

Some notes on non-fiction proposals

Most non-fiction books are sold on proposal, that is, a short outline for the projected book rather than a finished manuscript. Non-fiction editors like being 'in on the ground floor' of non-fiction ideas, especially debuts, and making a contract before you have gone away to undertake the bulk of the research or the writing can be very helpful.

The job of the proposal is twofold: it needs to show 1) that you have a complete understanding of the nature and trajectory of your proposed book; and 2) something of the style in which it will be written. Above all, though, remember that a good proposal is also a sales tool – it should not be simply a rigid blueprint of the book you want to go away and write.

Length: for a debut, a good rule of thumb is around 8–10% of the length of your projected book. Some of this should ideally be sample text as well as summary of themes or a specific chapter breakdown. You do not, however, need to write a complete 'sample chapter' if you include enough sample text to demonstrate point 2) above. In a proposal of, say, 10,000 words in total, perhaps 3,000 words of sample text should be enough.

It is also a good idea to think about and anticipate other questions the publisher will have: who is the author and what are his/her credentials for writing this book? Where does it sit in the marketplace and what are recent comparable or competing titles? Are there any other pertinent publicity or marketing details about the idea or the author that the publisher should know? Bear in mind that the fact that no one has ever written a book on a topic before is usually an indicator that it's a bad idea rather than being evidence of a gap in the market.

Above all: make it lively! Certainly it should be indicative of the style you will adopt in the finished manuscript, but if that isn't lively either, you are unlikely to find a buyer.