

Four Principles for a Successful Non-Fiction Proposal

by Linda Rohrbough

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For me, writing fiction is the holy grail, but non-fiction offers a lot of benefits. Non-fiction books are easier to sell and usually garner higher advances for beginning writers. Here are four principles for success along with resources for how to write a non-fiction proposal.

The proposal is just what it sounds like: a marketing tool to get a commitment from a publisher and, consequently, money on the table in the form of an advance without writing the entire book first. The best outline for a proposal I've ever seen is on the McGraw-Hill website under the heading "Project Submission Guidelines." Since we have limited space, I'm going to let you read over McGraw-Hill's guidelines for yourself and just hit the high points.

My first principle is write the proposal the way you plan to write the book. If your project is not aimed at intellectuals, then modify your proposal headings appropriately. For example, I recently used the heading "Why This Book?" instead of "Rational" because the book is aimed at a general audience.

New authors often ask me if they can just write their non-fiction book and skip the "boring" proposal. Think about this for a minute. Boring proposal, interesting book – is that real? My opinion is if you can't write a compelling proposal, then you're not likely to write a book that will sell.

My non-fiction agent recommended: *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction--and Get It Published* by Susan Rabiner. While I disagree with portions of the book, it does provide excellent examples.

Some parts of the proposal are only interesting to the editors whose job is to sell the book to their publishing committee, which brings me to the competing titles section of the proposal and principle number two. Never say, "There's nothing on the market like this book." That'll scare a publisher because it's an indication similar books have failed. It's your job to show them a waiting

market exists. You want to compare your book to a handful who are doing well, but also point out how yours is different enough to find a niche. Do list the retail price, page count and size (known as trim size) of competing titles. By the way, Amazon.com is your best friend when it comes to this task.

I’ve had authors ask me if they should suggest a retail price for their book. Absolutely not. You’ll look like the worst kind of amateur. However, you do want to follow principle three which is propose a book similar in length to the ones on the market. The rule of thumb is 250 words to a page, so a book that is 320 pages equals 80,000 words. You can violate this principle if you have a good reason, but make sure you state it in the proposal.

Also, defining the book’s potential market size is another area where writers get hung up. Many authors want to skip this part. But if you don’t know who your book is aimed at and how many of those folks exist, how can you expect it to sell? (Getting the answers to those questions is also an excellent exercise for fiction writers.) As a brief example, in the proposal my agent sold, among other sources I listed the American Obesity Association asserting the number of citizens who are one hundred pounds or more overweight is nine million--more than twice the number of people in the US who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease. I also mentioned the Center for Disease Control says obesity is a disease escalating at an alarming rate; and *USA Today*, who claims wealth is no longer a deterrent, asserted the disease is growing fastest in those making sixty thousand or more a year. Just for your information, the statistics are the majority of book buyers have average incomes of between forty and sixty thousand a year.

Where do you get this type of statistical information on the market for your book? I always check with a reference librarian, do a search on the Internet, and browse recent copies of the magazine “American Demographics.” Another great resource is *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, a thick book put out by the government, also available on the web, with everything from the number of people in the US to the number of television sets. All of these resources can be found at most public

libraries.

Also, analysts are another source. I watch for analysts and when I’m working on a proposal, visit their websites looking for past press releases. So the fourth principle is define your market and provide the size based on credible sources.

Non-fiction proposal writing can be fun and it helps sharpen your business sense about publishing. Most importantly, it can give you a jingle in your jeans while you’re working on your fiction career. Good luck!

Sidebar:

Four principles for a successful non-fiction proposal:

1. Write the proposal the way you plan to write the book. (If you can’t write a compelling proposal, then you’re not likely to write a book that will sell.)
2. Compare your book to those doing well, but make sure you point out how yours is different enough to be worth publishing.
3. Propose a book similar in length to ones on the market.
4. Define your market and provide market size estimates based on credible sources.

Resources:

Project Submission Guidelines website from McGraw-Hill:

http://mhprofessional.com/?page=/mhp/content/for_authors/submission_guidelines.html

Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction--and Get It Published
by Susan Rabiner

The Statistical Abstract of the United States – <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/>

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda’s newest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band: Everything You Need to Know Before and After Surgery to Lose Weight Successfully (Da Capo, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.