

Tuning your book proposal

non-fiction reports

THE CUCKOO VILLAGE – Cover Letter report

May 1, 2009

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.

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.

Brian Clegg