

Cover letter and proposal basics

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A free extract from Brian's ebook *The Non-Fiction Agent*. See www.cul.co.uk/Writers/index.html for details.

THE PROPOSAL

Getting started

When you are sure about your subject, it's time to begin putting the proposal together. But don't rush into it. First of all take a look at what goes into a proposal.

What's in it

First comes the title page. Keep this simple, though a photograph or image can be effective as long as it makes a real contribution to selling the concept. It is particularly important not to use clip art or amateur graphics here or through the proposal – few things are more effective at damaging the look of a proposal.

After a couple of practical pages – contact details and contents – comes one of the most important pages of the whole proposal, the one page overview or summary. If your cover letter (see next section) persuades the reader to get as far as the proposal, the one page overview is the next hurdle that has to be overcome in winning the heart and mind of your potential editor or agent. In this one page you must get across what the book is about, why this is the right time to publish it and why it is going to be a success. Not only will the immediate reader make use of the summary, it will be passed around the publishing house if there is any danger of the book being published, so it should be crafted with intense care.

Next comes some detail about you. This isn't a full blown biography, though it should contain relevant biographical details and a few interesting "personality points". Instead, its function is to explain why you are the right person for the job, the woman or man who was born to write this book.

The following section is an equivalent sell exploring the unique features of the book. What makes it different, why should it be written now, why will it sell? This is an expansion of the one page overview's key points which will be valuable not only to the editor but to the sales and publicity departments of the publisher, should the book be accepted.

The final sections of sales information look at the potential readership – who will be interested in the book and how they can be reached – and the potential for publicity. You may feel that by putting all this effort in you are doing the publisher's work. To an extent it's true – but this may well be something you can do better than the PR people or the salespeople, because you know your book in a way they never will. And it never hurts to give people a helping hand if you are trying to sell to them.

After a few practical details – when the book could be delivered and a rough length in words, which can be fitted onto the same page – we come to core of the document, concentrating on content: the sample and the synopsis. The first of these demonstrates your writing style and gives the editor a feel for what they will be buying. The more effort you can put into polishing this, the better – if you passed the one page outline test, this is what you will be judged on. Equally important is the synopsis, explaining the structure of the book and leading the reader through it. This can have bullet points or be a paragraph or two of flowing text for each chapter,

but the important thing is that it leads the reader through the book, rather than being a series of disjointed descriptions.

You may worry about what to put in this because you don't know for sure exactly how your book will end up. The final structure might depend on research that can't possibly be undertaken before selling the book to a publisher. That's fair enough. It would be very unusual for a publisher to expect you to stick precisely to all the details of your synopsis. Nonetheless, it is a good thing to warn them if, later on, you decide on a totally different structure.

It might seem odd that the sample comes before the synopsis – and many would put it the other way round. I believe, however, that the sample is so important that it should come first. The only circumstances this might not be sensible is if you are an established writer and can produce good, existing books to demonstrate your writing style – then the synopsis will be of greater importance.

Your proposal

Now get started on your proposal. Take it steadily. Try not to think of it as a chore – you may even find that you enjoy it. For the moment just use a simple style from your word processor – headings in one font, main text in a different font.

All done?

Not yet. Once you have written your proposal it will have to be polished to perfection, given a covering letter that demands attention and more. But first of all, what about that title?

Key concepts

- ▶ The proposal is more than an outline, it will help the recipient sell your idea on both internally and externally
- ▶ The proposal has several key parts
- ▶ Make sure you include a chapter-by-chapter outline, even if you aren't sure of the book's final format at this stage

The cover letter

The whole aim of your proposal is to sell your book. So it may seem strange that it's not enough in its own right. But in practice you have to sell the sell. In order to get someone to read the whole proposal, there has to be a shorter document – the cover letter or pitch letter – that will entice the agent or editor into reading the real thing. It's tempting just to dash off a few lines without much thought. Isn't this just a throw-away note? No. The pitch letter will make or break your attempt to get noticed. Many proposals may never be read at all if the letter disappoints. In fact it wouldn't be exaggerating to say that *most* proposals are never read, because the cover letter puts the reader off – so put a huge amount of effort into your pitch. Make it look just as professional as your proposal.

Don't be a Roger Bacon

Back in the thirteenth century, Friar Roger Bacon needed to get the pope to sponsor an immense book on science. Bacon set out to write a proposal – and it ended up stretching to half a million words. Like your average editor, the pope was a busy man, so Bacon knew he needed a cover letter. But as he wrote the letter he realized that he had missed some points in his original proposal. Quite reasonably, it seemed, he threw those into the letter. And he wanted to make sure everything was covered properly... the “cover letter” ended up around 300,000 words long. Amazingly this happened one more time, and it was only on his fourth attempt that Bacon managed to produce a letter that was truly a pitch rather than a condensed book.

Avoid the temptation to repeat large chunks of your proposal – keep the letter down to a single page that puts across what you have in mind, why your particular proposal is special and all your contact details.

The essentials

If the cover letter is going to do the job it should be structured like a compelling argument. Begin by introducing yourself – not by hitting the reader with a résumé (the aim is to be seductive, not to put the reader to sleep), but by making it clear why you are ideally qualified for the job of producing a book that will fly off the shelves. Next comes a description of the book itself (if, after thinking about your qualifications for writing this book you can't come up with anything compelling, this will have to come first). This is not just a repeat of your summary page in the proposal, or even worse of the chapter synopsis. The whole thing should not be more than a single paragraph. And – this is crucial – the first sentence should encompass the whole book in an exciting way that grabs the reader. We'll come back to this.

It's not essential, but you can finish up with a few more lines about yourself, just to make it more of a personal introduction. This is more essential when writing to an agent who will want to be sold on you, the writer, as well as the book. But more of you comes out in the proposal – remember that the job of the pitch letter is to grab the attention, not to fill in all the detail.

Here is an effective cover letter:

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 – over 200 letters – to a recent article I contributed to BBC History Magazine.

THE CUCKOO VILLAGE – the true story of an entire Yorkshire village, forcibly transported to a Caribbean island.

The village of Hartley in West Yorkshire 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.

I have enclosed a detailed proposal and a stamped addressed envelope for reply. The proposal itself need not be returned.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours etc.

Perfectly qualified

Why you? Why this subject? Why now? Always your aim is to win the enthusiastic support of the editor or agent you are addressing, and nothing can be more effective than being the right person in the right place at the right time. The fact is, most of the unsolicited proposals an editor or agent receives will be from people who have never been published – have no track record – and have no particular qualifications to write the book they are proposing, other than enthusiasm. There's nothing wrong with enthusiasm – you are going to need plenty of it – but it's not enough alone.

So, make a quick assessment of yourself. Have you had any books published already (by recognized publishers)? Have you written books in this or a similar field, that will demonstrate your style and expertise? How did those books do? Are they still in print? Did they win any awards, get great reviews or hit any bestseller lists? Did you get translations, serializations or other deals? And how about you, yourself? Do you have any special qualifications, or is there something about your work or experience that ideally qualifies you to write this book?

Capture in one or two paragraphs the essence of why you are the ideal person to write the book you are about to propose.

A book in a sentence

The more you think about it, the more horrendous it becomes. Here is a book that you might have been planning for years, that is going to have a big impact on people's lives... and you are being asked to summarize it in a single sentence. It's terrible. But it has to be done. It's not for nothing that many of us can remember one-liners from TV ads of our childhood – a good, strong phrase can stick like nothing else. And we want the idea of this book to stick. Apart from anything else, it helps the editor or agent in the future. When someone asks what this book is

about, it isn't going to be possible to work through a whole proposal. They want to be able to pull it together in a single phrase. Whoever your proposal is now addressed to, they will have to sell the concept to other people – you are helping them out in a big way.

This sentence should capture the essence of the book, providing the salesperson's favorite vehicle, a USP (unique selling point) – the aspect of the book that will make it appealing enough to differentiate it from the competition. You have a good starting point. Your strap line had many of the same aims, but now you have a luxury of a few more words to really push the point home. Don't be tempted to turn the single sentence into an essay, though, it has to be memorable. Feel free then to throw in a few more explanatory sentences that expand on that single line – but make sure that your key summary stands out. Try putting it on a separate line, or in italics.

Putting it on paper

Start a new document now – as with the proposal once you have filled in your basic text without worrying about format, save a copy of the letter and then transform it into your personal style so that the letter coordinates visually with your proposal.

As with the proposal, revisit your letter (perhaps after a day in this case) to make sure it delivers on its promise.

Key concepts

- ▶ The pitch letter has a fundamental role in drawing the agent or editor in
- ▶ Keep it short
- ▶ Ensure that there's a one sentence summary of the whole book, however painful that is to produce