

# Writing Book Proposals That Publishers Read

*By Barbara McNichol*

You'll find lots of books on the bookstore shelf about how to write book proposals for traditional publishers. They're often written by agents who sell to acquisition editors. But what advice would those editors give about writing a winning book proposal?

Says Matt Holt, Executive Editor at John Wiley & Sons, "Remember, the decision to publish a book isn't often made by an acquisition editor alone; it's made by a committee of people who represent marketing, publicity, and sales. Knowing this alone should give you insight into crafting a proposal that is compelling to these different parties.

"Publishing is a business. As such, your project ultimately has to make sound financial sense. Editors can like you personally, but if they can't make the business case for publishing your book, in all likelihood a major house won't publish it."

## What Goes Into a Proposal?

Below are the standard sections of a proposal as Holt suggests them (although the order frequently varies). Keep the publisher's business purpose in mind as you write each one of them:

Author's Biography or About the Author

Book Description or Overview

Sales "Handle"

Competitive Books

Marketing and Promotion

Table of Contents and Sample Chapter

Author's Biography or About the Author

This section explains why you, the author, are qualified to write this particular book. You want to include the background, accomplishments, and education that are relevant to the subject of the book, and leave out details that aren't. In this section, you answer this question: **Why are you the one qualified to write this book?**

## Book Description or Overview

In the Overview section, focus on what's remarkable about your topic and define why people would want to know more. It answers the question: What is your book about? It also grabs the editors' attention and answers a second question: **Why should readers care about that?**

## Sales "Handle"

Also called an "elevator speech," this pithy sales synopsis elicits interest in the short time span of an elevator ride. Ideally, it puts strong, short statements into the mouths of the publisher's sales reps who only have 10 to 30 seconds to interest their

buyers in your book. The book's sales handle answers the question: **Why would this book sell and who would buy it?**

### Competitive Books

This section shows that you've done enough research to say, "Similar books on this topic have value, but mine provides \_\_\_\_ (more, better, different, new). Summarizing three to five similar books gives decision-makers something to compare your book against while explaining its uniqueness and reinforcing your sales handle. It answers the question: **Given all the books on this topic already circulating, why do we need yours?** Caution: Never indicate that no other book like yours exists. As Matt points out, "There are two responses to this claim: 1) There is—you just didn't look hard enough, and 2) You're right—the idea doesn't warrant a book."

### Marketing and Promotion

You've likely heard the word "platform," a term that describes what you've already set up that will help you promote and market your own book. Publishers jump through high hoops to attract self-published authors and seminar leaders whose impressive reach into a targeted audience means a guaranteed volume of sales. They seek media-savvy authors who speak well and actively pursue publicity. This section answers the question: **How can you get the word out about this book so we'll make money selling it?**

Says Matt, "You, the author, are the most effective person in driving sales. You speak in front of groups, you have clients, and you have contacts in the media. That's why you need to create the pull-through for the sales of your book." Therefore, list everything you can do to support sales. Make this section highly persuasive; it counts for a lot!

### Table of Contents and Sample Chapter

As the nuts and bolts of any proposal, this section shows you have carefully thought through the book's content and you can craft your ideas into a well-written sample chapter. It answers the question: **Can the author communicate concepts clearly and persuasively?** Cautions Matt, "Remember, submitting a strong writing sample doesn't get you off of the hook when it comes to creating a first-class proposal. You need to make your proposal the best it can be!"

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