

Book Lab

Week 3: Content Outlines and Book Proposals

Please watch the following videos before completing your Week Three exercise:

Video #5: Mapping Out Your Contents

Video #6: A *What* Editor?

Mapping Out Your Contents

Last week's exercise was about organizing your ideas. Some of you will have whizzed right through it. Most of you will not. Or you'll have started to whizz, then realized maybe you want to organize your book completely differently. Or your ideal reader changed. Or your major theme changed.

That's great! It's all progress. It's all getting you that much closer to the book you dream about when you're driving your the car, talking out loud, pretending you're doing an interview with Terry Gross or Oprah. (Or both!)

This exercise is a follow-on to Exercise #3 from Week Two...

Exercise #4: Mini-Stories

As I said in the video *Mapping Out Your Contents*, each chapter needs to have a defined purpose. It needs to get your reader from point A to point B. The more clarity you have around that, the better, both in terms of the time it will take you to then write your book, and creating your book proposal. (More on that in a minute.)

For this exercise, take your big chapter titles or headings—whatever you're working with—and sketch out you're A-to-B points. Where is the reader starting, and where do you need to get them to? Then you can draw the map that will get them there. (Easy as pie, right?)

If you're doing a straight-up educational or self-help book, your points might look like a bulleted list of learning objectives or key takeaways for each chapter.

A Note About Writing

In the video *A What Editor?* I describe the different types of editors you'll be working with throughout your book production process. During the writing process, some writers waste energy agonizing over things like proper spelling or "Is it 19th Century or Nineteenth Century or 19th century"? Have no fear—your magical copyeditor will make sure all of that is correct.

Your developmental/line editor (an optional investment if you're self-publishing, but *do not skip the copyeditor*) will help you if you're not sure if your book is getting the job done, is clear, hangs together tightly, and so on. You can also find a freelance developmental editor to work with you through your content development process and/or review or help you write your book proposal.

The Book Proposal

If you want to sell your book to a traditional publisher, you're going to need a book proposal. If you want to seek representation by an agent (which is a good idea), you'll send it to them first. But even before that, you'll send a query letter, which we'll talk about in a minute...

You can write the book proposal yourself, or seek help from any number of freelance editors. Some of those editors might tell you there is only one right way to construct a book proposal. Not true. In reality, book proposals look lots of ways. For example, some of them have overviews that are one page, some 10 pages. There's some wiggle room.

The main thing is that your book proposal should include the following information:

- Book title and subtitle
- Author's name
- Estimated word count
- Estimated date of manuscript completion
- Overview: This is a snappy, compelling description of your book—what it's about, why it's needed, and why people are going to absolutely love it. It's typically a few pages long. Remember that this is *marketing*. Your book proposal is supposed to *sell* your book. It's helpful if there's text in the overview that reads like it could be

jacket or back-cover copy. Think *catchy and compelling*, but you don't want to be too clever or kitschy, unless that's the style in which the book is written.

- **About the Author:** A good solid bio will do here. Most people have trouble writing their own bios. It can help to have a friend or other loved one work with you on this to keep you from hiding your big accomplishments and awesome attributes. This is not the place to be modest.
- **Audience and need:** Who are your primary readers? Please don't say "everyone." While your book might have broad appeal, publishers will want to get an idea of how they're going to market this puppy, which means they need audiences they can wrap their arms around. Is it primarily for Millennial couples having their first child? Is it for people running for local government for the first time? Is it aimed at children of narcissists? List each discernable audience for your book and why it's relevant to them—bonus points if you can frame it in terms of problem these audiences have that your book will solve.
- **Competing titles:** Call out a handful (usually 3-5) other books that are for similar audiences or have a similar theme. You almost always want to pick out books that performed well—don't compare your title to a literary stinker or you will likely get the stench on you. *Do not bash these books or their authors*, even if you didn't particularly care for them. Instead, describe how your book is both like and unlike these books.
- **Marketing information:** If you have a platform, here's where you talk about it. You want to give the publisher or agent an idea of what you bring to the table in terms of marketing your book. Do you have 50k followers on Twitter? Do you have a top-rated podcast? Would your dear friend Cheryl Strayed love to have you on *her* podcast to promote your book? Are you a high-visibility member of a professional organization to which you can promote your book? Do you have a public speaking platform? Whatever it is, mention it here. Give an idea of what your "reach" is. Talk about any and every way you are ready, willing, and able to promote your book.
- **Chapter outline:** This is your detailed chapter-by-chapter outline. Typically these are a paragraph to several paragraphs per chapter, and tell the agent or publisher the key elements of what happens in each chapter. Remember: They want to get a sense of the book they're representing or buying. Paint a picture that walks them through the whole story.
- **Sample chapters:** You'll want to include at least two sample chapters. It's important that the agent/publisher gets a sense of your writing style and how you structure a chapter. In short: Can you deliver?

The Query Letter

Once you have your book proposal together, you'll want to create a query letter for your desired agent or publisher. Typically, this is a one-page letter you send to an agent describing your book and why you think it would be a good fit for them.

You'll pull details from your book proposal to create this letter. What's your book? Why is it so great and needed and timely? Who's the audience? Who are you and why is it great that you're the one who is writing this book?

There are lots of ways to write query letters, and lots of great samples that people have generously shared online (even for some well-known books), so spend some time on the Googles and search "great query letters" or "great non-fiction query letters" or "great memoir query letters" or "how to write a query letter." You'll get loads of helpful free examples and an assortment of pretty reliable structural formulas. And, of course, you can always hire a freelancer to help you.

That's it for this week! For those of you doing the live version of Book Lab, jot down your questions and we'll go over them and more during our second call.