

TIPS FOR BOOK PROPOSALS

A proposal is the most effective method by which to tell a prospective editor/publisher about your work. A clearly written, well argued proposal enables an editor to best determine whether or not your proposed book is suitable for the publishing program she oversees. An introduction or excerpt from your manuscript is not a substitute for a proposal. This may well run 10-20 pages.

Not every good proposal is precisely the same but here are some elements that good proposals include:

Overview

A working title/subtitle for your project.

A brief description of your book in which you explain the argument and lay out the arc of your book.

Write this in the style in which you intend to write your book.

What kind of contribution is the work? Be more specific than “a contribution to the literature.” Talk about what kind of contribution your analysis will make to understanding the issue.

Annotated table of contents

Provide a chapter outline, including a descriptive paragraph on the key points, themes, and arguments of the material to be covered in the chapter.

Sources

This need not be comprehensive but say what kinds of archival documents, oral histories, collections, etc. you are drawing on. A select bibliography at the end of the proposal can also be helpful.

Market/Audience

Discuss the intended audience for your book. Is it written primarily for scholars (if so, what discipline(s)), professionals (if so, what fields), students (if so, what level), or general readers (non-academic audience that has demonstrated interest in the topic of your book). If particular scholarly or professional organizations would be targets, identify them. Be as specific and realistic as possible. Few books appeal to all of these markets, and you run the risk of appearing naive to a potential publisher. There is nothing wrong with identifying a particular subfield and saying that your book is a monograph intended for specialists in this area.

Comparable/competitive books

List three or four similar titles (including author, title, publisher, publication date) and how your book is like/unlike these. It is always impressive to an editor if you mention a book on that publisher's list.

Nuts and bolts

Anticipated details of finished book—number of words (include text, notes, and bibliography), number and type of illustrations you hope to include. A ms of 100,000 words will produce a book of c. 300 book pages, an optimal length. Also give a sense of status and timetable—where the ms is at the moment you are writing and when you estimate having a complete ms.

Also in your submission package:

Cover letter/letter of inquiry

Your c.v.

Sample chapter (optional)

Cover letter

- If you have letterhead for an institution you're at, use it.
- Make sure your contact information (including e-mail) is clear.
- Address letter to an editor by name (and make sure the name matches the publisher). Do not send your proposal to a general mailbox. Follow the guidelines on the publisher website and do not send an attachment if the press asks you not to do so.
- Give title of your work and a succinct description.
- If you've met or been in contact with the editor before, say so.
- Briefly state your qualifications.
- Be honest about the status of the manuscript.
- Describe the state of play—is it a solo submission or a multiple query? If this is a multiple query, you must tell editors this. Not all presses will allow multiple submissions.
- Make explicit the purpose of the letter.

If you have a subvention, this is a good place to mention this.

If you have unique timetable requirements (i.e. your tenure clock is ticking very fast; important anniversary), this is a good place to explain.

For more information on putting together a stellar book proposal and navigating the publishing process, consult William Germano, *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press).

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