A FIELD GUIDE FOR NONFICTION AUTHORS

The Book Proposal Process

What it takes, and why you should write one even if you never submit it.

SUMMIT PRESS Publishers

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There's a document that traditional publishers send authors after they buy a book. It's called the **author questionnaire**, and at one of the big five houses it runs about thirteen pages.

Here's what it asks for.

Your short bio and your long bio. Your hobbies, your past jobs, the organizations you belong to, the authors you'd compare yourself to, and every speaking engagement you've done — with recordings, if you have them. Your connection to the book. A short pitch and a long pitch. What made you write it. Competitive titles and what makes yours different. The local bookstores that might stock it. The communities, academic journals, newsletters, specialty magazines, blogs, and websites that should consider it for review. The professional associations, clubs, companies, and government agencies that might be interested. Awards you want to be considered for. Points you think are newsworthy. Topics you'd write an article about to support the launch. Seasonal tie-ins and anniversaries. The authors you want approached for blurbs, and the book clubs and organizations worth contacting, with names.

Read that list again, and notice who is doing the work.

The publisher has already bought the book. The advance has been paid. And the first substantive thing they ask the author to do is compile the marketing intelligence — the network, the outlets, the contacts, the angles. Not because the publisher is lazy. Because that information lives with the author and nowhere else, and no publicist can invent it.

This is the single most useful thing to understand about publishing before you decide which path to take, and almost nobody understands it until they're already in it.

Now here's the part that matters for you.

A book proposal — the document you write before anyone has offered you anything — asks for the same things. Market analysis. Competitive titles. Audience. Platform. Promotion plan, with your contacts and your commitments. Bio built around your authority and your ability to sell.

Same homework. The proposal just makes you do it eighteen months earlier, and without the advance.

> Which means the real question was never should I go traditional or not. *The real question is:* when are you going to do this work, and who is it going to benefit?

What a book proposal actually is

A book proposal is not a writing sample with a cover letter. ***It is a business case.***

You are asking an acquisitions editor to persuade a room full of sales, marketing, and finance people to commit six figures of company resources to an unwritten product from an unproven vendor. Everything in the proposal exists to answer the question that room is actually asking, which is not *is this good* but *will this sell, and can this person help us sell it*.

Once you understand that, the structure stops feeling arbitrary.

A complete proposal contains:

1. A cover letter.
   Brief. Hello and thank you for the opportunity.
2. A title page.
3. A table of contents for the proposal itself.
4. An overview.
   Roughly ten double-spaced pages describing what the book covers and what it's about.

5 **A promotion plan.**
What you, the author, will do to sell this book.

6 **A market analysis.**
Who is affected by the problem you're addressing, what they currently believe, where the confusion or outdated thinking comes from, and how your book changes it — proven against five to seven competing titles.

7 **A bio.**
One page on why you are the person to write this.

8 **A chapter outline.**
Roughly half a page per chapter, showing the structure of the book including its parts or sections.

9 **Sample chapters.**
Usually the introduction and one strong chapter, totaling around ten percent of the finished manuscript.

That's the deliverable. What follows is the part most guides skip: the order you build it in.

Write it in this order (not the order it's assembled in)

The proposal is assembled in the order above. It is written in a completely different order, and the sequence matters more than most authors realize.

Market analysis first. Then the outline. Then the overview. Then the bio, the promotion plan, and the sample chapters.

Market analysis comes first for a reason that has nothing to do with publishers. It's the fastest way to find out what your book actually is.

Most authors start with the overview because it's the fun part — it's the vision, the pitch, the reason they wanted to write the book in the first place. And most authors write an overview that is vague, sprawling, and interchangeable with four other books, because they haven't yet done the work that would tell them where their book sits in the landscape. You cannot articulate what makes your book different until you know precisely what it's different from.

Do the analysis first and the overview writes itself. Do it backwards and you'll rewrite the overview five times.

SECTION ONE

The Market Analysis

Open with a paragraph that states your central argument and why this book has to exist. The hole it fills, the fresh angle, or a statistic startling enough that the need becomes self-evident.

Then prove it against real books.

First pass: build the long list

List about **fifteen** books yours could be compared to. Search Amazon, but don't stop there — go to the library, go to an actual bookstore, and read the bibliographies and appendices of the major books in your space. Ask a librarian. Ask a bookseller. Ask other people in your field what they recommend to clients.

For each one, and then across the whole list, answer four questions:

1. What is your book bringing that's different or better?
2. What is your book doing that other books have already proven works?
3. Why does this book need to exist?
4. What statistics, stories, or studies support that argument?

That third and fourth question tend to be where authors discover their book is actually about something slightly different than they thought. Let that happen. It's cheaper to discover it now than in chapter nine.

Second pass: cut to five to seven

Now narrow. The titles that survive should mostly meet these criteria:

- It sold well. A bestseller of some kind is ideal, though not mandatory.
- It's current, or has been reprinted recently. A comp from 2009 tells a publisher you haven't been paying attention.
- Your final set includes both books closely adjacent to yours and at least one that approaches the subject from a completely different angle.

Pay attention to voice, point of view, and organization as you read. You're not just cataloguing competitors; you're studying structural choices that worked.



How to write each comparison

Here is where most proposals fall apart, and where a good one separates itself immediately.

Give each competing title a genuine, respectful summary. Explain what the author set out to do and what the book delivers. Take it seriously — the acquisitions editor has probably read it, may have published it, and will not be impressed by a strawman.

Then find the specific wedge. Not *"mine is better."* Something precise: this book covers the individual case but not the organizational one. This book explains the research but offers no framework for applying it. This book was written by a journalist reporting on practitioners; mine is written by the practitioner.

A useful test: if you swapped in a different competing title, would your differentiation paragraph still make sense? If yes, it's too vague. Rewrite it.

SECTION TWO

The Outline

The outline states each chapter title and, beneath it, summarizes the goal, content, and flavor of that chapter in specific, economical language. Bullet points, lists, the stories and anecdotes you'll use. If you're including photographs, illustrations, graphs, or exhibits, say so here.

Before you write it, decide how the book is organized. Three common structures:

Chronological

Step by step through a process. A book on launching a consultancy might move from refining the offer, to positioning, to pricing, to the first ten clients. Natural when the reader's journey has a real sequence.

Story by story

Built on interviews or case studies, with chapters organized around themes and the stories supporting them.

Category by category

The subject broken into its component types or domains, examined one at a time.

Then build in two passes.

First Pass: list every chapter with its single big idea. Rearrange them — come up with two or three possible orders and compare. Choose the one with the most logical flow. Then, under each chapter heading, dump everything that could possibly go in that chapter as bullet points. Don't edit yet. Material that could sit in three different places should go where it's most useful to the reader, not where you thought of it.

Second Pass: get creative with the chapter and sub-chapter headings. Turn the bullets into sentences and a short paragraph. Show that each chapter has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Note where there will be exercises, tools, or case studies. Produce the final chapter list — this becomes the book's table of contents — including any appendix and notes.

SECTION THREE

The Overview

This is the sales page for your book. Three to ten pages. By the end of it, an editor should know exactly what the book is, who it's for, what it sounds like, and why they should be fighting to publish it.

Open with a hook: a statistic, a quote, a bold statement, or an anecdote that pulls the reader in immediately. Brainstorm widely before you choose — statistics you know or can research, current events, personal stories, research findings, a provocative claim, a question, a piece of counterintuitive data. (One caution: avoid building your hook on song lyrics or other licensed material. Permissions are expensive, frequently denied, and a needless complication.)

Then the body of the overview does four jobs, and keeping these four questions visible while you draft will keep you honest:

What is your book about?
Use specific examples. Describe actual chapters, stories, exercises, and exhibits. Name the chapters you'll use as landmarks on the reader's journey.

Why does it need to be written?
State the case. Is the audience underserved? Are there many books but none that do what yours does? Make the argument.

Why does it need to be written by you?
What experience do you bring? Why should anyone listen to you on this subject?

Who is going to buy it?
Be specific. *"Business leaders"* is not a market. Name the reader and explain how the book meets a need they already know they have.

Write it in the voice of the book. You're addressing agents and editors, but the overview doubles as a demonstration of how you'll sound on the page.

SECTION FOUR

The Bio

Not your general professional biography. The bio of the person who wrote this book.

Four areas carry the weight:

1. Your expertise and years of experience in the subject.
2. Prior writing experience, if any.
3. Marketing and promotion experience.
   You will be largely responsible for promoting yourself and this book, and an editor wants evidence you know how to do it.
4. Speaking, radio, television, podcast experience.
   They want to know you can hold a room and handle an interview.

Draft it in two passes.

First Pass: write down everything — jobs, personal experience, published work, publicity, research, education, awards, memberships, workshops, lectures, media appearances. Highlight everything that connects to the book's topic, to your writing, or to your ability to promote. Then pick the most impressive and relevant.

Second Pass: start with your connection to the topic. Keep it short. Keep it interesting. Be specific where you have the goods, and brief where you don't.

SECTION FIVE

The Promotional Plan

This is the section that changes people's minds about traditional publishing, and it's the section most first-time authors radically underestimate.

Agents and editors want to see what you can do and what you're actually going to do — with your own time, your own money, your own ideas, and your own connections. The plan should cover both what you already have and what you commit to building.

Work through these:

Media contacts. Who do you, or your friends, or your friends' friends know in television, radio, newspapers, magazines, blogs, and podcasts?

Influential contacts. Who will commit to a cover quote, a review, or a foreword? Name them.

Your list. How big is your mailing list? Your newsletter? Your following on each platform? Include anything impressive; be honest about the rest.

Organizations. What groups are you a member of that would care about this topic? How many members? Will you speak to them or partner with them? Which relevant groups could you join?

Touring and speaking. Will you tour, understanding that you organize and pay for it? Where — and choose cities where you know people or have media connections.

Workshops and courses. Will you run programs built on the book? Which ones?

Digital outlets. Which blogs and podcasts are a genuine fit?

Print outlets. Which magazines and papers?

Broadcast. Which radio and television?

Paid and earned placement. Will you buy ads or write articles for relevant organizations' newsletters and blogs? Which, and what's their reach?

Your own platform. Do you have a column or blog on this topic? How big is the readership? If not, will you start one?

Web presence. Will you build a site for the book?

Publicist. Do you have one? If not, will you hire one, and who?

Institutions. Would schools or universities have an interest, and will you approach them?

List the most impressive material first. Then push past the checklist into ideas: a video trailer, paid social campaigns, a free-plus-shipping launch, a coordinated bestseller push, joint ventures with complementary businesses.

And pay attention to how other authors in your space are promoting themselves. Ask yourself why you know about the books you know about. Then borrow what works.

A word on the standard here. A serious promotion plan doesn't say *"I'll do social media and reach out to podcasts."* It names the organizations, names the people, gives the audience sizes, and states the commitments in numbers — how many interviews, which cities, what budget.



The difference between a proposal that gets read twice and one that gets declined is very often just this section.

SECTION SIX

Sample Chapters

Usually the introduction plus one more, totaling about ten percent of the finished manuscript.

They demonstrate three things: that you can write, or have arranged for someone who can; that the material is genuinely meaty; and that you have a creative, confident handle on it.

Many authors default to the first two chapters, which is a fine instinct — the introduction usually has to be written anyway, and it does real work. But consider choosing on other grounds: which chapter are you most excited to write, which one can you execute best, which holds the most compelling stories and evidence, and which showcases the widest range of what the book offers.

So: should you go *traditional?*

Now that you know what the process demands, here's the honest assessment. We do both — we're a hybrid publisher, and we also write proposals for authors pursuing traditional deals.

We have no reason to sell you one over the other.



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Traditional makes sense when the book is the product rather than a vehicle for something else.

When you're writing for a broad consumer readership rather than a defined professional audience. When bookstore distribution genuinely matters to your goals.

When the imprint's name carries weight in your field.

When you have a large existing platform and the leverage that comes with it.

When you have the patience for the timeline.

And, sometimes, when a specific editor is the right partner for a specific book — that's real, and it isn't nothing.

Traditional usually doesn't make sense for the coaches, consultants, and executives we work with most often, for reasons that are structural rather than snobbish:

Time.

Finding an agent, submission, acquisition, editing, production. From starting the proposal to holding the book, two to three years is normal. If you need the book for next year's speaking circuit, board conversations, or business development, that timeline isn't a delay — it's a different plan.

Economics.

A first-time business author's advance is typically modest, paid in installments, and earned back before royalties begin. If you're a consultant with a meaningful day rate, the opportunity cost of the process can exceed the advance. Meanwhile a book you control keeps its margin — and, more importantly, its ability to be given away strategically, bought in bulk by a client, or bundled into a program.

Control.

Title, cover, positioning, and often the release date are decisions the publisher makes. If the book is a business asset, those are your brand decisions being made by someone with different incentives.

Marketing.

Return to the author questionnaire. Even with a traditional deal, the network, the outreach, and the platform work remain yours. The house adds catalog presence, sales representation, and review consideration — real advantages, but not a substitute for your own effort.

If you read that and traditional still sounds right for your book, good — that's a decision made with your eyes open, and we'll write you a proposal that competes.

Write it either way

Here's the argument this whole piece has been building toward.

Every component of a book proposal is something a serious author should have settled before writing chapter one. Who the reader is. What else exists and where you sit against it. What the book argues and why it's needed now. Why you're the one to write it. How it's structured. How anyone will ever hear about it.

Self-published and hybrid authors are never forced to answer these questions. That's the freedom, and it's also the trap. Manuscripts stall in the third act not from writer's block but from a structural question that was never resolved — usually the reader, or the argument, or both.

The proposal process forces the resolution. It makes you think like an acquisitions editor about your own book, which is simply a disciplined way of thinking like the person who has to decide whether to spend money on it. That discipline improves the book whether or not a single agent ever sees the document.

So write the proposal. Then decide what to do with it.

If it's strong and traditional is right for your book, submit it. If it's strong and traditional isn't right — which is more often the case — you now hold a market analysis, a positioning statement, a full outline, an author platform inventory, and a marketing plan. That's not a discarded submission. That's the business plan for your book, and it's worth more to you than to anyone you would have sent it to.

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Summit Press Publishers works with coaches, consultants, and executives publishing books as business assets. We write book proposals for authors pursuing traditional deals, and we publish the books that are better served by moving faster and staying in the author's control.

If you're not sure which describes your project, that's a conversation worth having before you write another chapter.

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