

## **2 -Eight Elements of a Successful Book Proposal**

By and large, the successful book proposal, the one that sells, has eight elements:

1. The cover or query letter
2. Title page
3. Contents of book
4. Synopsis (sometimes called Introduction)
5. Technical details/Vision
6. About the Author
7. Market study
  - Potential Market
  - Competition
8. Sample Chapter(s)

There are, naturally, exceptions to this 'Rule of Eight.' Books that require color plates or original drawings or technical charts may need another section in the proposal dealing just with those specifications and samples. In fact, anything truly special or unusual may require an additional section or two. No matter what, however, your proposal will need to contain at least these eight categories.

Each category or element is designed to answer questions a publisher or agent needs have answered before s/he can make a commitment to represent or publish your book. The questions the editors and agents ask themselves fall along these lines:

- ***Is this book even a remote possibility for us?***

You must be sure the agent or publisher actually handles your type of project. It's amazing how many inappropriate submissions are made, wasting everyone's time. Do your homework.

- ***Can this writer deliver this book?***

The best idea in the world is useless to an agent or publisher if you, the writer, can't complete the project. Your proposal is one way to demonstrate that you can deliver.

- ***Could this writer deliver a book on this subject, but one more to our liking?***

Publishers and agents are always on the lookout for writers who can handle a subject. That said, be aware, they may want a significantly different approach from you. The stronger your proposal, the less likely this is to happen, but it may. How you respond to a request for a major change will depend on you and how strongly you feel about the approach you're pitching. Don't be afraid to turn it down.

- ***Will this writer keep to schedule?***

Publishers and agents have a pretty good sense of what's required to complete a book project. They can't, of course, tell if you will keep to schedule, but they will recognize if what you've promised is possible or not.

- ***Who will buy this book?***

Some publishers and agents have a specific niche; they can tell you almost without thinking who will buy a particular book. Others cover a much wider subject area and may not immediately recognize a market. Either way, you need to make it clear who you believe will buy the book.

- ***How will we market this book?***

At an agent's, this question is answered with editor's names and publishing houses the agent has reason to believe will be interested. If you're dealing with a publisher, the marketing department answers this query, for the most part. Much of your proposal is designed to demonstrate to the marketing department that your project is a moneymaker.

- ***Does the marketing department understand this book?***

The name of the publishing game has become profit, and anything too new or too unusual won't be understood by the marketing department and is likely to get rejected. If you fall into this category, your selling job will be much harder. It can be done, but you will face more difficulties than most.

- ***Will this book work on our web site as well as in bookstores?***

This should be an automatic 'yes.' Even though the web is no longer new, there is still much confusion about what the 'net can actually accomplish in sales. It's worth your time pointing out why and how your project will work well on the publisher's and other major bookselling sites.

- ***Would this project also make a good ebook?***

If agents and publishers are confused about the 'net, they are even more confused about ebooks. Net-savvy agents and editors are beginning to at least give ebook potential a nod. Most of the online bookstores offer ebooks now, so an ebook version is worth considering.

Technology is such that anything that can be printed can probably work as an ebook, including high quality artwork and photographs. There is, however, still limits on how good the graphics will look on a majority of computers. Even if the display would be ok, printing is more problematical and the usual result is less than desirable.

If, on the other hand, your book is all or mostly text and has only simple graphics, an ebook edition is probably a good idea. Include it as a suggestion in your proposal. If the publisher isn't interested, ask if you can have the ebook publishing rights. The answer is likely to be no, but it won't hurt to ask. And if they say yes, you can sell it from your own webiste.

- ***How much will it cost us to publish this book?***

You, of course, don't have control here. But this question is asked and taken seriously, because of the bottom line. Your best line of defense is not to have any unusual expenses – like color plates or drawings, or odd sizes. If, however, your project needs these, spell them out and sell 'em.

- ***How small an advance can we pay?***

From the publisher's point of view, the smaller the advance, the less risk; but a small advance usually means small promotion as well. A good agent can help you get a larger advance, and, as a consequence, more promotion. If you're marketing yourself, tread cautiously, but don't be afraid to ask for more.

- ***Do I have time to acquire and follow-through on another book at this point?***

Agents and editors recognize that developing a project to completion takes time and effort on their part as well as yours. A well prepared proposal signals they may not have as much work to do to bring the project to completion.

- ***What's our competition doing about this subject?***

This is critical, and you don't have much control here either. You may be able to find some advance notice at Amazon.com, BN.com or Powells.com, but projects listed there with 'to be published' information are already pretty far along. Publishing, however, is still a fairly small industry, and editors from competing houses may exchange notes, or hear from an agent about a deal that is similar to yours. You may not know this is the reason for your rejection.

- ***Is the author willing to help promote the book?***

An author who is willing to help promote a book will win a contract over one who won't promote. So say you're willing to promote. Even if you don't know how, it's a learnable skill. On the other hand, if you have any type of promotional experience, spell it out. Include public speaking background, groups you belong to that might buy the book, etc.

- ***Can we promote the author as well as the book?***

This is a little different. Publishers like to be able to promote the author as a personality and/or expert as well as the book itself. If you have a reputation in your field, state it. If you're well known in some other field state that as well. Don't worry too much if you don't fall into this category – as long as you're willing to promote, the publisher can help you become a 'personality.'

- ***Can I go home now?***

OK, this isn't an official question, but editors and publishers do work hard and are usually pressed for time. Editors don't make a ton of money – and agents are working on percentage. The better your proposal the less likely it is to be rejected simply because the reader is overworked.

If you keep these questions in mind as you're putting your proposal together, you'll find it easy to stay on course.

## ***Who will see your proposal?***

When you mail your proposal it may feel like it's dropping into a black hole. Even if the publisher or agent sends you a post card acknowledging receipt of your package, you still won't really know what's happening or what to expect.

Here is a rough outline of the hands your proposal is likely to pass through and what each one is looking for. The actual process varies from house to house and agent to agent, as do the job titles. Large publishing organizations have lots of steps involving lots of people; smaller ones have fewer steps and even fewer people. The process, however, is roughly the same. No matter how they go about it, the goal is to find a book that will sell well.

Keep in mind that your proposal will (hopefully) pass through several hands. It works more or less like this:

1. **Your proposal arrives and is opened and logged in.** If it's a poorly typed or printed, coffee-stained presentation it will probably be returned to you in the next mail, provided you included return postage – if not, the form rejection letter will be on it's way and your proposal will land in the round file.
2. **Your proposal lands on a First Reader's desk.** First Readers are usually very recent college graduates who are paid little. As a group, they long to be part of the excitement of PUBLISHING. (Unfortunately, publishing isn't the glamorous business it once was, but it takes awhile to discover that.) The First Reader look over your proposal to make sure the topic fits her (yes, most First Readers are women) understanding of the goals of the publisher or agent. If you've sent a computer book proposal to a publisher who only wants books on the great outdoors, you'll be rejected out of hand.

If the First Reader thinks the book might be a fit, she will look at your proposal more closely. She will be looking more closely at the subject and asking 'does it really fit.' She'll also look to see if the proposal is reasonably well organized and if the writing is, well, not bad.

Keep in mind that the First Reader probably has more proposals than seems possible to read thoroughly and more stack up with every mail delivery. The First Reader is screening and sifting, reducing the slush pile (yep, that's what they call unsolicited manuscripts and proposals), looking for a gem. When she finds a book she thinks might fit, she passes your proposal to an Acquisitions Editor.

Keep in mind too, that the only real authority she has is to reject a proposal, and that it's much easier to reject a proposal – in fact, that's the easiest thing to do. Good First Readers don't pass many proposals along. They are trained to look for true gems; if they pass too many they may be out of a job. Even good books,