

The “Front-End” Method — or, How to Write the “Perfect” Book Proposal

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Of the manuscripts and proposals that come across my desk, I think it would be generous to say that one in ten is complete and well-prepared. I am not being tough, just honest.

And it makes me ask the question — WHY? There are plenty of articles and books out there that tell the basic components of a book proposal. Briefly stated, they are:

1. COVER LETTER
2. PREMISE STATEMENT
3. AUDIENCE/MARKET
4. COMPETITIVE TITLES
5. AUTHOR INFORMATION
6. CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SYNOPSIS
7. ONE OR TWO SAMPLE CHAPTERS

This list may vary a bit, but that is the basic outline. And yet regularly we get proposals, even from experienced authors, that are missing pieces — otherwise they are well-done, but because they lack crucial information, we are hampered in making a decision.

So, WHY? Why don’t authors — even experienced authors — provide a complete proposal?

Part of it is surely that authors do not realize how important the proposal is. The author is essentially presenting a sales pitch to the editor. It has to be complete, because the editor has to use it to sell the book to his boss, who sells it to the editorial committee, who will make the final decision. By writing a complete proposal, you give an editor the ammunition he needs to pitch your book to his company.

But there’s another, bigger reason why authors don’t provide complete proposals — because they’re going about it all backwards. First they write the book, then they prepare the proposal. It’s a process that’s doomed to failure.

I want to tell you about what I call the front-end method of writing a proposal. It’s the way I have written proposals for all my books. Simply put, it’s the idea of doing the proposal at the front end of the book project — BEFORE the book is written, sometimes even while it’s in the idea stage. There are two reasons to do this:

1. ENERGY LEVEL — Once in a while, we will get a manuscript from someone with nothing but a cover letter that says something like, “Here’s my book — either publish it or send it back; I’m sick of looking at it!” I can appreciate the feeling. The author has been through a grueling process — writing a book is equivalent to giving birth, except that the labor pains last all nine months! Writing a book is exhausting. Then you have to turn around and sell it to an editor?! Why torture yourself? Write the proposal early in the process, when the idea is fresh and your creativity is really hopping.

Are you afraid you might use up all your energy on the proposal and have nothing left for the book? Not at all! This leads right into the second reason for doing the proposal first:

2. IT STREAMLINES THE WRITING PROCESS.

The discipline of gathering the information and putting together the skeleton of your book on paper serves to focus your ideas, helps you identify places that need to be researched further, and smooths out any potential snags in the project. Your proposal becomes a “to-do” list, much like your outline does. It helps everything to fall into manageable pieces, and keeps your writing on track.

Ah, but there’s the rub! Putting together the proposal is harder to do than writing the book — or so it may seem. But you have to look at it this way: your work on the proposal is clearing the path to write the book. It’s not a waste of time. With that in mind, you can attack the job of the book proposal with a lot more optimism.

Writing the “Perfect” Book Proposal

The seven items listed above make up a complete book proposal. Since seven is the biblical number for perfection, it would appear that this is a sure-fire recipe for a “perfect” proposal! That may be overstating the case, but if you do a good job with these seven items, you should have all the ammunition needed to pitch your book to a publisher.

Here is a more complete description of the seven items, in the order that you might include them in your proposal:

1. **COVER LETTER:** This is a brief (one page) business letter with a few very abbreviated highlights from the rest of the proposal — so it should be the last thing you write. Find the three most persuasive points in your proposal and mention them in the letter. Better yet, just hint at them. If you can spark some curiosity with your cover letter, it’s done its job.

2. **PREMISE STATEMENT:** What is the book about? Can you answer that in one or two short paragraphs — or better yet, one or two sentences? The premise should answer the questions of what your topic is, what the elements of your topic are, and why the topic is of interest to readers. Think about what problem is addressed by your book, and what solution you have identified.

3. **AUDIENCE/MARKET:** You have to really step outside your skin to do this. This will help you in the long run, however, because it’s easier to write to an identified audience than some vague faceless crowd out there. Sometimes research and statistical information help, but I’ve seen many an author lose credibility by quoting some generalized statistic and implying that everyone in that statistical group would buy the book: “This book is for married people. Did you know there are X-million married people in the United States?”

4. **COMPETITIVE TITLES:** Take a trip to the Christian bookstore and browse the racks. Find three or four current books that are in some way similar to yours and explain why yours is different. It is possible (but very doubtful) that you will find one or more major books that cover exactly the same subject as yours, with exactly the same slant. Time to rethink your idea — back to brainstorming!

Now that we have the Internet, there are new possibilities. I now frequently receive a report like this in a proposal: “Amazon.com lists 347 books on this subject. 147 are by Christian publishers. I think mine is different because . . .” This is not seeing the forest for the trees!

Limit your review to three or four titles. In the proposal for my last book, I chose some titles that were deliberately different than mine, in order that I might use them to re-emphasize the salient features of my book. (Salient: standing out from the rest, conspicuous or prominent. I had to look it up.)

5. AUTHOR INFORMATION: Most authors get stuck on this. But dig deep into your life for credentials. What is your ministry in your local fellowship? Do you belong to any organizations? What makes you different from the next person in the pew? One of our authors did not have major credentials for a book on the spiritual training of children — except that she had raised three children and 25 foster children!

Also dig deep for your contacts and opportunities to market the book. Do you have a web site? Do you speak to any groups during the year? Are you *available* to speak? Do you know anyone of influence who might help you promote the book? Brainstorm this with close friends who know you well.

6. CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SYNOPSIS: Pull out the outline you’ve created and produce a short paragraph summarizing each chapter. Short means two or three sentences — almost like a premise statement for each chapter. Be clear, but also keep them guessing. Include just enough information to make them curious — so they want to read the book!

7. ONE OR TWO SAMPLE CHAPTERS: I know — earlier in this article I advised you to prepare the proposal *before* you write the first draft. So how can you have a couple of completed chapters to include in the proposal? Some authors work on the proposal and first draft simultaneously, so you may already have a couple of chapters done, anyway. But if you don’t, no big deal. Just start writing your first draft, and show the rest of the proposal to several people to get their feedback.

This is a major reason to prepare your proposal before writing the book — you want to answer questions and address objections now instead of later. (It’s easier to rewrite the proposal to incorporate some issue you failed to address than to rewrite the finished manuscript!)

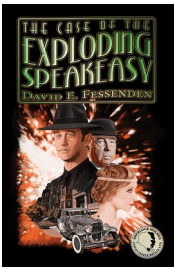
Show it to a couple of people that would fit the description of your audience (and if you can’t find two people who fit the description, you need to rewrite the “Audience” section!).

Show it to a couple of people who might be considered “experts” in the field you are writing about. I don’t necessarily mean PhDs. A proposal for a book on evangelism might be shown to someone you know is a real “soulwinner,” for instance — someone who probably could have written the book.

Show it to some other writers and editors — a writer’s conference is an ideal place to do that.

Ask for and expect honest criticism and suggestions for additional material. Then weigh the suggestions carefully, considering the source. For example, if a college professor tells you it’s too “popular” or not academic enough, remember that this poor soul spends hours pouring over research papers and dissertations! If a factory worker tries to give you tips on grammar, smile and nod politely. But if an editor questions your grammar, you probably want to listen!

Books by David E. Fessenden



The Case of the Exploding Speakeasy

Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolinas, 2013 ISBN: 978-1938499852

Sherlock Holmes' smarter brother, Mycroft, joins Thomas Watson, Dr. Watson's son, in 1920s Philadelphia to investigate the mysterious explosion at a speakeasy, which killed the owner and his card-playing buddies. *A Holmes-Watson detective team—in Jazz-Age Philly!*



Writing the Christian Nonfiction Book: Concept to Contract

Sonfire Media, 2011 ISBN: 978-0982577332

“There are three rules for writing a book,” a famous author once said. “Unfortunately, no one knows what they are!”

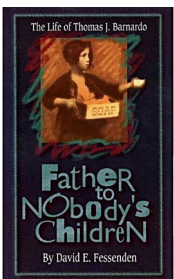
It's true — to some extent, the process of writing a book is shrouded in mystery, and is probably the main reason why so many potential authors are simply treading water. *Writing the Christian Nonfiction Book: Concept to Contract* helps take the confusion out of the process. Dave merges practical advice with spiritual counsel, so that his approach emphasizes the inspirational impact of the author's material.



A Christian Writer's Guide to the Book Proposal

Sonfire Media, 2014 ASIN: B00K1FISXA

Drawing on the rich heritage of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Scripture study, this book takes a specifically Christian approach to preparing a book proposal for the CBA market. Emphasizes *six specific reasons* why you need to write a book proposal, even if you have a contract already, even if you are self-publishing. First in a series of e-books for Christian writers.



Father to Nobody's Children: The Life of Thomas J. Barnardo

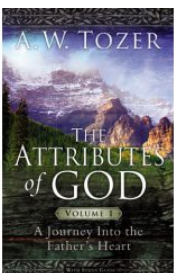
CLC Publications, 1995 ISBN: 0875086624

“Where did you sleep last night?”

“In a hay wagon, down at the market. Please, sir, let me stay by the fire all night—I won't do no harm.”

A horrible thought sprang to Thomas Barnardo's mind: Is it possible there are other children in the city of London like this one — cold, hungry, homeless? What could he, a young medical student, do to help them?

This encounter became the springboard to a lifelong ministry in the East End of London, rescuing thousands of the needy for Christ. Though he lived a hundred years ago, Dr. Thomas Barnardo is a name still warmly remembered throughout England — and his life is an inspiration for Christians today.

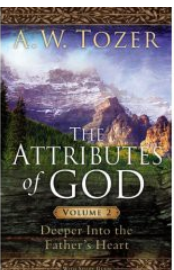


The Attributes of God, Volume 1

(Edited from transcripts of sermons by A.W. Tozer; includes a study guide by David Fessenden)

Christian Publications, 2003 ISBN: 0875099572

In this journey into the Father's heart, Tozer discusses God's attributes in the light of the believer's personal relationship with God. Covers God's attributes of infinitude, immensity, goodness, justice, mercy, grace, omnipresence, immanence, holiness, and perfection.



The Attributes of God, Volume 2

(Edited from transcripts of sermons by A.W. Tozer; includes a study guide by David Fessenden)

Christian Publications, 2003 ISBN: 0875099882

In this journey deeper into the Father's heart, Tozer discusses God's attributes in the light of the believer's personal relationship with God. Covers God's attributes of self-existence, transcendence, eternity, omnipotence, immutability, omniscience, wisdom, sovereignty, faithfulness, and love.