

How To Write a Winning Book Proposal

“Voice is an author’s fingerprint.”

Very wise words from **Jennifer Enderlin**, Executive Editor of St. Martin’s Press. And because I so strongly believe in the power of a writer’s voice, I thought it was an appropriate way to lead into this article on how to write a proposal that will grab an editor’s attention and in succession, gain you a sale.

Authors can be taught many things; characterization, pacing, tone, grammar, mechanics. We can attend workshops and read how-to books and absorb the sage advice of others while we hone our craft. But voice is an inherent asset, and we have to learn to trust in it, to value it, because it’s what makes us unique, both as people, and especially as writers.

I’m a firm believer that words of advice carry more weight when they come from the people who really know. So I asked several editors and a few agents a variety of questions on what constitutes a good or bad proposal, and what made them request a complete manuscript from the proposal.

Jennifer Enderlin said, “When I read a cover letter and can see a distinct, high concept story line written with intelligence and professionalism, and with a clear, resonate voice, then I’ll ask for the complete.”

--For those of you who aren’t certain what a high concept idea is, think in terms of word groups that give a clear image of the story. *Marriage of Convenience*, or *Cowboys & Booties*. High concept is what very briefly depicts the plot. It could be anything, like *Married to the Murderer*, *Star Wars*, or *Fatal Attraction*. By these titles alone, you can get a grasp of the plot.

When we consider that editors wade through an enormous amount of proposals each month, any help we can give in identifying our story is appreciated.

Lyssa Keusch, Avon Editor for contemporary, historical and mainstream women’s fiction, mystery, and selected non-fiction projects, said, “The most desirable submission is one that is brief and to the point, and presents a story idea with passion and with true storytelling flare. What makes the greatest impression on me is the sense, from the writer’s style, that she has a great story to tell and that she can make it come to life.

Wendy Chen, Assistant Editor of Bantam, adds, “It’s always nice to see a strong voice right from the beginning, and a fresh hook.”

--I’d like to interject that a ‘fresh hook’ doesn’t necessarily mean a hook that’s never been seen before. As in Hollywood, there are only so many original ideas in the writing industry. It’s how you put your own special slant to the hook that will make it fresh. Your voice, and your interpretation, can make any tried and true idea seem totally new and unique.

Cindy Hwang, Associate Editor for Berkley, points out, “It’s always important to have a professional-looking submission. I see too many submissions which are hand-written, or contain typos, or are just plain hard to read. Beyond that, any writing credentials or contest wins is a plus. Of course, the most important thing is to impress me with your writing and your storytelling skills.

“What to include in non-fiction proposals, and what elements grab attention: Really good sample chapters, which tells the reader the heart of the book and the most

important points/argument you want to make. Unlike fiction proposals, these don't have to be the first 3 chapters.”

The ‘elements’ **Ruth Kagle**, an agent with the Rotrosen Agency, looks for in a proposal are as follows (in no particular order):

- 1) A clear, strong voice that expresses the writer's unique sensibility.
- 2) A vibrant storytelling energy.
- 3) Originality, whether it's expressed in a delightfully fresh take on a tried-and-true plot or in a story that feels completely new.
- 4) A plot that develops organically from consistent character motivation & action.

Ruth says, “These are the qualities I look for in any work of fiction. For a romance proposal I would add that it should be the developing romance that drives the plot. I feel that beyond these general qualities, the more specific elements of a ‘winning proposal’ vary according to the goals of the author in question. Whilst any strong proposal should contain the above elements, a ‘winning proposal’ for one of the Harlequin lines will obviously have different qualities from a ‘winning proposal’ for a single title book. For example: When one of my clients first came to me she had been targeting her work for Harlequin. When I read her proposal I felt that while it was not particularly well suited to the intended category market, it had all the qualities of a terrific single title contemporary romance. By identifying and focusing on her strengths, this author was able to turn a ‘near miss proposal’ for Harlequin into a ‘winning proposal’ for a single title house.”

--It’s important to send your proposal to the right editor, at the right publishing house, which means if you’re unageted, you definitely need to do your homework. Surprisingly enough, editors see submissions all the time for lines or genres they don’t publish. It’s equally important to make it clear what your story is about, and how/why it’s suitable to that publisher.

Cecilia Malkum Oh, an Associate Editor with new American Library, advises: “The best way to think of a synopsis/outline is that it is the road map for the complete manuscript. And the most important aspect about a road map is that it should be drawn in scale. The last time I depended on a map that wasn't drawn in scale, I found myself wandering around Long Island for over an hour, lost, wondering why I hadn't yet crossed even one of the three blocks I had to pass to reach my destination. (It turned out the map showed the three MAJOR streets I had to pass, without a single mention of the numerous smaller streets along the way.) In the same way, when a synopsis does not explain the story in proper proportion, I end up judging an inaccurate picture.

“Some ways to keep the outline in proportion are: it should not have three pages out of ten explaining the backstory if the author plans to touch only lightly on that past in the manuscript; secrets/information should be revealed in the same sequence as in the manuscript; details that do not affect the major plot points should not be included.”

Susan Sheppard, Harlequin Temptation Editor, advises, “Show how the story is paced. That is, include the pivotal plot points and if you're writing for a sensual line show how the sexual tension develops and where it reaches a climax. Think of depicting a paradigm where plot point leads to plot point leads to climax leads to denouement. “Make sure your proposal highlights the hooks, or saleable themes, and try to boil your story down into a simple concept so you can do so.”

--I strongly believe in the benefit of an agent to a writer's career, so I got input for this article from two agents, **Ruth Kagle**, and my own agent, **Maureen Walters**, Vice President, Curtis Brown Ltd. I know from personal experience how much influence Maureen has had on my career success, and how knowledgeable she is in the industry. Maureen shared these words of advice: "A proposal is one of the most important factors in selling a story idea, both within the romance genre and outside in the world of mainstream fiction. It should be concise and powerful, including all of the elements of the story - story line, characters, setting – and should capture the attention of the reader so that the unique aspects of this particular story are apparent. The chapters included in the proposal give a clear indication of the writing ability and imagination of the author, and if all of the elements are put together well, can smooth the selling process immensely.

"A proposal should consist of at least two chapters and a synopsis of no more than ten pages - three to five pages is optimum. Given the volume of material that the editors have to wade through, less is more. But of course, it also depends on the track record of the individual author."

--How can an agent help with your success?

Cindy Hwang explains, "A good agent will not only help you put together a stronger proposal, more importantly the agent will help put together the whole package complete with a platform, and not just a proposal.

"Our agency is concerned with the long-term management of our clients' careers," says **Ruth Kagle**, "as opposed to selling proposals on a book by book basis. My job as an agent is to recognize and enhance the value of my clients' careers and in this context a proposal for a new book represents an opportunity for career growth and development. In selling a proposal, my goal is to match the author with the right editor, at the best house (for that author), for the most advantageous possible terms and conditions."

Maureen Walters adds, "A good proposal gives the agent the elements essential to selling the idea to a publisher. The agent will know from this which particular editor within the publishing house to submit the work to."

--And I should point out that there's a very personal rapport, an inside knowledge of likes and dislikes, between agents and editors. It's the kind of relationship that we as submitting authors can't anticipate until we've sold a book and are working hand in hand with the editor. That inside knowledge, which an agent brings to the union, is an invaluable tool to placing your manuscript.

Susan Sheppard wanted to clarify. "Submission of a proposal through an agent only makes a difference if the editor trusts the agent to have read the proposal and determined it's a good fit for the line. If the agent isn't proven to be dependable, then it doesn't matter whatsoever."

--Which makes a good point. A bad or ineffectual agent is definitely worse than no agent at all. So again, do plenty of research before you make any major decisions or sign any agent contracts.

Now we know what constitutes a good proposal. But what are some obvious and common flaws?

Ruth Kagle has a list:

Writing to some perceived hot trend to the detriment of writing to one's strengths and true passion.

Inconsistent characters and weak plotting.

Synopses that "leave me in suspense". I need to know how the story is going to play out. Romance proposals in which the romance does not seem to be the central focus of the story.

Cindy Hwang: "One of the most common (and important) mistakes is to not differentiate your book enough from the competition."

Susan Sheppard: "Don't be coy. Don't have the editor guessing at the ending (as in, "if you want to see how it turns out...") or any other key points."

Cecilia Oh: "I dislike quotes from the manuscript in the synopsis/outline. When I'm reading a synopsis or an outline, I'm looking for the larger picture. If I wanted to get a sense of the writing style, then I would read the sample chapters."

Lyssa Keusch: "In queries, the most common flaw is writers trying to be too cute or to draw special attention. Don't tell me that your book is going to be the next bestseller. That's not going to convince me. Be succinct, be professional, and be enthusiastic about the story you plan to tell."

Wendy Chen: "Submissions should be double spaced in at least a 12 point font. We get a surprising number of submissions that are single spaced. Other pet peeves are bound manuscripts, and synopses that are written to sound like back cover copy."

--Now that I've shared the opinions of editors and agents, I want to add some personal perspective.

First, don't suffer too much anxiety over writing your proposal. Relax, be yourself but be professional. Let your voice, that unique part of you that sets you and your writing apart from everyone else, shine through.

Be confident. Nothing can sell you better than you. If you grovel in a letter, or sound overly desperate, you've not only lost that necessary professionalism, but you've denigrated your own value to the person you want most to impress.

Be honest! If you've written ten books, won a contest or an award, or have a complete manuscript to offer, say so. Modesty is not a virtue in this case. But don't fabricate successes. Editors are far too busy to waste time trying to second guess your level of experience. Besides, if the story appeals to them, it won't matter if it's your first, or your fiftieth. You'll get the sale – thanks to that winning proposal!

Good luck.