



## AIA Best Practices: Mastering the book proposal process

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### Summary

Architects gain an abundance of knowledge over the course of their careers. Some are inclined to share that knowledge with others through the written word but have no idea of how to start. Writing and publishing a book begins with understanding the publishing process and learning the fundamentals of book proposal development.

### Sharing the book within you

Many architects have a great deal of knowledge to share with others. The volume of information that an architect acquires over the course of time lends itself to the assumption that one's own knowledge is common knowledge. A review of the breadth and quality of books written by architects, however, suggests that the seeds of wonderful and useful books lay dormant within many architects.

### Understanding the process

Writing a book and getting it published, however, are generally beyond an architect's expertise. As with any other project, understanding the process is often the key to success. Unless one undertakes the tasks and assumes the financial risk of self-publishing, an aspiring author must persuade a commercial publisher that a book idea is a viable publishing venture. The author must clearly articulate the proposed topic for the book, convince the publisher that he or she has the expertise to address it, and substantiate that a market exists for it.

Publishers are best approached in a two-step process:

- Send an initial query letter (preferably to several publishers) to test the waters for a book idea.
- Upon receipt of a positive response to a query letter, submit a formal book proposal package.

This approach has several benefits. Editors or acquisition editors are more likely to read a concise unsolicited query letter than to delve into a detailed unsolicited proposal.

The query letter also requires a much smaller investment of time, effort, and expense on the author's part. It allows the author to make multiple queries at a nominal cost, which helps narrow the field of prospective publishers. The greatest benefit, however, is that a detailed book proposal is more likely to receive serious consideration if submitted in response to a publisher's invitation.

## Author beware

There is another important reason to refrain from submitting unsolicited book proposals simultaneously to more than one publisher: Many publishers will accept only exclusive submissions.

If your query letter generates more than one invitation to submit a book proposal, contact each publisher to determine whether simultaneous submissions to multiple publishers are acceptable. If not, you must decide which publisher you would most prefer. If your first choice rejects your proposal, you can then contact one of the others.

**Helpful Tip:** Your query letter and book proposal give publishers an opportunity to judge your writing ability. Be sure to give those documents the same degree of care and attention that you will devote to the book itself.

## Essential elements of a query letter

In *How to Write a Book Proposal*, Michael Larsen writes, “A query letter should be like a skirt: long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to keep it interesting.” In one page (two at the most), the query letter should contain the following:

- An introduction to the book (its title, type, length, and current status of completion)
- A summary of the book (its subject, basic theme, proposed perspective or slant, and so forth)
- The author’s credentials, experience, and expertise to write about the subject

When preparing and sending a query letter, pay particular attention to the following:

- Address the letter to a particular individual, if at all possible.
- Individualize the content and make the prose interesting and engaging.
- Be persuasive, especially with respect to your qualifications and experience.
- Include contact information on how best to reach you.
- Close on an optimistic note, with a sentence such as, “I’m looking forward to hearing from you.”

**Helpful Tip:** It’s a good idea to prepare a draft of the book proposal before preparing and submitting a query letter. The exercise and discipline of writing the proposal will provide a more solid foundation for crafting a concise, effective query letter.

## Essential elements of a book proposal

There is no definitive standard for the content, organization, and format of a book proposal. Most publishers, however, look for certain kinds of information to evaluate the viability of a prospective work. Generally, a book proposal will be eight to 10 pages long, though some may be as long as 30 pages, depending on the nature of the material and the detail needed to describe it properly. The essential elements are listed below, accompanied by a brief explanation of each:

**Title.** Identify a working title for the book. Keep in mind that the publisher may suggest a different title at any time, even after the final manuscript is complete, to best capture and promote the essence of the final work.

**Author profile.** Describe your credentials for writing on the subject. Attach a current curriculum vitae or resume listing your affiliations, prior publications, special qualifications, awards, and teaching experience, if appropriate. Include your mailing address, telephone numbers, office hours, fax number, and email address.

**Synopsis of the book.** Describe the essence of the book. Explain why the subject is important, why readers will find it valuable, and how your treatment may differ from previously published works on the subject. If there is a void of previously published information on the subject, explain how the book will fill that void. You may also want to explain the slant or perspective you will take in presenting the material.

**Proposed contents.** Enumerate the proposed contents, describing major parts and chapters. Identify planned front and back matter such as the foreword, preface, appendices, and index. A detailed outline of the contents may be included, although this is optional.

**Chapter summaries.** Summarize each chapter, describing its focus and what the chapter will define, explain, or show.

**Potential market.** Identify market sectors that would find the book of interest, and explain why the book would appeal to those sectors. Estimate the approximate size of each market and identify any geographic differences within them, if appropriate.

**Competing works.** List the most relevant and significant competing titles you can identify (including author, publisher, and date of publication). Provide a synopsis of what these works address, and explain their strengths, weaknesses, and special qualities.

**Production issues.** Estimate the word count for the body text, and identify any format considerations that might affect page design and layout, page size, etc. These may include the expected number, types, and sizes of illustrations such as drawings, photos, charts, and tables. Explain whether: (a) you will provide camera-ready artwork to which you hold the copyright; (b) you intend to seek permission to copy artwork belonging to others; or (c) you or a professional graphic artist will create new artwork.

**Marketing and promotional ideas.** Identify opportunities (e.g., conferences, seminars, courses, workshops, and periodical publications) where the book might be promoted. Include names of individuals who might provide endorsement statements for the book, and identify other opportunities that may help the publisher fashion a marketing strategy for the book.

**Helpful Tip:** Ask trusted friends or colleagues to review your proposal before submitting it. As members of your intended audience, they may make constructive suggestions that will help you strengthen the material.

## The proposal package

The proposal itself represents the core of your submission. However, a complete submission package will include the following parts:

**Cover letter.** On a single page, summarize the contents of the package and why you are sending it, provide a few sentences about your credentials, and end with a brief closing. The cover letter does nothing more than transmit the material; do not embellish it.

**Proposal.** In addition to the essential elements described above, the proposal should reflect your ability, your passion for the subject, and the commercial potential of your book.

**Attachments.** Include a current resume or curriculum vitae and supporting items such as published articles about the need for the book, articles or letters about the author, or awards and honors received by the author. Provide sample chapters or even a completed manuscript if you have them, but only if the publisher requests them.

## The waiting game

Each publisher has a review and evaluation process for book proposals that usually involves a panel of acquisition editors, marketing staff members, and others. It's not unusual for the process to take as long as three to four months. Resist the temptation to badger the publisher for a decision. If you do not receive a response within three to four months, send the publisher a brief note inquiring as to the status of the project.

## Advancing to go

In the publishing world, rejections far outnumber acceptances. Do not be discouraged if your proposal is rejected once, twice, or even several times. It does not necessarily mean that your idea is without merit. The history of publishing is full of runaway successes that more than one publisher rejected. Most publishers, particularly publishers of professional titles, specialize in the subject matter they publish and the markets they serve. None has the resources to publish all of the books of interest that meet its criteria. This book proposal process is as much about finding a publisher that is a suitable match as it is about the quality of your idea.

## Resources

Many books are available on the subjects of writing book proposals and query letters, including *How to Write Attention-Grabbing Query and Cover Letters*, by John Wood (Writer's Digest Books, 2000); *Write the Perfect Book Proposal: 10 That Sold and Why*, by Jeff and Deborah Herman (Wiley, 2001); and *How to Write a Book Proposal*, by Michael Larsen (Writer's Digest Books, 2011). Many publishers post submittal guidelines on their websites, which can also be sources of valuable information about the type of material they publish.

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This article corresponds to:

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