
A wooden staircase with a metal railing is shown against a bright yellow wall. The railing consists of a dark metal handrail and two parallel vertical bars. The stairs are made of dark wood. A semi-transparent dark blue circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title text.

6 Steps to Writing a Book Proposal That Sells

FROM BOOK PROPOSAL EXPERT

Sally Collings

Why you need a book proposal



If you are planning to write a nonfiction book, and you're planning to seek a publishing deal, the first thing you need is a book proposal. This is what literary agents and publishers want to see first—not a full manuscript.

Your proposal is like the DNA of your book. If you are successful and land a deal with a publisher, your proposal will be the basis of the company's understanding of your book. It will help the editor, the publicist, the sales force, and the cover designer to know what your book is, even before they read it (and some of those people will never read the full text of your book). Your book will go through various incarnations and stages of production on the way to reaching the bookstore, but the DNA remains constant.


Where to start?

The best book proposals are created through a solid, thoughtful process consisting of six stages: concept, testing, competitive analysis, platform, path, and distillation.


Remember that the *process* of writing a book proposal is different from the *components* of a book proposal.

There are some actions, thinking, and ideas required that will never directly appear in the finished document you send out to literary agents, but they are 100% essential to its success.

Get your strategy in place.



A fighter spends hours in the gym lifting weights, even though they'll never actually move barbells around once they're in the ring facing an opponent. All that time spent on weightlifting, cardio, and improving strength and technique beforehand is essential in building the muscle, strategy, and endurance they need to win the fight.



The same model applies to writing a book proposal. If you want to create a proposal that will get multiple offers from leading publishers, it is imperative to go through a strategic process of development before you begin writing.

Step 1: Develop your book concept.

1

What will your book do for its readers—what benefits, what problems solved, what changes in thinking or behavior?

This book concept will align with who you are, and what you are inspired to accomplish. Work on articulating this clearly. Be as lateral and brainstormy as you need to be.

You know you've clinched this when you can describe the unique features or the offering of your book in one or two clear, explanatory sentences.

Step 2: Test your concept.

2

Test out your concept with the people who will become the audience for your book.

Test it by writing articles; blogging; podcasting; running a course or workshop.

Gather feedback meticulously. If you get good responses, and you're able to describe your findings in detail (either anecdotal feedback or data on comments/reads for online content), you know you've nailed this part of the process. This will also be useful as "proof of concept" in your book proposal.

Step 3: Know your competition.

3

What other books do your readers have on their shelves? How do those books achieve their aims—through case studies, a sustained narrative, executable advice? Maybe a combination of all those elements?

Read the reviews of those books, too, and find out what people like and dislike. Absorb it all. Then write up your findings: list 5-10 comp titles to your book and describe their strengths, weaknesses, and how they demonstrate the need for your book.

By knowing your competition, you can be confident that you have something unique to offer that your readers are not getting from any other author.

Step 4: Build your platform.

4

Once you have distilled your message, tested it, and assessed what else is on offer, it's time to double down on connecting with your readers.

This is about boosting your credentials as an author. You want to reach a point where complete strangers (not best friends or blood relatives!) ask, "Are you writing a book? When can I buy it?"

For this stage, the proof is in the data: having strong numbers or a marked increase in your blog followers, social media engagement, articles published, or workshops booked.

Step 5: Choose your publishing path.

5

Many authors hanker after a book deal with one of the major publishing houses (HarperCollins, Penguin Random House etc.). But it's not the only solution, or necessarily the best one for every author.

Weigh up the pros and cons of the majors and their mid-level brethren; small presses; assisted and hybrid publishers; and independent or self-publishing.

You know you've got this covered when you can explain clearly which publishing path is right for you, how you will go about achieving it, and why it's the best choice for you and your book.

Step 6: Write your book proposal.

6

If you've decided to pursue a traditional publishing deal, you need to write a book proposal.

It distills all your findings and achievements from the previous stages (your business case, including your concept, your audience, your competition, and your profile as an author) with a chapter outline and sample chapters from your book. This is the persuasive document you will submit to agents and editors. It gives them a snapshot of your message, your credentials, your audience, and your writing chops.

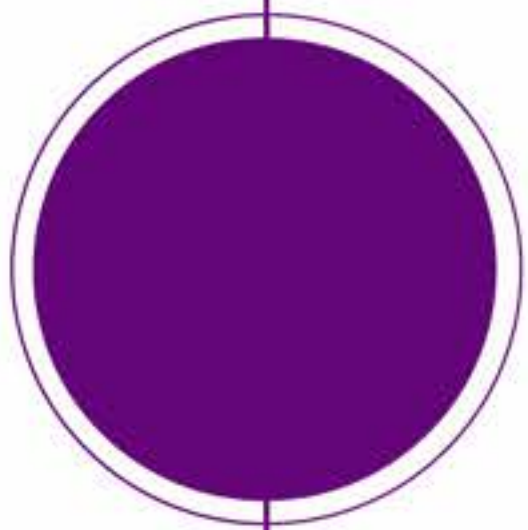
To have the weight, depth, and professionalism agents and editors expect, your book proposal will run to at least 60 pages, often more.

So ... what do you put in your book proposal?



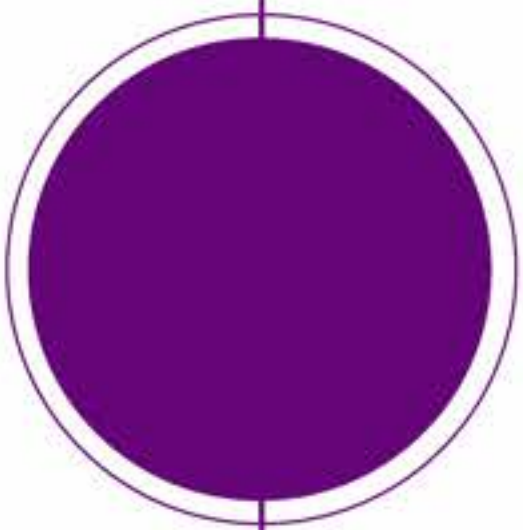
10 Essential Elements of Your Book Proposal

THE 10 SECTIONS EVERY
BOOK PROPOSAL NEEDS

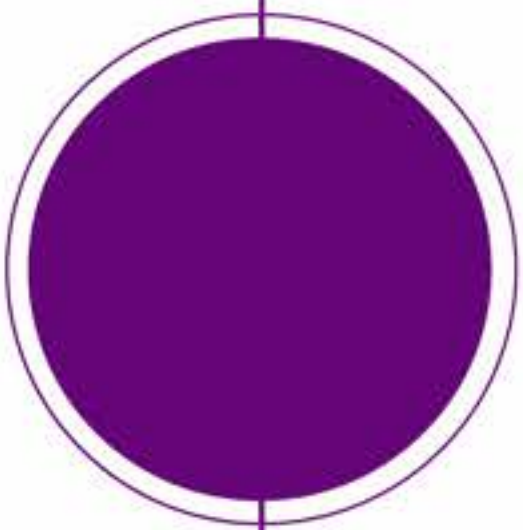


Here's what to include.

- 1. Cover page**—with title + subtitle, author name, contact details, maybe an author photo.
- 2. Contents page**—listing the sections of the proposal (not the book). It helps agents and editors find their way around your book proposal.
- 3. Book overview**—the quick summary and the “sell” to convince publishers of commercial viability. It includes the concept, the market, purpose and need, reader benefits, author credentials, and maybe why you are writing this book. You might dot-point unique angles or evidence of current interest. Be sure to include a clear one-sentence description of what this book is, and a note of the category/genre. Include word count, other manuscript specifications such as illustrations, and a delivery date estimate (e.g. six months after signature of contract). Your overview should be est. 2-3,000 words.



- 4. About the author**—an author biography of 300 words or so, highlighting your credentials, awards, achievements, with a link to your website for more detail.
- 5. Target audience**—and/or demographics, up to 1 page. Note the key markets for this book (personas; organizational opportunities; educational outlets; etc).
- 6. Comp titles**—describe and compare 4-6 recent successful titles (traditionally published, not self-published).
- 7. Marketing & publicity opportunities**—current or recent demonstrations of how you connect with readers. 1,000 words or thereabouts. You may include these elements, and anything else that proves how you and your publisher will get the book in front of potential readers:
 - Selected National Media / Industry Magazines / Local and Regional News / Podcasts / Television / Radio / Connections with Influencers / Social Media (numbers and activity) / Public Appearances



8. Chapter summaries—chapter list for the book, with detailed descriptions. 200-300 words or longer per chapter, total est. 3,000 words. Indicate which chapters are included in the proposal as sample chapters.

9. Sample chapters—usually the first 2-3 chapters, but choose the chapters that will be fresh and exciting for publishers, and the best representation of your book. MAY include the introduction, but not if it has too much overlap with the summary in the book proposal. Est 10,000 words.

10. Praise—if you've got amazing blurbs/testimonials/reviews for yourself or your writing, break these out into a separate section.

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Your book will go through various incarnations and stages of production on the way to reaching the bookstore, but the DNA remains constant.

Daunting? Sure, it's a large effort, but these 6 steps will not only result in **a stellar book proposal**.

They'll also propel you far down the runway to **writing your full manuscript**, and put you in just the right place to be **the author you dream of becoming**.



Former non-fiction publisher for HarperCollins and editorial director for Amber Books, Sally Collings now works as a ghostwriter and developmental editor, specializing in non-fiction book proposals.

Born in Australia, Sally now calls Northern California home, and gets her kicks running through the Santa Cruz Mountains.



If you're ready to take action today,
contact Sally about her writing, editing, and
consultancy services at
sally@sallycollings.com

Connect with Sally online:

Facebook facebook.com/WriterSallyCollings

LinkedIn linkedin.com/in/sallycollings

Also, check out her website for resources,
including
her online courses.

www.sallycollings.com

