

**NEGOTIATE
LIKE AN INSIDER!**
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YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO
GETTING PUBLISHED

Writers's

DIGEST

JULY 1991

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The Bulletproof Book Proposal

Publishers ask five key questions about every project they consider. Here's how to make sure your proposal has all the answers.

BY ROBERT W. BLY

You have a great idea for a non-fiction book. Your wife thinks it's a great idea. Your parents think it's a great idea. Even your neighbor who hates to read thinks it's a great idea.

But will a publisher think it's a great idea—enough to pay you an advance, commission you to write it, and publish and sell it?

That will depend largely on your book proposal. Here's where you demonstrate—persuasively—that your idea has merit. Of course, even a solid idea and a great book proposal can't guarantee success, but they surely can tip the odds in your favor. But if either the idea or the proposal is weak, your chances of a sale are slim to none.

It's no secret what book editors look for when reviewing book ideas and proposals. You'll increase your chances of winning a publisher's contract by testing your book proposal against the five key questions editors ask. Let's look at those questions—and the best ways to answer them.

Is there a large enough audience interested in this topic to justify publishing the book?



The major New York publishing houses aren't interested in highly specialized books written for small, narrow-interest audiences. If you want to write the definitive work on LAN/WAN networking, for example, seek out a publisher of technical books.

Big publishers are primarily interested in "bookstore books"—that is, books that appeal to a

general audience or at least to a large segment of the general population. Examples of such audiences include parents, small business owners, corporate executives, fitness enthusiasts, movie buffs, users of personal computers, teenagers, and other large affinity groups.

A book aimed at a major publisher must appeal to an audience of *hundreds of thousands* of people, if not millions. To sell your idea to the editor, you must demonstrate that such an audience exists. In our proposal for *How to Promote Your Own Business* (accepted and published by New American Library), Gary Blake and I cited statistics showing there are more than 10 million small businesses in the US and an additional 250,000 new businesses started each year.

One excellent source of market data is *Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS)*,

a book listing US magazines that accept advertising and their circulations. *SRDS* is available at your local library or from the publisher (tel. 708/256-6067). If you're proposing a book on freelance writing, for example, you could look up writers' magazines and find that the two largest publications in the field have a combined circulation of more than 300,000; this is the potential market for your book.

But, only a small percentage of the intended audience will actually buy your book. And a major publisher hopes to sell at least 5,000 copies of your book. So if you're writing a book that appeals only to the 44,171 branch managers working at banks nationwide (say, *How to Manage Your Branch More Efficiently*), and 2% can be persuaded to buy the book, you've sold only 883 copies—not nearly enough to make the project worthwhile for either you or a publisher.

Is this a book—or a magazine article?

At the onset of the recession of 1991, I came up with an idea for a book I thought would be a strong seller: *Recession-Proof Business Strategies: Winning Methods to Sell Any Product or Service in a Down Economy*. It was timely. It had strong media appeal. And it contained vital information readers desperately needed.

But, as my agent pointed out, there were two problems with the book. First, its timely nature. From conception to bookstore, it can take 18 months to two years to write and publish a book. If the recession was over by the time *Recession-Proof Business Strategies* came out, the book would bomb.

Second, my agent was concerned that there wasn't enough material to fill a book. And he was right.

The average nonfiction book is about 200 pages in typeset, published form, with approximately 400 words a page. That's 80,000 words; about 320 double-spaced typewritten manuscript pages. Your book might be longer or shorter, ranging from 35,000 words (a slim, 100-page volume) to 200,000 words or more.

Trouble was, when I finished writing everything I knew about recession-proof business strate-

GOOD WRITERS SEND GOOD PROPOSALS

The worst part is incomplete information. I need a good outline, a table of contents, at least one chapter, and a couple of pages that outline the treatment of the book. Anything less than that doesn't give me an idea of what the book is. On the other side, I got a book just the other day in which there were so many snippets that I couldn't get a sense of the whole—half of Chapter 1, a third of Chapter 7—it was too disjointed. I felt no sense of content or style. Another thing that drives me crazy is when I get something that says, "This is the title of the book that I'm working on; would you be interested?"

I love to see a really good, professional presentation, with clear, crisp copies; it's the little things that make our lives easier. The pages have headers, and are numbered, clean and well organized. Inevitably, these submissions are well written, well thought out and—guess what—they're well presented. When I open a package and see that someone has taken the time, I find that they're a good writer.

—Karen Jackson,
Owner/Publisher
Delphi Press



FIRST OF ALL, CAN YOU WRITE?

I very much prefer—in fact to callers over the phone, I say I require—agented submissions. They're a definite plus. Why? The agents do preliminary screening. At least one person has thought the proposal has enough to stake something on.

I hate complete manuscripts. I find that among unsolicited ones, most of the time the decision will be based on whether an author can write. Ninety-eight percent of the things that come to me are written by people who can't write.

—Roger Devine
Assistant Trade Books Editor
Viking/Penguin USA

gies, I had 5,000 words—too short for a book, too long for an article. The solution? I self-published *Recession-Proof Business Strategies* as a \$7 booklet and sold several thousand copies. So a booklet—not a book—was the right vehicle for this material.

Many book ideas seem strong initially, but wilt under close examination.

For example, a year ago, a (to me) wonderful book title popped into my head: *How to Survive a Midlife Crisis—at Any Age*. My coauthor loved it and wanted to do the book. But when we sat down, we couldn't think of anything to put in it! We soon abandoned the idea.

How do you know whether your idea is a book, article or booklet—and how do you convince a publisher that your concept is a big one? Here are some guidelines:

First, see if there are other books on the topic. The existence of a few similar titles indicates that this idea is big enough to deserve a book, since other publishers bought and published book-length manuscripts on the topic.

Second, go to the library and see what else is written on the topic. If you feel overwhelmed by all the magazine articles, newspaper stories, booklets, pamphlets, surveys, reports and statistics on your topic, that's a good indication the topic is "meaty" enough to justify a full-length book.

For example, I heard a public service announcement describing a toll-free number you could call to get safety information about any car you were thinking of buying. I thought, "There seems to be a lot of these free consumer hotlines; why not organize them into a reference book?"

I researched the subject and discovered there were indeed hundreds of such hotlines. New American Library bought the book and published it as *Information Hotline USA*. However, if I'd uncovered only a few such hotlines, New American Library would have rejected my proposal.

The third step to convincing a publisher that your topic is broad enough to warrant a book is to organize your information into chapters. Think about how you would logically explain your topic or

present your information, and organize it into major categories. These will become chapter headings.

A full-length nonfiction book typically has 8-15 chapters. If your outline has fewer, the publisher may think there's not enough information to fill a book on your topic. Shoot for an outline with at least nine chapters.

On index cards, organize all your research material by chapter. Then add the most important or interesting items as bullet points in your chapter outline to create a complete table of contents for your proposed book. Here's how my coauthor and I described Chapter 15 in our proposal for *How to Promote Your Own Business*:

Chapter 15: On With the Show—Trade Shows and Displays

- Why do people attend trade shows?
- How to select the shows at which you will exhibit
- Creating effective trade show displays
- Five things you can do to attract more prospects to your exhibit: demonstrations, product samples, free gifts, contests and entertainment
- Other uses for your display materials: retail point-of-purchase, malls, lobby, displays

This type of detailed table of contents proves to the publisher that your topic is appropriate for a book, not just a magazine article.

What's different—or better—about your book?

The first page or two of your book proposal must contain an overview of your idea. This describes what the book is about, who it's written for, and what's in it.

Your overview must also tell the editor why and how your book is unique, different or better than other books already published on this topic. And you must do this within the first two paragraphs (if you don't, the editor probably won't read further).

The *hook*—the angle that makes your book different—can take many forms: it might be a

slant toward a different audience, a better way of organizing the material, or inclusion of topics not covered in other books. The key is to make your book seem both different and better.

For instance, if the other books aren't illustrated, say that your book *will be*—and explain why that's important. If the other books are lengthy, promise to write a more concise book. If the other books are incomplete, describe the topics they omit—and tell how you'll cover them in your book.

When planning *How to Promote Your Own Business*, my coauthor and I hoped to write a book on advertising that would appeal to small business owners rather than advertising agencies, PR firms and other advertising professionals. We used this as our hook; our proposal began:

How to Promote Your Own Business is not a book for the professional publicist, promoter or advertising professional. Rather, it is a practical working promotion guide for the 10.8 million Americans who own their own businesses, and the 250,000 entrepreneurs who start new businesses each year.

We wrote a previous book, *Technical Writing: Structure, Standards and Style*, because we believed the existing technical writing books were too lengthy and dull to be suitable as references for working technical writers. We wanted to create a handbook for technical writers that emulated the concise, to-the-point style and format of *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White's popular style guide for general writers.

Our proposal called our book "the Strunk and White of technical writing," which instantly communicated the key appeal of the concept. Our agent sold the book—within three weeks—to the first publisher who looked at it. Interestingly, McGraw-Hill also used the phrase "the Strunk and White of technical writing" in publicity and promotional materials describing the book. The book is now in its tenth printing.

Another section of your proposal that positions your book in relation to others on the same sub-

THE MAKING OF A WINNING BOOK PROPOSAL

A successful book proposal contains these sections.

TITLE PAGE

A cover sheet. The book's title and the name of the author are centered in the middle of the page. In the upper left corner, type *Book Proposal*. In the bottom right, type your name, address and phone number (or, if you have one, your agent's).

OVERVIEW

Summarize what your book is about: the topic, who will read it, why it's important or interesting to your intended audience, and what makes your book different from others in the field.

SPECIFICATIONS

Specify approximate word length, number of chapters, types of illustrations or graphics to be included, and any unique organizational schemes or formats (for example, is your book divided into major sections or do you use sidebars?).

MARKET

Tell the editor who will buy your book, how many of these people exist, and why they need it or will want to read it. Use statistics to dramatize the size of the market. If your book is about infertility, mention that one in six couples in the US is infertile.

PROMOTION

Is your book a natural for talk radio or *Oprah* (be realistic)? Can it be promoted through seminars or speeches to associations and clubs? Give the publisher some of your ideas on how the book can be marketed. (Note: Phrase these as suggestions, not demands. The publisher will be interested in your ideas but probably won't use most of them.)

COMPETITION

List books that compete with yours. Include the title, author, publisher, year of publication, number of pages, price, and format (hardcover, trade paperback or mass market paperback). Describe each book briefly, pointing out weaknesses and areas in which your book is different and superior.

AUTHOR'S BIO

A brief biography listing your writing credentials (books and articles published), qualifications to write about the book's topic (for instance, for a book on popular psychology, it helps if you're a therapist), and your media experience (previous appearances on TV and radio).

TABLE OF CONTENTS/OUTLINE

A chapter-by-chapter outline showing the contents of your proposed book. Many editors tell me that a detailed, well thought-out table of contents in a proposal helps sway them in favor of a book.

—R. W. B.

ject is the "Competition" section. Here you list and describe competing books; each listing should emphasize how your book is both different and better. Here is an example from our *How to Promote Your Own Business* proposal:

1. *How to Advertise and Promote Your Small Business*, by Connie McClung Siegel, John Wiley & Sons, 1978, 128 pages, \$4.95 trade paperback.

This book is part of John Wiley's "Small Business Series." The author neglects several vital areas of small business promotion including mail order, sales literature, trade shows and displays, contests and newsletters. There are very few examples of actual promotions, and the author gives no indication of the costs involved or the results achieved. The book does not provide step-by-step instructions for selecting and implementing promotions.

Include in the "Competition" section those books that cover the same—or very similar—topics as your book; that are published by a major publishing house; and that are no more than five years old.

How many books you list in this section will be important to publishers. The presence of two to six competitive books shows there's a market for this type of book, while still room for one more. On the other hand, if there are seven or more books a publisher may think the field is overcrowded, and you'll probably have a difficult time making the sale.

Will people pay \$12.95 for this book?

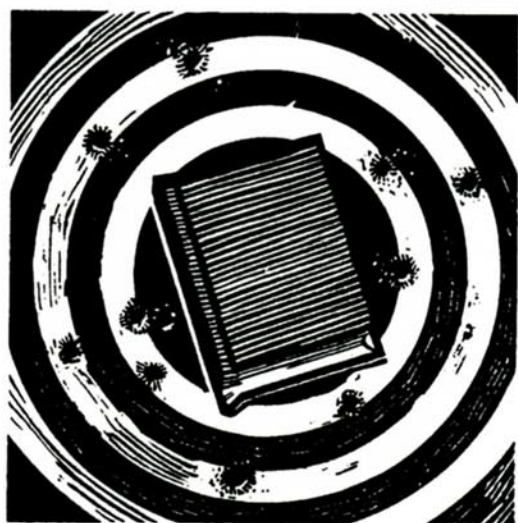
The average hardcover nonfiction book sells for \$19.95 or more; the average trade paperback for \$10.95. Your book must be interesting or valuable enough to make readers part not only with their money (remember, they can always read your book for free at the library) but with their time as well (many people would rather watch TV, go to the movies or nap than read a book).

When it comes to nonfiction, readers typically buy books to learn something, for reference or

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Passion! I love to see passion. For me that means that someone has knowledge of the subject and can write about food in a way that makes me want to read more, and cook. I don't like flat recipes that don't have any quiriness. Recipes should be clearly thought out and should be from someone who knows what the elements are. I think all cookbook proposals have to have lists of recipes with great titles. There's nothing worse than someone writing in and saying, "I'm writing a book on celery, are you interested in it?" There's just nothing there.

—Suzanne Rafer
Cookbook Editor
Workman Publishing



DON'T MISSPELL MY NAME!

A cover letter that is poorly written or not very correct grammatically doesn't start the editor off in the right frame of mind. My name misspelled starts off like a bad handshake.

Most of our ideas come from articles. What makes a proposal really exciting to me is when I find one that hits a subject I've been thinking about. I always have ideas in my head; when I see a proposal that's close to one of those, I get interested.

—Bryan Oettel
Fiction Editor
Grove Weidenfeld

to be entertained.

A how-to or reference book proposal should stress the benefits readers will get when they buy the book. Will it help them save time and money? Make money? Look beautiful? Feel young? Live longer? If your book will make readers' lives better and easier, say so. In our proposal for *How to Promote Your Own Business*, we said:

How to Promote Your Own Business is unique because it goes right to the heart of the problem: How can the owner or manager of a small business—a person with little time, money and promotion expertise—promote his business as effectively as his bigger, wealthier competitors?

If your book is biography, journalism, history, or any other form of nonfiction written primarily to entertain, your proposal should highlight some of the more fascinating details of the book. Your aim is to make the editor want to read the whole story.

Why should the publisher hire you to write it?

Your proposal must show why you are uniquely qualified to write the book. Such qualifications fall into two categories: *writing credentials* and *expert credentials*.

Writing credentials establish your expertise as an author. In an "About the Author" section of your book proposal, write a brief biographical sketch of yourself, being sure to include such information as:

- titles, publishers and dates of publication for any books you've written
- total number of books and articles written (if the number is impressive)
- names of major magazines and newspapers in which your work has appeared
- excerpts from favorable reviews about your work
- sales figures for your best-selling books (if they're impressive)

Expert credentials establish your position as an authority in the topic of your proposed book.

Actually, you don't have to be much of an expert. The trick is to make yourself *seem* like an expert

A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PROPOSAL

by Lynne Shaner

Think of your book proposal as a sales presentation that doesn't require your presence. Now, imagine me with a stack of other submissions piled around, fumbling through yours. I'm always on the lookout for good projects to dazzle me, but I'm not always willing to rub a tarnished manuscript to discern its promise.

Think of small conveniences. Paper clip things together. Don't staple: if I see something great, I'd rather make copies than circulate yours. Staples are a pain.

Don't forget the obvious. Your phone number, for instance. I may want to clarify something over the phone, see more information, or give you ideas of other publishers to go to. Using the phone is often easier than writing a note.

For most small publishers, return postage is important. The postage required to mail back huge manuscripts plus the hassle of finding envelopes large enough will often guarantee that you won't see your material for months. Like many editors of smaller presses, I do it all. It's more important for me to get a book to the printer on time than it is to mail back a manuscript I never asked for in the first place. That may sound cold, but when you think about it, it makes sense. I know writers who brazenly assert that they never send return postage because the only thing they've ever received with return postage is a rejection. Well, sure, but a manuscript without postage may sit on somebody's desk forever, and will hold up your life. It may also annoy someone you're trying very hard to impress.

Can you make me laugh? If you succeed, I'll find it hard to put your proposal away. Humor is not appropriate in all instances, but if you seem like an interesting, witty person in your cover letter, I'll be likely to read extra carefully through what's in front of me. A sense of humor projected onto the page shows you're confident, balanced, and probably someone I'll enjoy working with.



I also like proposals in which the writer tells me how capable he or she is of writing about the topic *and* promoting the book. Tell me about who you know and how you and your book can get into different markets. Do you have associates or colleagues who are interested in the book and are in positions to give it some press or some special sales opportunities? Are you someone like that? Have you often appeared on television, lectured on this topic, written newspaper or magazine articles? Tell me! Not only will this information affect the fate of your proposal, but—if we do go to press with your book one day—these items will help shape the marketing plan.

One more thing. Make sure you're sending your proposal to the right place. All the beautiful words in the world won't convince me to publish a book in a category that proved unprofitable for us years before. Check *Literary Market Place*, *Writer's Market*, or call the publisher and ask what sort of titles they're in need of. Don't spend more than a few seconds. You'll be thrilled when you hear someone say they're looking for the subject you've just written up.

Every editor has an idiosyncrasy—a wish for some odd or arcane item that will make the perfect book proposal. Unless you have second sight, you won't figure out all these oddities. But the majority of us are in complete agreement on one thing: There are never too many good book ideas, never too many good stories. Each of us wants to find as many of them as possible and nurture them to publication.

You can make it easier for us by being thoughtful in the little things; well-organized enough to emphasize your best business ability; and humorous or pleasantly conversational to let us know that we, too, are working with a real person.

Lynne Shaner is managing editor of Acropolis Books, a Washington, DC-area publishing house. She also gathered the other comments from editors that appear in this feature.

to the publisher.

For instance, author Wilbur Perry wanted to write about mail order. To make himself more appealing as a potential author for a book on the subject, he started and operated a small part-time mail-order business from his home. This gave him the credential he needed to convince John Wiley & Sons to publish two books by him on the topic.

In my experience, your expert credentials don't need to be in-depth. Editors understand you

can research the topic, and they don't require you to know everything about it before buying your book. They just want enough credentials to convince their editorial board—and book buyers—that you know what you're talking about.

Of course, having a published book to your credit is one credential that always impresses publishers. And that's a credential I'm sure you'll soon have if you follow the five key points covered in this article. ■



Bob Bly
Robert W. Bly is the author of *Secrets of a Freelance Writer* (Henry Holt). For a free copy of Bly's *Writer's Profit Catalog*, which contains more than 30 resources for writers, write to Bob Bly, Dept. WPC, 174 Holland Ave., New Milford, New Jersey 07646.

**THE 10 MOST COMMON QUERY LETTER MISTAKES
AND HOW TO AVOID THEM**

1. **Sending the right letter to the wrong publisher.** No matter how well-written your query letter is, if you don't send it to the right editor or publishing house, you've wasted your time and postage. Before querying, write to publishers for guidelines and sample magazine copies. Study the various editions of Writer's Market. Make some phone calls to learn which editors are reading what. And don't forget to keep your marketing files up-to-date by reading writer's magazines. Often they contain news items regarding the latest requirements and editorial changes within the publishing world.
2. **Sending the wrong letter to the right publisher.** When you read through marketing directories, make sure you follow the submission policies exactly. If a publishing house or magazine asks for a query letter only, don't include two sample chapters plus biographical material. The idea of the query is to attract the attention of potential publishers as quickly as possible, with a minimum of fuss. If a house wants you to include writing samples plus an outline, those instructions will be printed with the market listing. Otherwise, a one-page letter is all you need.
3. **The letter is too long.** Always try to keep your query letter down to one, uncluttered page. Ideally, your query should have four distinct paragraphs: an opening with an attention-getting lead; a brief description of plot and resolution; your reason for writing the proposed book or article; and your closing paragraph.
4. **No narrative hook.** Your first, or opening paragraph, should be as dynamic and intriguing as the first paragraph of your proposed manuscript. In fact, many writers simply begin their queries with the same first lines of the manuscript they are pitching. Whatever you do, never waste valuable space or risk boring an editor with a first sentence such as: "I am a new writer seeking publication," or, "I have a manuscript I am trying to sell...." Don't be afraid to jump right into your query with a strong, no-holds-barred approach.
5. **No character interest.** Unless you are writing the driest "how to," your fiction or nonfiction story, book, or article should revolve around character, and an appealing character can often be enough to attract an editor's interest. Rather than writing, "My book is about young female athletes," bring your characters to life: "Mary Jones is elated to be chosen for the Olympic swim team...."
6. **No indication of plot, conflict, or resolution.** Always be sure to include what your main character wants, why that goal seems unattainable, and what your character is going to do about the situation. For instance, "Mary Jones is a bright student and a natural born swimmer. More than anything she dreams of being chosen for the Olympic swimming team, but her family's poverty coupled with her mother's severe disapproval has kept Mary from the training she needs. Determined to overcome the odds, Mary goes after a scholarship

to an expensive, private school known to have the best swimming coaches in the country. Once there, she encounters a level of competition and snobbery she never imagined possible. And when she inadvertently reveals the school's high scores have come from illegal means, she loses both the scholarship and her reputation. But Mary knows what she deserves; she will never give up...."

7. **No indication of writing style.** Serving as both audition and job interview rolled into one, your query letter is a one-time chance to display your best writing skills. Watch grammar and spelling, and try to couch your letter in a style similar to that of your proposed story or article. For instance, if you are interested in writing humor or satire, you might want to slip some humor into your letter. Or if your goal is the romance market, you'll want to avoid sounding as if you'd be happier writing computer manuals. Above all, aim for clarity. Write a letter that makes an editor say, "Sold!"
8. **No mention of intended readership or need for the manuscript.** In today's busy publishing world, editors need your input as to who you think will buy or read your manuscript. Before you query, study Subject Guide to Books in Print to see if your book manuscript fills a gap, or look through a magazine's back issues to see if your proposed article "fits." Let an editor know why you think the market needs your work, and back up your opinion with research.
9. **Trying to sell too many ideas or stories in one letter.** One idea or story per query, please! If you have an idea for a great story on corporate management techniques, let an editor be the one to decide whether or not variations of that story will be continued in the next twelve issues of her magazine. And while you know that your science fiction epic can go for at least five volumes, concentrate on selling that first book first. Presenting long-term plans in a query letter can give an editor burn-out before she's even read your manuscript. You also want to avoid telling editors that your book can be turned into a film, T-shirt line, and/or audio cassette. These are decisions publishers will make after they've been sold on your initial idea and manuscript.
10. **Too many, or irrelevant, publishing credits.** Never include a separate resume with your query letter unless a publisher's listing specifically asks for one. Even then, you should include only the publishing credits that relate to your proposed manuscript, and not an entire writing history that covers the last thirty years. If you do have an impressive list of credits which you want to share in your letter, simply state in your concluding paragraph, "My previous work has appeared in a wide variety of scientific and literary journals," or, "My last book was published by Starsong Press."

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