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Book Proposals: A First Step Toward Publishing Your Manuscript

Anatomy of a Book Proposal — Worksheet

(1) Title: Subtitle, Author(s)

(This will be the cover page for your proposal – Google for format/margins.)

(2) Table of Contents for Proposal (for proposals longer than ± 50 pages)

(3) Overview / Summary / Synopsis (1-3 pages, more if illustrations are vital)

- High-level elevator pitch: think of it as the back jacket copy that will sell your project to the acquisition editor.
- Why does it matter to today’s readers?
- Consider writing it last

Sample: “*RENDERING THE AMERICAN WEST: Sara Plummer Lemmon, 19th-Century Botanist and Artist* is a timeless tale about one woman’s discovering who she is by leaving everything behind. Her inspiring story is a universal one of resilience, determination, and courage—and is as relevant to our nation today as it was in the 1880s.”

(4) Author bio (1-2 pages): Why are you the perfect person to write this book?

Sample: “Wynne Brown is ideally qualified to bring this fascinating woman to general readers. Like Sara Lemmon, Brown is a mix of illustrator, scientist, and writer.”

- Show your qualifications (experience, teaching, etc.)
- Past awards and recognition
- Previous publications (books and articles)

(5) The Market: Competing Titles and Potential Sales

Sample: “RENDERING THE AMERICAN WEST is a work of narrative nonfiction that will appeal to a mix of readers. That blend includes those who enjoy popular science, biographies, Civil War journals, Western and women’s history, and works about plants and art—specifically about botanical illustration.”

- Consider dividing market into segments (popular science/ “hidden figures” / botanical art and then cite examples within past five years)
- Potential sales: special interest (Civil War / women’s history classes / nurses / alumni groups)

(6) Promotion / Funding (the dreaded “platform”) : START EARLY

- Email newsletter (include open rate, whether you respond, any awards)
- Speaking engagements – list (blend of history, botany, ecology, conservation, art, border politics)
- Media coverage/events
- Memberships (writers, ecological, cultural, etc.)
- Social media (Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, etc.)

(7) Manuscript Specifications and Delivery (1 page)

Length (word count) _____

Time to finish _____

Maps? Illustrations? Photos? _____

What special resources or permission do you require? Are there any costs associated with finishing the book? (Color reproduction is likely to cost you a “subvention” i.e. a fee.)

(8) Annotated chapter outline and/or table of contents

Sample for Chapter 1: “Having wrenched herself away from the East Coast, Sara sets up a temporary home base in San Francisco. She explores the surrounding ‘rich land, valued at \$100 per acre,’ including early Vallejo, Santa Clara, San Jose, and Oakland—and decides that if she were a man, she’d go into raising California livestock. In many ways, Sara is her father’s daughter: Her interest in agriculture isn’t surprising, given that Micajah was a farmer. This chapter provides some background about her family.”

(9) Sample chapters

- Consider Prologue, Chapter One to set scene
- Use your strongest chapter (Chapter 7, “Try to Touch the Heart of Santa Catalina”)

(10) References for proposal

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Extra tips:

- Allow enough time: A good proposal is a LOT of work.
- Networking works: Attend conferences, if/when you can.
- Track your submissions (Word table or Excel spreadsheet):

No.	Agent/Publisher	Connection?	Looking for	Submissions	Query?	Response
A1	REJECTED Michelle Tessier, Tessier Agency	Reps Daniel Connolly	"Our list is diverse and far-reaching. In non-fiction, it includes narrative, popular science, memoir, history, psychology, business, biography, food, and travel. In many cases, we seek authors who are especially adept at writing books that cross many of these categories at once."		Sent April 12, 2017 (6 PM Good Friday evening!)	She responded early Sat AM. I'm "very well-qualified" but it's difficult to sell biographies unless subject is a household name...
Please provide the following with your proposal package: • A brief biography of the author with a focus on why the author is the best person to write the proposed book.						

- Don't give up!! **Embrace rejection ... ☺.**

Aim for 100 rejections: Chances are excellent you'll snag a publisher before then.

Samples:

"You are very well-qualified, but it's difficult to sell biographies unless subject is a household name..."

"Not enough of a narrative pull."

"... although I agree that Sara Plummer Lemmon is a fascinating 'hidden' figure in the American landscape, I'm sorry to say I don't believe I would be successful placing this project with a commercial publisher. I do think it is a project that will work very well for a university press."

"I really admire what you're doing for Sara Lemmon's work and legacy. I don't think I'm the right agent for you, though. The scope of the project with Sara's artwork included will be more difficult to sell than I can take on, I think. I'm just not confident I could do it."

- Sample successful book proposal at wynnebrown.com/resources
- See Writers Resources sheet for useful references.

Questions?

Email Wynne until April 30, 2022: writerinres@pima.gov

Writing Resources I Re-visit (an evolving inventory that's survived multiple moves)

Creativity/inspiration/prompts/getting organized

- Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way*.
- Cohen, Sage. *The Productive Writer*.
- Rico, Gabriele Lusser. *Writing the Natural Way: The Right Brain Writing Technique*.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*.
- Pellegrino, Marge, and Kay Sather (2019), *Neon Words: 10 Brilliant Ways to Light Up Your Writing*. (For teens, but useful for everyone prompts for characters.)
- Febos, Melissa, *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*.
- Keyes, Ralph, *The Courage to Write*.
- Penn, Joanna: The Creative Penn. <https://www.thecreativepenn.com/>
- Lamberg, Lynne. "How Do You Organize a Book?" *ScienceWriters*, Summer 2015. http://www.nasw.org/system/files/sciencewriters/sw_summer2015.pdf.
- Babic, Gregory. *Words to Inspire Writers: Writing-related Quotations on Writers, Writing, Words, Books, Literature, and Publishing to Illustrate the Writing Process and to Motivate Authors*.
- Lawler, Jennifer. *Finish Your Book: Finding the Time, the Skill, the Mindset, and the Motivation to Finally Get to The End*.
- Submittable.com (for tracking submissions, finding markets)

General writing

- King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.
- Strunk & White. *The Elements of Style*.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft*.
- Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*.
- Ueland, Brenda. *If You Want to Write*.
- Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*.
- Clark, Roy Peter. *Murder Your Darlings: And Other Gentle Writing Advice from Aristotle to Zinsser*.
- William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.
- William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn*.
- John McPhee, *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*.
- Hall, Donald, *Writing Well*.
- Lerner, Betsy. *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers*.
- Chee, Alexander. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*.

Creative Nonfiction / journalism / essays

- Gerard, Philip, and Carolyn Forché. *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*
- Shapiro, Susan, *The Byline Bubble*
- Creative Nonfiction website (classes, publications): www.creativenonfiction.org
- Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction — from Memoir to Literary Journalism*.
- Kramer, Mark and Wendy Call. *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*.
- Kidder, Tracy, and Todd, Richard. *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*.
- Hart, Jack. *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*.
- Franklin, Jon. *Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction*.

Memoir

- Barrington, Judith. *From Truth to Art: Writing the Memoir*.
- Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*.

Editing / Fact checking / Stylebooks

- Editorial Freelance Association: www.the-efa.org
- Browne, Renni and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*.
- Borel, Brooke. *The Chicago Guide to Fact-Checking (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing)*.
- *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition (books, many publications).
- *Associated Press Stylebook* (newspapers, some magazines).

Romance

- Hayes, Gwen, *Romancing the Beat*

Science writing

- National Association of Science Writers: www.NASW.org
- Blum, Deborah; Knudson, Mary; Henig, Robin Marantz, Eds. *A Field Guide for Science Writers: The Official Guide of the National Association of Science Writers*.

Poetry

- Wooldridge, Susan. *Poemcrazy*
- Kowit, Steve. *Poems in the Palm of Your Hand*
- Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*
- Strand, Mark & Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem*
- Kooser, Ted. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*
- Grimm, Susan. *Ordering the Storms*.

Book proposals

- Classes with Jane Friedman.
- Rein, Jody and Michael Larsen, *How to Write a Book Proposal*.
- Lyon, Elizabeth, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*.
- Herman, Jeff. *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors and Literary Agents 2017: Who They Are, What They Want, How to Win Them Over*.

Publishing/promotion

- Maum, Courtney. *Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer's Guide to Finishing, Publishing, Promoting and Surviving Your First Book*.
- Horowitz, Stuart. *Blueprint your bestseller*, other two in series.
- Sreenivasan, Sree. "How to Use Social Media in Your Career." *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2017.
- Chavez, Felicia Rose. *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*.
- Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*.

So ... Are You Sure You REALLY Want to Write That Book? *Musings for Potential Authors*

Some thoughts to keep in mind ...

- *Planning, writing, editing, and promoting your book will take FAR more time and energy than you can imagine.*

“Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement.
Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant.
The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude,
you kill the monster and fling him to the public.”

— *Winston S. Churchill*

- *You’d better love what you’re writing—because you’ll be stuck with it for a very long time.*
 - Do you feel passionately enough about this book that you can “keep the seat of your pants in the seat of the chair?” for months and probably years?
 - Writing the book is the easy part. Are you up for promoting and doing talks on it for the next few (or more) years?
- *Be prepared to spend some money—maybe quite a lot of money.*
 - Even if you choose to go the traditional publishing route (more on that below), your book will need to be edited by a professional—even if you’re a professional editor. Check out the Editorial Freelance Association, www.the-efa.org, for rates and industry standards.
 - And if you choose to publish independently, you’ll need still professional editing, in addition to design (for both the cover and the interior), formatting, and printing.
- *Ultimately, what is your goal for this book?*
 - To be a book author? This, by itself, is a terrible reason to write a book.
 - To tell your personal story to your friends and family?
 - To entertain many readers with an enthralling story?
 - To inform many readers about an important issue or situation? Or a special place?
 - ~ Here’s a question to keep in mind: *Why should they care?*
- *Who’s your audience?*
 - Where will your book be shelved in Barnes & Noble?
 - If your book is a novel, how would readers of your book answer this question?
 - ~ *My favorite fiction authors are _____, _____, _____, _____*
 - If your book is non-fiction, what else does your ideal reader read?
 - ~ Books published by university presses?
 - ~ Papers in various scholarly journals, articles in trade journals?
 - ~ Literary general-interest magazines? *New Yorker, Harper’s, Atlantic Monthly?*
 - ~ Mainstream topical interest magazines: *Psychology Today, Smithsonian, etc.?*
 - ~ Websites, blogs?
 - ~ What publications are on your own coffee table?
- *What else is out there that’s similar to the book you want to write?*
 - Do your homework:
 - ~ Research other books and projects that would compete with yours.
 - ~ For novels, list what books are similar to yours.
 - ~ For non-fiction, list what makes your book different – and more valuable.
 - ~ Check to see if other authors have covered aspects that need to be in your book.
 - ~ What about collaborating with one or more of them?

- *Why YOU?*
 - What do YOU bring to the project that will elevate this book above all others like it?
 - Why are YOU perfectly suited to write it?

- *What tools do you intend to use?*
 - Yes, you’ll be using a computer and a word-processing program; most likely, Microsoft Word, Apple’s Pages, or an open-source (i.e. FREE) program like Open Office or LibreOffice.
 - How are you going to build your book? And keep track of your source material? Index cards? Yes, but also check out the various mind-mapping and reference programs. (I’m a Scrivener fan.)

- *What will your book look like?*
 - No, it’s NOT too soon to think about that ...
 - ~ Just text?
 - Typography gives a visual tone to your book — what tone do you want for yours?
 - ~ Images, either photos or illustrations? (Yes, fiction too: Think *Miss Peregrine’s School...*)
 - ~ What physical shape is your book? Vertical? Horizontal?

- *Do you want to go with traditional or independent publishing (self-publishing, or a hybrid)?*
 - Traditional publishing: Advantages
 - ~ The clout of the “Big Five” (IF you can get their attention)
 - ~ A wide variety of small and independent presses
 - ~ Some do design, editing, promotion, distribution very well. Others not so much.
 - Traditional publishing: Disadvantages
 - ~ It’s slow, VERY hard to get accepted, they keep 92% of the profits
 - Independent publishing: Advantages
 - ~ It can be quick; you have more control (not always a good thing!).
 - ~ You keep more of the profits.
 - Self-publishing: Disadvantages
 - ~ You pay for ALL the editing, design, production, promotion, distribution.
 - ~ Your book may not be deemed acceptable in some markets (including TFoB)
 - Hybrid publishing (Examples include Wheatmark, She Writes, 1106 Publishing)
 - ~ A mix: You pay part of the costs; they handle editing, design, distribution (sometimes).
 - ~ Amount of hand-holding, investment, promotion, etc. varies tremendously.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK.

- *And here’s a final thought: Maybe what you really want to do ... isn’t a book at all?*
 - Maybe it’s a website? Or a podcast? Or a video?
 - Or a collection of recordings for an oral history?
 - Or a gallery showing with touch-and-feel exhibits?
 - Or

GOOD LUCK! And please let me know if I can help in any way.