

# The Perfect Package

“There is one rule for business and this is it: Make the best quality of goods possible.”

—Henry Ford

**EVEN IF YOU’RE A PROFESSIONAL** builder, you still need help building a house. So it is with building a book, only instead of a painter, a plumber and an electrician, you’ll potentially need an agent, an editor and a publisher. But to get to any of these people, you must put together a package so perfect that it will make a jaded publishing professional perk up. For nonfiction writers, this means an airtight proposal consisting of everything from a bang-up bio to an outstanding outline. For fiction writers, it means an entire manuscript, along with a few bells and whistles.

Either way, in order to prepare this package, you’ll need a steadfast support team, a top-notch title and maybe even a doctor in case your proposal or manuscript gets sick.

## Selecting Your Dream Team

One of the ironies of the book business is that while writing is generally a solitary art, the publishing process is all about assembling a great team. Linda Bubon, co-owner of Women & Children First, an independent bookstore in Chicago, says she’s noticed a common thread among successful authors: “They involve others in their work. They send drafts out to friends. They solicit advice from friends. They are part of writing groups. They go to readings and support other writers. They make other people feel that

they're part of the process. Writers who never leave their garrets rarely make successful books."

We can't tell you how many times we've heard the sentence, "I never could have finished my book without my writing group." Particularly for those writing fiction, creative nonfiction or poetry, writing groups and writing partners can be a great source of inspiration, constructive criticism and support in that we're-all-in-the-trenches-together kind of way. Many people have a hard time starting a project (especially one as big as a book), and an even harder time maintaining motivation. So if you have that sinking woe-is-me-I-can't-even-get-started-and-when-I-do-what-will-I-do feeling, see if you can find some kindred spirits to march down that long and winding road with you.

▶ **Planning on self-publishing? While you will need only a few of the elements included in this chapter (like a pitch and a bio), you will benefit by at least thinking about all of them. So before you skip ahead, at least take a speed-read.**

The fact is, it's nigh impossible to be a brilliant writer, excellent editor, superb proofreader, social media guru, salesperson extraordinaire, graphics genius and perfect publicist all at once. Instead, you need to build a team. Your first draft pick, if at all possible, should be anyone you know who's actually in publishing. Beyond that, look for people who are erudite, enthusiastic, business-savvy, articulate, selfless readers of books like yours; graphically/visually acute; fab proofreaders . . . and nice enough to tell you when you've got a bit of food on your lip without making you feel like a miserable loser. Start assembling your team early. Prepare to barter for services.

If you're despairing because you don't know a single soul to fill any of these roles, have no fear. We'll show you where these people are and how to find and woo them. No garret for you!

## Models for Success

Imagine trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle without a picture. Not impossible, but much more difficult. So it is with a book. Before writing your proposal or manuscript, it helps to have a model—a successful book similar to yours in theme, style and/or approach. You're going to use your model to prove that your book-to-be will succeed. And you're going to learn from your model how to make it so.

When locating a model, there are two rules: 1) Your model must be or have been successful in some way, and 2) Your model must be similar to your book in content or form, but not directly competitive. A model is all about success by association. For example, if you want to sell a book about Peruvian mud sharks and heart disease, you wouldn't choose as your model a bestselling book about Peruvian mud sharks and heart disease. You might, however, choose a bestseller on Peruvian mud sharks and liver maladies. Or a bestselling

“Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.”

—Mark Twain

## Supermodels Are Not Beautiful Airheads

For years, Arielle and her mom, Joann, wanted to write a book about the science, history and culture of color. First, they thought they'd write the book for 8- to 12-year-olds. They developed a proposal. The publisher they sent it to said, “This doesn't feel like a kid's book.” Back to the drawing board. Arielle and Joann discovered a book that did everything they wanted to do, but was on a totally different subject. It was called *The Elements: A Visual Exploration of Every Known Atom in the Universe*. This funny, smart, beautiful book was the perfect model for Arielle and Joann. It also happened to have sold about 250,000 copies up to that point (and tens of thousands more since). They studied it to figure out what “elements” made *The Elements* so great. They developed a second proposal, hiring a graphic designer who used the same square format as their model. The publisher of *The Elements*, Black Dog & Leventhal, has since published two more books with the same trim size and the same popular science audience. Arielle and Joann wondered if Black Dog & Leventhal might be interested in publishing one more. They submitted their book exclusively to this inventive publisher. Lo and behold, the publisher was looking for the next book in this unofficial series. Any other publisher would've had a hard time categorizing Arielle and Joann's book. Was it science? Art? History? Nature? It was also very expensive to produce. But Black Dog & Leventhal had been so successful with *The Elements* that they had buyers waiting with bated breath—both in the United States and worldwide—for whatever came next. What would've been a very hard book to sell—both to a publisher and to the public—became very easy due to the great model they chose. Their book, *The Secret Language of Color: Science, Nature, History, Culture, Beauty of Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue & Violet*, has already sold tens of thousands of copies and has been translated into five languages.

book on heart disease and hammerheads. Look, if you're proposing a book that's already out there, editors and agents will naturally question the need for your book. Whereas, if you're proposing a book that's like your model but reinvents the mouse trap in some key way, it will make them excited to sell your book to those same readers. And once your book has found a home, your model will also help you and your publisher figure out how to get you media attention, and how to get your book onto the shelves of major retailers and ultimately into the hands of readers who will give you all the love you so richly deserve.

### Comp Romp: The Power of Comparable Titles

Within the publishing business is an insider name for models: "comp titles"—short for "comparable titles." Once a book is bought, comp titles are used by the sales force and the publicity and marketing departments to help the media and booksellers understand exactly what your book is, why it will sell and where it fits on the shelf. Comp titles tell us who your audience is. They tell us how commercial or literary a thriller is. Whether a mystery is cozy or suspenseful. If a dystopian novel is for adults or middle graders.

Many authors are confused when trying to come up with comparable titles for their book. When you're looking for comparable titles, think in big, broad strokes. Which books are like your book in general terms of character, plot, tone, language and category? A great way to find comparable titles is to go to your local library or your local independent bookstore. Find a person who is the expert in your category. Tell her about your book and ask her if there are any similar books that you should know about. (Note: If you're doing this in an independent bookstore, you must pay for this service in a very important way. You must buy a book.)

Although you should be thinking in big, broad strokes, don't go too big. Using comps that are mega-bestsellers makes agents and publishers roll their eyes. It displays how little you know about your category. Good comp titles, on the other hand, demonstrate just how well you know your shelf by trotting out writers/books that people within publishing love and know to be great but that the average reader may not be aware of. You get instant insider status.

If you must compare yourself to the great or famous, be specific or inventive (more to come on this in a few pages when we discuss the elevator pitch). But, please, whatever you do, don't say you're the next *Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, or *Eat, Pray, Love!*

## Getting Titular: Titles and Subtitles

America's most famous B-movie meister, Roger Corman, often used to come up with the title and the poster for a movie before the story. And his movies always made money. Corman understood the value of a great title, and you should, too. Believe it or not, in some cases, a great title and/or subtitle alone can result in a book sale.

Titles can be metaphoric, like *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Or practical, like *101 Ways to Cook Chicken*. They can be clever like *Lies, and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, poetic like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or silly like *Captain Underpants*. It doesn't really matter how, but your title must make readers want to pick up your book, buy it and read it. And for nonfiction it must express clearly what's inside your book. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* is a terrific title because it's clever and intriguing, and it states a point of view that many humans intuitively relate to. It lets readers know what they'll find between the covers. And it does so in a jiffy.

Here's one of our all-time favorite titles, which you're going to hear a lot more about shortly: *No Plot? No Problem!: A Low-Stress, High-Velocity Approach to Writing a Novel in 30 Days*. We love this title because it strikes just the right note of freewheeling whimsy and rock-solid information. The subtitle lets people know exactly what the book is, while the main title communicates both the gist and the hilarious tone of the book.

Speaking of subtitles: For nonfiction, they can be just as important as titles, especially if a title is poetic or metaphoric. A subtitle will clue your potential readers into what your book is about, without requiring them to open the book. And if they can catch on to what your book is about with just a glance, there's a much greater chance that they'll pick it up and buy it. Most people don't take the time to open books in bookstores. Most often, it's that first glance that hooks them—or not.

A common mistake authors make is choosing a title that has a particular meaning to them but that no one else understands. Choosing a title that sounds good but doesn't clue readers in to what's great about the book also smacks of self-sabotage.

A good technique for finding a title and/or subtitle is to create a title pool. Write down all the forms of speech of chief words relating to your book.

“A good title should be like a good metaphor: It should intrigue without being too baffling or too obvious.”

—Walker Percy

## Title Torture

Rick Beyer had an idea for a popular history book made up of clever, fascinating and little-known stories. Unfortunately, he didn't have a clever, fascinating title to match. He went through approximately, oh, 50 million different ideas, but nothing fit. Just at the point of giving up, Rick said to one of his team members, "Well, there's one I thought about a long time ago, but I don't think it's any good." Hoping for some sort of seed to brainstorm with, she encouraged Rick to say it anyway. "*The Greatest Stories Never Told*," he said. Not only did she flip her wig over the title, but every publisher his proposal was sent to loved it as well.

The title, a fabulous twist on a common phrase, perfectly captured the idea behind the book. Interestingly, even though Rick came up with this title himself and had always had it in the back of his mind, he didn't have confidence that it was a winner. This is why it's important to share your title ideas. Yes, you'll get a million opinions. But if you've got a great title, its greatness will be confirmed by others over and over again.

Indeed, *The Greatest Stories Never Told* sold in a heartbeat and has spawned three sequels. The rest, as they say, is history. . . .

For example, if you want to use the word "receive" in your title, also write down "receiving," "reception" and "receiver." Then put all the words into columns based on their part of speech—noun, verb, adjective, adverb. Play mix-and-match.

As we revealed in our introduction, words and terms that are search-friendly have become such important selling tools that we had to scrap a book title we loved. It was search-unfriendly. How can you tell what's search-friendly and what's not? Thanks to Google, you can now get up-to-the-moment information on the most commonly used "keywords" (the professional term for search words) within your subject area of choice. Go to Google Adwords, select the Keyword Tool and start trying out different words and phrases related to your title. You'll get to see which keywords are most commonly used by Googlers. Add these to your pool. For example, if you're writing a tomato cookbook, you might want to consider using the word "sauce" in your subtitle; "sauce" is one of the search terms most commonly combined with tomatoes.

When you're looking for a title, get lots and lots of opinions. Write your options on a piece of paper so your bias is not revealed by the tone of your voice. Go to your support team or writing group and show these around. Ask people you think would be likely to buy your book—this includes booksellers and librarians. Have brainstorming sessions. Sometimes the title is lying right

there; you just can't see it. But be forewarned: Other people's opinions can confuse matters. Arielle frequently has clients who've settled on a title only to call in a panic and say, "Tom and Dick didn't like it! But Harry loved it! What should I do?" Take the ideas of people you trust, and then go with your gut.

## Perfecting Your Pitch

One of the most egregious and common mistakes that both amateur and seasoned writers make is underestimating the power of the pitch. Your pitch will be both the backbone and lifeblood of your book, from idea through (and past) publication.

The first time you announce to anyone that you're going to write a book, there's an excellent chance their response will be "What's your book about?"

Your answer to this question is your pitch. When you approach an agent, you will have to pitch your book. When your agent approaches an editor at a publishing house, she will have to pitch your book. When the editor presents your book at his editorial meeting, he will have to pitch your book to his editorial colleagues as well as his colleagues in publicity, marketing and sales. And they will all be evaluating his pitch to determine whether or not to buy your book. If you're lucky enough to sell your book, the sales force will go out to large retailers and small booksellers alike to pitch your book. And the publicity and marketing staff will be pitching your book to the media. If you get on the *Today* show and Matt Lauer asks what your book is about, you better have a very good answer. And a hundred years from now, when a reader in New York is reading your book on the screen implanted in her wrist while waiting for her molecular transporter to take her to New Shanghai, and the person next to her says, "What's that book about?" . . . you better hope that reader can give one hell of a pitch!

Every book makes a promise to its readers: to educate, to challenge, to amuse, to romance, to inspire, to entertain. What does your book promise? A pitch must take your promise and deliver it lickety-split. The beauty of a major

▶ Don't make your pitch a book report. Your pitch is your audition to show us what a brilliant or funny or romantic or authoritative or fill-in-the-blank writer you are. That's why your pitch has to demonstrate the very best of your writing. We like to think of it this way: A pitch is like a poem. *Every word counts.*

league pitch is that it contains the juicy essence of your book, it's over in no time at all and it leaves the crowd oohing and aahing in awe. Your pitch should entertain and delight, pique interest or give pause, depending on what kind of promise you need to deliver. At the end of your pitch, you want the person you're pitching to say, "Wow, I can't wait to read that book!" or "I can't believe I never thought of that before!" or "I know someone who would really love that book!" A beautifully crafted pitch is a skeleton key that will open many doors.

There are two kinds of pitches: 1) the elevator pitch, which is over by the time the elevator gets to the next floor, and 2) your long-form pitch. But when we say long-form, we're talking *under a minute*. Never, ever, let your pitch go longer than a minute. In fact, most long-form pitches can be done in under 30 seconds. Whenever pitches go longer than a minute, eyes start to glaze and boredom sets in. Hey, most people are willing to give you a minute, but often not a second longer.

### Elevator to the Penthouse

Elevator pitches usually draw from those comp titles you've unearthed and are often framed in Hollywoodesque combos like the following:

- *The Catcher in the Rye* with Asperger's (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*)
- *Pride and Prejudice* in modern London (*Bridget Jones's Diary*)
- *Winnie-the-Pooh* meets the *Tao Te Ching* (*The Tao of Pooh*)

There are variations on this theme as well:

"The \_\_\_\_\_ with/without \_\_\_\_\_,"

"The \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_," or

"The \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_."

For example, Mark Bittman's *How to Cook Everything* is the "Joy of Cooking for the 21st century"; Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* is "Alive without the cannibalism." Or one of our all-time favorites that we heard at an early Pitchapalooza: "The Elements of Style for Fruit Trees," which became *Grow a Little Fruit Tree: Simple Pruning Techniques for Small-Space, Easy-Harvest Fruit Trees*. If you borrow from a familiar title, you don't have to explain your promise because people already know what the "it" is. Take this book. We pitched it as "the *What to Expect*® *When You're Expecting* of publishing." People think of *What to Expect*® as the leading reference book for women who are looking for friendly, in-depth advice on the entire pregnancy process, written by people who have

been through it—who know what you’ll be feeling because they’ve felt it. By associating our book with *What to Expect*®, we were promising the same sort of in-depth, in-the-know, full-spectrum advice. The only adjustment our editor had to make was to replace “pregnancy” with “publishing.”

“I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter.”

—Blaise Pascal

But as we mentioned in our discussion of comp titles, beware of comparing yourself to the biggest and best authors out there because you’re sure to disappoint. “Early Philip Roth with a dash of Jane Austen” can’t stand alone as an elevator pitch. You’re asking an agent to make a comparison that more than likely isn’t going to come out in your favor. Instead, if you must use literary giants because they really do help describe your book, construct a pitch that specifies how your book will speak to the audience of those über-authors: “What happens when the repressed male sexuality of Alexander Portnoy meets the strong-minded, spunky joie de vivre of Elizabeth Bennet? Watch the sparks fly in *The Shiksa of Herefordshire*, a new twist on the old battle of the sexes.”

For nonfiction books, your subtitle often makes for a great elevator pitch. Chris Baty’s book is a fabulous example of how your subtitle can work double duty. Here’s how you’d put this into pitch form: “My book, *No Plot? No Problem!* takes a low-stress, high-velocity approach to writing a novel in 30 days.”

Check out the subtitles for these books, which we think also make for standout succinct elevator pitches:

- ***The South Beach Diet:*** The delicious, doctor-designed, foolproof plan for fast and healthy weight loss
- ***The Quants:*** How a new breed of math whizzes conquered Wall Street and nearly destroyed it
- ***The Happiness Project:*** Or, why I spent a year trying to sing in the morning, clean my closets, fight right, read Aristotle and generally have more fun
- ***Trattoria:*** Healthy, simple robust fare inspired by the small family restaurants of Italy
- ***Same Kind of Different as Me:*** A modern-day slave, an international art dealer and the unlikely woman who bound them together
- ***The Happiest Baby on the Block:*** The new way to calm crying and help your newborn baby sleep longer

- *The Backyard Homestead*: Produce all the food you need on just a quarter-acre!

If your elevator pitch doesn't fit into a formula or use its subtitle, that's fine, too. One of our favorite against-the-grain pitches was for *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* by Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Acquili and Vince Rause. Here it is: "Did God create the brain? Or did the brain create God? The answer to both these questions is a resounding 'Yes!'" This pitch is quick as silver. It uses intriguing questions and an unexpected zinger of an answer to reel readers in. It makes people want more.

Because your elevator pitch is a few sentences long, it has to be jam-packed and drum-tight. A pitch is all about economy.

### Magic in Under a Minute

Your long-form pitch is typically more like a paragraph or two. Your elevator pitch often makes a great first or last line(s) to your long-form pitch. But where to go from there? Read lots and lots of flap copy and, particularly, the backs of paperbacks, where the whole kit and caboodle is limited to a paragraph or two, tops. You'll see how concise those copywriters had to be, and how they managed to describe a book—and sell it—in only a few sentences. Online bookstores are great resources as well, and they have an added benefit: Because nearly every book is accompanied by flap or back cover copy, you can cut-and-paste phrases you like into a document and then use these phrases to craft your own pitch. Just be sure that your copy represents the writing style of your book. (And don't copy copy. There's a word for that: plagiarism!)

Make the pitch for your hardcore, authoritative business book hardcore and authoritative. Make your tear jerker jerk some tears. Make the pot boil on your potboiler. Here are a few examples of pitches we think are pitch-perfect, along with why we love them:

- *One Plus One* (Pamela Dorman Books). *Notice the deft and detailed introduction of numerous characters.* Suppose your life sucks. A lot. Your husband has done a vanishing act, your teenage stepson is being bullied, and your math whiz daughter has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that you can't afford to pay for. That's Jess's life in a nutshell—until an unexpected knight in shining armor offers to rescue them. Only Jess's knight turns out to be Geeky Ed, the obnoxious tech millionaire whose vacation home she happens to clean. But Ed has big problems of his own, and driving the

dysfunctional family to the Math Olympiad feels like his first unselfish act in ages . . . maybe ever.

- ***A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning by Lemony Snicket.*** *Observe the brilliant use of voice:* Dear Reader, I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children. Even though they are charming and clever, the Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with misery and woe. From the very first page of this book, when the children are at the beach and receive terrible news, continuing on through the entire story, disaster lurks at their heels. One might say they are magnets for misfortune. In this short book alone, the three youngsters encounter a greedy and repulsive villain, itchy clothing, a disastrous fire, a plot to steal their fortune, and cold porridge for breakfast. It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing. With all due respect, Lemony Snicket.
- ***Trattoria: Simple and Robust Fare Inspired by the Small Family Restaurants of Italy.*** *Check out how this copy actually makes your mouth water:* Whether it's a bustling eatery in the heart of Florence or a tiny alcove tucked away on a side street in Venice, the trattoria is where Italians go for big flavors, great friendship and good times. Patricia Wells now fuels America's undying passion for Italian food with more than 150 trattoria recipes—recipes for honest food, bursting with flavor and prepared with a

## Beware of the Plot-Heavy Pitch

Time and again, we see amateur authors pitch by trying to tell the plot of their entire novel or memoir in excruciating detail. Here's the kind of thing we've heard about a squazillion times: "My main character, Frodo Potter, gets up one morning and decides to have breakfast. So he invites his pet rat Bobo to eat an egg with him. But the egg is slightly runny, so they decide to cook it a little bit more. . . ." This pitch, which we heard a few months ago, might still be going on if we hadn't emphatically put an end to it. Broad strokes combined with specific imagery should display how exciting your characters and story are. Universal appeal should be implied via the mention of themes rather than an endless recitation of events. And, again, the pitch should be an amuse bouche that gives your audience a tiny, delightful taste of the delicacy that is your writing.

minimum of fuss. Savor the succulent taste of lamb braised in white wine, garlic and hot peppers, the hearty pleasure of authentic lasagna with basil, garlic and tomato sauce, or the delight of a luscious fragrant orange and lemon cake created by a chef in a tiny hamlet in Tuscany. Patricia Wells' *Trattoria* presents a full range of healthy, homemade recipes for soups, antipasti, dried and fresh pastas, rice and polenta, fish, poultry and meats, with special chapters on breads and pizzas, spreads, broths and condiments, and an irresistible selection of desserts.

- ***Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions.*** *Marvel at the way this makes you go “Really? Wow! I want to know more!”: Why do our headaches persist after taking a 1¢ aspirin but disappear when we take a 50¢ aspirin? Why do we splurge on a lavish meal but cut coupons to save 25¢ on a can of soup? Why do we go back for second helpings at the unlimited buffet, even when our stomachs are already full? When it comes to making decisions in our lives, we think we’re in control. We think we’re making smart, rational choices. But are we? In a series of illuminating, often surprising experiments, MIT behavioral economist Dan Ariely refutes the common assumption that we behave in fundamentally rational ways. Blending everyday experience with groundbreaking research, Ariely explains how expectations, emotions, social norms and other invisible, seemingly illogical forces skew our reasoning abilities. We consistently overpay, underestimate and procrastinate. We fail to understand the profound effects of our emotions on what we want, and we overvalue what we already own. Yet these misguided behaviors are neither random nor senseless. They’re systematic and predictable—making us predictably irrational. From drinking coffee to losing weight, from buying a car to choosing a romantic partner, Ariely explains how to break through these systematic patterns of thought to make better decisions. *Predictably Irrational* will change the way we interact with the world—one small decision at a time.*

Once you’ve figured out the words, then you’ve got to practice your delivery. Rehearse on your own, then start pitching everybody, everywhere. The more often you pitch, the sooner you’ll know what works and what doesn’t. If during a certain part of your pitch, people look confused, bored or nonplussed, cut or change those parts. Sometimes it’s as simple as reordering your words or trimming some fat. Get feedback. Keep refining your pitch until it rolls trippingly off your tongue. Until people who hear or read it want to be in business

with you and your idea. As Valerie Lewis, co-owner of Hicklebee's in San Jose, California, says, "You have to pitch in a way that eliminates the possibility of getting back the word 'No.'"

## The Facts About the Fiction Proposal

When it comes to selling fiction, unless you've recently turned up in the pages of *People* magazine or have already sold a treatment of your unwritten novel to a Big Hollywood Film Studio, chances are you'll need to write the whole enchilada before you start marketing it. This doesn't mean you can't show it to readers a chapter at a time for comments. Just don't start marketing it until you're sure it's the best you can possibly make it.

Once you've polished off your fiction manuscript, all you'll need to complete your package is a bio (see pages 80–82), blurbs (pages 98–99) if you can get them and possibly a cover (pages 96–98). If you have a brilliant and/or unusual idea for marketing or publicizing your novel, or you have a large following on Twitter or some other social media platform, you'd be crazy not to include these as well.

Lastly, we'd like to address the issue of plot synopses. Some agents and editors will never look at such things because they know how difficult it is to boil your book down to a page or two. Others like to scan these first to see if they're even interested in looking at what you've written. Our advice is to work up a synopsis if you feel you can capture the narrative drive of your book and manage to make it seem exciting. If you're unable to do this (and it's particularly difficult with literary fiction), don't submit a synopsis with your manuscript. Just wait and see if anyone asks. To master the art of synopsis writing, start reading flap and back cover copy of novels similar to yours. This can be done without leaving home, since most online bookstores repurpose the publisher's flap copy as the book description.

In the meantime, keep reading, because the rest of this chapter touches on all the oh-so-relevant issues that will pop up down the road.

## The Nonfiction Proposal

Think of writing a nonfiction book proposal as an art form like competitive figure skating. First you must perform the compulsory moves, then you

have to dazzle the judges with your original material if you want to bring home the gold. And a really snazzy outfit doesn't hurt! Go back to your notes, where you identified your audience, your competition, your marketing and publicity opportunities and the reasons why you're the one to write your book. Now you're going to pull these pieces together with succinct, deep and specific information and wrap them up into a nice package with a shiny bow.

### Should You Finish Your Manuscript Instead of Writing Your Proposal?

No. That's the short answer if you're writing nonfiction. As we said, for fiction, you need a complete manuscript. And if you already know you want to self-publish, there's obviously no need for a proposal either.

There's an old show business adage: Leave 'em wanting more. Publishing is no different. The less information you can give and still make an airtight case, the better. Why? Because publishers live off HOPE. Hope that your book will be reviewed in top-tier newspapers and magazines. Hope that your book will speak to Terry Gross and, for that matter, that she'll speak for it. Hope that it will quicken the pulses of buyers at bookstores. Hope that it will spread on the World Wide Web like a virus. Hope that it will beat the odds and become a big fat juicy bestseller. Publishers throw a lot of spaghetti at the wall and hope that something sticks. Because when they score a big fat juicy bestseller, they make lots and lots of money.

▶ As we mentioned in Chapter 2, your chances of landing a publisher will almost certainly increase if you pre-test your material online and make it as great as you can with the help of your audience. Bonus: You can use the material that was best received as your sample to a publisher.

The chilly reality is that few books get reviewed in top-tier publications, wind up on the homepage of the wildly hot website du jour, land on national TV or become bestsellers. But you want to keep potential agents and publishers in fantasy mode for as long as possible. Most often this means shorter is better and less is more. If your idea is particularly hot and timely, this may mean going so far as to exclude actual sample chapters from your proposal. However, 95% of the time, publishers are more likely to shell out good money if they read a dazzling sample chapter or two to get the voice and point of view. More than that is rarely necessary. Indeed, doing too much writing can both harm your chances (if it strays from the agent's or publisher's idea of what the book should be) and waste your

time (because the publisher or agent who takes on your project may want you to change large parts of it).

*Exceptions to the don't-write-the-whole-nonfiction-book rule:* Say you're an English teacher who's writing a popular book about sociobiology. If you have no science background, why would a publisher believe you're qualified to write this book? A proposal alone might not be enough. But maybe you really *do* have something earth-altering to say. If so, you have a much better chance of convincing people when they can see the finished product. Memoirs can be another exception. Because memoirs read like novels, some editors want to see how you handle the plot and writing from beginning to end before making an offer.

The other reason to finish a book is simply because, well, you have to. Some people can't complete a part without completing the whole. If you know this about yourself, do what you gotta do. But this doesn't mean you should submit a finished book. Instead, employ the guidelines below, picking the best chapters as samples.

## Braving the Elements: The Nuts and Bolts of Your Proposal

Good proposals have one thing in common. They convince agents and editors beyond a shadow of a doubt that lots of people will want to not just read your book, but pay money to buy it. The particular book proposal form we use (our proposal for this book is reproduced in Appendix V) has been honed over the years by James Levine of the Levine Greenberg Rostan Literary Agency, where Arielle is an agent-at-large. The elements include:

- Table of contents
- Overview
- Bio
- Audience
- Competition
- Special marketing and promotional opportunities
- Manuscript specifications
- Outline
- Sample chapters

Each section should stand on its own, with its own heading at the top of its opening page. You don't want to begin a new section in the middle of a page. And no section—with the exception of marketing and promotion, the outline and the sample chapters—should be longer than a few pages, double-spaced. It's best if you can keep the other sections under two. Sometimes a section may be only a paragraph. In other words, keep it short. Keep it tight. Keep it moving.

▶ With nothing more than a standard word processing program, you can make your proposal look better than most just by keeping it clean. Choose an inviting and readable typestyle (Garamond and Times New Roman are always good stand-bys). Make sure your margins are 1¼" on either side and that your text is unjustified.

We're including an actual nonfiction proposal in this chapter, so you can see what one looks, feels and smells like. We will refer to and analyze it throughout in order to illustrate how to turn your idea into a proposal that will compel people to give you money and publish your book. This proposal was written by Chris Baty for his aforementioned book *No Plot? No Problem!: A Low-Stress, High-Velocity Approach to Writing a Novel in 30 Days*, which can be found at a bookstore near you and has just entered its sixth printing with over 60,000 copies in print!

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Start your proposal with the same kind of table of contents that you'd find at the front of any book, including page numbers. This will give an agent or editor a snapshot of your proposal's organization.

Here's what a table of contents looks like:

#### TITLE OF BOOK

Overview _____	1
Bio _____	2
Audience _____	3
Competition _____	5
Special Marketing and Promotional Opportunities _____	7
Manuscript Specifications _____	10
Outline _____	11
Sample Chapters _____	17

### THE OVERVIEW

If it's comprehensive enough, sometimes your pitch is your overview. Sometimes your overview is an extended version of your pitch. It's like what you read on the inside flaps of a hardcover. (Great flap copy is worth its weight in gold. To master the art, read lots of it.) The overview needs to entice and invite while illuminating how your book is unique yet universal, timely yet timeless. It should touch on nearly every part of your proposal, including your audience and why your book will garner the nation's ovations.

Here's the overview from the *No Plot? No Problem!* proposal:

*When I was 26 years old, I accidentally founded an institution that now produces more fiction than all of America's MFA programs combined.*

*I blame it all on coffee. National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) began in a moment of overcaffeinated ambition when I sent out an email to friends, challenging each of them to write a 50,000-word novel in July. Since then, the escapade—chronicled on the CBS Evening News and NPR's All Things Considered and in dozens of newspaper and magazine articles around the world—has grown to include a high-tech website, hundreds of spin-off fan sites and discussion groups, and thousands of enthusiastic participants every year.*

*Part literary marathon and part rock-and-roll block party, NaNoWriMo is based on the idea that anyone who loves fiction should be writing his own. Not for fame and fortune (though those may come in time). But because novel writing is ridiculously fun once you throw away the rulebook. My rallying cry as NaNoWriMo cruise director (and fellow participant) is simple: No plot? No problem! That low-stress, high-velocity approach has helped tens of thousands of writers set aside their fears and dive headlong into the joys of homemade literature.*

*Based on four years of experience as the director of NaNoWriMo, No Plot? No Problem! will be a thoughtful, encouraging and fun guide to blasting out a 50,000-word novel in a month.*

*A resource for those taking part in the official NaNoWriMo event, as well as a stand-alone handbook for year-round noveling, the book will break the spree down into five unforgettable weeks, taking writers from the preparation phase ("If you have children, say good-bye to them now") to the intoxicating highs of Week One, crushing self-doubts of Week Two, critical "plot flashes" of Week Three, and Week Four's victory laps and reluctant reentry into normal life.*

*Along with the week-specific overviews, pep talks and essential survival strategies, the book will feature checklists, boxed text and anecdotes from myself and other repeat NaNoWriMo winners, i.e., those who completed 50,000 words.*

*Bursting with can-do literary mayhem, No Plot? No Problem! will be the kick in the pants first-time novelists need to jump into the fiction fray, an empowering, creative push from the heart of a wildly successful writing revolution.*

Why is this such a good overview? It tells you about the audience, the competition, the market, publicity hooks, even the manuscript specs. But

above and beyond all that, Chris makes a profoundly compelling case for why this book will sell. And he makes it sound fun while doing it. Let's break it down:

- 1. *Chris begins with a Big Bang*, i.e., NaNoWriMo produces more fiction than all MFA programs combined.**
- 2. *Chris uses the same playful voice that he plans to use in his book.*** People often write dull, dry overviews, falsely believing that this is like a college assignment where their only job is to get the facts right. Your overview has to be entertaining and informative. Even if you're writing about a very serious subject, you must engage readers.
- 3. *You see what an interesting, funny and unusual person Chris is.*** You can tell right away that he'll be terrific in front of a microphone or camera.
- 4. *Chris identifies both a rabid fan base and a wide audience.*** Rabid fan bases often drive a book's success even if their numbers are relatively small. If you have such a base (a blog with a good number of readers is one example), advertise it right up front in your overview, even though you'll repeat it later.
- 5. *Chris demonstrates marketing and publicity potential*** by pointing out previous coverage. Even if you've never had any media coverage, be sure to artfully point out how your book is both newsworthy and publicity-ripe.
- 6. *It's clear that Chris has thought out every aspect of his book*,** right down to the inclusion of checklists and boxes. This reassures publishers that he will be able to pull off what he proposes.
- 7. *Chris lets the reader know there's no other book like his out there*,** even though he doesn't say it directly. His voice, and the organization from which the idea sprang, is particular, energetic and hard not to like.

### YOUR BIO

Just like your overview, your bio should not be a dry, dusty affair. Even more important, it must make the case for why you are the ideal person to write this book and to sell it to the reading public. Whether it's your insider's expertise on a subject, your shockingly compelling life story or your boundless passion for your material, it's up to you to demonstrate why you and you alone are the perfect author for your book. In a page or two. If you've been published, won any awards, been showcased in the media . . . whip all that stuff out. Include any and all information that shows you've got the savvy necessary to publicize and market your book. If you have a Big Time CV, put it in the back of your proposal and pull out

the appropriate highlights for your bio. The bottom line is, if you don't toot your own horn (albeit in a way that drips of humble sincerity), who will?

In one of our seminars, a successful businessman mentioned that he'd been homeless for several years. We told him to put this in his bio because it would show what an unusual and resilient person he is. Can't you just see this story on an afternoon talk show? Clearly, this is the kind of information you wouldn't bring up in a job interview. But again, it'll set you apart from the hordes of others trying to storm the gates of publishing.

You also want to try and anticipate any problems that publishers may find with your bio. Bill Parker, a gynecologist, had a stellar résumé—great credentials, media experience, the works. He also wrote a proposal that a number of editors said was the best they'd ever seen. But every one of those editors turned the book down. Why? Because Bill was a male doctor writing about women's health. Bill was well aware of this issue in his practice, but he never thought it would be an issue in a situation where he wouldn't be examining anyone. After a second round of submissions, two thoughtful editors (one of whom was the daughter of a male gynecologist) saw beyond this stumbling block and bid on the book. Before publication, Bill opted against a sex change and instead decided to involve his two female partners in the project. As preventive medicine, he mentioned their contributions on the cover. In hindsight, this might have been the thing to do in his proposal from the get-go.

Once again, in *his* bio Chris Baty knew just what to say about himself:

*Founder and four-time National Novel Writing Month winner, Chris Baty is the Web's most sought-after writing coach. The 29-year-old Oakland, California, freelance writer has been called "an indie David Foster Wallace with compassion" (Fabula Magazine) and has been profiled in newspapers ranging from the L.A. Times to the Chicago Tribune to the Melbourne Age, as well as being featured on NPR's All Things Considered and a host of BBC radio programs. When not heading up NaNoWriMo, Baty is usually on the road, covering Louisiana juke joints and Parisian thrift stores for such publications as the Washington Post, the SF Weekly, the Dallas Observer and Lonely*

▶ If you're writing a children's book and are inclined to make a big deal in your bio of how you're a mom or a dad, think twice! Editors get this from every freshman children's book writer, and there's nothing persuasive about it. Just because you have kids doesn't mean you can write for them.

*Planet guidebooks. His funny, freewheeling style landed him an Association of Alternative Newsweeklies award for Best Music Writing in 2002. Before becoming a full-time writer in 1999, Baty spent several years behind the editing desk, first for Fodor's publications and later as the New York, London and Chicago City Editor for the travel Web site ontheroad.com. Baty holds degrees in cultural anthropology and psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. His quest for the perfect cup of coffee is never-ending and will likely kill him someday.*

Why is this an excellent bio? It's got awards, it's got Big Names, it's full of writing cred, and again it displays in its style a rigor, a vigor, a self-deprecating wit and a sense of rollicking good fun. Let's break it down:

- 1. *Chris shows that he's got a wide reach***—he's the most sought-after writing coach on the World Wide Web. He also tells us that he's the founder of National Novel Writing Month, which makes him sound important.
- 2. *Information is doled out fast and furious.*** In the very first paragraph, we find out how old Chris is, what he does for a living, that he's been compared to a famous guy and that he's connected to media outlets like the *Los Angeles Times*, the BBC and NPR.
- 3. *Chris has other people saying nice things about him.*** Better others than yourself—more believable.
- 4. *Chris associates himself with top publications,*** suggesting that his book has a good chance of ending up reviewed and/or covered there.
- 5. *Chris identifies his own style: funny and freewheeling.*** Yes, he does this by actually telling us, but he also shows us by writing his bio in a comparable tone (as illustrated by the inclusion of juke joints and Parisian thrift stores in the copy).
- 6. *Chris establishes his writing and academic credibility.***
- 7. *Chris's bio ends with a joke,*** illustrating why it's always good to leave 'em laughing, if you can pull it off.

If, after reading Chris's bio, you feel yours doesn't stack up, do not despair. You, too, can spin a web of magic around your life to make it come up smelling like roses. At first, many people doubt they have anything significant to say in their bio. But if you sit down and make a list of your accomplishments, hobbies

and quirks, you'll see an interesting portrait emerge. Have you raised nine kids? Did you ever get a hole-in-one? Do you keep chickens in the middle of Manhattan? All these things count as long as you can spin them so that they help make the case for your book.

## YOUR AUDIENCE

Who's going to read your book? Even more important, who's going to buy your book? Describe your audience—and their motivation to buy—as specifically as possible. Prove to an agent or an editor that people are hungering for your book and that you've been actively connecting with your audience and listening to what they say through your company, your workshops, your blog, your social networks or whatever other means you have.

In addition to a display of your knowledge of your audience, bottom-line proof of your audience through numbers is always a major plus. When Jun Chul Whang, Sun Chul Whang and Brandon Saltz put together a proposal for a book on taekwondo, they included the fortuitous fact that there are seven million worldwide practitioners of this particular martial art. Publishers couldn't believe that, given the size of the audience, no major house had ever done a book on the subject. The authors landed a six-figure advance from Broadway Books for *Taekwondo: State of the Art*, in no small part because they drew attention to the staggering number of practitioners.

Reference librarians are fabulous resources for number-related research. And with the power of the Internet, numbers are getting easier and easier to quantify on your own. For example, if you put "taekwondo" into the search field of Facebook, you'll find groups with hundreds of thousands of followers. You'll also find dozens of taekwondo blogs. Use the web to make a compelling case for how big your audience is, and be very specific about who they are, where they hang out and what they buy.

If you're unable to track down statistics proving your audience, or if statistics don't apply, get as specific as possible about your future readers and why they will buy your book. If you say women will be interested in your book, you're not saying much. The question is, which women? If you say women who suffer from depression, then you're getting somewhere. But take it even further. Do they watch QVC or *Sesame Street* on demand? *Masterpiece* or reruns of *Friends*? Do they listen to NPR or Howard Stern? Beethoven or Busta Rhymes? Do they read *Good Housekeeping* or *Wired*? The latest Harry Potter or Charles Dickens? Do they drive Range Rovers or hybrids? Do they buy K-Mart or Prada? Are they downhearted baby boomers or despondent

Gen Xers? Do they read on their iPads or stick with the printed word? Are they active on Facebook or do they prefer to tweet? And lastly, a very important question: Do you have direct access to these women? If you can successfully define your audience and show that you know how to reach it, you've done a large part of your job.

Let's check in with Chris to see how it's done:

### ***The numbers tell the story***

*NaNoWriMo grew from 21 participants in 1999 to 14,000 in 2002. With a minimum of 25,000 participants expected in November 2003, the built-in market for No Plot? No Problem! is sizable, international and annually recurring. NaNoWriMo participants are, by and large, an inexperienced group, excited by the prospect of writing a novel in a month but daunted by the creative and time-management challenges of the endeavor. Participants have already committed a large chunk of their lives to the event; many would be happy to spend a little money on a handbook that would increase the likelihood of a higher return (read: completed novel) on their investment.*

### ***The silver bullet: artistic fulfillment made easier***

*Readers buy how-to books expecting a silver bullet—a magical formula that makes a daunting activity understandable and achievable. This is exactly what No Plot? No Problem! delivers: a results-oriented plan for people who want to nurture their inner artists without getting tangled in time-consuming classes or ongoing writing groups. After one week of the No Plot? No Problem! regime, participants will have already written 46 pages of their novel. By delivering huge results in a short time, the book will have instant appeal for busy people who want to experience the creative joys of writing, but who have limited free time to devote to the project before the demands of real life intervene.*

*Also, by framing novel-writing as a short-term, highly accessible activity for everyone, No Plot? No Problem! casts its line out beyond the confines of “serious writers,” tapping into the vast demographic of people who have no fiction-writing experience but who feel they have a story worth telling. The structured creativity of No Plot? No Problem! will reassure first-time writers that they already possess all the skills necessary to write a rough draft, and that the only thing standing between them and their manuscript is a month's labor.*

*The book will also appeal to those who may not intend to write a novel, but who simply enjoy the thrill of contemplating the project. Studies have shown that 20% of travel guidebooks are purchased by armchair travelers, those who have no intention of buying a ticket to the destination but who appreciate the thrill of a vicarious visit. I anticipate a similar percentage will pick up *No Plot? No Problem!* for its gonzo tone and uproarious depictions of the psychological states writers pass through on their month-long journey to literary fulfillment.*

***Success stories will reassure hard-nosed, results-oriented book buyers***

*Though the focus of *No Plot? No Problem!* is on personal achievement rather than fame and fortune, there is no question the low-stress, high-velocity technique laid out in the book has led to some surprising success stories in the world of publishing, allowing several would-be writers to transition into new lives as successful, full-time novelists. These stories, detailed in the book's final chapter, will increase the allure of the book for results-oriented writers looking for a creative on-ramp into the world of publishing.*

Why does the audience section of this proposal work? Because it clearly identifies a die-hard, hard-core audience and then branches out to describe several other large yet specific groups of readers and buyers. Let's break it down so you can get to work:

- 1. *Chris starts this section off with numbers.*** Publishers love numbers. Right away, an agent and/or publisher will see how many people are ready to buy this book, and why.
- 2. *He makes the argument for perennial readers and a long shelf life.*** Chris explains that how-to book buyers need a silver bullet. *No Plot, No Problem!* delivers such a bullet in no time at all, hence appealing to the evergreen I'm-too-busy-to-accomplish-any-artistic-goals crowd. This indicates a continuous need for his book, because there will always be those seeking silver bullets for problems they have no time to solve.
- 3. *He differentiates his book from the competition*** (books that apply almost exclusively to the "serious" writer) and so opens up a new audience for himself: people with absolutely no novel-writing experience but the inclination to give it a try. It's a huge leap in numbers when you go from people who

desperately want to write a book to people who have thought at some point in their lives that they might want to write a book.

4. *He closes strong* by explaining why a person who is faced with a shelf chock-full of writing books would choose his over another.

If Chris were to have written this proposal today, he would also have added a very compelling bullet demonstrating how easy it is for him to reach his followers, friends and fans via NaNoWriMo's extensive and highly successful social media platform.

### THE COMPETITION

Identifying your competition has two primary purposes: 1) to prove that no one has published the same book as yours, and 2) to associate your book with books that have been successful. In the first case, you need to state quickly and clearly why your book is different. In the second case, you'll want to state quickly and clearly how your book is similar.

Return to your preliminary search of the competition and fill in any gaps. Go to your favorite online bookseller and plug in your keywords (like "taekwondo" and "martial arts" if you're doing a book on taekwondo). Once you've found a book that's a good match, be sure to go to the screen that gives you all the publishing info, reviews and so on. Scroll down until you get to a feature that says, "People who bought this book also bought . . ." Following this lead will take you to many other appropriate titles. Aim for at least 5 books and stop at around 15. Even if your search leads you to dozens of books, you're not likely to come up with more than 15 that fit squarely into our definition of competition.

After you've made your final list, go back once again and ask around at your local bookstore or library. Sometimes librarians and booksellers may be able to point you to obvious titles you've missed. In all cases, you must identify the publisher and author of each book and the date it was published. In a short paragraph, describe the book(s) at hand. Say why your book will succeed where the competition has failed. Speak to an aspect of your subject that the competition has not addressed. Appeal to the same core audience.

Don't trash the competition. You may want to send your proposal to the publisher of one of your competitive books, and if you slag their book, they may not want to play with you.

Call us old-fashioned, but we think it's a very good idea to actually read the competition. That way, you'll really know what you're talking about when you write this important piece of your proposal.

## Separating the Bigs from the Littles

If you're submitting to a major publisher, it's only necessary to track down titles published by major or midsize companies. Sometimes this can be difficult to suss out, because almost every major publisher has numerous imprints that may look like small presses. Check out books' copyright pages. If a book was published by an imprint of a larger house, it will identify the larger house. For example, on the copyright page of a book published by Riverhead, you'll see that Riverhead is a division of Penguin. To help sort out big from little, see the list of major and midsize publishers and their divisions and imprints in Appendix III.

Let's check out Chris's competition section:

### ***Writing vs. writing well***

*Bookstore shelves are overflowing with tomes from well-known authors quibbling over the tenets of good writing. No Plot? No Problem! does not teach good writing. From my work as a writer and editor, I have come to believe that the most valuable writing lessons are self-taught, and that the most beautiful pieces of literature begin as mediocre pieces of crap. No Plot? No Problem! is essentially a personal trainer in book form, a wisecracking coach who sits down with would-be writers each night for 30 days and gives them the permission they need to make messes and the encouragement they need to keep going.*

### ***A pan-genre approach to taskmastering***

*Unlike craft-based books, where the author's opinions on timing, semantics and plot development may miss the mark for certain genres, the tactics and strategies of No Plot? No Problem! work regardless of novel niche. And unlike the overly broad books for novice writers that cover everything from brainstorming protagonists to handling royalty checks, No Plot? No Problem! brings all of its taskmastering to bear on the first and highest hurdle: surviving the first draft.*

### ***The miraculous power of a deadline***

*Finally, where several of the books below give writers assignments on getting started (3 pages a night, 15 minutes a day, etc.), none of them offers a clear-cut stopping point. The value of a deadline—and a contained writing period—cannot be overstated in helping novice writers pull off the mammoth (and at times painful) task of extracting a novel from themselves.*

*The looming 30-day cut-off in No Plot? No Problem! helps keep writers motivated, focused and on track.*

*Along with the range of books that have used the time-tested motivational strategy of a month-long exercise (30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary, The 30-Day Low-Carb Diet Solution, Successful Business Planning in 30 Days, etc.), complementary titles on writing include:*

*Immediate Fiction: A Complete Writing Course by Jerry Cleaver (St. Martin's Press, 2002, \$24.95). Simple, straightforward advice on everything from plot strategies to book marketing, written in a reassuring tone from the founder of The Writers' Loft in Chicago. Expounds on the joys of messy first drafts and offers the timeless insight "the less you care, the better you write."*

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Anne Lamott (Anchor, 1995, \$12.95). Inspiring book avoids the quagmire of revision advice and offers humorous insight about the realities of the writing life (including several sections on the utter necessity of not taking first drafts so seriously).*

*The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing: A 16-Step Program Guaranteed to Take You from Idea to Completed Manuscript by Evan Marshall (Writer's Digest Books, 2001, \$16.99). Breaks memorable plots down into a series of formulas and concrete charts, and includes information on how to set up a writing area and manage your time while writing.*

*How to Write a Damn Good Novel by James Frey (St. Martin's Press, 1987, \$19.95). A colorfully written, character-centric guide to the novel-writing process. Heavily reliant, however, on prewriting.*

*How to Write & Sell Your First Novel by Oscar Collier with Frances Spatz Leighton (Writer's Digest Books, 1997, \$16.99). A somewhat celebrity-focused book takes novice writers on the inspirational path from selecting a genre to finding an agent.*

Why does this audience section work so well? Because it clearly illustrates how Chris's book is different from everything else out there. And again, it does so in a gonzo style. Note that Chris decided to put his "why my book is different" info all up front. This is a great thing to do when none of the books

on your list is directly competitive. But if you're writing what you claim will be the definitive book on taekwondo and there's already a book out there that purports to do the same, you'll have to get very specific about your competition (for an example, see our proposal for this book in Appendix V). Let's break it down:

1. *Chris faces his competition head on* by telling the reader that he's well aware of the vast number of writing books available. Sometimes writers shy away from the truth because they think the competition will hurt their chances of selling their book. Better to speak the truth and show how your book reinvents the mousetrap for the huge pool of mousetrap buyers always looking for the new best thing.
2. *He's very clear about what differentiates his book* from the competition. For example, when he talks about the power of the deadline, he's making a specific case for what his book will offer that no other book does.
3. *He identifies himself with a well-published category*, yet explains why his book is unique within the category. His enumerating of all those 30-days books makes publishers feel warm and fuzzy because they've sold lots of copies of those same books.
4. *He inspires confidence* by laying out the list of books thoughtfully and carefully. Looking like you know what you're talking about is often more important than really knowing what you're talking about. (We advocate a cozy combination of the two.)
5. *He maintains a consistent tone*. Throughout, he continues to illustrate the zany style of his personality even as he presents information: "most beautiful pieces of literature begin as mediocre pieces of crap." He makes us laugh with his matter-of-fact demystification of art. We can see even here that he'll be a fun interview and put on a good show at events. Which leads directly into . . .

## SPECIAL MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

As publishing tightens its belt to the point that its belly is aching, publishers are demanding more and more of their authors. In addition, with the shrinking of space in newspapers and magazines where books traditionally got attention, it has become increasingly difficult for publishers and authors to get the love they need. Luckily, it is now possible for individuals to connect with huge networks, communities and tribes of other citizens interested in their book. That's why we

spent so much time in the last chapter talking about how to develop your platform *prior to* developing your book.

Whether you have a big platform, a small one or none at all, you need to convince an agent or editor that you'll make it your top priority to let the public know about your book. Publishers want to know what public venues, both traditional and electronic, you can use to make a speech, post an opinion or grab the ear of the public. The more creative yet concrete your plan, and the more you can show what *you* will do to spread the good word (as opposed to what the *publisher* can do), the better.

Speaking of spreading the word: The only thing publishers like better than a platform is a rapidly expanding platform, something the Internet is particularly well-suited to delivering. So if you skipped Chapter 2, please go back and read it now!

Can you get yourself on radio and television, into magazines and newspapers? Can you get bloggers to write about you? Can you write about other experts on your blog and get lots of people to pay attention? Can you get your material into the hands of people who review books online? Do you write a column for your local paper? Do you have regular speaking engagements? Do you ever appear in the media? Are you affiliated with any large groups? Any specific groups your book will speak to? Do you belong to any trade organizations? Do you have a website with noteworthy traffic? Does your high school, college or graduate school have an active alumni association with a newsletter or magazine? Can you write an editorial, rant or personal essay that you can place prominently on the leading website where your readers regularly hang out? Can you make a short movie that taps into a wave of interest as it streaks down the Information Superhighway?

This is one place where it pays to let the muse flow through you, without resorting to the obvious or the overly pie-in-the-sky. Everyone knows you fully expect that your book will be reviewed in *The New York Times* and that you're a natural for national TV. But unless you have a concrete plan for making that happen, you run the risk of coming off as a rube.

Are you wondering about Chris's marketing strategy? Here it is:

### ***Evangelical participants as advertisers***

*The NaNoWriMo participants themselves are evangelical advertisers. The growth of the event—which has never sent out a press release or advertised anywhere—has been due primarily to hyperlinked endorsements from a vast network of participants' Web sites and Web logs. These sites would*

*happily promote a book they felt reflected the zany and unique experience that NaNoWriMo provides every year. The incentive of proselytizing for a good cause is further enhanced by the ubiquitous “Amazon.com Rewards” program, which gives Web logs a kickback on any copies of books sold via click-through recommendations.*

*The primary sales vehicle, though, would be the NaNoWriMo.org Web site. No Plot? No Problem! could be sold on the site or offered to participants as part of a “donation package,” where a donation to National Novel Writing Month would net the donor a free copy of the book. Each year, around 15% of participants donate to the (otherwise free) event. With 30,000 participants expected in November 2004 (the approximate period of the book’s release), NaNoWriMo.org-facilitated book sales could range anywhere from one to four thousand units, repeatable annually.*

### **NaNoWriMo groups around the world**

*There are about 50 NaNoWriMo chapters in the U.S., and 15 groups overseas. These groups meet informally throughout the year to swap manuscripts and support each other’s writing projects. No Plot? No Problem! would serve as a bible for these groups, and, in the case of a promotional tour, they could be counted on to come out and support the founder of the escapade (and hopefully buy a book or three while they’re at it).*

### **The joys of annual coverage**

*Because it makes for a fun human-interest story, NaNoWriMo is widely covered by TV, radio and print media every year. Most of the pieces on the event feature interviews with local participants coupled with quotes from me on the history and current status of the event. This recurrent media attention will be a boon to No Plot? No Problem! creating an annual opportunity to promote the book long after the first publicity push subsides.*

Why does this publicity and marketing section rule? Because it shows concretely that there’s a terrific grassroots marketing campaign behind this book as well as real opportunities for local and national publicity. It also indicates that new publicity and marketing opportunities will arise year after year because of the annual nature of NaNoWriMo. Let’s take a closer look:

- 1. Publishers love authors with direct access to a core audience.** Chris leads with this aspect of his marketing juggernaut, which is just the sort of thing that makes publishers drool.

- 2. *Chris ties this grassroots appeal to e-marketing.*** By placing the website and the Amazon tie-in so centrally, he lets publishers know that he will be exploiting the awesome power of the Internet, and that makes them happy, too.
- 3. *Chris keeps throwing numbers at them.*** He makes a great case for 1,000–4,000 guaranteed sales a year before the publisher has to lift a finger. Granted, this isn't a huge number in publishers' minds, but it's a nice security blanket. The more you can convince publishers that they will sell books without having to do anything, the better your chances.
- 4. *Chris shows that his audience is worldwide.*** An expanding number of groups that meet regularly in America and internationally will buy his book. By bringing in the international angle, he lets publishers know that foreign sales are likely.
- 5. *Chris makes a compelling case for his ability to get both big- and small-time media.*** Pieces that appear in little papers and on tiny radio stations, as well as on national morning television and NPR shows, are the fuel that keeps the media engine purring. And Chris makes it clear he can get behind the wheel and drive that baby off into the sunset.

## Best Foot Forward

Most agents and editors have thousands of pages stacked on their desks and tens of thousands sitting in their inboxes, which means they probably won't read your proposal or manuscript in its entirety unless they're so taken in by the first sentence, first paragraph or first page that they're spurred on to read more. So make sure each of these firsts is spectacular. Don't count on anyone getting to the "heart" of your proposal or manuscript somewhere deep on page 10. Count instead on having about one minute to capture someone's attention.

Spend as much time as necessary to get your first words right. Study the first sentences of great books for inspiration. Arielle's predictable favorite is the classic opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." And one of our more recent nonfiction favorite first paragraphs is from Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*: "The Number 6 train from Manhattan to the South Bronx makes nine stops in the 18-minute ride between East 59th Street and Brook Avenue. When you enter the train, you are in the seventh richest congressional district in the nation. When you leave, you are in the poorest."

## YOUR MANUSCRIPT SPECIFICATIONS

What is the approximate word count of your book? Are there any special design features? Will there be illustrations? Recipes? How many? How long will it take you to complete the writing of the book?

It's no surprise that Chris had a fun way to deal with even the nuts and bolts.

*The book's format—part travel guide and part survival kit—will echo the fun, adventuresome feel of the novel-writing process. The book will be 45,000 words long and will contain 36 illustrations.*

*The completed manuscript can be delivered in PC Microsoft Word format within six months of signing of the contract.*

Even in this little section, Chris displays the *joie de vivre* that dances through his proposal.

While you may view the manuscript specifications section of your proposal as a throwaway, it has some essential information. By carefully preparing and evaluating your outline, you can reasonably calculate what your word count and delivery timetable will be. Yes, this information is hard to predict. But the more precise you can be, the better the chances that you and your future publisher will be on the same page from day one.

## YOUR OUTLINE

First off, your outline is not a final commitment. At this stage, it's enough to show that you've got a solid working plan for moving ahead. The outline should contain section and/or chapter headings; beneath each heading, you'll need to write up to a few paragraphs explaining what the chapter contains and how it moves the book forward.

Again, your outline should maintain the style of your book. Every part of your proposal must be a great read. Here's a piece of Chris's outline to give you a sense of how it's done:

### **Introduction**

*The author offers a personal history of National Novel Writing Month, explaining both the absurd origins of the event and the surprising, life-changing effects it had on the first group of 21 participants.*

### **Chapter 1**

*Enlightenment is overrated: Why you should write a novel now—16 pages. For most people, novel-writing is a “one day” event, as in “one day, I'd like to write a novel.” This chapter explores why that day never comes for*

most would-be writers and offers five reasons why the biggest tasks are best accomplished in a minuscule amount of time.

The chapter opens with a list of common reasons people offer for postponing the writing of their first novel. These include:

*“I’m waiting until I’m older and wiser.”*

*“I’m waiting until I get fired from my job, so I’ll have more time to dedicate to the book.”*

*“I don’t have a quiet place to write.”*

*“My plot ideas are all clichés.”*

*“I’m afraid my novel will suck in unpredictably monstrous ways, and I’ll be forced to admit that I’m a total failure as a creative individual.”*

The author dispels each of these worries, building a reassuring case for the fact that novel-writing is best undertaken as a month-long, anything-goes adventure, where the stakes are low and the rewards are high for writers of all ages and skill levels.

The second part of the chapter delves into those rewards, including the tremendous boost in creative confidence and a deepened understanding of the hell professional writers endure in creating the books we love.

The final part of the chapter explores the supernatural way a deadline enables achievements far beyond our normal powers, and offers a guarantee for would-be writers: Write for two hours a night, five nights a week, and, over the course of a month, aliens will beam a 50,000-word novel onto your hard drive.

Two supplemental boxed texts for Chapter 1 will provide 1) a gauge of how long 50,000 words really is, including a short list of famous 50K novels, and 2) an overview of the magic number 1,666 (the average daily word quota) and about how long it typically takes writers to reach that goal.

Why is this outline so effective? Chris combines his playfulness with a sure-handed description of exactly what the chapters will cover. Appearing to know indicates to publishers that you may, in fact, actually know what you’re doing. Here we go again:

- 1. Chris explains how he will handle every aspect of the book.** By addressing the components of each chapter (including supplemental boxed texts), he leaves no one guessing.
- 2. Chris’s chapter descriptions are only as long as they need to be.** The introduction necessitated one sentence; Chapter 1 required several paragraphs. Unnecessarily long outlines are not just boring, they’re dangerous. And if

they feel too much like the real book, without communicating the level of information or interest that the real chapter will hold, the publisher may come away thinking your book itself will be thin. On the other hand, if your ideas are highly complex, take the space you need.

- 3. *The outline is fun to read.*** We can't overemphasize the importance of this. Not that "fun" has to be the universal descriptor—heartwarming, authoritative, edgy are all legitimate descriptors for a proposal. But you want your proposal to pop.

Chris does do something out of character that we would like to point out. His impersonal references to "the author" lack the intimacy of the rest of the proposal. Not a big deal, but not in keeping with his voice. As a general rule, don't refer to yourself as "the author" anywhere in your proposal. Either keep it in the first person or call yourself by your given name.

## SAMPLE CHAPTERS

You'll need one to three professional-caliber sample chapters, for a total of approximately 20 to 50 pages. Most writers start with the first chapter—it's harder to get a feel for a book when you jump in midstream. But both chapter choice and page count are ultimately dependent on what you think will make the best case for your book.

While the business end of your proposal is the skin and bones, the sample chapters are the heart and soul. They're what agents and editors will look at to see if you have the goods to produce what you say you can. So while a bad overview can hurt your chances of getting published, bad sample chapters will probably kill them dead.

After you've written and rewritten and rewritten, show the sample chapters

## First-Person Proposal: Yea or Nay?

If your book will be written in the first person (as in a memoir, for example), it makes sense to write the proposal in the same first-person voice. This will familiarize publishers with the "sound" of your writing. Problem is, not everyone can write an effective bio in the first person. If you can't blow your own horn, use the third person (it will sound as if someone else is saying how great and qualified you are). If you feel that your proposal will benefit from a first-person voice but you're not comfortable with a first-person bio, change the voice for your bio only. That's okay. The same holds true for your overview and special marketing/promotional opportunities sections.

to your team. Take heed of all their advice and criticism. Listen with open ears and ask smart questions. But ultimately, trust that little person in your head who's always right. (We won't include Chris's sample chapters here, simply to save some space. But you can go check out his book if you're curious about how it turned out.)

### Looks Are Everything

If it looks like a book, if it smells like a book, chances are it will become a book. Again, agents and publishers are inundated by books and book ideas. At parties. At dinners. From family, friends, friends of friends, friends of family, and family of friends. So the more your document can look like a book, the easier it will be for them to see that it should be a book.

### ILLUSTRATIONS

If yours is an illustrated book, it can be beneficial to hire a graphic designer to do between two and five sample spreads, i.e., side-by-side book pages. This typically costs anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000, depending on the number of spreads and the designer's level of experience. A major investment. However, an illustrated book is all about how it looks. And an agent or editor who has a hard time envisioning the look of your illustrated book is likely to pass on it.

If you go the sample-spread route, the trick is to make sure your spreads have the finished look of a published book. To achieve a professional look, go to a professional. Not just a graphic designer, but a book designer, preferably one who designs for major publishers. Thankfully, these people can be found. Their names are often listed on the back flaps of books or on the copyright page, and many freelancers have websites. Once you've found a designer, let her know if you don't have a deal yet, and she may give you a better price.

### COVER DESIGN

Study book design. Find covers that attract the eye. Go to AIGA's website (AIGA is the leading organization for graphic designers) and look up the 50 Books/50 Covers Award for the year. Check out the blog The Book Cover Archive, which displays awesome covers, will lead you to top book designers' websites and discusses all things related to book design. If you can design a great cover or know someone who can, go for it. If you don't know anyone with these skills (and most people don't), you can contact schools that have graduate design programs. For one of his own books, David found a student who created a great cover for \$250.

## Are You Writing a Children's Book?

One of the biggest mistakes authors of children's books make is to submit illustrations with their text. Even if you think your friend or colleague is a master illustrator, hold off making any sort of recommendation about art until after your book is sold. David Allender, the editorial director of Scholastic Book Clubs, says, "Including illustrations doubles your chances of rejection. If it's essential, include directional sketches." If you're wondering why submitting art could possibly hurt your chances, here's David's explanation: "Children's book editors are a bit like musicians. We can read the score and hear the music in our head, and that's what's exciting. Typically, pictures drain the life out of the text. Of course, the exception is when there are illustrations that are wonderful. But you have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than submitting this kind of quality illustration."

Another question children's book authors face is how educational to make their books. Steven Malk, an agent at Writers House who has represented many of today's top children's authors, says, "The children's book industry is anchored by schools and libraries, so ideally a book will have a strong life in the retail market while also having the support of teachers and librarians. However, your book can't be purely educational." In other words, don't forget the entertainment factor!

Speaking of entertainment, Steven adds a piece of good news for the world of children's publishing: "A lot more attention is now given to children's books because so many have recently been turned into movies." And when Hollywood calls, the publishing industry jumps to attention. . . .

If you decide to include a cover, here's the catch: **MAKE IT GREAT OR NOT AT ALL.** If it's not a Grade A cover, it will call you out as a rank amateur. The following books have beautiful, elegant, fun and/or vibrant covers that you might want to check out.

*A Natural History of the Senses*

*The Zuni Café Cookbook*

*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*

*The Worst-Case Scenario*

*Survival Handbook*

*I Married a Communist*

(hardcover edition)

*Everything Is Illuminated*

(hardcover edition)

*Gone Girl* (original, not movie, cover)

*Drive: The Surprising Truth*

*About What Motivates Us*

*Dry: A Memoir*

*The Mind's Eye*

These range from covers that use only color and type (the graphically intense *I Married a Communist* and *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*), to those that elegantly incorporate photography (*A Natural History of the Senses* and *The Zuni Café Cookbook*), to those that evoke a mood (*Gone Girl*). Yet they all scream: Read me!

### The Cherry on Top: Blurbs, Press Kits, Photos and Other Enticing Extras

It's easy to get so caught up in your proposal or manuscript that you forget about the additional materials that can be exceedingly helpful in selling your book. Typically, these include blurbs, DVDs or links to video, press kits, speaking schedules and/or a great photo. But don't stop there. Include any others that you think would get an agent or publisher racing to the phone.

#### BLURBAGE

A blurb is an endorsement from another author or well-known person. An advance blurb can also be used to help sell your proposal. It's slightly shocking how much stock people put in blurbs, but the fact is that a great quote from the right person can push agents and publishers from on-the-fence to in-your-corner. And while it's not essential to have blurbs at this stage of the game, it helps. Just one great blurb can do the trick. If you have a connection to an

## Are You Writing a Cookbook?

Let's start with your title. Unless you own an established restaurant or catering business, or you have a title that conjures up images that make people's mouths water, your title must announce the focus of your cookbook. Some classic examples are *The Cake Bible*, *How to Cook Everything* and *Bistro Cooking*. And unlike other nonfiction proposals, here your table of contents is key. It serves as an outline, rather than just a page locator, so it has to be thoroughly thought out. Instead of just listing soups, salads, vegetables or whatever, you need to be explicit about recipes in the book—not necessarily every single one, but enough to get an agent or editor hungry and interested. An introduction to the book as well as the introduction to an individual chapter should be included in your proposal. If there are sidebars or other bits that will give your book literary flavor, provide samples of these as well. And you'll need at least 10 to 15 recipes with headnotes (the little introductory thoughts found at the beginning of a recipe). Keep in mind that the purpose of a headnote is to let your reader know both what makes this recipe different from others and what makes it something you want to try.

influential person in your field, or if a well-known writer was your professor in your MFA program, or if you can track down the perfect candidate and help him see why it's incumbent upon him to endorse your work, start making your requests now. Many times you'll get no response, but you'd be amazed what people will do for you if you're respectful of their time and ask nicely.

## TRAILERS AND VIDEO LINKS

When we wrote the last edition of this book, book trailers were all the rage because they were new and novel. But publishers quickly learned that the vast majority of trailers did not go viral. Instead, they were time and money vacuums that sat unwatched on YouTube and author websites.

If you are an excellent presenter, and the camera loves you; or if you are a filmmaker or know someone who is (and who is willing to help you for free); or if you do have a unique and fabulous idea that just might go viral, it's still worth considering making a trailer. Although the risk/reward ratio is not in your favor, an easily clickable link that shows what makes you or your book special might be just the thing that separates you from the pack.

There are as many kinds of trailers as there are books. Dramatic live readings, how-to demonstrations, highly artistic creations that have very little to do with your actual book and so much more. A trailer doesn't have to be fancy, but it does have to hook its audience. Author Kelly Corrigan became a star when

Suzanne Rafer, the editor of such all-star cookbooks as *The Cake Mix Doctor*, *How to Grill* and the Silver Palate series, says, "I like it when someone can title a recipe well and can give information in the headnote that draws me in. Grilled steak I've seen a million times, but tell me something *new* about grilled steak."

As for photos of recipes, 99% of the time they are not necessary and may scare off a publisher who prefers line drawings or no illustrations at all. The exception is when your photos are so exquisite, so professional, that they'd leave Jacques Pepin drooling.

Suzanne adds one last piece of advice: "Even if you're the best chef in the world, you have to realize that it takes a lot of writerly invention and imagination to translate what you do in the kitchen to the page. A lot of people are good chefs but not good writers. If you're having trouble getting what you want to say down on paper, be sure to partner up with someone who can reflect your talent and passion." This advice applies to anyone who has a great idea and/or brand but lacks the necessary writing chops.

▶ If you happen to have appeared in a TV segment with a long introduction that doesn't include you, cut the introduction out of the recording. People want to see YOU, not an anchorperson. But be sure to keep enough of the intro to identify the show if it's reputable in any way, shape or form.

a simple video of her reading an essay she wrote on women's friendships was viewed by more than four million people. It helped propel her book *The Middle Place* into bestsellerdom.

But trailers aren't the only kind of video that can showcase your voice and talents. Have you been on TV, and do you have a professional-quality video of yourself? If you've been on the tube a number of times, cut together a sampling of your best appearances. Same goes for professional-quality video of lectures you've given or workshops you've hosted. All you need is a couple of minutes—this is just a tease to show how good you'll be at marketing your book.

If you do decide to create a trailer or highlight reel of media appearances or lectures, upload it onto your favorite video-sharing site (like YouTube or Vimeo) and include it as a hyperlink in your proposal. (Agents and publishers are now used to reading proposals on their computers and clicking directly wherever an author sends them.)

But before you put any time, and certainly any money, into making a video featuring yourself or your book, read the advice of the experts we consulted (see pages 355–359).

### SPEAKING SCHEDULE

If you speak or hold workshops regularly, include a list of select speaking engagements for previous and upcoming years. Leave out very small venues, unless you're making the point that you will speak anywhere and everywhere, big and small. If, on the other hand, you speak in front of particularly large audiences (500 or more), be sure to include those numbers.

### PRESS KIT

Gather together any press coverage that you've received over the years. Your press kit is living proof that you and/or your work have already been recognized. It makes publishers think that someone will want to write about you again. If you can't get copies of the original articles, try to track them down online.

### AUTHOR PHOTO

If you've been told you take a great photo, then take one now. What does a

great photo have to do with a great book? Nada. What does it have to do with a great marketing campaign? A lot. If you remember Sebastian Junger's book *The Perfect Storm*, you might also remember the author photo on the back. The guy looks like a supermodel! The joke in the publishing industry was that his photo launched his book. Okay, he wrote a great book. But the photo didn't hurt.

## The Value of Good Readers

It is an immutable law of the universe that humans simply cannot, under any circumstance, no matter how hard they try, be completely objective about what they've written. That's why, once you finish a draft of your proposal or manuscript, it's important to let it sit and ferment, marinate and settle. Move away from your work for a bit. This will help with your objectivity. In fact, there's a direct correlation between the amount of objectivity you can achieve and the time you spend away from your material. You can test this by going back and reading things you've written over the years—things you thought were deep and witty and spectacular. Yes, there may be lots of great writing there, but there's also a very good chance you'll be shocked by how not deep and witty and spectacular some of it is.

So, during this marinating/objectivity-enhancing time, get other people to evaluate your writing—to tell you what's wrong with it, what's right with it and how to fix it. The more input you have, the more you'll know about how to make your book better. One of the biggest mistakes amateur writers make is sending out their material before it's ready. It's like feeding someone a half-baked cake.

If you subscribe to the theory that Writing Is Rewriting (and if you don't already have a subscription to this theory, buy one now!), you must locate smart, literate, articulate people and then convince them to read your writing after you've finished a draft. Believe us, this is just as hard as it sounds. First of all, where do you find smart, literate, articulate people these days? If you're lucky enough to know any people like this, you know that they mostly have lives that keep them busy. And it takes a lot of time to read a proposal, let alone a fiction manuscript, and make thoughtful, useful comments that will help move your book forward, strengthen plot and characters, and cut away fat.

Friends and colleagues notwithstanding, where can you find people who will have the time and expertise to help you? Who are they? Where are they? And how can you bend them to your will? The first and most obvious group to

penetrate in your search for quality readers is, of course, other writers. Because if they're smart (and that's one of our prerequisites for a quality reader), they will one day need readers, too. So you'll have an I'll-scratch-your-back-you-scratch-mine situation on your hands. But where can you find and connect with other writers? At literary events listed in the Events section of your local newspaper or online hot spot. At cool websites and blogs where writers and people who love them hang out. At readings in bookstores. Writing groups. Creative writing classes at colleges, universities and community centers. Writers' forums on the Internet. Poetry readings and coffee shops. Khaled Hosseini, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Kite Runner*, read parts of his novel to his

writing group and received some excellent advice: "Several members of the group suggested that the beginning of my novel could be better served if I kept the first chapter short (it was initially around 25 pages long)." Heeding their advice, he cut it to one page. "Obviously, not all the suggestions were helpful, but several were. There are always people in a writers' group who are natural-born editors."

It's particularly helpful if your potential reader is someone who fits into the profile of your audience. The more specific your audience, the more knowledgeable your reader should be. So instead of a general writers' chat

room, you might want to find a mystery writers' chat room if you're writing a mystery. But if you're writing a book about knitting, you'll want to track down your local knitting group or the owner of your local knitting shop. You'll want to find and follow the hottest and hardest-hitting knitting bloggers. You'll want to become a member of online communities, both large and small, which cater to knitting in general and to your particular knitting niche.

If you feel like you want to hire a professional reader, read on.

► Stay away from obsequious sycophants! The last thing you want is people telling you your proposal/manuscript is good when it's not. Be sure to let people know you want the you've-got-a-wart truth.

## **Picking Partners: "Help, I Need Somebody!"**

If you've tried to sit down and write your proposal and are questioning your ability to pull it off at the level you would like, you may need to ask

yourself a harsh but necessary question: Are you, when it comes down to it, a professional-caliber writer? If you don't think you have the answer, you may want to ask it of a close friend or colleague—or anyone else you can trust to be honest with you.

Unfortunately, neither you nor anyone else in your immediate circle may have the expertise to know whether you've got what it takes. If you're feeling unsure or you're having trouble getting started, staying the course or being a finisher, you might want to bring in a hired gun in the form of a coauthor, cowriter, ghostwriter, writing coach, outside editor or professional reader. These people can help you at every turn, from picking the right idea to starting it up, from finishing your proposal to writing the best book possible.

If you've got the money, hiring a professional could be dollars well spent. Someone who really knows his stuff—and the industry—can give you a major edge over your competitors. This is especially true if you're a beginner at writing genre fiction such as mystery, romance or true crime. Genre fiction has hard-and-fast rules that you may be completely unaware of but that a professional writer or editor will know inside out. With a little help, your novel could go from one of promise to one that contains the ingredients of bestsellerdom. All work can benefit from a professional eye, but not to worry if you can't afford one. You'll just have to outsmart (and outresearch) your wealthier counterparts.

What distinguishes a coauthor from a cowriter? A writing coach from an outside editor? Here's a cheat sheet to help you get a handle on the nomenclature:

- A *coauthor* brings equal and/or complementary knowledge and expertise to the table. Coauthors may be professional writers, may or may not already have a book or two under their belts and are schooled in the subject at hand. Coauthors generally get equal credit on a book cover—same-size lettering, same line. They typically split all money 50-50, although every deal is different.
- A *cowriter* is usually a previously published writer who's in the mix primarily to write—not to provide information. Cowriters usually get their names on the cover, but often in smaller type and underneath the primary author's name. They generally split all advance dinero up to a percentage of 50-50, but may get a lesser percentage of royalties paid from books sold. Sometimes cowriters get paid a flat fee broken down into two parts: a fee to write a proposal and then a fee for the book itself if it sells to a publisher.

Sometimes cowriters are given a guarantee for a certain amount. And, hold on to your hat, sometimes this guaranteed amount can actually turn out to be more than 50%—even up to 100%—of an advance.

- *Ghostwriters* are typically, but not exclusively, hired for celebrity autobiographies or other works “penned” by famous folk. Ghostwriters are brought in to make readers believe that the person whose name appears on the cover has written what’s inside the book. Great ghostwriters are able to capture other people’s voices with uncanny perfection. Even some mega-bestselling commercial fiction authors use ghostwriters to churn out book after book, without actually having to write them. Nice work if you can get it, being a well-paid author and not having to actually write anything! Naturally, ghostwriters, being ghosts, don’t get their names on the cover, but often you can find them in the acknowledgments. Ghostwriters are typically paid up front to write a proposal and are often guaranteed a certain amount of money to write the book. Sometimes they get a percentage of an author’s royalties. Often not. Sometimes they’re brought in if a deadline is looming huge and the author won’t be able to get the book done on time. Or maybe an author is just stuck. Or maybe an author or publisher wants someone to add some panache, punch and pop to a manuscript. If this is the case, hiring a ghostwriter may be just the ticket.
- A *writing coach* works with a writer over a period of time, often until the book is sold—or until the money runs out. A good coach will know when to give you a pat on the back and when to give you a swift kick in the behind. She’ll hold your hand and midwife your book into the world. She’ll help set up a schedule and make sure you stick to it. She’ll help you with everything from large structural issues to delicate turns of phrase. She’ll help you define and refine what you’re trying to say and make sure you’re saying what you really mean. A good coach will be a combination cheerleader, taskmaster, master editor, plot guru, devil’s advocate, guardian angel and powerhouse motivator. Most writing coaches are paid by the hour, anywhere between \$25 and \$150 an hour, depending on their level of experience and expertise.
- *Outside editors*, a.k.a. *book doctors*, diagnose, treat and help you fix your book. Many outside editors have worked in publishing and know the ins and outs of proposals and manuscripts. For a fee, they will identify the strengths and weaknesses of a manuscript and suggest ways to correct its flaws and enhance its best qualities. Their fee depends on their degree of

expertise, how fast they're expected to get the work done and whether it's a cosmetic nip and tuck or radical open-heart surgery. Hourly rates typically range between \$50 and \$250. There are two kinds of edits that book doctors and outside editors offer: developmental edits and line edits. A developmental edit usually includes a thorough read of your manuscript and a detailed editorial letter that outlines overarching conceptual or structural changes, but no markup of the actual manuscript. A line edit includes all of the above plus a line-by-line markup. Depending on the kind of edit you're interested in, as well as the length and state of your manuscript, the cost could range from \$250 to \$25,000. Again, all fees depend on the editor's level of experience as well as the amount of work involved.

- *Professional readers* write evaluations that assess the commercial potential of a manuscript or proposal. They can give you an objective opinion of how your writing will fare in the marketplace—for a one-shot price of between \$75 and \$1,000. The high end is reserved for professional editors who are hired solely for this kind of evaluation.

## Where to Find Your Perfect Partner

If you know you want professional help and you've got money to throw around, you can hire someone who's not only great but has publishing connections. While this won't guarantee you an agent or a publisher, it certainly can't hurt. But whether you have a little or a lot to spend, you can find the help you need by returning to our favorite principle: Research, Research, Research.

If you're in the market for a writing coach or outside editor, the first place to look is in the acknowledgment sections of published books. What we like about this method is that the published book is proof of the person's expertise. If you venture onto the web, switch your shyster detector on and check to make sure the person really has done what he says. Check references and, again, check the acknowledgments in any book an editor claims to have worked on.

Writers' conferences, book festivals and fairs are also great places to look for writing coaches or outside editors. So are the continuing education departments of the best universities in your neck of the woods. Many professional writers teach classes in these departments, and many of them work as writing coaches or outside editors on the side.

If you're in the market for a professional reader who won't break the bank, we think your local bookstore or library is a lovely place to look for one. Is there someone who's been there a long time? Someone you rely on for

recommendations? Who thoroughly knows the category your book falls into? If so, this person will more than likely make an excellent reader.

If you're looking for a coauthor, cowriter or ghostwriter, start reading magazines and newspaper articles, websites, literary journals and books with coauthors or cowriters. Check out organizations like the American Society of Journalists and Authors that will help you find a writer for whatever subject you're writing about. Many writers have websites. The more you know about them, the better it will go when you make your approach. Use your bio, audience, competition and marketing info to woo said writer by letter, email or phone call. Even with shallow pockets, if you have a great idea and you describe it well, you'll have a good shot at hooking a professional writer. Why? Because many writers spend their days 1) looking for work, and 2) trying to dream up great projects. Some will forgo up-front money for a bigger share of the overall cabbage if they think something has a good shot at selling to a publisher. And if you team up with an experienced writer, you automatically catapult yourself into the ring of serious publishing contenders.

If you're considering seeking an agent before you hire a cowriter, the advantage will be that the agent will likely be able to introduce you to a writer. But be forewarned, you better have a big profile, a substantial press kit and a perfect pitch if you expect a callback from an agent without a fleshed-out proposal.

### Hiring Excellent Writers and Editors

You have got to hire top-notch professionals to get top-notch assistance. So, how do you know if you're getting high-end help or low-down bottom-feeders? Naturally, you'll want to ask the typical informational questions: May I have a list of references? How much do you charge? How do you work? Also ascertain the person's previous publishing experience: Have you worked with a major publisher? If so, which one(s)? Doing what, and for how long? Do you have an agent? Do you know any agents, or anybody who knows any agents? What books and/or articles have you written? Have you written and/or sold a book proposal? Do you have publishing contacts to share?

Ask for samples of the person's work. Only a true schmo would hire a writer whose writing he has not read.

After you've asked questions, let the writer/editor/writing coach prove to you that he or she is the right person for the job. The best of these people know what sells. They know the language of books. They should be able to give you a sense of why they can or can't help you. And if they can help you, they should be able to tell you exactly how this will happen and for how much. If you're going

after a coauthor/writer and you don't have money to pay someone up front, let the person know from the get-go that you're willing to go 50-50 on everything in exchange for no up-front fees.

## **Prepare Your Package for Liftoff**

**N**ow that your proposal or novel is as close to perfect as it's going to get, it's time to send it out into the world. If your book has a shot at a mid-to large-size publisher of trade books (books for a popular audience), you'll be sending it to literary agents. If it's more than likely to end up at a small, regional or university press, then you'll be sending it directly to editors. If you decide you and your publisher are going to be one and the same, you'll need to investigate which kind of self-publishing best suits you and your book.