

Mary Francis' Guide to Writing a Book Proposal

These are the general instructions that Mary often sends to individual authors who ask about how to write a (book) proposal.

1. First part of the proposal should focus on the thesis. What is the main argument? How will it change the way readers think about your topic, particularly if you are writing about a well-known paradigm, historical figure, work of art, or event? Start with a concise, forceful statement of the thesis in the first paragraph. (This doubles as your elevator pitch for conference mixers, job interview letters, etc.) Then give yourself two or three pages to talk about why your argument is new and significant. The latter is especially important: write about why it matters that you are making this argument. A good scholarly argument is out to change readers' minds about something they think is familiar, or teach them something they do not know that will alter how they see the field as a whole.
2. Second part of the proposal should start with a table of contents, and then give an abstract for each chapter. The abstracts can be relatively long, particularly if you will not be sending a lot of sample material. Try to show what each chapter contributes to the logic of your argument, and how the chapters relate to one another. Every book is different, and editors are looking for a rational structure to your argument. Some historical arguments have to rely on chronology; often archive-based work depends on case-study chapters that look closely at documentary evidence; each thesis will dictate a distinct chapter layout in order to give the arguments the best chance of convincing readers. This ought to be the longest part of the proposal.
3. The third part of the proposal should be about your readers/audiences/market. Write about colleagues who will find your work intriguing, useful to their own research and teaching; write about the community that might find your work useful; write about other books that are related to or analogous to yours, show you understand the scholarly conversation you are seeking to contribute to.
4. Conclude with some ideas about how long the book might be, what kinds of ancillaries will be needed (images? musical examples? online AV? charts?), and what kind of timeframe you are assuming to complete the project (if it is not yet complete--if a full manuscript is available, please indicate that it could be sent if requested).
5. Include a copy of your CV.
6. Include a sample chapter. I advise including a very polished chapter that is integral to your argument, rather than an Introduction. If done right the proposal will do the work, in brief, that your Introduction will do later.