

# An Ideal Book Proposal

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I've always considered the ideal book proposal to consist of four elements:

1. A description of the book. You can consider this a draft preface, except that you should avoid the tiresome practice of taking the reader through a chapter-by-chapter description. Instead you should focus on the central question you're asking, why it's an important question that previous authors either haven't understood properly or haven't addressed at all, what your approach is and where it leads you. An editorial guru of mine says you should write in your preface what you want to read about your book in the New York Times Book Review. Christopher Lasch once wrote that the purpose of a preface is not to summarize what you'll say later but to tell readers where you stand. This should be about 1,000 to 2,000 words.
2. An extended outline, with the chapter titles listed and one to two paragraphs of description per chapter. Don't merely list the subheadings—this tells your editor nothing—but focus on how each chapter will function within the logic of the whole book. E.g. “The previous three chapters showed how the Reagan and Bush foreign policy teams negotiated the end of the Cold War and helped manage the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. Here I will describe the Clinton Administration's erratic and inattentive management of relations with the newly emerged Russian state.” If your description was equivalent to an architectural elevation (“Look at the beautiful building I'm proposing to put up”), the outline is the floor plan: it tells how the parts will be organized into a coherent whole.
3. About the author. This should be a page or so (two at most) describing not only your academic qualifications but also why you're the ideal person to write the book you're proposing. E.g. “I have published several papers on such subjects as patterns of neighborhood restoration, income flows between U.S. cities, and the relation of gay and lesbian populations to high-tech economic development. But I have never brought my ideas together, as I propose to do here, into a coherent theory of how what I call the ‘creative class’ affects urban economic growth generally.”
4. “Comp” books. “Comp” stands for both competing and comparable. It goes without saying that no one's written your exact book—otherwise you presumably wouldn't feel the need to write it. But it's worthwhile discussing some books that are on the same subject as yours to show how they differ—because you have access to information the other authors didn't have, because you're applying some ideas from a different discipline that illuminates the subject in new ways, or because you have a new way of looking at the subject that will overturn much existing thinking. Beyond that, though, you should also discuss comparable books—books that are not directly competitive but whose readers you wish to reach. “This book will appeal to readers of...”—and say why.