photo story of your life.

- Give us a clear picture of what you have done that support your being the right person to write *this* book.
- Keep the educational details brief – we don't want to know what GCSEs you got.
- It's fine to keep in the little point about being an expert on origami – a little personal interest is fine as long it's short and makes you seem rounded.

Proposal – existing publications

- These are useful where relevant. The contributions to the student rag mag probably don't help. If you have any existing books, including any (positive) reviews is fine. Just brief summaries, though – don't reproduce text from the material, unless, for example, it's an article in a famous magazine you've written on the same subject as your book.

Sample – layout and presentation

- No need to do this in a monospaced font like courier.
- Use more white space at the edges of the page.
- Your paragraphs are over-emphasized. Just leave a line break – there’s no need to indent them.
- Double spacing isn’t necessary as this isn’t going to be edited. Try 1.5 spacing to be readable but not excessive.

Sample – content [RESTRICTED SAMPLE FOR THIS EXAMPLE: would usually be comments on the whole sample of one or two chapters]

CHAPTER THREE: ASSEMBLING IMAGES

- Think really seriously about whether you want to start your sample with chapter 3. You might consider this your best work, but the reader will wonder what’s wrong with your opening chapters. Use them if possible (improving them so they *are* your best) – or if you must start here, give us a couple of lines explaining why.

The beauties and wonders described in this book, however, are not presented for the benefit of the sick, but to the crowd of pleasure-seekers who make their annual visitations to Niagara, Newport, Saratoga, Cape May, and other centers of fashion, frivolity, foppery and folly. With half the expenditure of money and vital force thus thrown away, to the moral and physical deterioration of all concerned, the California trip, via the Pacific Railroad, may be thoroughly enjoyed. There is nothing in it to enfeeble, but everything to strengthen.

From Samuel Kneeland’s *The Wonders of the Yosemite Valley and of California* (1870)

- It’s fine to start your chapter with a quote, but make sure it’s relevant to what follows: I can’t see the point with this one.
- Don’t make the quote too long – many people won’t bother to read them.

The Whitby to which Worthington returned at the age of 36 had moved on in the handful of years he had been away—hardly surprising considering the extreme youth of the city. It was more sophisticated and better established; its population had doubled. Many of the businesses of Worthington’s time had folded or changed premises. The remains of his own establishment, the book shop run by his brother, had shut down when Thomas opted for further emigration, out to Australia, perhaps at the recommendation of their uncle. There Tom seems to have converted to dentistry, by the simple act of buying an old surgery and putting up a shingle. It doesn’t make an encouraging picture for his clients. The skills overlap between book agent and dentist are limited. But Tom persevered. Like his brothers, though, he seems to have tired of the name Worthington: He changed it to the simpler, slurred “Worton.”

- This is a long paragraph, perhaps too long for an opener.

- Bearing in mind this is the first bit of your writing we encounter, it better really stand out. This verges on the dull. Grab our attention.
- A good example of why starting with chapter 3 isn't a good idea. By then it's probably okay to meander off into what brother Tom did – but here we don't know who Worthington is yet, and so hearing about Tom is just a distraction.
- It's not essential, but for a UK publisher single quotation marks are preferred – and there is no distinction between quotation marks and speech marks.

Worthington, meanwhile, with no commercial base in the new Whitby, where it was now less easy to simply slip into premises, spent a year squatting in the gallery of his old friend Silas Selleck, who had abandoned the obsolete daguerreotype technology in favor of the more modern technique of wet plate photography. Where Selleck concentrated on the immediately lucrative business of portraits, however, Worthington was still determined to capture the landscape and the special character of Whitby itself.

- If this is for a UK publisher, stick to UK spellings (favour)
- What has all this photography stuff got to do with the story of the disappearing people? I'm confused and the reader will be as well.
- That first sentence is very long and compound – consider breaking up.
- I still don't know who Worthington is.

This was not a period when you could slip your camera from your pocket and take an instant photograph. Not only was the camera itself bulky and in need of solid placement on a heavy-duty tripod, but the technical aspects of the process were also messy and time consuming. Although Frederick Scott Archer's wet collodion process was much simpler (and less dangerous to the health of the operator) than the daguerreotype that it made obsolete, it still took considerable time and expertise on the part of the photographer. In fact, the process was so complex, it's surprising that it was used so successfully.

- By now you have confirmed this is the wrong selection to provide as your sample. It's not exciting enough and doesn't give us anything relevant to the main story – this is a side story and shouldn't be here to give a picture of THE CUCKOO VILLAGE.
- It's quite heavy on technical terms – avoid them or at least explain a bit more.

Etc.

Brian Clegg