

Excerpts from
Writing the Perfect Proposal:
Structure, Function, and Step-by-Step Instructions
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Let me be blunt: If you send your completed nonfiction manuscript to an agent or a publisher, it will go directly into the trash. Yet every day hundreds of writers violate this rule, and it tells everyone in the industry that they didn't do their homework. Agents and publishers need a concise 20-50 page *business plan*, double-spaced, that includes the following essential elements:

- **Title Page:** This includes your working title, subtitle, author's name and contact information, and the agent representing you (if you have one).
- **Pitch Page:** An optional one-paragraph summary of your book's focus, concept, and audience. This is your 60 second elevator pitch – your *hook* – and it resembles the inside flap of a hardcover book or the back page of a softcover book. It is a key element in the overview section, and it is used in the creation of a query letter.
- **Overview:** A one or two page description of your proposed book, written in a dynamic narrative style. The first few paragraphs need to be exciting and provocative as you describe what the book is about, who the specific audience is, and what the reader will gain by buying this particular book. The overview should also include any unique qualifications the author may have.
- **About the Author:** A one or two page biography of the author listing credentials, expertise in the area addressed by the book, previous writing credits, awards, and a brief summary of previous television, radio, and media coverage. Fame, celebrity, financial wizardry, and academic affiliations increase the sales potential of your proposal.
- **Competitive Books:** Use Amazon.com or Amazon.uk to create one paragraph summaries of five competing books that address the same topic you are writing about. Focus on the most recent and commercially successful books in the field, and explain how your book is different, better, or fills a need not addressed by these other books.
- **Manuscript Specifications:** A one-paragraph statement describing the projected length of the book, writing style, and delivery date of the finished manuscript.
- **Marketing and Promotional Plan:** Describe in detail the specific ways you will be involved in promoting this book (talks, blogs, conferences, internet advertising, media presence, supporting academic or professional papers, etc.). Only state those strategies that you have done in the past. In other words, you must document the degree of success you have had selling other books, services, or products. A professional marketing strategy can double or triple your advance.
- **Table of Contents:** List each chapter, subheading, and section of your book, including any appendices you plan to include.
- **Chapter Summaries:** 1-2 page dynamic narrative descriptions of what each chapter will address, written in the style that you will use in your book.
- **Sample Chapter:** 5-10 pages of the best writing you can do. The briefer, the better; less chance of the editor finding fault with your literary skills.

Ten Preparatory Steps to Take Before You Write Your Proposal:

1. **Identify “Your” Book:** What do you really want to write about, and what book would you be the most qualified to write about, based on your work expertise. Often the book you want to write about will be different from the one you are qualified to write. Publishers prefer that you are a recognized expert in the field you are writing about. If not, they will want to see that you have an exceptionally original approach, and that you are a highly skilled writer. EXPERTISE + GOOD WRITING + CREATIVITY = LARGE ADVANCE. If you only have one of these skills, coauthor your book with a person with complementary talents. Note: Memoirs are harder to sell than other nonfiction genres because your writing must be excellent and your story must be structured like a novel. With a memoir, you will often need to submit the first, middle, and last chapters of your book.
2. **Create a WOW Title:** Our research shows that being in a near trance-state (relaxed and mindfully aware of the constant flow of thoughts and feelings) generates the best and most interesting ideas. This “bookstorming” strategy works best when you do it with another person, who will write down the ten or twenty possible titles that spontaneously flow through your consciousness when you maintain this deeply relaxed and focused state. Keep the titles short: ideally four words or less.
3. **Create a “What-How-Why” Subtitle:** Again, using the bookstorming strategy, create a separate list of ten possible subtitles. This can be a long phrase telling the reader what they will get or find in your book.
4. **Create Ten Chapter Titles:** Continue doing the exercise above and write down a series of potential chapter titles. Often, you’ll find that many of the titles you came up with in Step 2 can be used. Make them clever *and* descriptive. You can also create a subheading for each chapter title in the same way you created a subtitle for the book.
5. **Bullet-Point Three Key Concepts for Each Chapter:** First write a single sentence describing what each chapter addresses. Then put down, as bullet points, the key ideas, concepts, lessons, techniques, or experiences the reader will be exposed to. Narrow your selection down to three, but remember: chapter needs only to address one key principle. Don’t overwhelm the reader with too much information, or your manuscript will sound like a textbook.
6. **Visit a Bookstore:** Walk down the aisle containing books in the genre you are writing about, and see which titles jump out at you. Compare their titles to yours. Study the subtitles and then look at the table of contents. Use this information to revise your title, subtitle, and chapter headings.
7. **Go to Amazon.com:** Study the titles of bestselling books, then do an Amazon.com search to see if the title has been used before. If it’s recent, or overused, find another title. Look to see if books similar to your topic have been bestsellers in the past. If not,

consider a different topic. Look for low Amazon.com ranking numbers and see if they got reviews from *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal*.

8. **Start a PowerPoint Presentation:** Put each title on a separate slide and find a single provocative image for each one. This is an optional step but one that research suggests can help you organize your book more effectively than using the typical written outline.
9. **Write Your Chapter Summaries:** Make your first sentence “Wow.” You must capture the jaded agent or editor who has just read 50 weak proposals. The first paragraph should be written as though it were the opening paragraph in your finished book. The second paragraph describes to the publisher what that chapter is about, citing key points that will excite the editor to want to read more.
10. **Write a Single Paragraph Book Pitch:** I actually recommend that you do this step before, during, and after the previous ones. The final paragraph you create will be used by the marketing department to describe your book to the bookstore buyers. Don't make exaggerated promises, but make it original and provocative. Include the title, subtitle, and the three key points your book will address. Define your audience in a single sentence or phrase, and explain what the reader will get from the book in a single sentence. For example: “*The Magic of Money* is a modern-day *Think and Grow Rich* book that will improve the functioning of your brain.”

Mark Robert Waldman **Coaching, Writing and Editorial Services**

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If you want to have an initial one-hour consultation, the charge is \$350 per hour. A 3-hour coaching package is \$900 and includes the following materials (or they can be purchased separately for \$97.

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The Biggest Mistakes Writers Make
How to Write the Perfect Book Proposal
The Original Book Proposal for *Words Can Change Your Brain*

I'm also including in this package a 100 keynote slides that I use when teaching writing and publishing strategies at writer's conferences.