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Effective Book Proposals (or, how to make your proposal stand out in a crowd)

Writers, particularly “unknown” writers, face a growing slush pile of competition for publishing slots. How can you develop your idea and present it to a publisher (or agent) so that it rises above the crowd?

Pick Any Two

For publishers, a proposal ideally combines a well known author, a great idea, and a motivated target audience. If you’re not a “big name author” *yet*, how do you identify and develop two key components to your proposal: Great idea and a motivated target audience.

Great Ideas

Where do you find them? How do you know? Is anything really new under the sun?

Motivated Target Audience

“If a book is for everyone, it’s for no one.” –Robert Wolgemuth

Things to consider when matching your great idea to potential target audiences: size of the audience, your ability to write to the audience, potential publishers’ ability to reach the audience, groups that are connected to the target audience.

Proposal Format

When your proposal reaches the publisher, you want it to be well prepared, ready to answer the tough questions a tough acquisitions editor asks. A good query (pitch) gets the editor’s attention and keeps him or her looking for a reason to like the proposal. While no two publishers have the same format, acquisitions editors commonly look for the following elements:

I. Content

A. Hook: a short description of what the book is about

B. The manuscript

1. Status (Is it complete? When do you expect to complete it?)
2. Special features
3. Anticipated length



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II. Audience

- A. Target audience: age, sex, special interests or needs
- B. Motivation: Why will readers want to purchase this book?

III. Unique Selling Position. For non fiction: What makes your book different from other popular titles on the topic? For fiction: Readers who like (insert author or book title) will like my book. My writing is like (author examples).

IV. Author

- A. Background
- B. Previous writing, including sales figures for previous books
- C. Opportunities you have to market and promote the book, for example, radio or TV interviews, speaking engagements, website, blog, etc.
- D. People you know in positions of influence who could endorse or promote the book

V. Competitive Analysis. 3-5 key books currently in the market.

VI. Outline/synopsis (non-fiction/fiction)

VII. Sample chapters

Finding the Right Publisher

One way to guarantee rejection is to send a proposal for a children's picture book to a publisher that doesn't publish picture books.

1. Check *Christian Writers' Market Guide*.
2. Visit your local bookstore, find books similar to yours, and note the publisher.
3. After you've identified several potential publishers, check the publishers' websites for submission guidelines. If the publisher does not accept unsolicited manuscripts, go to step 4.
4. Attend a writers conference and meet editors, agents and other authors (oh, you knew that one already!). An author might open the door for you at his/her publisher.

The Inside Scoop on Proposals

1. It is the sad truth that editors are looking for a reason to say no to your proposal.
2. Neatness counts. Grammar counts. Spelling counts.

Proposals: Effective Book Proposals

Workshop #6, Friday, 4:30–5:40 PM 

LOCATION: NEWTON: ROOM A



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3. Many publishers do not review unsolicited submissions. Seek to cultivate relationships with established authors who might recommend you or with editors you meet at conferences.
4. *Writer's Edge* and *First Edition* listings **may** get your proposal noticed by an editor, but they're not an invitation to submit to publishers.
5. Editors increasingly have to think like marketing and sales people when they review proposals. It help us when authors think like marketing and sales people too.
6. The best publishing relationships happen when your subject and a publisher's ability to connect you to your potential readers intersect. Make it your goal to publish well...not just to "get published."
7. Email or hard copy? Always ask an editor's preferences, and if the editor prefers hard copy, always offer to mail it.
8. You never know until you try. Don't say "no" to yourself.
9. Rejection sometimes means "we did a book on this topic last year."
10. You may never know until you try again.