

So you want to write a book? Don't.

Counter-intuitive, I know, but it's the first rule of getting published. Instead of writing a book from cover to cover, you first need to take one step back and do some bigger-picture thinking. Not only will this initial preparation speed up the writing process when the time is right, it will also form the foundation of your book proposal. And writing a book proposal should be first on your 'to-do' list.

At a rough guess, there were at least 100,000 new books published in this country last year. To be amongst them, your book proposal has to sparkle so as not to be deleted as spam in the publisher's email inbox. So if you've got an idea for a book but don't know how to take the leap to get it started, here's your first stepping stone: craft a lip-smacking book proposal.

1 Answer the publisher's questions

Any publisher who sniffs success from your book idea has to tread a long path to convince their colleagues of its blockbuster potential, too. Help them champion your title by doing some of their work for them. What competition is out there for your book? Why would anyone buy your book over any other? What will give it the undeniable, pickuppable force any new book has to have?

Your proposal has got to tickle the creative fancy of the commissioning editor, but their publishing colleagues are a mix of marketing and money people. They'll want to know that you have a ready-made stage to promote your book. How well-known are you in your field? Do you regularly present your ideas or products to an audience?

2 Why me? Prove to a publisher you're qualified to write it

There are many facets to a diamond author. It's a given that you're enthusiastic and passionate about your field – but make sure it comes across

in your proposal. On top of that, what qualifies you to portray yourself as an expert? What professional qualifications do you have? Are you a regular contributor to a weekly magazine or newsletter?

What further work would you do to complete the writing of your book? Can you reassure them that you'll finalise the research and do you ooze confidence that you'd be putting the last touches to it by the required deadline?

3 Present a panoramic view of your book

It's always a sad sight to see a complete, unsolicited manuscript on a publisher's desk. It has a bit of the uninvited party guest to it. Just like the old-fashioned telegram, prepare a concise overview of your book, and the topics you'll cover. Feel free to include *a few* pages of sample manuscript – this will give an indication of your author's voice, and provide the taster a publisher needs.

4 Fake it to make it – does your proposal look like it came from a professional author?

You may not be signed up as yet, but no matter. Make sure your proposal has the gold-star making of a contracted author: no spelling mistakes, tidy grammar, even line spacing (probably 1.5 just to give it the 'air to breathe') and engaging headings and sub-headings to invite someone to read it. Get it professionally edited if you wish, or learn to self-edit.

5 Pave the way for its safe arrival

Always ring to check you're sending your proposal to the right person. Some publishers will have a robust system for signing in unsolicited manuscripts and tracking their progress round the building, whilst others will allow them to languish on someone's desk or be too hurriedly passed on to someone else. Address your proposal to a named person. Would they prefer an e-mail attachment or hard copy: and if so, how many copies?

A fairytale ending for you? – I hope so. If you're faced with rejection, always stick with your vision and remember that whatever your final outcome, the learning voyage on the waves of self-discovery will have been fascinating.

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Mary James is an ex-Editorial Director and now combines her publishing expertise with a hands-on knowledge of the female enterprise market to work with individuals who dream of how a book might enhance their status as experts and get their talents spotted, but don't quite know how to go about it. For more information, go to www.getpublishedadvice.co.uk.

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