

How to write a book proposal?

A guide for academic and non-narrative non-fiction writers

Part 1 of the non-fiction writing guides by

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Preparing to write the proposal

Before you write a book proposal, there are a few steps to complete:

1. Identify your target publisher. Compile a list of similar recently published books (you will find this list useful as a part of the proposal) and note the publishers and presses with the highest number of books.
2. Evaluate the target publisher. For instance, consider these questions:
 - Do the publisher's books seem well designed, appealing to the readers and with attractive covers?
 - Is it easy to find information online about the publisher's books, such as synopses, endorsements, and tables of contents?
 - Do the publisher's books have a reasonable price point?
 - Does the press seem to actively promote its books and authors?
 - Would it be fulfilling for you to be associated with this publisher if they were to publish your book?
 - Does the publisher show commitment to publishing and promoting authors from historically underrepresented groups?
 - Does the publisher have a public code of conduct or mission statement on their website that indicates its commitment to treating authors with respect?

Balancing the answers to these questions can help you narrow down the most fitting publisher based on what is most important for you as an author. If you are an academic writer, you could also ask your colleagues about the reputable press in your field.



3. Gather submissions contact details of potential acquisitions editors, series names and series editors, and reasons why your book would be a good fit.

Proposal components

Publishing houses and presses usually provide book proposal templates, which may vary, but usually consist of these sections:

- comparable or competitive title analysis,
- target audience,
- author bio,
- target audience,
- book overview,
- blurb,
- chapter outline and/or table of contents,
- sample chapter(s).

Comparable or competitive title analysis

List a few books that would sit naturally next to yours on the bookshop's shelf, including title, author and year. Furthermore, include a brief evaluation of the competing books consisting of a broad description and how your work would complement or offer an alternative argument or approach.



Comparable or competitive title analysis table

Title	
Author	
Year	
Publisher	
A broad description of the (other) book's topic and approach	
How your book complements/counter-argues with the (other) book?	

It is a mistake to assume that your book has no competition or exclude niche publications. The acquisitions editors, who are used to reading proposals representing specific areas of knowledge, probably have seen the same 'big names' that authors commonly use many times. Including publications that did not reach the 'top ten' or are otherwise lesser known will demonstrate your familiarity with the field's publishing landscape.

It could help to begin this section with a paragraph introducing the publishing landscape and current trends, what is popular, over-represented and, on the other hand, what the gaps are.



Target audience

This section aims to demonstrate your critical insight into the intended readership, which should not be an afterthought. Avoid stating that your book is ‘for everyone,’ because if it is for everyone, then it is really for no one. Instead, focus on the most likely or primary readership you envision would buy your book.

If your writing (articles, blog or earlier books) has already received some exposure, this a good place to list:

- conferences where you presented your research,
- publications and media outlets that quoted you or featured your work,
- publications you contributed to or edited.

Author bio

This section shows the credibility/authority you have as a writer to discuss the topic. This is not a place to tell your story or include details not relevant to your writing expertise. You could attach a CV with the book proposal, which is a common requirement with academic presses, but remember to make it concise and relevant. Your ‘author bio’ could include these:

- PhD institution,
- current and relevant previous positions,
- previous books, articles, or blogs published or contributed to,
- relevant awards won,
- relevant media appearances or recognition of your research.



Book overview

This part of the book proposal is a high-level pitch for your book. Start with the title; it could be a working title. Describe the situation, environment or problem currently and urgently experienced by society/culture (and/or your ideal reader), then introduce your book as the solution or compelling exploration that people want or need on the topic. Show how your book explores new ideas or new research or introduces arguments that feel surprising or make us question what we think we know.

To write a good book overview, you can also consider these questions:

- What would it be if you could leave your reader with one takeaway from your research?
- What was one thing you learned during research that most changed your thinking about your subject matter?
- If your book has multiple arguments, which is the main one, consider which argument you think drives your book?
- Why do your arguments and findings matter? And to whom?
- How does your argument contribute to existing knowledge?

Also, include these elements:

- status – at what stage of the writing/how close to completion is your manuscript (e.g. first draft, only sample chapter, copyedited manuscript),
- a broad description of your evidence and methods,
- general structure and arc of the book.



Blurb

When I purchase a book, the blurb and the first few pages are what matter to me. The blurb or the one-line description needs to be attention-catching and make your reader want to know more about the book. It usually captures the book's approach to its topic or the main claim your book makes.

Chapter outline and/or table of contents

The chapter overview demonstrates how the book will develop and how each chapter delivers on the promise made in the proposal. This is important because the publishers commonly accept them based on the proposal rather than a manuscript. The trick to making this section convincing is not going into too much detail. Finally, this is an opportunity to show your idea is cohesive and creates a whole. You could map out each chapter by following this structure:



Chapter outline and/or table of contents

Working title	
Title	
Argument	
Publisher	
Methods of analysis	
How does the chapter support the book's principal argument and relates to other chapters?	

Sample chapter

You should attach a sample chapter to support the promise of good writing and a novel, well-research argument that you have now made in the proposal. It should leave the commissioning editor hungry to read more; ideally, the sample chapter will be the most exciting of your chapters.



How to structure a book ?

A guide for academic and non-narrative
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Book outline

Start structuring your non-fiction book with creating a high-level map of the chapters, including their titles, summaries and outlines. It is likely they will change, but it is a good start. At least, at this stage, it will function as a compass, a beacon anchoring the writing process. If you have previously written a book proposal, you could use the book overview enclosed there. If not, recreate the following steps for every chapter:

- create a title,
- write a one-sentence summary,
- list all sub-headings and sub-sections to be included in the chapter.

Introduction

I always read introductions. When I look for materials relevant to specific themes, topics or questions, sometimes it may even be the only part of the book that I read. That is to say, I judge a book based on its introduction. A well-written introduction is like the first date — it is often enough to determine if the two parties (in this case, a reader and a book) are a match. And although I find them endlessly captivating, introductions follow a simple recipe. By the rule of thumb, they will include the following:

- book hook,
- main thesis and its significance,
- background,
- methods and methodology,
- chapters outline.



Book hook

A book hook is a statement or question designed to generate immediate curiosity and captivate the reader's attention enough for them to want to know more immediately. Here are some ideas on how to write an attention-grabbing non-fiction hook:

- use language accessible to a wide audience,
- showcase your unique voice, language and style,
- introduce the most compelling piece of your argument or thesis,
- make the reader feel as if you are addressing them directly and individually, for instance, by sharing an anecdote,
- offer a promise of more interesting insight available to the audience if they continue reading.

Main thesis and significance

This part is the great reveal — it gives away the fundamental idea behind your book and lays out why it matters. It should posit how the book fits within the existing research landscape and, more importantly, what new knowledge or methods it contributes to the topic.

Methods and methodology

You have told your reader the 'what,' now, it is time to detail the 'how.' Here, try to answer such questions: how did you arrive at your findings? How (using what methods) did you construct your argument?

Chapters outline

The chapters outline should read like a short story, explaining how the consecutive chapters relate and build on each other or push back and offer an alternative. In essence, to be successful, this section must summarise the individual puzzle pieces and how they fit together.



Chapters

A generic chapter structure of a monograph or any non-fiction book includes the following elements:

- hook,
- main body,
- summary,
- smooth segue to the next chapter.

Building a chapter hook is not much different from a book hook, as described above, so let us look start with the informative paragraphs of the main body.

Main body

This section should offer well-structured, solid research that does not read like an encyclopaedic entry. Instead, you want to structure your thesis as if telling a story, leaving the reader with answers to the following questions:

- Why did they choose to read your book?
- What do they need to know?
- Did the contents of the chapter address their questions and doubts?

Summary

The chapter summary should comprise the key takeaways that constitute the crux of your argument.



Segue

The transition to the following chapter offers room to connect the chapter to the next and answer the 'so what' question. This is the moment to briefly contextualise the significance of the findings of this chapter within the sequence of the chapters and the entity of the book.

Conclusion

The final element of your non-fiction book structure, the conclusion, offers no new material and reuses what you have already presented to the reader, including:

- hook,
- thesis,
- chapters summary,
- implications and recommendations.

Still, this is your chance to reinforce the reader's impression of your work, emphasise the connections running through the chapters and restate the core message. It should end with the research implications, or in other words, a conclusion inferred from your findings. Research implications contextualise the importance of your findings within the practice, theory or policy. You can also provide the research recommendations pointing to further studies in other disciplines or outside the specs of your research but still building on your findings. Such recommendations may increase the relevance of your book in the scientific arena.



How to carry out a developmental edit of a book?

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Developmental editing

What is developmental editing?

Conventionally, we explain developmental editing as diagnosing the big-picture issues in the manuscript that usually takes place before copy-editing. I like Scott Norton's slightly longer definition on pages of *Developmental Editing*. Norton denotes developmental editing as an intervention that moves content from one chapter to another, rearranges the lion's share of the chapter's contents within itself but falls short of writing new material. It is a tough definition to apply, writes Norton, because developmental editing almost always involves some writing, usually of transitional sentences at the beginnings and ends of passages.

What is the purpose of developmental editing?

As all editing interventions do, non-fiction developmental editing aims to help an author clarify their message and deliver it to the intended audience effectively. A vital element of this endeavour is determining what the text tries to achieve and why the reader should care. For instance, after reading every sentence, I like to ask, "so what?" to weed out fluff and ensure each sentence that remains is relevant.

What does developmental editing entail?

Developmental edit is to clarify the central arguments of the book and identify any conflicting arguments or major issues. There are five components to consider here:

- content,
- structure,
- clarity,
- tone,
- flow.



Content

Here are some questions you can pose when working on the content as a part of the non-fiction developmental edit. Before you have a look at them, read through the entire text and, using a different indicator, make a list outlining every time the subject changes and the page number. You can create codes for each argument or subject (e.g. STAT for statistics, PSY for psychology, HOR for hormones) and use them as indicators. This list will be helpful to determine if there are any content issues in the areas of scope, cohesiveness and others.



Identifying main argument	Which subject is covered most?
Identifying themes	Can any subjects be grouped together?
Argument cohesiveness	Are any subjects unrelated to the majority of the content? Is the order of the arguments/subjects logical? Is it clear how one connects to the next?
Scope of the argument	Does anything divert from the central argument? Is any information/argument repeated? Is there any content (not included in the manuscript) that would complement the thesis? Are there too many subjects?
Supporting of the argument	Does the table of contents support the main argument? Have you provided enough evidence to support the main argument and each of the chapter's arguments? Are there any claims that need to be backed up?
Purpose of the text	Does the manuscript meet its objectives?
Intended audience	Could any of the content confuse the reader? Have you assumed too much or too little background knowledge?



Structure

Here, you need to consider if the top-down structure is cohesive and smoothly transitioned between chapters, paragraphs and subsections. Go back to your list of subjects/arguments codes and check in the manuscript if the transitions between each of these elements are present and adequate. For instance, you could use TR to code them on the list.

Here is an example of a list tallying up transitions and subjects in the manuscript. Even without counting the pages, you can clearly distinguish strings of pages that indicate dominating subjects and the presence of transitions:

Subject	Manuscript pages
TR	27-29, 59-82, 100-101, 102-4, 236-38
STAT	44-52, 53-58, 105-44, 154-70
PSY	1-2, 34-35, 83-96, 145-53, 171-89, 197, 205-28, 239-42
HOR	7-11, 30-33, 36-43, 97-99, 190-96, 198-204, 229-35

Table adapted from Scott Norton, *Developmental Editing. A Handbook for Freelancers, Authors, and Publishers* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 45.



Clarity

Going back to the fundamentals of non-fiction developmental editing, consider the intended audience and purpose of the manuscript. Bearing these two in mind, evaluate your manuscript according to the following questions.

- Is the language too simplistic or is there too much jargon?
 - Is enough information provided for the intended audience? Or in
- other words, what assumptions about the reader's background knowledge did you make?
- Are there repetitions? Did you notice describe the same thing in different wording?
- Do figures or tables support the argument? Could they present the information more clearly?

Tone

Developmental editing checks if the tone accurately conveys the author's attitude and evokes desired feelings in the audience. To investigate the tone, consider if it is:

- consistent throughout the manuscript?
- too conversational or formal?
- suitable for the discussed subject?
- appropriate for the intended reader?



Flow

In non-fiction developmental editing, logical structure, smooth transitions and development of the argument throughout the manuscript need to be considered when scrutinising the flow of the text. In practice, to carry out the flow analysis, you could produce an outline of each chapter and see if they comprise a cohesive whole. Often (and especially in non-narrative non-fiction), texts follow a chronological order, but if that does not work for you, you could try:

- moving from granular details to the macro outlook of each chapter,
- moving from the known information to that introduced by your text,
- grouping chapters by theme.

Finally, whichever approach you adopt, review whether the pieces fall together to narrate your argument.



How to self-edit a book?

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List of contents

Confirm that:

- spelling and capitalisation of chapter titles, headings and subheadings are consistent with those in the main text
- page numbers align with the main text
- size and position of page numbers is correct and consistent

List of figures, tables and maps

Confirm that:

- spelling and capitalisation of all items are consistent with those in the main text
- page numbers align with the main text

Main text

Pagination

Confirm that:

- all text pages are numbered consecutively in the main text
- size and position of page numbers are correct and consistent
- the first page of the first chapter starts on a recto (right-hand page)
- all odd page numbers are on rectos



Chapter titles, headings and subheadings

Confirm that:

- font, spacing, colour, size and position on the page for each heading level are consistent
- capitalisation is correct and consistent for each heading level

Lists

Confirm that:

- spacing above and below lists is consistent
- line spacing of list items is consistent
- bullet style is consistent
- end-of-line punctuation is consistent within the list

Footnotes and cross references

Confirm that:

- all notes are cued and numbered consecutively by chapter or throughout the book
- note numbers match the in-text note markers
- all cross-references are complete
- in-text citations are presented in line with the preferred style



Long citations (extracts)

Confirm that:

- punctuation is in line with the source text
- extracts are styled consistently (size, font, colour, position)
- all acknowledgements/permissions are included

Figures, tables and maps

Confirm that:

- quality is acceptable
- numbering is correct and consistent
- font, size, colour and spacing are consistent
- captions align with the lists of figures, tables or maps in the list of contents
- spelling, punctuation and grammar of figure labels and table column headings are correct
- alignment of columns in tables is correct and consistent
- items provide a credit/source acknowledgement

