

How to Prepare A Winning Book Proposal

Copyright © 1992, 2008 by John Hedtke

This is the second in a series of articles on publishing.

Preparing a winning book proposal is very similar to bidding on many other freelance documentation projects. This article will show you how to create a book proposal that will give you the best chance of selling your book idea to the publisher you want.

A book proposal is more than an outline and a schedule. A well-written proposal is a package of material that not only communicates how you intend to do the project, but also demonstrates your writing and organizational abilities. Moreover, a good proposal tells a prospective publisher that you have carefully planned all aspects of the book and that you're ready to hit the ground running as soon as the book's approved. And if you are one of several authors being considered for a specific project, presenting a solid, well-considered proposal can frequently be the deciding factor in getting the contract.

There are four parts to a book proposal:

- A cover letter
- A resume
- Writing samples
- A documentation plan

Cover Letter

In general, publishers prefer to work with people by email when they first meet them, as it will probably save time in the long run for everybody. (By the way, unless you know an acquisitions editor from previous experience, just send your proposal to the Acquisitions department at the publisher. They'll make sure it gets routed to the appropriate people. The publisher's website will have information about making submissions.) Once you have a bibliography, you'll be able to approach publishers directly, but it's better to start by email. As such, you'll need to start your book proposal with a cover letter that introduces you to the publisher, pitches a brief idea of the book you want to do, and sells the publisher on your ability to complete the project in a timely fashion.

The plan (discussed later) will give a detailed explanation of the book, but you need to come up with a brief statement of what the book is about. For example, all of these are probably adequate to get the editor to read more of your proposal if they have a niche for your book:

- This book will introduce the reader to the undocumented features of Windows XP. It will have a conversational style aimed at the intermediate user, with graduated steps to increase their skill level so that they're able to take advantage of the more powerful undocumented features.
- This book will teach gardeners how to identify useful weeds and wild plants, and cultivate them as companion plants, or food and ornamentation crops. There will be a reference section in the latter half of the book with line drawings of many of the more common useful wild plants in North America.

- This book will be a tutorial on how to program using the new Adobe AIR language, with an emphasis on beginning programmers who are learning this as their first or second programming language. The book will contain extensive examples and exercises, and will have a diskette of sample code and AIR development tools in the back of the book.
- This book will be aimed at intermediate to advanced quilters who want to create their own patterns for their programmable sewing machines. The book will give a brief description of the general features currently available in programmable sewing machines and what to look for if you don't already have one. It will then discuss how to create effective designs and how to avoid the eight common mistakes made when transferring a paper design to a programmable sewing machine. There will be a special section on creating very large designs and quilting patterns for programmable long-arm sewing machines.

Make sure that your idea is right for the publisher. You can't sell books on computers to a publisher specializing in books on sailing... but you might sell a book that tells how to use computers when building wooden boats. Having an angle like this is often the best way to bridge the gap into a field of writing in which you have no direct experience.

Radiate your enthusiasm for the project. Refer to the writing samples and the resume items that show your depth of knowledge for this particular topic. Mention anything you've written on this subject before (and include it in your samples if at all possible). It's not enough to show the publisher that you have a good idea; you need them to know that you are the most qualified person to write this book.

Most importantly, you need to sell the publisher on your ability to meet your deadlines. Because of the topical nature of book publishing these days, it is extremely important for book publishers to get books out *quickly*. The time between getting an idea approved and seeing the book on the streets should be no more than 6 to 7 months. Allowing 2 to 3 months for final editing, indexing, production, and printing, you'll need to write the book in 3 to 4 months. Fast work is 4 months from idea to street; *really* fast work is 3 months. Conversely, a slow book is one that takes 9 months or more. Large reference works may take this long, but the amount of time should be carefully documented and justified in the schedule.

It's worth noting that publishers of other types of non-fiction books—cooking, travel, do-it-yourself, and so on—will have differing and probably more generous schedules than the computer book industry, but all publishers are speeding up their publishing cycles to be the first on the market. Any publisher will be impressed by your ability to turn out a book quickly. Nobody ever seems to complain about work done ahead of schedule.

Resume

Include a copy of your resume. You may want to tailor the resume to underscore skills and accomplishments relating to the book. For example, if you are pitching a book on using a particular graphics package and have a background or education in design, make sure that this is featured prominently in your resume. Also make sure that relevant skills and experience are mentioned on the first page of the cover letter.

Writing Samples

Your writing samples should demonstrate your abilities as a technical writer in general, and, if possible, your ability to write on the subject you're proposing. It's not necessary to send a copy of a complete manual to a publisher (they're probably prefer that you don't, as a matter of fact). As with a job interview, give them photocopies of a chapter or relevant section and offer to send them the entire manual if they want to take a more detailed look.

One of the most obvious writing samples to include may be a sample chapter from the book you want to publish. Although it's usually a bad idea to write the entire book before you have a contract (particularly in the computer book field), a sample chapter will give the publisher an exact gauge of your ability to write well on your chosen topic. Include sample screen shots, rough drafts of conceptual artwork, and appropriate references to other chapters in the book. (Be sure to put your copyright notice clearly on the bottom of each page. Accidents do happen occasionally.)

Finally, don't make the publisher return copies of anything to you! Publishers are up to their collective eyebrows in submitted material of various kinds (this bunch of stuff is known affectionately in the industry as "the slushpile") and they don't need the hassle of returning anything. Assume that anything you send to them will not be returned; marking copies in red ink on the front page with "May be discarded after review" or some such will make it even easier.

Documentation Plan

A documentation plan is a useful and necessary project management tool before, during, and after a project. It presents information about the book's scope, purpose, target audience, and goals, the book's market niche, the standards and styles the book should adhere to, staffing requirements, the delivery schedule, and a detailed outline.

At the beginning, the documentation plan gives detailed information about the project to the publisher so they can make an informed choice about whether or not they want to publish the book. Once your idea has been approved, the plan serves to further clarify your and the publisher's concept of the project. By writing down and agreeing to the scope and purpose, the goals for the book, and the schedule, you eliminate most of the causes of friction between you and the project editor.

During a project, a documentation plan is an effective scheduling and tracking tool. With each of the sections identified, you can gauge your progress compared to your original estimates. This information is helpful for avoiding writing crunches near the end of a project. With the schedule and outline information, you can also use the documentation plan as a tool for delegating sections of a project to subcontractors or other authors on the book.

Finally, the plan serves as a reminder of the scope, purpose, and goals of a book, a standard against which you can check your work. A documentation plan is essential for a post mortem analysis of the project. You can check your original assumptions and statements of the project against the finished product. By comparing your actual schedule against your estimates, you can pinpoint problems to avoid or plan for in the next project. This information is extremely valuable, as over the course of several books, you will learn how to estimate your time in each phase of a project very accurately. This can result in tighter bids and schedules, which in turn can help you get more contracts.

There are six basic sections of a typical documentation plan:

- overview
- marketing
- production information
- staffing requirements
- schedule
- outline

Each of these sections addresses a specific topic:

The **overview** section states the scope and purpose of the project, defines the audience, gives the relationship to any other projects, and identifies the responsibilities of you and the publisher. It also identifies the general details for the handoff of the finished product (how many copies and in what general form). What you put in the overview is not a binding legal description unless the information is included by reference in the actual publisher's contract (some publishers may want to do this), but it will serve to spell out a lot of details that might otherwise get lost or misinterpreted.

The **marketing** section identifies ways in which the book can be marketed. (Most publishers don't expect authors to lift a finger to help them market, so showing that you're able and willing to supply marketing opportunities may impress them.) Be sure that you can also point to the competition in the field—no publisher wants to walk into a heavily populated field without warning—and how and why this book will beat all of them. Also mention if there are opportunities for co-marketing or bundling with the product. Dan Gookin's classic book *DOS for Dummies* was already a bestseller even before Microsoft bundled it with their MS-DOS 6.2 release; there are now millions of copies in print. Riding on a product's coattails will help you, and can frequently help the product, too. Don't be afraid to aim high with your marketing ideas.

The **production information** section discusses what the finished product will look like, and how you intend to get there. What style will be used for the book? What format and page size? Art requirements? Some of this will be dictated by the publisher, but you should be able to estimate the number of pages and the type and approximate quantity of illustrations your book will have. You'll probably also have an idea of what the book should look like overall, so mention this in the proposal.

The **staffing** section discusses who will be doing the reviews and which kind. It also identifies the technical editor (usually a reviewer with background in the field you're writing about), illustrator, proofreader, indexer, and other related personnel. At the beginning of a project, most of these are likely to be unknown.

The **schedule** section lists the proposed schedule along with any assumptions about the schedule. Be as specific as possible. Budget for vacations, holidays, and life requirements (such as doing taxes, birthdays, and so on). Leave yourself as much room as you can near the end of the book to make up time—there's never enough.

Finally, the **outline** section presents an in-depth outline of the book. *A detailed outline is a requirement for a good book proposal!* The editor will be able to clearly identify the focus of your book and offer specific suggestions before you begin writing on how to change or improve the book to better fit the publisher's marketing plans.

By the way, a documentation plan is best when it's a living document. As a project progresses, you should make changes to the plan to reflect changes in staffing, schedule, or (most importantly) the outline. Whenever you make a material change, you should also send a copy of the revised documentation plan to your editor so they're up to date as well.

Summary

You can occasionally get a contract by coming up with a killer idea, phoning a publisher, pitching the idea over the phone, and hitting the jackpot... but you'll stand a much better chance of getting the contract you want with the right publisher by making a planned presentation.

Remember that you're selling your idea and your abilities as an author to the publisher, so it's important for your proposal to shine. Publishers respond best to an idea if they can see that you're excited about it, there's a marketing niche, and that you know what to do to bring the book to fruition. If you think of your complete book proposal as a job interview by mail, you won't be far wrong. Make sure the proposal is dressed well and looks good when it first meets the publisher.

About the Author

John Hedtke is the award-winning author of 26 books and is a Fellow of the STC. He runs JVH Communications (www.hedtke.com), a company that provides writing, consulting, book production, and training services to private and government clients in all fields. John requests that anyone who gets a book contract because of this article remembers him in the acknowledgments and send him a copy.