

# THE POCKET GUIDE TO WRITING BOOK PROPOSALS

by Sylvia Cary, MFT

Want to get published, but don't know how to go about doing it? Here's *Rule #1*: Do *not* write the whole book. That's what you do *last*, after you've landed an agent, signed a book contract with a publisher, and (hopefully) managed to get yourself an advance (meaning some money up front).

What you do *first* is write a "book proposal." What is a book proposal? It's a "preview of coming attractions." It's a sales tool that is sent to publishers, usually by your agent (if you have one, although sometimes you can skip the agent and go right to the publisher). By the way, publishers actually *do* read book proposals (which is nice to know) and if they are interested in *your* book idea and think it will sell (that's always the bottom line), they may end up giving you a contract and the time to finish writing the book -- anywhere from six months to a year.

## Basic Elements of a Book Proposal

A typical book proposal is between 25 to 75 pages long and is made up of a number of specific elements. These elements, roughly in order of appearance, are:

1. **Cover Letter** (to agent or publisher) saying that your book proposal for (put your working title here) is enclosed. Point out that a SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) is also enclosed for their reply.

2. **About the Author Sheet/Platform**. A 3/4-page author bio, single-spaced. Include your credentials, previous publications (if any), awards, PR experience (radio, TV, speaking engagements, etc). Hype yourself here. These days the new buzz word in publishing is "platform," so put down anything that emphasizes the fact that you have a following and therefore can SELL BOOKS. A photo in the upper right-hand corner is OK.

3. **Overview (Summary or Synopsis)**: Your premise, topic, angle, and how you plan to present your material in 1-2 pages, single-spaced.

**4. Key Selling Points:** List the main reasons the publisher should publish your book - the subject matter, the uniqueness of the topic, if it's the "only book of its kind," the credentials of the author, the helpfulness to the readers, etc. Make this one page, single-spaced.

**5. Competition:** List 5-10 books (include publishers and publication dates) that are similar to yours that have been published in the last five years. Don't knock the competition, but explain briefly how your book is *better than* and/or *different* from these others. 1-2 pages, single-spaced.

**6. Market Information:** What's the "market" for your book? Who are the potential book buyers? What kinds of groups? What kind of individuals? What "niche" markets? What book clubs? What magazines and journals would like to run excerpts for their readers?

**7. Promotion and Publicity:** What are you, the author, willing to do to help market this book? What "big names" (celebrities or names in your field) will give you "cover blurbs" for the book? Will you hire an outside publicist? Will you give talks and arrange to have books for sale? Will you go on TV and radio? What special-interest or professional groups can you address on this topic? Again, think "platform." Put your ideas down in 1-2 pages, single-spaced. If you have a video of yourself lecturing or a clip of you on TV, make a copy and send it along with your book proposal.

**8. Table of Contents:** List the chapters in the book, with the chapter titles and subheads (these can always be changed). This helps the agent/publisher to "see at a glance" what the book covers.

**9. Sample Chapters:** Write 2 or 3 complete chapters, such as your first chapter (where you set up your premise), maybe the following chapter, plus a chapter from later on in the book so the agent or publisher can see your writing style, and see how you plan to carry out your premise. Chapters can be anywhere from 10-25 pages, double-spaced.

**10. Chapter Summaries:** For every other chapter, write a 1/3 to 1/2-page summary of what's going to be in that chapter. Be as specific as possible, not vague.

When you've done all this, *don't send it anywhere*. Put the book proposal away. Then you back up and write a 1-page *query letter* describing the book (use your Overview as a guide). Send this query letter to literary agents. Try 10 at a time. Tell them you have a completed book proposal and ask if they'd like to read it. (Do not ever send book proposals to agents "cold". Get their permission first). If an agent asks to read your book proposal, send it immediately. If the agent likes it and agrees to represent you, then it will be up to them to send it on to publishers to try to get it sold. That's their job.

Does it all sound overwhelming? Keep in mind, the work you put into the book proposal (which can take months) is the hardest part of writing a book. After you get that done, the rest is easier. Remember, *publishers publish books*. They want and need books to publish. If you have a fresh, timely idea, and you can write it down well, and you are willing to give time and energy to marketing your book, then you just may get your book published. Why not? *Somebody* has to do it!

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**Bio:**

*Sylvia Cary, MFT, is a Los Angeles area licensed psychotherapist and writer and has been a member of The Scriptwriters Network for nearly a decade. She was the winner of the 2003 Carl Sautter Screenwriting Competition (for Features). She is the author of 4 books, 5 educational films, and numerous articles in national magazines. She is currently "book-doctoring" and writing script coverage for a film distribution company. She can be contacted at [sylvia@sylviacary.com](mailto:sylvia@sylviacary.com). Her website is: [www.TherapistsWhoWrite.com](http://www.TherapistsWhoWrite.com).*