



YOUR
NONFICTION BOOK
NEEDS A
BUSINESS PLAN

Preparing a nonfiction book proposal will not only give you a map for determining key elements like what is your main idea and who is your market, but it also will give you a document that can be submitted to publishers.

BARRY BECKHAM is a distinguished prose writer and founder of the Beckham Publications Group, Inc. He was director of the graduate writing program at Brown University where he taught for 17 years. His shorter prose has appeared in *Esquire*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Black Enterprise*, *The Washington Post*, and other periodicals. His novel, *Runner Mack* was nominated for the 1972 National Book Award. Beckham serves on the board of the Authors Guild Foundation.



To find a traditional publisher who will give you a sweet advance for your book idea and then commit a hefty budget for marketing, you need to present a knock-your-socks-off book proposal. The big six in New York won't even look at unsolicited manuscripts. They accept manuscripts only from agents. And your agent will need your book proposal to submit.

But suppose you are not looking for a traditional house? Maybe you want to publish the book yourself. Or go with a self-publishing arrangement? Or maybe you just want to organize everything before you start writing.

Then you should still prepare a proposal. Call it your own business plan. But it will be a valuable map for you to follow. It will make you think about your main idea, how you will break it down into chapters, and most importantly, what the market prospects are. In this last section, you will answer those valuable questions about who is your market and what your competition looks like.

1 | Title and subtitle

Spend considerable time on these. The title works better either short or long, depending on the elements. But your title should be enticing, alluring, and maybe tantalizing. Remember that we think in pictures, so try to focus on the image you want to convey.

The subtitle should be explanatory, and answer the question, “what’s in it for me?” Or “what’s it about?”

Here are some examples of titles and subtitles that work:

- **The Nine:** Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court
- **The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up:** The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing
- **Big Magic:** Creative Living beyond Fear
- **A Lucky Child:** A Memoir of Surviving Auschwitz as a Young Boy

2 | Table of Contents

We call them table of contents, but in today’s convention, we use contents now on that page, and we don’t put written by either. Just the author’s name is sufficient.

Here you list your chapters, including your introduction or preface. You may put the introduction off until later, after you have organized your ideas into sections or divisions. Or you may have written your introduction first to get your main idea on paper before you expand it into book form. Still, you must break down your entire book into chapters. This is your structural road map, describing each of the paths you will take to get to the end of your journey.

Tip: Amazon is a valuable resource for all of the ingredients, so start by looking at titles that have the “Look in the book” feature & look at...yes, look at contents of books similar to your title or subject.

3 | Introduction & Overview

Describe the main theme and sub themes, indicating their significance and your unique approach. Show why it is an absolute match for your abilities and why you are so perfect for this title. Readers love stories, so bring in anecdotes and incidents that are relevant to your main idea and its development.

4 | Chapter Outlines

The outline is very important because it shows that you really have a book idea and not just a short magazine article. The outline shows the editor where you’re going with your idea. Your detailed outline of topics covered in your book should include chapter titles, subtopics, and synopses of what each chapter covers.

5 | Target Market

You’d be amazed at how many writers never consider who will buy their book in addition to the relatives who encouraged them. And before you use that term, be aware please that “everybody” is not a sensible description of your typical reader.

Here you must describe who your market is and who the typical reader is. Use facts and details about your target market—your audience. What is their size, its rate of growth, and the number of books published for and purchased by this audience in recent years. You must convince yourself that there are people buying books similar to yours, and therefore, readers will certainly buy your book.

So where do you get this information?

Here again, you can lean on Amazon. Look for information about the best sellers in categories. How many reviews does a title have? Is it in electronic form? Audiobook?

Check sites of publishing information:



Publishers Weekly:

<http://www.publishersweekly.com>



International Publishers:

<http://www.internationalpublishers.org>



Association of American Publishers:

<http://publishers.org>

6

Competitive Advantage

Of course we all think that our book is incomparable. But you must find titles that are similar to your book in some ways. List these books along with their authors, publishers and date of publication. Then describe how your book is different and superior to each of these others. Show where that book falls short in some area in which your book excels.

One place to find advantages and sore spots of some titles is in the Amazon reviews. Look for terms like “my criticism is” ...”I didn’t like” ...and “what’s missing.”

If your title has no competition, that may be more revealing than you expected.



7

Marketing & Promotion

What resources can you rely on to help promote your book? We call this your platform. Think of your contacts, your established audience, and any presentations you have and will make. Do you have a Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn following? Identify institutions and organizations that may not only purchase your book, but also invite you to speak. Remember that as an author, you are now an expert, and establishments are always looking for experts to address their members.