

Book Proposals

Most book proposals are incomplete, if the ones that cross my desk are at all typical. They lack much of the information that an editor needs to recognize the book's potential and, in turn, sell it to an editorial committee. Let me outline the six crucial items that are needed in a proposal:

1. **Cover Letter.** This is usually an abbreviated version of the entire proposal, stating (or at least hinting at) its strongest points and most telling arguments *in two or three paragraphs*. This is the toughest piece of writing you may ever do, because it is the editor's first impression of you and your manuscript. **DO THIS LAST.**
2. **Premise Statement.** This should answer *very* briefly *what* the book is about, and *why* the book should be published, or what need it meets. Your plan here is to get the editor on your wavelength. Where are you coming from? Why are you so excited about this great project? This should be short—about a half page.
3. **Audience/Market.** Who are you aiming at? Who would want to read this book and why? Do not needlessly limit your audience to only one gender or age group, but don't say that the book is for "all people, everywhere." This usually takes up about a quarter page.
4. **Competitive Titles.** What other books are in print on this subject? How is yours different? In half a page, explain how this book is distinctive from others on the bookstore shelf.
5. **Author Information.** Who are you and what qualifies you to write about this subject? Do you have any previous publishing credits? With what organizations are you affiliated? How can you help promote your book? Answer these questions in one or two paragraphs.
6. **Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis.** Summarize each chapter in two or three sentences. A well-written synopsis will spark curiosity as often as it brings clarity. You should describe each chapter in a way that leaves the reader wanting to know more. Each chapter description should also show a clear connection to the main theme of the book. The synopsis should be no more than two or three pages long.

One more item may be included with the proposal if you can get it ready:

7. **One or Two Sample Chapters.** Here is your opportunity to show the editor that you can write, so the sample chapter(s) you send must be well-polished—don't send a first draft! Ideally, you should include the introduction and/or the first chapter; a chapter from the middle of the book can be confusing and give a bad impression. If you prepare a proposal early in the process, it is possible to have the previous six items done before you have even written a word of your book. If so, don't be shy about sending a proposal without any chapters to an editor; the feedback you receive can be invaluable in preparation of your manuscript. Besides, if the editor sends you a contract on the strength of the proposal, you'll be all the more motivated to finish the book!