



Week 1 Audio Transcript

Sally Collins Pitching To Publishers

What Is A Proposal

If there's one thing most publishers and literary agents really hate to see, it's a manuscript. You're probably surprised by that. Most new authors are. The fact is that agents – and publishers – return most manuscripts to the author without ever having read them. They just don't have the time or staff to wade through the enormous number of manuscripts they receive from hopeful authors. For a big publishing house, it can number in the thousands each year.

WHAT AGENTS AND PUBLISHERS REALLY WANT IS A BOOK PROPOSAL.

In the US, your initial submission usually consists of just a letter. In Australia, it's usually a letter or a proposal document covering the key points about the book, plus some sample chapters. (Most often the sample chapters are the first few chapters from the book.)

The proposal is designed to hook a publisher or agent on your book so that they really want to read it. It's a bit like the way the blurb on the back of a book entices the reader to buy it.

In the world of publishing, the proposal is key. With a great proposal, a successful author can land an agent who will go in to bat for them when it comes to signing contracts, and win over a major trade publishing house who can bring their expertise to

bear in the editorial, marketing, production, publicity, sales and distribution of that book. All of it starts with the initial proposal. That's the way to get your foot in the door.

There are some exceptions to the rule that “publishers don't want to see manuscripts”. Michael Heyward, the publisher at Text Publishing, says he doesn't even read covering letters – he doesn't want to know what an author says about their work, he just wants to get straight into the manuscript to see what the voice is like. He'll know within a few pages whether he likes what he sees. That probably applies more to fiction than to non-fiction, where there are other factors at play, like the author's credentials – we'll talk more about that later.

By and large, though, your proposal tells an agent or publisher the what, who, when, where, why of your book. There are all sorts of variations on a theme here, depending on what your book is, in particular whether it's fiction or non-fiction, but here's the core:

- Firstly, **What** – this is the “pitch”, one or two sentences that sum up your story or concept. It isn't summarising the story, it's capturing the essence of your book.
- **Who** – this is about you, and why you are the best author for this book – and why you would be a great author for this agent or publisher.
- **When** – this says why now is the perfect time for your book to reach its readers. You might also consider if there are any key dates relating to your story, for example if there's an important event coming up in a year or two that will focus attention on this subject. It's important to remember that this is not about you telling the publisher which month to publish your book, just an opportunity to point out reasons why your book is timely.
- **Where** – this might be about where the story is set, or whether there are international points of interest about your book, or where the author lives – anything about location that is special to this book.
- **Why** – they should publish it (or for an agent, why they should acquire it), why this book is a perfect fit for them.

For non-fiction, the bigger picture is particularly important – the author's background and credentials, any competing titles, particular marketing opportunities.

With fiction the most important thing is the writing itself, so your sample chapters must really shine to capture an agent or publisher's attention. They won't read very much in the first instance – maybe just a few pages will be enough to tell them whether you can write and what your voice is like, what the essence of the story is.

Publishers and agents all have different rules and preferences for how they like a proposal to be structured – that's because it's a subjective thing and everyone works differently. Some people like all the what/who/why to be embedded in a single letter. Others prefer a covering letter plus a separate proposal: a document that gives an overview of your concept outlining the chapters, author details, potential market, etc.

Given all these variations, the best rule of thumb is to decide where you are going to send your proposal and look at that publisher or agent's guidelines. You need to do it individually; what I mean is that you might be able to send a batch of a dozen identical submissions out to various publishers, but there will be some that you need to tailor specifically to fit their guidelines.

Later in this course we'll talk in more detail about choosing your market – that is, picking the publishers and agents that you want to submit to.

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