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# Non Fiction Agent Brian Clegg

# The Non Fiction Agent

A guide to organizing your ideas into a winning non-fiction book proposal  
by

*Brian Clegg*

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## 0. Welcome

*From writer, Brian Clegg*



I'm lucky. Unlike the majority of writers, I've got an agent to help me present myself effectively to publishers. When I am working up an idea for a new book I go through an intense process of bouncing ideas off my agent. Between us we polish what was a good idea into an exceptional one. He will then turn my proposal into a selling package to take out to publishers.

Before I had an agent, I did manage to sell direct to publishers, and they always commented on how good my proposals were. Having now seen what's possible I realize that this wasn't because my proposals were particularly great, but because the majority of proposals that publishers and agents receive are *terrible*. What I now know for certain is that every writer's proposals can be hugely improved – and that is the job of this e-book.

Occasionally, through the guide you will find small sections of personal comment from me, highlighted like this.

## 1. Quick start

The heart of this guide is building your proposal, but depending on the stage you are at, you might like to jump in as follows:

<i>Know you want to write, but nothing more?</i>	Start with section 11, <i>Your next book</i> , then continue at section 2, <i>Nurturing your idea</i>
<i>Know the type of book you want to write but not the exact subject?</i>	Start with section 11, <i>Your next book</i> , then continue at section 2, <i>Nurturing your idea</i>
<i>Got the idea for a book, but haven't done anything about it yet?</i>	Start with section 2, <i>Nurturing your idea</i>
<i>Already written your book, but not tried to sell it?</i>	It's hard when you've already written the book, but we still recommend you start with section 2, <i>Nurturing your idea</i> . Until you've done this, you won't be able to carry things forward.
<i>Got a proposal, but haven't sent it out yet?</i>	Start with section 3, <i>From concept to proposal</i>
<i>Sent your proposal out and got no response?</i>	Before you dismiss what you've done, check out sections 5, <i>The winning name</i> , 6, <i>From first draft to polished proposal</i> and 7, <i>The pitch letter</i> . If this results in a radical change to the proposal, it's worth trying it again. If not, jump to section 9 – <i>Learning from responses</i>
<i>Got a positive response from an agent or publisher?</i>	See section 10 – <i>The contract offer</i>



## ***2. Nurturing your idea***

This e-book has been carefully designed to maximize the effectiveness of your proposal. Resist the temptation to rush in and start writing immediately. Putting together a book proposal is a lot like decorating a house. A little time spent up front in preparation will provide huge benefits when you come to the actual work. Read through the guide first. This guide covers essential techniques to make sure that your proposal presents your book idea in the best possible way.

Before looking at the proposal itself, it is important to spend a little time on your idea. Anything you can do to tighten and polish it now will provide big rewards when you come to share your idea with a publisher or agent. All new ideas are like little green shoots, easy to trample on and destroy. By nurturing your idea, giving it a chance to grow and strengthen, you will have a big impact on its chance of survival. However good you think it is, take the opportunity to make it better.

### *Does your idea have enough substance to become a book?*

The first essential is to explore the depth of your idea. Not every idea makes a good book. This doesn't mean that it's a bad concept, but it may be more appropriate as a magazine article or an item on a TV news show. A book will typically be at least 75,000 words in length, and must appeal to a national or international readership before a publisher will take any significant interest. You have to understand the unique qualities of your chosen medium. Books (remember we are talking non-fiction) are purchased because the reader perceives something of value in the book itself; something that they are willing to invest their own time and money in; and which they need to own in order to fully benefit from.

There is an important psychological reason behind the distinction between books and magazines. Readers often pay nearly as much for a magazine as a book, but consider it a much more transient purchase. If it keeps them happy for half an hour, or on a train journey, it's enough. A book requires a bigger investment of time – in the end, more precious than money – from the reader. For a topic to make a good book it has to be deserving of that investment. You could think of the magazine reader as a TV channel hopper, while the book reader is like someone who has committed themselves to watching a full length movie – only there isn't the same restraint that being in a movie theater imposes – you have to keep their attention, to keep the pages turning.

### **Topic breakdown**

Take a sheet of paper or start a new document in your word processor. Write your idea at the top, then add a numbered list underneath of each of the main areas of information your book will cover. Now run through the list – imagine each of these information areas was a chapter. Is there enough there for a full chapter? Would you realistically have to combine it one of the others. If at the end of this process you haven't got at least seven or eight information areas this is in danger of being a very thin book.

Note that these topic areas aren't real chapters – this isn't a structure for your book, just an analysis of the depth of the concept.

For example, take the book *Heal Thyself* (UK – *The Herbalist*) by Benjamin Woolley. This is a biography of the 17<sup>th</sup> century medical writer, herbalist and astrologer, Nicholas Culpeper. An initial idea breakdown of this book might have been:

#### *Biography of Nicholas Culpeper*

1. Culpeper's family life
2. Culpeper's herbal work
3. Culpeper's involvement in the civil war
4. Culpeper's disputes with the physicians
5. Culpeper and astrology
6. Culpeper's writing

Frankly, there just isn't enough. We know very little about Culpeper's family life, so it wouldn't make a whole chapter in its own right and would have to be combined with his civil war activities. And there is a strong overlap between his herbal and astrological work and his writing – they don't make satisfying sections. This leaves only three topic areas. Woolley could have decided this wouldn't make a book, choosing another subject to write on – instead he brought in a wider scope. The final book's topic breakdown might look something like this:

#### *Biography of Nicholas Culpeper*

1. Culpeper's life and civil war involvement
2. The civil war as a whole
3. William Harvey (a contemporary physician who discovered the circulation of blood)
4. The Royal College of Physicians
5. The medical methods of the period
6. Culpeper's writing on herbal medicine and astrology
7. The power struggle between herbal and chemical medicine, and between physicians and surgeons/midwives

Here we see a much sounder set of topics. Each has plenty of depth. This is much more likely to make an effective book.