

TEN TIPS FOR CREATING NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSALS

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OVERVIEW

The nonfiction book proposal is the sales tool of the nonfiction writer. At a minimum it contains the following elements: an overview of the book, a credentials section (“about the author”), a competing-and-complementary books section, a marketing and promoting section, an annotated table of contents, a length-and-delivery statement (how long the book will be and when it will be ready) and a sample chapter (or chapters). Literary agents and editors are looking for book proposals where the author has a strong platform (a ready-made audience), marketing and promoting skills, and a salable idea. Here are ten tips for turning out a smart, powerful nonfiction book proposal.

TIP ONE: EXPECT YOUR PROJECT TO MORPH

When you start a new book you start with an idea. As you elaborate your idea, as you think about it, and as you actually work on it, it typically shifts--often unrecognizably! Be prepared for these shifts and for your project morphing from one day to the next. That this is happening doesn’t mean that you “don’t know what you’re doing,” it means that you’re engaged in the thinking and writing process.

TIP TWO: UNDERSTAND THE IDEA OF PLATFORM

Publishers want their prospective authors to *already* be reaching an audience: as a guest blogger on a well-trafficked site, as a radio, tv, or podcast host, as a regular lecturer and workshop leader, as a social media maven, and so on. If you can say that your column appears on a site that attracts a million hits a month, that makes you infinitely more attractive than an author who has no such platform. Get started on building your platform *now*.

TIP THREE: STEP UP ON PROMOTING

The nonfiction book proposal includes a marketing and promoting section. Make yours a winner! Identify the many smart promotional efforts you'll engage in to support your book, from making personal connections with media folks in your vicinity to arranging high profile speaking engagements to creating a virtual blog or twitter tour. Publishers want more than your assurance that you will avidly market: they want to hear about the concrete efforts you intend to make.

TIP FOUR: EXPRESS YOUR CREDENTIALS SMARTLY

Publishers want you to be an expert in your field but they are also hoping that you have other sorts of skills and credentials--that you are comfortable speaking in public, that you are dependable and will deliver what you promise, that you are savvy about marketing and promoting, and so on. Make sure to describe *all* your credentials that make you look like an author who would be attractive to a publisher.

TIP FIVE: MAP THE TERRITORY

Agents and editors are unlikely to be keeping track of your nonfiction area. So paint them a picture of how your book fits in among recently published books in your area--and how it makes a contribution. Don't bother with a comprehensive list of competing and complementary books--just pick out the highlights and make the case for your book being a worthy addition.

TIP SIX: GET EARLY ENDORSEMENTS

Because you are trying to sell your book before you write it, you can't really get book endorsements at the proposal stage. But you can get endorsements for your *idea*. Write to experts in your field, explain your book idea, and ask them what they think. If they say that they love your idea, ask them if you can quote them. Voila!--you've got early endorsements.

TIP SEVEN: GET REALLY ORGANIZED

Because your book may do a lot of morphing, it is hard to keep it organized--either in your mind or in neat computer files. You are bound to end up with

lots of “pieces” and “chunks” that don’t seem to go anywhere. Periodically--say every two weeks--glance at these pieces and chunks and see if they now have a home in the book. If you leave them all to the end you may find the task overwhelming! Regularly deal with the loose ends that inevitably come up in the writing process.

TIP EIGHT: DON’T BE DEMANDING

You may have many ideas about what you want your book to contain and how you want your book to look. These desires are best expressed after a publisher wants to move forward with your project. If you include in your book proposal that your book must have four-color illustrations, a forward by a world-famous expert, French flaps, and so on, you are making it that much harder for a publisher to want you and your project.

TIP NINE: WRITE A POWERFUL SAMPLE CHAPTER

Not all chapters are born equal. Some are nicely informative and do good work and belong in your book and others may be richer, more exciting, and just, well, better. As you decide which chapter or chapters you intend to write as your sample, go down your annotated table of contents and get a sense of which chapters seem the liveliest and strongest. Choose one or two of those to write for your sample!

TIP TEN: CREATE A GREAT QUERY EMAIL

When your nonfiction book proposal is ready it will be time to approach literary agents and/or editors. Having a personal connection or a referral are the best ways to make contact but if you don’t have either of those you will still want to approach these marketplace players “cold” with an email query (if they accept email queries) that has an intriguing subject line and a strong, lively body. Let some friends read your query email before you send it out--you want your query to really work!

RESOURCES

The Art Of The Book Proposal. Eric Maisel

Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write. Elizabeth Lyon

Write The Perfect Book Proposal. Jeff Herman

ABOUT ERIC MAISEL

Eric Maisel is the author of more than 30 books, including *The Art of the Book Proposal*. His recent books include *Brainstorm: Harnessing the Power of Productive Obsessions*, *Mastering Creative Anxiety*, and *The Depression Code: From Mental Disorder to Meaning Solution* (2012). Dr. Maisel writes for Art Bistro, Professional Artist Magazine, Wholeliving.com., and the Huffington Post, trains creativity coaches and meaning coaches, works with individual clients, and presents workshops worldwide in places like San Francisco, New York, London, Paris and Berlin. Visit Dr. Maisel at ericmaisel.com or contact him at ericmaisel@hotmail.com.