

## **BOOK PROPOSALS: What you need to know**

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Jill Lambert was opening book proposals in Doubleday Canada's editorial offices when the contents of one envelope suddenly showered her in baby powder. The wildly misguided sender explained the stunt with a note that read, "This book is my baby."

Ouch. As you might guess, Doubleday did not purchase the book and Lambert spent the day scrubbing stubborn white clouds from her black clothing.

Several years later, Lambert is now a Vancouver-based freelance writer and editor who uses her publishing expertise at Doubleday, HarperCollins Canada and Macmillan Publishers to help authors craft proposals for books, film and television.

"A good proposal always has a balance of editorial considerations and marketing considerations," she says. "I want to see passion. I want to see integrity. I want to see concision and clarity."

Before putting hands to keyboard to write a non-fiction proposal (novels are generally signed on the strength of a completed manuscript), authors should read publishers' online guidelines and follow them closely, says Lambert. Pick your top prospect and use their requirements to lead you.

Most major publishers will only accept proposals from agents, but "getting an agent is starting to get as difficult as getting a publisher," Lambert points out. Do the work upfront and you'll smooth the entire process.

Next, research what's already sitting on the shelves in your genre. What's your competition? Where would your book fit into the existing literary landscape? "Publishers," says Lambert, "like to have some kind of context to publish a work."

Robert Mackwood agrees. The principal agent and director of Vancouver's Seventh Avenue Literary Agency says it's important to write a comparative analysis and figure out what books are already published in your general category -- "and not by walking around a Chapters store and concluding that yours is completely unique."

Finally, develop a strategy and build an outline. Lambert also suggests that authors write their own back-cover copy. Create descriptions of your book in 200 words, 100 words, even 25 words. Keep working it through until you can describe it succinctly.

Remember, editors are busy. Be clear and don't waste their time. As Lambert says, "it can be really overwhelming on the receiving end when you're looking at hundreds, if not thousands, of proposals each year."

Ultimately, editors want projects that will keep the pages turning, "something that has a narrative pull," says Diane Turbide, editorial director for Penguin Group Canada. The proposal should also convey your tone, writing style and talent.

If you still have no idea where to begin, pick up a book on the topic, ask a more seasoned writer in your genre to read your proposal or consult the vast resources available on the Internet, Mackwood suggests. Writers can also contact Lambert at [jill.lambert@telus.net](mailto:jill.lambert@telus.net).

Turbide advises that you "try to convey the enthusiasm you feel for your book." Just keep it grounded: no excessive hype, no false promises -- and, definitely, no baby powder.

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Everyone's talking about a quirky blog called Seen Reading (<http://seenreading.blogspot.com>), penned by Torontonion Julie Wilson. Whenever she spots a stranger engrossed in a book, she guesses what page he or she is devouring, posts a piece of the text and writes a scene based on how the book and the reader intersect. The result? "People get giddy and buy more books," writes Wilson.

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