

THE ART OF THE BOOK PROPOSAL

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In January of 1990 I wrote a novel originally entitled *Amontillado*, later renamed *Anticipation*, written under the pseudonym of Paris Hall. I was asked to change the Title because my editor at Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books said that the word “Amontillado” was too difficult for people to pronounce (‘a-mon-tee-a-doe’, not ‘amon-till-a-doe’)—never mind the fact that the intricate tale of vengeance borrowed its theme from Edgar Allen Poe’s *Cask of Amontillado*.

The Title of that book was the only change S&S made to my 129,000+ word manuscript, a manuscript they had purchased at auction, bidding against seven other major publishers in New York. Yet when they bought my book, for a tidy five-figure advance (of which the first digit wasn’t a 1), they did so in a week-and-a-half from date of submission on a 48 page Book Proposal. I hadn’t even written the book yet. I was an unpublished author at the time, not living in New York, not knowing any “insiders” in the publishing business, just a wannabe like millions of others.

A publisher or editor makes a buying decision about every submission for publication—a business decision, not an artistic decision. Failure to comprehend that one key point is what keeps most authors unpublished.

After the book was released, my Editor gave me what I took as one of the best professional compliments of my career, when she said, “Bob, you write better book proposals than you do books.” Do I have your attention?

Considering the fact that in my “day job” I was a sales and marketing professional, I realized that the skills and principles I had learned in persuading Fortune 500 business executives to purchase millions of dollars worth of products and services from me were no different when attempting to sell to the Publishing Industry. Selling is selling. A publisher or editor makes a *buying* decision about every submission for publication—a business decision, not an artistic decision. Failure to comprehend that one key point is what keeps most authors unpublished.

Today, over a decade later, I *am* a Publisher, and am therefore on the evaluation end of book proposals I see every day. It is the book proposal that is the primary sales instrument I use to decide which books I want to invest my time, energy, and money to bring to market.

I’ve heard writers whine, “But I just want to write. I can’t sell. I’m not a salesperson. It’s up my agent to sell my work.” After you’re rich and famous you can indulge yourself in the luxury of such wrong-headed thinking—and maybe not even then. With no disrespect to the wonderful literary agents out there in the industry, the vast majority of them work under the strategy of “mail and pray” with little more than a cover letter to the publisher and a faint hope that someone will actually read the submission, like it, and want to publish it. It’s true agents should be intimately involved in the sales process of their clients’ works. Unfortunately, that’s rarely true.

In my personal experience during my years as an author, it was my observation that agents bring two key elements of value to the table for an author: 1) the ability to submit works to publishers who don’t accept submissions directly from authors, and 2) to leverage their existing relationships with editors and publishers to get an author’s work moved up in “the slush pile” of submissions and have it considered sooner rather than later.

Incidentally, I am one of those Publishers who only takes submissions from literary agents. There's really no mystery to the basis of such a practice. If I didn't have that policy, I'd be inundated with submissions and nothing would ever get done. If nothing else, literary agents provide the valuable service to the publishing industry of screening out most of the garbage and giving publishers decent material to work with. But regardless of how close a relationship an agent has with an editor and/or a publisher, as in my case where my proposal for *Amontillado* was overnighted to an editor in New York and read the next day, any decision to move forward on a publication contract is only going to happen on the strength of the material/proposal the editor is considering—not how much they like the agent.

So my advice to all aspiring writers wishing to become published authors is this: learn what a good book proposal is, and arm your agent with one for every manuscript you wish to see in print. The book proposal is your sales brochure, your entire sales pitch to a potential buyer you will probably never have the opportunity to speak to in-person about their decision. It has to do your talking for you. OK, so what constitutes a “good” book proposal? Glad you asked!

At the highest level, it's the big two of any business proposal: Style and Substance. Not either/or, but both, and equally important. In the style category, this doesn't mean “gimmicks,” no tacky clip-art, strange fonts, colored paper, etc. It needs to look like a million-dollar business proposal: clean, sharp, professional, clearly written, concise, and most importantly—persuasive. On the substance side of the equation it needs 4 primary elements:

- **Hook**
- **Business Case**
- **Synopsis/Treatment**
- **Sample of Execution**

THE HOOK

Most publishers receive thousands upon thousands of manuscript submissions a year. For genre related fiction the vast majority of it looks, smells and tastes just like all the rest. The publisher/editor making the buying decisions is asking themselves at the very outset, “What's unique about this story? What sets it apart from everything else that's out there?”

What they are doing is looking for a “marketing differentiator,” some unique element that will cause book buyers to choose this title over all the others available. It is an odd balancing act for the editor who wants fresh material that has enough commonality with the preferences of a particular market segment or genre so that they can promote the book to that group, but they also want enough original elements that it is not just the same formulaic exercise as everything else on the bookshelves, and thus gets lost in the noise. So first and foremost, the book proposal needs to identify why this particular book is special. If you, the author, can't think of why your book is special, that should tell you something. One of the biggest reasons why most manuscripts are rejected, other than the fact the writer has no talent in the craft, is that their material is just a carbon copy of everything else out there. It's nothing but an echo of something that's already been heard.

OK, some more personal author history. When I first wrote that proposal for *Amontillado*, it wasn't the first book I ever tried to get published. It was the second. I had written a spy thriller a year earlier. That book got me an agent, but when my agent tried in vain to sell it for months, we kept getting the same feedback, "Brilliantly written. Great story. But I'm up to my neck in spy thriller inventory. Sorry, don't need it." So after a long period of discouragement, it occurred to me one day to ask my agent, "What are publishers telling you they need? What are they *not* overstocked with?" I just wanted to write professionally.

The response I got was, "Funny you should ask, Bob. Have you ever thought about trying your hand at women's fiction?" I recoiled, "You're not talking about romance novels are you?" She said, "No, just books written for a female audience instead of a male audience." At the time I didn't realize there was a distinction. I soon learned that 70% of all book dollars are spent by women. So I tried my hand at crafting a mainstream story, with strong female lead characters, and more bedroom scenes than body bags. That story, which began as only a 48 page proposal that I sent to my agent only to see if it sounded good, was *Amontillado*.

To illustrate, the hook I came up with was a place: "The North Dallas Women's Center," a private club with manicured grounds on the shores of a picturesque lake, where it costs \$250,000 to join plus \$10,000 a day to visit. It was a luxurious resort featuring an ultra-lavish spa and five-star recreational facilities, unrivalled cuisine, special medical and health treatments to make any woman look and feel beautiful, along with certain other specialty "services" provided to indulge a woman's any and every sensual fantasy. Basically, it was a high-dollar bordello for extremely rich and powerful women. Amid this titillating setting, I wove four separate storylines of powerful women, of which the lead character was seeking her revenge against the woman who had ruined her life fifteen years earlier. What I found most amusing after the book was released years later was hearing the same question asked over and over, from fans as well as editors of other publishing houses, "Does this place really exist?" They were "hooked."

THE BUSINESS CASE

You'll have a much better chance selling your book to a reputable publisher if you understand a couple of marketing basics:

1. Don't try to sell a product where there's no existing market, nor to a saturated market.
2. Find a niche and fill it.

These are marketing clichés, but nonetheless true. The business reality is that publishers are the manufacturers of a retail commodity. They obtain their "raw material" from authors and then process and refine it into a finished product for distribution and sale to the market place. This is Business 101. And publishing is indeed a business, not a non-profit art society. Publishers stay in business by making a profit, and can only do so with titles they honestly believe will appeal to a significant readership (market segment).

So it is therefore incumbent upon you the author, in your proposal, to help the editor/publisher understand exactly how your book is going to help their business. That message needs to be communicated clearly and concisely regarding:

- Applicable Genre

- Target Audience
- Rationale for Appeal

Again, these are business concepts. If your book is a Romance novel, or a Horror novel, that needs to be clear. Don't even submit your soul-searching introspection novel about the down and out drug addict dying of some terminal disease to a publishing house or editor that only publishes Detective Mysteries. It doesn't matter how good it is, that's not what they manufacture.

As an aside, providing a rationale for appeal is not synonymous to self-editorializing. I've rejected several manuscripts at the point in the proposal where the author has written something like, "This is the scariest book ever written. You won't be able to sleep at night and will never forget it." My instant reaction is: that's one person's opinion, not necessarily mine. It's a turn-off, and highly unprofessional. And if I perceive a lack of professionalism in the proposal, my expectations aren't too high for the work itself.

Another compelling rationale for a book's potential may be the author themselves. If you've already published a lot of books and had good sales, i.e. an existing fan base, mention it! If you're working on getting your first book published, and you have any aspects of your life that are unique, or more specifically, that which will enable the publisher to help market and promote you, make sure they know this. For example, if you're a charter member of an organization with 10,000 members who would love to see one of their own come out with a book, you're on the right track. If you're an expert at some field that is integral to the book, say so. The business question you're answering is: "Who's going to buy this book, and why from this author?"

SYNOPSIS/TREATMENT

You'll save me and every other publisher and editor in the country a lot of time by giving me the gist of the story in three to five pages, or as they say, that which can be read in less than a ten minute visit to the men's room. This is your Synopsis. A synopsis is just that, a condensed high-level view of the whole story: beginning, development, ending. It's not a three page "teaser" of all the cool elements you believe you've incorporated in the story. At a minimum it should lay out the entire plot, inclusive of any twists, the circumstance of the climax of the story, and how it all ends. Yes, it gives away the big secrets and the ending of whodunit. Don't worry about spoiling the ending for the editor. They want to know from your Treatment whether or not they even like the premise of the story and what it deals with. Again, the analysis they are doing is to determine whether or not they believe such a tale would actually have any significant market appeal. Don't force them to have to read your entire manuscript before making up their mind on that point, you may not get that far.

In heavily character-driven stories, where plot is less predominant, I recommend giving a short paragraph on your major characters. Helping the editor envision these three-dimensional individuals all coming together can be very persuasive about a book's potential to entertain and generate a buzz of recommendation to others. If you've been to a play and read the program, often you find just such a paragraph on each of the major characters, introducing them to the audience prior to the opening curtain. That's the idea: a snapshot of back-story to show the editor how you've cast your performance.

SAMPLE OF EXECUTION

You've heard the old joke: after spending millions to market a new dog food and having the product fail miserably, the researchers finally discovered, "The dogs didn't like the way it tasted." Even if you can write better book proposals than books, you still need to be able to write a good book.

I am amazed at how many unpublished authors are mystified as to why the "unfeeling and uncaring" publishing industry has conspired to ignore their work, only to look at the first page of their writing and have the mystery solved. Perhaps it's only in the field of writing where people are under the misconception that if one is an avid reader (consumer) that somehow qualifies them to be a talented writer. That's analogous to someone believing that because they own a radio and listen to music that makes them a gifted musician. Writing is a talent, a talent that needs development and practice. Some people have this gift, others don't. And like singing, or playing an instrument, or drawing and painting, etc., if you weren't blessed with one of these gifts, then you need to find the talents you do have and work with those.

Giving you the benefit of the doubt, dear reader, that you indeed possess this talent, and have developed it in school, gaining a mastery over the English language and the craft of weaving it to construct vivid word images of the creative fruits of your imagination, then I have a few tips to share with you on your Sample Chapters of your book proposal. Most editors like to see the first three chapters. There isn't anything magical about three. That's usually sufficient volume to give them an idea of your level of writing skill, and to decide if the story is compelling enough at the outset to inspire them to want to read the rest of it.

Tip#1: Start Strong.

Keep in mind, the person reading your sample chapters isn't your target reader curled up on their couch with a cup of hot tea by the fire. It's usually someone sitting at a desk with a large pile of other proposals, looking for any reason not to waste a single second more on yours before moving on to the next one. This is why you can't take the first ten or twenty pages to just kind of "ease" the reader into the story slowly. In the very first paragraph you need to have the reader asking, "Ooo. What's going on here?"

Did you notice that in the very first scene of the original Star Wars movie (Episode 4) you were thrust right into a battle scene? From the first moment you're intrigued and in the thick of things. Start your story with something poignant, something exciting, something intriguing. Something! When I turn to page one and the first paragraph starts giving me the history of "who cares, nowhereville" and three pages on the weather, I'm done. Your Prologue or Chapter 1 needs to suck the reader right in and give them a good idea of what the dog food tastes like—and it better be good.

I recall author Bill Crider once told me that his favorite opening line of a book he read was, "I knew it was going to be a long day when he brought in an arm." *What? A severed arm? What happened? Who brought it in? Why did they bring you such a thing?* Get it? You know, it's perfectly acceptable to open a story at some momentous point, and then back-track to show the reader how you got to that point. All narrative exposition, back-story, and detail filler is best introduced after you are well on the journey, *after* you have the reader hooked and committed to reading the whole thing.

Tip #2: Introduce your primary characters early.

If your story is about a particular lead character, don't leave them out of your sample! I read a sample recently of a story where the first four chapters were about one character, and then about a quarter of the way through the book a woman was introduced who turned out to be the lead. So why did we waste so much time with the other guy?

Tip#3: Set the Hook

Even though you've explained the hook to the editor in your proposal in an earlier section, you need to execute on that promise and make sure it's introduced in your sample chapters. This shows the editor how you're planning on hooking the reader early in the story and not have them toss the book aside and never finish it. People who become engrossed in a book at the outset usually consider that a positive experience, and are therefore more likely to tell a friend about it, and thus increase sales of that book. Publishers and editors know this.

Tip#4: Build to a cliff-hanger

If you send three chapters as your sample, then the last page of Chapter 3 needs to come to a significant point in the plot where the reader is dying to know what happens next. Keep in mind, the purpose of the sample chapters is to convince an editor that your full manuscript is worth devoting the hours to reading it in its entirety. When they get to the end of the sample they are either hungry for more, or not interested. This is one element you do have some measure control over. Craft your story accordingly.

Tip #5: Polish, polish, polish

If you send an editor 40 or 50 pages of your writing, and can't clean up the typos, correct the bad grammar and punctuation, or identify the rough areas and polish them up, that makes a strong statement about your attitude and dedication as a writing professional. The editor is also asking themselves, "Is this author someone who takes this business seriously, and will be an asset to promote?" When you've written your first few sample chapters, go over those pages a minimum of five (5) times.

- First Pass: Basic Action, Dialogue, Narrative. Set the stage.
- Second Pass: Logic holes and corrections. Does it all make sense?
- Third Pass: Setting, Scenery, Color, Sounds, Smells, Bugs, Birds—**details**.
- Fourth Pass: Say it better.
- Fifth Pass: Say it even better.

Keep going through it until you look at those pages and say to yourself, "I can't say it any better than that." That's the point when you show it to your friends, family, agent, etc. to get feedback. They'll tell you the five things that are still wrong with it, and then you go back and fix it, and polish, polish, polish again.

Did you ever notice that the hamburgers in food commercials bear no resemblance whatsoever to that squashed greasy thing they serve to you in the bag at the drive through? That's because "food artists" (no joke) prepare the burgers for the photos with meticulous care. They're perfect. They have to be because they are literally "the poster" that sets expectation in every consumer of what they're going to get. That's what your sample chapters are, the advertisement for what all the rest of the book is going to be like. Make them perfect.

Tip #6: Read it aloud

Language, is a medium of communication. It is rife with idioms and expressions that give it color and texture, passion, emotion and vibrancy. The mastery of writing is really a mastery of one's own language. It has a "voice."

In a very literal sense, passages of prose either "sound" right or wrong. Often reading your own story aloud can instantly help you find areas that just don't sound right. This is especially true with dialogue. When you say the lines out loud, you can often immediately know whether it sounds natural for someone to say or comes off as awkward. If it sounds wrong, fix it.

Certain genres have appropriate "voices" as well. The flowery and lyrical prose of an historical romance novel with lots of heaving breasts and torn bodices isn't the same selection and structure of vocabulary you typically find in a serial-killer thriller. Knowing such differences and demonstrating them in your writing execution is important.

IN SUMMARY

The first novel I ever sold, was sold on the strength of a book proposal, which launched my professional writing career. My second novel was sold on synopsis and sample, my third novel on synopsis only, and my fourth from a phone call which came after I'd submitted four or five story ideas, one paragraph each—all four books to the same editor. So yes, the process does get easier, after you're off and running.

However, when that first proposal was written, no one in the publishing industry knew who I was, nor had I even given them a finished manuscript to prove I could even write an entire book. But I overcame all that by investing the time to study the Publishing Industry like any market prospect I had ever sold to. I found out what their hot-buttons were, and what were the show-stoppers. And thus I crafted a product that I felt they genuinely needed and would buy. It worked. It can work for you too, if you diligently invest the time and energy to learning more about this topic and working hard to master it.

I suspect some writers reading this paper may feel like what I've shared here is an encouragement to "commercialize" their writing, or to not be true to their own creative inclinations, or even to "sell out" and compromise their integrity as an "artist." And to anyone who feels that way, I would tell them exactly what I learned first-hand long ago and is still true today. The facts: Less than 1% of what gets written ever makes it into print. The main reason why 99% of what's written is rejected, is because 99% of writers see themselves as "artists" and less than 1% are prudent business professionals.

Anyone with a pen and paper or a PC can participate in the activity/craft of “writing.” There’s no prohibition to writing all day long for one’s own personal entertainment, or the benefit of friends and family—and even spend an entire life laboring under the self-delusion of preserving one’s “artistic integrity.” However, to be a true “published author” is to aspire to a professional vocation within an established industry—an industry with designated buyers and market needs. The strong book proposal is the mechanism to help those buyers better understand how your work is best suited to meet those needs.