

How To Write
A Fiction Book
Proposal

Gary Smailes

Bubblecow.net

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About BubbleCow

BubbleCow was established in 2007 with the simple goal of 'helping writers to get published'.

At first we just provided professional copy editing services, as well as advice and guidance on the best way to prepare a book proposal. These two services remain a significant part of our business, but the publishing world has changed greatly over the years, and in response to our clients, we have expanded and developed the benefits we can provide to writers.

We now recognise that writers face two very real publishing options. The first is the traditional route of agent/publisher. The second is self-publishing.

We still provide copy editing and book proposal advice, but we now also offer additional services that are designed to help writers, no matter which publishing route they intend to take. We have teamed up with a number of third party companies, including self-publishers, book designers and PR experts, who provide our writers with discounts to these services. In addition, we offer proofreading and even free ebook conversion.

As BubbleCow grows we continue to listen and react to the needs and requirements of writers.

bubblecow.net

Introduction



Each year thousands of book proposals are rejected by agents. The sad truth is that the reason that many of these ideas are never turned into books is that the initial query letter and synopsis were not strong enough to be worthy of further consideration. I can help you to make sure that this does not happen to your book.

In 2001 I wanted to be a writer. At the time I was working for author Terry Deary (of Horrible Histories fame), as a researcher. I showed Terry some of my work and he encouraged me to try and get it published. However, a bucket full of rejection letters later and I was left disillusioned and ready to give up. I went back to Terry and asked him what was the key to his success. It turns out there was no secret, just hard work and (here it comes) a great book proposal.

I knew that if I was to build any kind of a career as a writer I would need to crack the book proposal code. Since that day I have been obsessed with decoding the book proposal, both fiction and non-fiction, and over the years I have talked to literally hundreds of writers, publishers and agents about what makes a great book pitch.

Today my dream has come true. I have not one, but more than twenty books in print by a number of publishers including Hachette, one of the biggest publishers in the world. I also have an agent (Andrew Lownie). However, I did nothing special. I have no special book proposal writing skills, and I learned nothing that you can't also learn and apply to your book proposals.

This book is the accumulation of the knowledge that I have gathered in the process of becoming a professional writer and publishing more than 20 books. If you follow the guideline I set out in the site you will learn how to write book proposal that instantly appeals to both agents and publishers. It will also teach you how to avoid writing a book proposal that fails to answer all the relevant questions an agent or publisher may ask about your book.

Gary Smailes

Part 1: Query Letter

Lesson 1 - What Is A Query Letter?

The goal of the **Book Proposal** is very simple. Its job is to convince agents and publishers that your book has the potential to be a commercial success. In this context 'commercial success' does not mean best-seller. Instead, commercial success means a book that the publisher is able to successfully sell to enough readers for them to make an overall profit. With big publishers (such as HarperCollins) 'commercial success' is measured in the tens of thousands of sales, whilst for smaller niche publishers, such as the military history publisher Osprey, 'commercial success' is measured in the thousands, if not hundreds.

To understand what a publisher is looking for in a potential 'commercial success' we must first understand how their businesses work.

Though the publishing industry has changed in recent years, their business model is still based on the concept of selling books to real, physical, brick and mortar book shops. This is important and you need to understand this to be able to think like a publisher.

The sales process starts at the bottom when a potential reader walks into a book shop. Rather than walking aimlessly up and down the aisles, most readers head for the section of the book shop that contains the books they like to read. If the reader is a science fiction fan then they head for the science fiction shelves; if they are looking for cook books then they will go to the cookery section. And if they're looking for a book for their kids, then it's off to the children's aisle. This makes sense and we have all done it. However, as a writer, what is important to see here is that at the very granular level book shops are segregated by **GENRE**.

When looking to stock their shelves book shop buyers are also genre focussed. They will buy books based on genre from representatives of publishers who publish books in that genre. When the book buyer needs a Science Fiction novel, they will go to a Science Fiction publisher, they get cook books from cook book publishers and children's books from children's book publishers. These publishers are **experts** in producing genre specific books that sell well in book shops. The publishers have teams of people (writers, editors, marketeers and salesmen) all specialised in that one genre.

This brings us full circle. When you approach a publisher (or agent) they are looking for books that fit their genre model and will sell well in book shops — simple. Therefore, a Book Proposal must do two things:

1. Convince the publisher that the book fits into the publisher's business model
2. Convince the publisher that there is a big enough readership for the book to make a profit

The Aim of the Query Letter

The book proposal is split into three sections: query letter, synopsis and extract. We will go into depth regarding the synopsis and extract in later lessons.

The query letter, sometimes called the cover letter, is the first thing the agent or publisher sees. It introduces your book and you as a writer. Many writers underestimate the power of the query letter and instead of producing a highly detailed document that allows them to sell their book, they instead provide a brief please-read-my-synopsis-style letter. This is a recipe for rejection.

The query letter is an agent or publisher's first contact with your book and provides you with a chance to 'frame' your book proposal, impressing them from the first word.

The goal of a query letter is as follows:

1. Provide a clear outline of your book's content.
2. Define your book's genre.
3. Define your book's place in the market.
4. Define your book's potential readership.
5. Provide information of your book's status.
6. Outline your marketing plans.
7. Sell you as the writer.

In the next lesson we will look at how the Four Paragraph Method will allow you to fulfil each of these seven goals, in the process providing agents and publishers with all the information they need to make an informed decision about your book.

Summary

- Commercial success is a book that makes a profit for the publisher.
- The publishing industry is segmented by genre.
- The aim of a book proposal is to convince the publisher that the book fits into the publisher's business model, whilst also convincing publishers that there is a big enough readership for the book to make a profit.
- The seven goals of a query letter.

Lesson 2 - The Four Paragraph Method

In this lesson you will learn about the Four Paragraph Method and discover how it will ensure that your query letter provides all the information needed for an agent or publisher to make an informed decision about your book.

In the previous lesson we examined the role of the query letter. We learned that the overall aim of the letter was to ensure that an agent or publisher would clearly understand your book's content, your book's genre, your book's readership, your book's place in the market and your role as a writer. We discovered that providing this information would allow the agent/publisher to make a fair assessment of your book's potential to be a commercial success.

Define your Book's Genre and Demonstrate its Commercial Potential

Before we delve into the detail of the Four Paragraph Method I want to make one important point: the best possible outcome you can possibly expect from a query letter is for the agent/publisher to read your synopsis and extract. No matter how good your query letter turns out to be, no matter how detailed the information you present, and no matter how accurate the brief synopsis you include, the best you can hope for is for the agent to NOT reject your proposal. No query letter has ever sealed a book deal. At the end of the day it is the quality of your book (or more accurately its commercial potential) that will sway the agent/publisher. This said, the query letter is the first essential step to that elusive yes!

On the first reading of your query letter the agent/publisher is really only asking two questions:

- Will this book fit into the genre I represent/publish?
- Does this book have the commercial potential to make a profit?

Notice there is no question about quality of writing or complexity of narrative, nor the realism of your characters. At this earliest stage it's commercial considerations, not plot considerations, that are uppermost in the agent/publisher's mind. This means that your query letter **MUST** address these two questions. If you fail to answer the questions, you leave the

agent/publisher the easy option of simply rejecting your book. They are busy, they see hundreds of books, why would they go to the trouble of reading your synopsis and extract, only to find the book is of the wrong genre? If you fail to accurately define your book's genre or demonstrate its commercial potential, agents/publisher will find it easy to say no!

The Four Paragraph Method

I am a working writer, and the query letter is an essential tool in my tool box. The reality is that if I can't write a book proposal I don't get work and I have to stop writing. Over the years I have experimented and refined my query letter style, finally developing the Four Paragraph Method. This technique has proved to be a powerful and effective way to write query letters that provide agents/publishers with all the information they require. These four simple paragraphs will not only answer the two questions highlighted above, but also give the agent/publisher an insight into your book's content and your role as the writer.

The structure of the four paragraphs is as follows:

1. **First Paragraph:** This paragraph starts with your book's tag line and gives your book's elevator pitch.
2. **Second Paragraph:** This section contains marketing and readership information including word count, genre and indication of competition.
3. **Third Paragraph:** This is where you include a very brief synopsis.
4. **Fourth Paragraph:** The final paragraph is where you will include your biography and any relevant writing experience.

Summary

- The best you can hope for from a query letter is for the agent/publisher to read your synopsis and extract.
- Define your book's genre and demonstrate its commercial potential.
- Use the four paragraph method to ensure you provide agents/publishers with all the information they need.

Lesson 3 - The Tag Line

In this lesson you will learn how using a tag line will help you quickly convey the essence of your book without a long and complicated explanation. It will also help you to avoid agents and publishers misunderstanding the nature of your work.

In the previous lesson we looked at the Four Paragraph Method and learned how applying the framework will ensure you provide all the information needed by agents/publishers to make an informed decision about your book. In this lesson will look at the first paragraph and examine the role of the tag line.

Jaws In Space...

The summer of 1979 saw the release of a unique science fiction movie. The film was to become hugely popular and to this day is widely regarded as a sci-fi classic. In fact, in 2008 Empire magazine listed Alien as the 38th greatest American movie of all time. However, the success of the film was never guaranteed and its runaway popularity took the studio very much by surprise.

The fact that Alien was ever made is a minor miracle. From the very outset of the project, the script for Alien presented writers Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett with a huge problem:

How do you convince a major studio to back a film that, by its very nature, is difficult explain and has no track record of similar films on which to call?

The answer was to forget about the complexity of the plot and genre-bending narrative, and instead focus on communicating the essence of the film. In the end O'Bannon and Shusett successfully pitched their concept for Alien by using one very simple phrase. They described the movie as, '**Jaws in space.**' The rest, as they say, is history.

The role of the tag line in your query letter is to communicate the essence of your book, in a way that will avoid agents or publishers misunderstanding the nature of your story and its place in the market. A tag line is a simple sentence that summarises the 'essence' of your book. Its aim

is to short-cut the need to explain the context of your novel and instead draws on an already existing schema of understanding.

Let me explain...

Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett could have approached the studios in a very different way. They could have gone into the meetings, determined to make the executives understand the complexity and nuances of their script. They could have explained that they were writing a cross-genre movie that mixed science fiction with horror. They could have explained the genius of keeping the monster hidden for much of the film, only revealing it when the audience were begging for a clear on-screen 'reveal' of the alien. They could have even tried to place the movie within the social climate of the time, suggesting the alien was a reflection of Cold War fears.

But they didn't, and that was why the film was made.

Instead of trying to the almost impossible task of educating the film studio executives as to the plot and narrative of the film, they instead decided to draw on universal memories and experiences that matched the 'essence' of their film. By drawing on an already successful and well-known film, in this case Jaws, the writers were able to short-cut the pitching process and automatically trigger relevant images in the studio owner's minds. In 1979 everyone was aware of what Jaws represented, the vision of 'Jaws in space' wasn't a huge leap in imagination.

So is 'Jaws in space' an accurate description of Alien? No... not by a long shot. Alien is much more. But 'Jaws in space' was enough to spark the interest and open the door to developing the pitch.

The Power of Schema

To understand how to construct a powerful tag line, you must first understand the concept of the schema.

In psychology a schema is a 'pattern of thoughts' or 'a cluster of pre-conceived ideas'. Suppose I say 'Christmas'. This will conjure a set of images in your mind. These images are a schema. Granted that each person will have a slightly different schema, but a large portion will overlap.

Now imagine I say, 'Easter is like Christmas, but without the presents.' This will conjure an image based on your schema for Christmas.

Going back to our example of 'Jaws in space' you can begin to see why this phrase was so powerful. By referring to Jaws, the writers of Alien were tapping into the schema for the film. They knew that anyone who had seen Jaws, and in 1979 that was just about everyone, would have a certain schema. It is impossible to think about Jaws without conjuring images of a huge shark, terrorizing helpless swimmers. The feeling of tension and horror are also brought forward. Therefore, 'Jaws in space' becomes a huge, terrifying monster, terrorising helpless humans, but in space. Perhaps not the most accurate description of Alien, but close enough.

The power of the 'Jaws in space' phrase was not its accuracy, but the fact it removed the need for the writers to explain a complex narrative and instead it cut to the heart of the film in just three words.

This one phrase was enough to HOOK the studio executives.

Writing your own Tag Line

I recently celebrated the release of a four-book series with publisher Franklin Watts. When I pitched the concept for BattleBooks to my agent, and then to my publisher, I successfully employed the tag line technique. I could have described my books as what they are: detailed, historically accurate interactive fiction based around historical battles, aimed at children 9-12 years old. This is, in fact, an accurate summary of what BattleBooks was to become. Instead, I decided to pitch the books as 'Fighting Fantasy for battles'. I summed up the essence of my books by tapping into the schema for Fighting Fantasy, a set of books that I knew an agent interested in my books would have read and loved.

Here are the three actions steps you can use to create your own tag line:

1. Describe the essence of your book.

Grab a pen and paper and write out two or three sentences that describes the 'essence' of your book. Think about the book's plot, its setting,

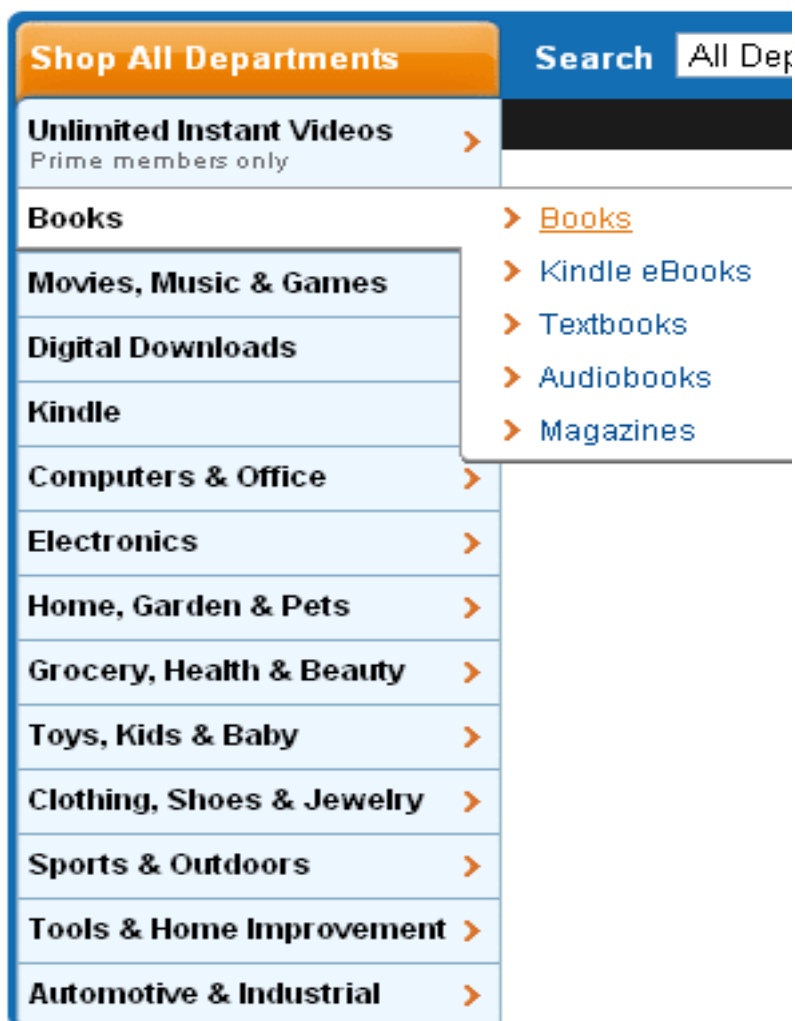
the big idea behind the writing, the intended readership and any other factor that sets your book apart from the competition. Spend some time on this, work at the sentence, writing and re-writing until you are happy. It may take you a couple of days to really focus in on the essence of your book.

If you go back to BattleBooks, this is where I produced the description: 'detailed, historically accurate interactive fiction based around historical battles, aimed at children 9-12 years old.'

2. What book is like your book?

Having written the summary of your book, your next stop is Amazon. First locate the section of the site that matches the genre of your book. If you don't know the genre of your book, then skip ahead and read the section about genre, and then come back.

Once on the Amazon site, navigate to the 'books' section:



You will then be presented with a list of 'categories', these are the genres:

A screenshot of the Amazon Books navigation menu. The menu is contained within a light blue-bordered box. At the top, there is a header 'Browse Books' in bold black text. Below this, there are three main sections, each with a bold orange header. The first section is 'Amazon Kindle', which includes links for 'Kindle (Wi-Fi, 6")', 'Kindle 3G (Free 3G+Wi-Fi, 6")', 'Kindle DX (Free 3G, 9.7", Graphite)', and 'Kindle eBooks'. The second section is 'Best Books', which includes links for 'Award Winners', 'Best Books of 2010', 'Best Books of the Month', and 'The New York Times® Bestsellers List'. The third section is 'Books Categories', which includes a long list of genre links: 'Amazon Student', 'Arts & Photography', 'Audiobooks', 'Audible Audiobooks', 'Biographies & Memoirs', 'Business & Investing', 'Calendars', 'Children's Books', 'Christian Books', 'Comics & Graphic Novels', 'Computers & Internet', 'Cooking, Food & Wine', 'Crafts & Hobbies', 'Entertainment', 'Gay & Lesbian', and 'Health, Mind & Body'.

Pick your genre and click on the link. In this example I clicked on science fiction. If you now look in the bottom left, you will see a list of the bestsellers.

Click on the title link:

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1.

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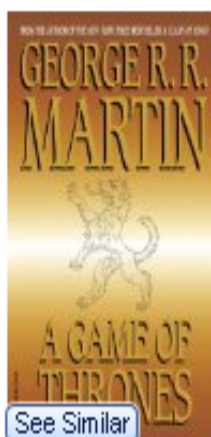
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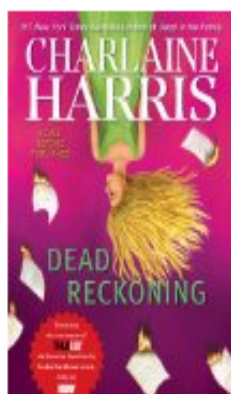
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3.

107 days in the top 100



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by Charlaine Harris

5 customer discussions

Release Date: May 3, 2011

List Price: ~~\$27.95~~

Price: **\$14.70**

You Save: **\$13.25 (47%)**

Once you have the bestseller list for your title you need to methodically search the list and write down books that are like your book. These don't need to be identical to your book, just similar in some way.

One thing that is important to remember is that you will be using these books to tap into the schema of the agents and publishers. This means that the books need to be popular enough for agents or publishers to

have read them, or at least be aware of their basic premise. For example, there are many people who have never read a J.K. Rowling novel, but still have a schema for these books.

You may find it useful to also examine your own bookshelves or list of all-time bestsellers on the internet for your genre. You are looking for well-known books. The more prevalent the book in the consciousness of its readers, the more firmly held and commonly similar the schema will be, and the more powerful your tag line will be.

For example, if you were to say your book was like, ‘Da Vinci Code with zombies,’ you will be able to tap into a pretty strong schema. Most people are aware of the Da Vinci Code and many people hold a pretty similar set of understandings of the novel’s content. However, saying ‘The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail with zombies’ is far less powerful. This is despite the fact the Holy Blood and the Holy Grail is the non-fiction book on which the Da Vinci Code is based. The truth of the matter is that the schema for the Da Vinci Code is stronger than the one for Holy Blood and the Holy Grail.

3. What is different?

You should now have a couple of sentences that describe your book and a list of popular books that are similar to your own. The final step is to work out how your book is different from the other books on your list.

Alien was ‘Jaws in space’. That is, it was a horror movie with a single unstoppable monster but set in space, not the ocean.

My own BattleBooks are ‘Fighting Fantasy for battles,’ — that is choose-your-path interactive fiction, but set during battles and not in dungeons.

You must use your description of your book to find a book that is similar to your own and then define how it is different. This is the key; you use the schema of the chosen title to short-cut the explanation process, but then use the difference to define your book’s unique angle.

Summary

- It is difficult to simplify complex ideas without a frame of reference.
- A schema is a common understanding of a term or phrase.
- Three steps to a tag line: Describe the essence of your book, What book is like your book? and What is different?

Lesson 4 - The Elevator Pitch

In this lesson you will learn how to use a brief summary of your book to communicate the essence of your work in the most concise manner possible. Using the Elevator Pitch technique will help you to avoid agents and publishers misunderstanding the nature of your book.

In the previous lesson you learned the importance of a tag line and how one can be used to quickly communicate the essence of your book. In this lesson you will learn how this technique can be expanded to produce an Elevator Pitch, which is a brief summary of your book's content.

What is an Elevator Pitch?

The job of the tag line is to grab the agent or publisher's attention, using established schema to short-cut to the heart of the book. The job of the elevator pitch is to build on this foundation.

If you use the elevator pitch in the way that I am going to teach it will allow you to clearly communicate the 'essence' of your book, and in the process help you to avoid any potential misunderstanding about your novel and its meaning.

The elevator pitch is a concept borrowed from the business world.

Imagine you are an entrepreneur who is looking for investment for a new business. You have arranged a meeting with potential investors, but their office is on the top floor of a large building. You wait for the elevator to arrive. After what feels like an eternity the doors slide open and you step into the elevator. The doors close and you look to your right to see the unmistakable image of Donald Trump. Weird hair, killing glances, you get the picture. Now's your chance to impress — this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You have the length of the elevator ride to pitch your idea, secure his investment and live happily ever after...

This is all well and good, but you are not seeking investment. You are pitching a book, not a business. However, the concept remains that you have just a few sentences to explain the concept of your novel, whilst capturing the attention of an agent or publisher.

The Five Element Approach

The general rule that applies to creating an elevator pitch for your novel, is that YOU must first understand what your novel is about, before you can begin to explain it to others. There are a number of ways to write elevator pitches. Some people start with a mass of information, describing their novel in the finest detail and then work backwards, cutting and shaving until they have the bare bones. Other writers do the opposite, starting with the smallest nuggets of information and then adding only the essence until they are left with the outline.

I suggest that you don't leave this process to chance.

The technique I am about to teach you will avoid hours of painful thought and procrastination and instead show you how to construct an effective, focused and complete summary of your novel in the fastest time possible.

For the past few years I have taught writers to use a method for writing elevator pitches that I developed from Randy Ingermanson's Snowflake Concept.

Randy Ingermanson is a doctor of physics turned successful novelist. He is, unsurprisingly given his past, an advocate of planning in writing. He states on his site that, 'Good fiction doesn't just happen, it is designed.' He goes on to explain that when writing a novel, 'you start small, then build stuff up until it looks like a story.' You can (and should) read his full article, if only to see the way in which Randy suggests you write.

This is all well and good, but how's it going to help you with an elevator pitch?

The answer is that you can take the outline of Randy's Snowflake methodology and use it to deconstruct your novel's narrative and themes. Then once this is done you can rebuild the parts to form a coherent summary of your book.

You can deconstruct your novel by asking yourself five questions. The answer to each question represents one of the five key elements of your book.

Here are the five questions:

1. Who's the main character?
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action?
3. What is the main character's aim?
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal?
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever?

Before you move onto the next section, go find a piece of paper and a pen and write out the answer to each of the questions above. Please don't skip this stage — it's an important part of the process. In fact, these five questions will go on to form the backbone of your synopsis!

The next step towards writing your elevator pitch is to take the answers for all of the questions above and write them into a single coherent paragraph. This is not easy and will take you a few attempts to get it right. Don't worry, that's part of the process. The aim is to produce what is, in essence, a tight outline of your book's plot. Once you have this in a single paragraph you can then chip away at it and mould it into just a couple of sentences.

Example:

As an example I have taken the popular children's fairy tale, *The Three Little Pigs*. Below you will see the steps I have taken to form an elevator pitch for this well-known tale.

1. Who's the main character? *The Three Little Pigs*.
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action? *Pigs have left home and need to make their own way in the world.*
3. What is the main character's aim? *Build three new houses.*
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal? *Big Bad Wolf will huff and puff and kill the pigs.*
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever? *Two pigs are killed and a third needs to escape.*

Using the answers to the questions I then combined the five key elements to get:

Three little pigs venture out into the world, looking to make a new home. However, vicious serial killer, the Big Bad Wolf, is on the prowl. After a terrible killing spree, can the last little pig — who is left with just a pile of bricks — escape?

Your Turn

Before progressing to the next lesson you should have a workable one paragraph summary of your novel. It may take you days or weeks to get to this stage, but don't worry. Remember, this one paragraph will HOOK the agent or publishers, frame the book and force them to keep reading...

The final step is to trim the paragraph down to just a couple of sentences. I can offer little help at this point. You need to just bite the bullet and get trimming. To help you out, here's what I managed produce for The Three Little Pigs:

With his brothers already devoured by a serial killer known only as The Big Bad Wolf, the third pig fights for his life with just a pile of bricks between him and certain death...

Summary

- A novel can be deconstructed with five key questions.
- These key questions provide the skeleton for your elevator pitch.
- An elevator pitch takes time to get right.

Lesson 5 - Defining Your Genre

In this lesson you will learn the importance of genre and how it holds the key to avoiding unwarranted rejection. You will also learn how to identify your book's genre and use this to find an agent or publisher.

In the previous lesson you learned how to define the essence of your book using the elevator pitch. In this lesson you will learn how to identify your book's genre and use it in your book proposal. Before embarking on this lesson you should have already constructed the first paragraph of your query letter by using a tag line and elevator pitch. We now move onto the second paragraph...

Genre is a fundamental part of your book proposal. However, many writers are uncomfortable with tightly confining their work to one particular genre. A feeling exists amongst writers that for a book to be truly excellent it must be genre breaking — this is, to be honest, a huge pile of bull crap!

Genre is a tool used by agents, publishers and booksellers, and it is a tool that must also be used by writers. If you are to produce a focused pitch with a realistic chance of winning a book deal it is ESSENTIAL that you accurately define your genre.

I will say this again... Accurately defining your book's genre is essential to the success of your pitch.

At BubbleCow we see hundreds of books each year, and I can safely say that over the years I have never come across a book that didn't fit comfortably into a genre. It is true that some books are further towards the edges of a particular genre; it is also true that some even have elements of more than one genre. I have even seen books that are on the verge of redefining their own sub-genre, but I have never come across a book that couldn't be assigned correctly to a single genre. As you will see, this is a good thing when it comes to pitching your book.

Why Genre is So Important

To understand the importance of genre we must cast our minds back to the now-distant past where books were sold in book shops. The publishing industry was established in pre-internet days, and despite them claiming otherwise, their foundation is still based in this bygone era.

The key to understanding the structure of the publishing world is to think bookshelves. If you start at the point of sale, books are stacked onto bookshelves and displayed to readers. These book shops would be divided into sections (genre) allowing readers to browse the sections of particular interest.

Bookshops, being a business, need to ensure that they fill their precious shelves with books that will sell. Think about it: if you own a bookshop with limited shelf space, which book are you going to put on a shelf? One that will sit for six months before being sold, or one that will be sold within hours or days? Easy choice. This means that bookshops are looking for books of a particular genre, which will sell well (or become bestsellers).

So this takes us up one rung up the ladder, and leaves us with the question as to where bookshops buy their books. The answer is booksellers. There are two types of booksellers, those working for distributors and those working for publishers. Big publishers will employ their own booksellers, whilst a smaller publisher will use a distributor. However, either way these booksellers will be selling books of a particular genre. This is a situation that is easier to grasp when you move up another rung of the ladder and look at publishers.

Publishers are based fully on finding writers and publishing books of one particular genre. A good example is Osprey Publishing. Osprey publishes military history books and therefore has the in-house editing, design, marketing and distribution expertise. Osprey doesn't sell cookbooks — they don't know how!

You will find that big publishers, like Hachette, sell many genres of books, but when you delve into the structure of these companies you will see that they are actually made up of many smaller imprints, each with their own genre expertise. If we return to the Osprey example, we find that when they wanted to branch into selling fiction books, they didn't try

to do it in-house, but instead bought a smaller publisher called Angry Robot and brought them under the Osprey umbrella.

The final rung of the ladder is the agent. It will be of little surprise to see these are also focused on genre. An agent's job is to find books that are of publishable quality and place them with a suitable publisher. For an agent to do their job they must have an eye for a good book, but also understand what publishers are looking to publish. This requires an intimate knowledge of genre. This is why you find more than one agent at big agencies.

This means that no matter which way you look at things, genre is important. Agents, publishers, distributors and booksellers are all setup to instinctively segment the book world into genres and sub-genres. This means that when pitching your book you **MUST** clearly place it in a genre.

I would go one step further and say that failing to place your book in a genre will result in rejection. Agents and publishers are inundated with manuscripts and they are looking for a reason to say no. If they read your query letter and don't get a clear indication of the book's genre, that's just one more hurdle you are placing in between your book and an agent/publisher's clear understanding of what you have written. It is also just one extra reason for an agent or publisher to say no, not yes!

How to Define Your Book's Genre

The steps to defining your book's genre are as follows:

First, pick three books that you feel are similar to your book and will be read by the same readers as would read your book.

Second, go on to the Amazon website and see in which category these are listed.

Third, consult the list of genres below to confirm you have a suitable genre.

Here is the internal list of genre we use at BubbleCow. This has been based on the listing of sites such as Amazon, plus genre lists used by publishers and agents.

FICTION

Action and Adventure

Chick Lit

Children's

Commercial Fiction

Contemporary

Crime

Erotica

Family Saga

Fantasy

Dark Fantasy (probably still a major sub-genre!)

Gay and Lesbian

General Fiction

Graphic Novels

Historical Fiction

Horror

Humour

Literary Fiction

Military and Espionage

Multicultural

Mystery

Offbeat or Quirky

Picture Books

Religious and Inspirational

Romance

Science Fiction

Short Story Collections

Thrillers and Suspense

Western

Women's Fiction

Young Adult

NON-FICTION

Art & Photography
Biography & Memoirs
Business & Finance
Celebrity & Pop Culture
Music, Film & Entertainment
Cookbooks
Cultural/Social Issues
Current Affairs & Politics
Food & Lifestyle
Gardening
Gay & Lesbian
General Non-Fiction
History & Military
Home Decorating & Design
How To
Humour & Gift Books
Journalism
Juvenile
Medical, Health & Fitness
Multicultural
Narrative
Nature & Ecology
Parenting
Pets
Psychology
Reference
Relationship & Dating
Religion & Spirituality
Science & Technology
Self-Help
Sports
Travel
True Adventure & True Crime
Women's Issues

Example of how to define your book's genre: As an example we will look at Lord Of The Rings. Imagine you had written this book but didn't know into which genre it fitted best. The first step to finding the book's genre is to make a list of books that are similar to Lord Of The Rings. In this case I was able to list three books that are similar to Lord Of The Rings.

These titles are:

1. The Scions of Shannara by Terry Brooks.
2. Redwall by Brian Jacques.
3. A Game of Thrones by George R. R. Martin

The next step is to go onto Amazon. Type in the title of the book and find its Amazon page. Once there, scroll down about three quarter of the way until your come to a title that says, 'Look for similar items by category'. The information below this will tell you the book's category, which relates to its genre.

In our example we found the following:

The Scions of Shannara = Books > Fantasy

Redwall = Books > Children's Books > Fiction > Science Fiction & Fantasy AND Books > Fantasy

A Game of Thrones = Books > Fantasy > Epic, Books > Fantasy > Series AND Books > Science Fiction

Looking carefully at these results it becomes clear that all three books fall into just one category (genre) and that's FANTASY. If we consult are own list of books we see FANTASY is on the list — yeah!

Just one word of warning here, Amazon is not a book publisher nor a traditional bookseller. Amazon allows publishers and writers to list books in multiple genres. It is essential to remember you are writing a book proposal to an agent and that agent will almost certainly represent just one genre. Please don't confuse Amazon's category listing policy with the book genre model of the traditional book publishers and agents.

What happens if it is not clear to which genre your book belongs?

It is possible that you will choose three titles that seem similar, but are in fact spread across a few different genres. If this happens you must do two things. The first is to pick another three titles and repeat the process. If this still fails to resolve the issue than the problem may be that you are not being general enough in your genre choice.

Many writers are instinctively drawn to sub-genres, but this should be resisted. For example, William Gibson's *Necromancer* is, strictly speaking, cyber-punk. However, if I were pitching it today I would class this book as science fiction. However, this is a rule of thumb and can be broken. The litmus test is this: are there agents and publishers openly representing the sub-genre in which you are interested? If the answer is no, then go for the parent genre. If the answer is yes, then the sub-genre will be fine.

For example, dark fantasy (a sub-genre of fantasy) has recently started to gather a considerable following. You can now find sections of book shops dedicated to this genre. This is a good sign that the sub-genre is strong enough to stand alone. Another sign is that we are seeing agents and publisher specialising in the sub-genre. This means, for me, that you would be safe to declare your book as dark fantasy, rather than just fantasy. However, one final word of warning. The tighter you define your genre, the smaller the number of agents and publishers that will be open to you when you come to pitch. The flipside is that if you have correctly defined your genre (or sub-genre in this case), this small group of agents and publishers are far more likely to say yes, since your book may be just what they are looking to publish.

Summary

- If you are to produce a focused pitch with a realistic chance of winning a book deal it is **ESSENTIAL** that you accurately define your genre.
- Use similar titles to define your genre.
- Avoid sub-genres.

Lesson 6 - Importance of Word Count

In this lesson you will learn why an inappropriate word count can be a stumbling block to a potential deal. You will also learn how to avoid word count being an issue for agents and publishers.

In the previous lesson you learned how to define the genre of your book. In this lesson you will begin to understand why word count can become an issue.

When writing the second paragraph of your book proposal it is important to include the approximate word count of your book. If your book is not finished, then estimate. It is also best to quote the number of words, rather than the number of pages. The reason is that the number of words of a printed page alters. By using word count you avoid any potential confusion.

At BubbleCow we are often asked by unpublished writers what is the correct length for their book. My answer is always the same: "It depends!" The only thing that is really important is that your book is neither too long nor too short. However, the ideal length varies with genre.

The almost universally agreed minimum word count for a novel is 40,000 words. Below this then the book will be considered a novella. I would strongly suggest that if your book is sub-40,000 words that you seriously consider expanding. Though novellas have their place, they are very difficult to sell to publishers and you will not be able to secure agent representation with a novella.

If you are writing science fiction then the minimum word count is 50,000 words. The reason for this is that 50k is the minimum size for a novel to be considered for the prestigious Nebula Award.

As for typical novel sizes, I would suggest that you should be aiming somewhere in the region of 60-80,000 words. However, some genres can be considerably longer. It is not unusual for a fantasy or thriller novel to be closer to 100,000 or even 120,000 words.

So, as a rule of thumb your novel should be between 80,000 and 100,000 words.

However, it's not quite that simple. There is a belief that a debut novel is slightly different. It is sometimes said that for a debut novel you need to be aiming for a word count around 80,000 words maximum. I am not convinced by this argument, but feel it is something of which you should be aware. This blog post has more to say on the subject.

Why does size matter?

Let's start with very small novels...

The publishing industry has a belief that when readers are deciding to buy a book, its physical size plays a part in the buying equation. Rightly or wrongly, it is felt that very small novels (sub 40,000 words) will appear flimsy and less substantial than the competition, and therefore will, in the mind of the reader, not be worth the cover price. Now, I understand that this may (or may not) be the case in reality, but all that matters is that this belief persists in the publishing world. If your novel is below 40,000 words it will be an issue. And too big...

The problem with large novels (we are talking above 150,000 words) is twofold. The first reason is all to do with cost. If a novel is made up of hundreds of thousands of words then it will naturally need lots of pages, and pages cost money. Large novels with hundreds of pages can quickly become prohibitively expensive to print. All books are a gamble, but those by debut novelists are even more so. A publisher will be looking to print at least a couple of thousand books in their first print run. It is cheaper to print 60,000 word novels than it is to print 120,000 words novels. Therefore, smaller novels = less financial gamble.

The second reason is also all to do with cost. When an agent or publisher is assessing a potential book deal, foreign rights sales will play a part in the thinking. Foreign rights are permission for the book to be translated and sold in other countries. These rights are sold to foreign publishers — giving agents, publishers and writers an additional cash windfall. However, very large novels present a problem. Translators charge by the word and therefore very large novels bring with them very large translation costs. This means the rights will be more difficult to sell and this will be seen as a negative by agents and publishers when initially assessing your book.

Summary

- Word count is linked to genre.
- Aim for between 80 and 100K.
- Always talk in word count not page count.

Lesson 7 - Competitor Titles

In this lesson you will learn how carefully listing a set of books that are similar to your book will allow agents and publishers to have confidence that your book is suitable for them. This technique will also allow you to avoid confusion regarding your book's genre.

In the previous lesson you learned the importance of word count. In this lesson you will discover how knowing the marketplace increases your chances of landing a book deal.

In addition to word count, your second paragraph should also contain a list of competitor books. The reason for this is not to say that you are 'like' the writers of the books listed, but instead to demonstrate to potential agents and publishers that you have a firm grasp of where your book fits in the marketplace. We have already established that genre is essential for agents and publishers. However, one problem that agents and publisher face is that many writers incorrectly place their books. It is not uncommon for an agent or publisher to get a pitch for a book that says it is in their genre, but once they start reading they soon realise it have been misplaced. By listing competitor titles you can ensure that you avoid this disastrous problem.

I have found that, when initially explaining the concept of competitor title to writers, I will often face understandable resistance. Writers will say things like, 'Why should I turn an agent's attention to my competition?' They will also often express a concern that by highlighting well known writers they themselves will come across as arrogant or overly ambitious. Both of these viewpoints misunderstand the aim and potential power of competitor titles.

Why Use Competitor Titles?

One of the reasons that a writer is rejected by agents and publishers is that the agent or writer misunderstands the nature of the book that is being proposed and fails to see that it would be suitable for their list.

As I described, the whole publishing industry is based around genre. We have seen that bookshops, book sellers, publishers and agents have all positioned themselves to be experts in producing, marketing and selling

a particular genre of book. Agents and publishers spend time and effort making it clear to writers what genres they represent and publish.

There are two important facts to remember:

1. No matter how good your book, if you pitch it to an agent or publisher that doesn't represent or publish books of the same genre as your novel, your book WILL be rejected.

2. Agents and publishers are so used to receiving books from an unsuitable genre that it is the writer's duty to ensure that there is zero chance of the genre of their book being misunderstood.

There are two ways to ensure the genre of your book is not misunderstood. The first is to clearly state the genre of your book at least once (if not twice). The second is to provide three or four titles of other key books that are similar to your book AND are in the same genre.

Agents and publishers are experts in your genre. If you start listing books that they recognise as being in the genre they represent and publish, there is no chance that the genre of your book will be misunderstood.

How to Choose Competitor Titles

There are two criteria for selecting suitable competitor titles:

1. The books MUST be the same genre as your book.
2. The books MUST be similar to your book in some way.

I suggest that you don't begin selecting your competitor titles until you have firmly established your book's genre.

As for the titles you end up listing, it is very much a personal choice. You may find that one or two books jump out for a particular reason. They may have been strong influences on your writing, or they may represent a particular niche in your genre. This will be especially true if you are pitching a sub-genre to a more general agent or publisher.

For example: Let's say you are pitching a book that you have identified as science fiction, but could easily fit into the sub-genre of cyberpunk. The problem you face is that, since cyberpunk is a very narrow sub-genre, there are no agents or publishers specialising in publishing this genre alone. You don't wish to put off potential agents or publishers by openly declaring the book as cyberpunk and therefore you pitch your book as science fiction and make no reference to cyberpunk. You feel this will open up more agents and publishers. However, by carefully selecting your competitor titles you can make it clear that your book fits into the sub-genre of cyberpunk without ever mentioning the word 'cyberpunk'.

In this case my three competitor titles would be:

1. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (A genre-defining novel).
2. Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep* (the novella on which the film *Blade Runner* was based).
3. Gary A. Ballard's *Under the Amoral Bridge* (a more modern title).

When choosing your competitor titles I suggest you use the following pattern:

Book 1 – A genre-defining classic.

Book 2 – A book that you feel is very like your book.

Book 3 – A more modern title.

The reason for these choices is as follows:

Book 1 – A genre-defining classic — this clearly defines your genre and should support your earlier declaration of your book's genre. An agent or publisher of the correct genre will be intimately aware of this title and it will leave no chance of confusion that your book is suitable for them.

Book 2 – A book that you feel is very like your book — a second re-enforcement of genre, plus it gives you a chance to pin-point the niche within a genre (or sub-genre) in which you see your book fitting.

Book 3 – A more modern title – this is showboating. You are demonstrating that you understand the genre, the marketplace and the potential readership. Get this choice right and you will leave the agent or publisher in no doubt regarding which genre your book belongs.

Using the Internet to Pick Competitor Titles.

The first step to selecting your three titles is to pick your classic title. This should be the easiest title to choose since almost all genres will have a handful of very famous bestsellers that define the genre. If you are struggling to think of a genre defining book then it is time to reassess your genre. If you have written a novel without at least a basic understanding of your book's genre, then you are going to find it very difficult to impress an agent or publisher.

However, this said, I would suggest that you carry out a Google search using the following two terms:

'Bestselling [your genre] books'

And,

'Classic [your genre] books'

In the case of cyberpunk books this produced a number of good hits. Two that sprung...

A quick browse of these website showed that Neuromancer is considered to be a genre-defining book.

You now have your classic title and you can use this to pick your second title. The best way to do this is to open up Amazon and search on your classic title, in our example Neuromancer.

Having located your classic titles' page on Amazon scroll down and look at the very handy 'Customer Who Bought This Item Also Bought' section. This will give you a list of titles that are similar to your 'classic title.' A bit of browsing should produce your second book. Remember this needs to be similar to your own book and still in the correct genre (or the sub-genre of cyberpunk in our example). Please beware, not all titles listed will be in

the same genre as the classic title.

Below is a screenshot of what I found when I carried out this exercise for Neuromancer. Take a quick look at the fourth title from the left...

Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought



Book Title	Author	Star Rating	Price
Count Zero	William Gibson	★★★★☆ (74)	\$10.20
Mona Lisa Overdrive	William Gibson	★★★★☆ (53)	\$7.99
Snow Crash (Bantam Spectra Book)	Neal Stephenson	★★★★☆ (624)	\$9.14
Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?	Philip K. Dick	★★★★☆ (258)	\$8.53

That gives us two of the three titles, but leaves the tricky third title. This book requires a bit more knowledge and work to locate. Hopefully, you will have a good understanding of the genre and can quickly identify a bestseller from the last year or so. You are looking for a title that fits firmly in the genre, but has sold well in the past twelve months. If no title jumps to mind a bit of internet searching will help.

You need to search on Google using terms like:

'Best seller [your genre] 2011'

Or,

'Best [your genre] 2011'

Or,

'New [your genre]'

This was, in fact, the way I pinpointed Gary A. Ballard's Under the Amor-al Bridge as the third title in our example.

A search on 'bestseller cyberpunk' threw up a result with the title

Bestseller — Under the Amoral Bridge: A Cyberpunk... — godzstudio ...
I followed this link which took me here:

<http://friendfeed.com/godzstudio/aac00f46/bestseller-under-amoral-bridge-cyberpunk>

And finally here:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1449509673/idiscount-feed-20>

Remember the aim of your competitor titles is twofold:

1. To clearly identify your genre and show that you will fit into their list.
2. To show that you understand the In this lesson you will learn the importance of resisting the temptation to pitch an incomplete manuscript.

Summary

- Listing competitor titles is not boasting.
- There are two criteria for competitor titles: 1. Same genre as your book, 2. Similar to your book.
- It takes time and research to identify your competitor titles.

Lesson 8 - Is Your Book Finished?

In the previous lesson you learned the importance of competitor titles. In this lesson you will find out why agents and publishers are only really interested in completed manuscripts.

Having determined your book's word count, and identified a number of competitor titles, the final aspect of the second paragraph is the status of your book.

We have all done it... You're a couple of months into a writing project, the story is taking shape and you have a couple of thousand good words down on paper. We feel good and we are pretty sure we know where the novel is going. Slowly the question arises in our head, 'Is this good enough?' You consider the idea of submitting it early to a publisher or agent — after all, what do you have to lose? If they reject it then nothing's lost, the novel is in its early stages after all. If they like the book, it will give you the validation you need and, you never know, a book deal.

Please, please, please ignore this voice in your head — it is not your friend.

Under no circumstances should you submit your book to an agent or publisher until you are 100% sure it is finished and ready to go.

Let's deal with the reasons why you may feel the need to submit your unfinished manuscript to an agent or publisher:

1. **Validation:** I understand: all writers have that nagging voice at the back of their mind that is telling them that their work is not good enough, and I mean ALL writers. Now, let me let you into a secret, no publisher will ever make that voice go away. No matter how many books you write, no matter how many bestsellers you produce, that voice will remain. No one can make it go away. All you can do is ignore it. IF and it's a big if, you need some early validation then look elsewhere for the answer. I suggest a professional editor (like BubbleCow) or a reading group or even a friend, but not an agent.

Books are rejected for many reasons and quality is just one. If you pitch early to a publisher in the belief that a yes means it's good enough and no

means its rubbish, you are destined for heartache. An agent or publisher just can't give you what you need.

2. **A reason to go on:** If you are a quarter of the way through a novel and its getting tough, then tough. Suck it up and keep writing. If you need external motivation at that early stage, then writing really isn't for you. Writing is a lonely, nerve-wracking and confidence-sapping pastime. You need the constitution of an ox and the determination of a bull. You need to be able to ignore the logical and reasonable voice that is telling you to stop and get validation, and just keep writing. Get words on the page. There are many techniques that will keep you writing; looking for an agent to offer you a book deal on a partially written novel is not one of them.

3. **A book deal:** I personally know many published writers, and I can safely say, hand on heart, not one of these was offered a deal on a book that was partially written. Does it happen? Well, yes. Debut novelists do get offered book deals on partial manuscripts... but it is very rare. In fact, as the publishing world alters it is becoming almost unheard of. So in reality, if you submit a partially written manuscript to an agent or publisher the most likely response you will get is 'no thanks'. The best possible response you can reasonably expect will be a request to see the full novel, and this leaves you with a problem. The publishing world moves quickly and the agent will not wait around for six months (or a year) for you to finish your book. The result will be that you go into a tail spin, stabbing away at your computer, rushing through your novel, all for the sake of an agent who has shown a glimmer of interest. The resultant novel will probably be sub-standard, the agent will read it and reject.

The cold hard truth is that you get one chance with any agent. Why would you blow that chance by submitting a partially written novel?

So to sum it all up, your second paragraph should contain a statement saying the novel is written and ready for submission.

Summary

Don't submit a partially written manuscript genre and the marketplace.

Summary

- Listing competitor titles is not boasting
- There are two criteria for competitor titles: 1. Same genre as your book, 2. Similar to your book
- It takes time and research to identify your competitor titles

Lesson 9 - Writing a Brief Synopsis

In this lesson you will learn that providing an outline of your book's narrative will help the agent and publisher to make an informed choice. You will also learn that an extended synopsis is unneeded and may even put the agent or publisher off your book!

In the previous lesson you learned why it was essential to pitch a completed manuscript. In this lesson you discover the best way to summarise your book's narrative into a single paragraph. By this point you should already have the ammunition to complete your first two paragraphs. The first consists of a tag line and elevator pitch. The second pin points your book's genre, lists the word count, provides competitor titles and explains the status of the book.

The third paragraph in your query letter is a brief synopsis of your book. Before I delve into the guts of this topic I want to make one point — this is a **BRIEF** synopsis.

As we have discussed, at the moment of reading your query letter, the agent/publisher is concerned with assessing the suitability of your book for their list. Therefore the synopsis here is to simply reassure the agent/publisher that your book is of the correct genre and is something they will be comfortable selling to publishers. In addition to the query letter, your book proposal will also be including a more extended synopsis. This will probably be a couple of pages in length and provide a detailed outline of your book. Therefore, there is no need for your brief synopsis to be longer than a single, short, paragraph.

We have already talked about using the Five Key Elements, and we are going to return to this concept in order to write an effective synopsis of your book. As a reminder, the Five Key Elements come from these five questions:

1. Who's the main character?
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action?
3. What is the main character's aim?
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal?
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever?

Let's look at these in a little more depth and examine how they relate to your synopsis.

Who's the main character? This may seem a simple question, but its aim is to clarify who the story is about. Good stories are about people, not events, and knowing which character your story is about is essential. Another name for the main character is the protagonist. Looking at some examples, you will see more clearly what I mean.

Who is the protagonist in the Harry Potter series? Well, Harry. What about Lord of the Rings? In this case it's Frodo. In Lord of the Rings you have many characters and many events, but the protagonist is Frodo. He is the main character that drives the narrative forward.

What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action? All traditionally structured stories will have an event, early on in the narrative, which forces the protagonist to react. This is an event which leaves the protagonist no option but to act. They may choose not to act, but this is still an action. This is called the Inciting Incident. A clear example of this is in a cop drama. A body is found (inciting incident) leaving the protagonist policeman no choice but to react to the event. This blog post will give you more information.

What is the main character's aim? Here we are looking at the protagonist's resultant choice from the inciting incident. The event will have forced the protagonist to act and they now have a goal or aim that will resolve the incident. Returning to the cop drama, the discovery of a dead body will force the protagonist police officer to react. Chances are he will resolve to catch the killer. Catching the killer is now the aim of the protagonist. The aims and goals of your character may be complex, but for the sake of the synopsis you are looking to define the key aim.

What is stopping the character from achieving their goal? Having defined the protagonist, the event that spurs them into action and their goal, you can't have the resolution occur in the opening pages of the book. For any type of story to exist there needs to be forces beyond the control of the protagonist, which conspire to stop them achieving their goal. This is conflict. It may be that the protagonist is facing an internal struggle that is stopping them from reaching their goal. It may also be that

people close to the protagonist stand in their way or it may be that society as a whole is providing the conflict. It may also be the case that all three types of conflict exist. In our cop drama it is the serial killer running and hiding that is causing the conflict. Yet in Lord of the Rings, as Frodo seeks to destroy the ring, larger powers conspire to stop his progress. Yet, he also faces personal conflict as he fights an internal psychological struggle with the ring.

What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever? This is the climax of your story, the point at which the protagonist resolves the inciting incident. This can be as simple as catching the serial killer or throwing the ring into Mount Doom. However, it may be less obvious and more subtle as the protagonist overcomes an internal battle. However, whatever your climax it is essential that you identify this important moment.

By answering these five questions you have the basis for a synopsis.

Example

As an example I have returned to The Three Little Pigs. However, I have refined the answers in light of our new understanding of the questions.

1. Who's the main character? *It was, 'The Three Little Pigs'. However, the protagonist of the story is actually the Third Little Pig. The story is about him, not his brothers.*
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action? *Was, 'Left home and need to make their own way in the world'. This now becomes, 'Big Bad Wolf attacks'.*
3. What is the main character's aim? *This was to, 'Build three new houses'. It now becomes, 'To survive the attack of The Big Bad Wolf'.*
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal? *Was, 'Big Bad Wolf will huff and puff and kill the pigs'. We can now think of this in terms of conflict, so this now becomes, 'Big Bad Wolf is strong and able to destroy houses made from straw and sticks'.*
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever? *'Two pigs are killed and a third needs to escape', becomes 'Big Bad Wolf attacks the house made of bricks'.*

Using the answers to the questions I then combined the five key elements to get the following one paragraph synopsis of the story:

Thrown out of their homes, the Third Pig and his two identical twin brothers are forced make their way in the world. When the brothers hear of a pig eating serial killer, known as the Big Bad Wolf, they have no choice but to build houses in which they can hide from the Big Bad Wolf. The First Little Pig builds a house of straw and The Second Little Pig a house of sticks. Yet these are little protection from the Big Bad Wolf who huffs and puffs and eats the pigs. The Third Little Pig constructs his house from bricks and when the Big Bad Wolf attacks, the huffs and puffs are useless. Yet, the big Bad wolf decides to climb down the chimney and only the quick thinking of the Third Little Pig saves his life, as he places a pot of boiling water on the fire and the Big Bad Wolf comes to a steaming end.

Summary

- The synopsis should be no longer than a single paragraph.
- Use the Five Key Elements to build your synopsis.
- Keep it brief.

Lesson 10 - Writing Your Biography

In this lesson you will learn what to include in your biography to ensure you are an attractive prospect to agents and publishers. You will also learn how to avoid including irrelevant or damaging information.

In the previous lesson you learned how to write a brief synopsis. In this lesson you will discover the importance of a good biography.

By this point you will have already completed the first three paragraphs of your cover letter. The fourth paragraph covers two key elements: the first is your biography, the second is your marketing plan. This lesson is all about you, your profile as a writer and any interesting facts that may act as potential marketing hooks.

In this paragraph you will be presenting the following key facts:

- Your writing history
- Information about you as a person
- Your marketing platform

A common mistake writers make is to assume that their life, beyond writing, is of little interest to a publisher. This is simply not the case. In the modern internet age the writer is as much a product as the book, and it is for this reason that writers must sell themselves when pitching their book.

To help you construct the first part of your final paragraph, I will go through each of the key points in turn:

Your writing history: Writing history is not an essential part of getting published; many debut writers, with no writing history, are able to secure a book deal. However, detailing your writing history will give the agent/publisher a feel for just how serious you are as a writer. If you are able to paint a picture of a writer who has been through a series of steps, over a number of years, developing and honing your craft in the process, this will be a big positive. Therefore, I would suggest that you consider including the following information:

- ANY published material. This can be books, magazine articles or even poems. Any published work will show that someone, somewhere, has taken a gamble on you and your writing
- Any writing competitions in which you have been placed
- Any long term writing groups to which you belong

This is not an exhaustive list, but gives you an indication of the kinds of information you should be including.

Information about you as a person: The aim here is to give the agent/publisher a snapshot of you as a person. The reason for this is twofold. The first is to flesh out your proposal, to help the agent see you as a person and to make it that little bit easier for them to say yes. The second is for potential marketing opportunities. If you are a skateboarding grandmother or a skydiving housewife, then these are all hooks for a marketing campaign. Let me give you two examples:

The Stephen King publishing story is pretty famous, but let me tease out one fact. Wikipedia says, 'King actually threw an early draft of the novel in the trash after becoming discouraged with his progress writing about a teenage girl with psychic powers. His wife retrieved the manuscript and encouraged him to finish it.' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_King] This throwaway incident is, in fact, a great hook for any media outlet and instantly provides an interesting story that can be used to kick start a marketing campaign.

The second example is in regards to GP Taylor. He is a children's writer, but more importantly, at the time of his first novel being published, he was a vicar. Once again, 'vicar turned writer', provides a great 'in' for a media campaign. The point is that for GP Taylor his job as a vicar may have seemed mundane and unimportant, but to the marketing department it was gold dust.

Summary

- In the modern internet age the writer is as much a product as the book.
- Include any writing history.
- Include any aspect of your life that might act as a good marketing hook.

Lesson 11 - Your Marketing Plan

In this lesson you will learn the importance of providing the outline for a realistic marketing plan. If done correctly, this will avoid you appearing to the agent and publisher as just another wannabe writer.

In the previous lesson you learned how to construct an effective biography. In this lesson you will learn how to present a marketing plan that will impress agents and publishers.

This lesson covers the final section of your final paragraph. By this point you will have clearly identified your book's genre, its readership and your value as a writer. This final section shows what you are prepared to do to promote your book.

Marketing budgets, for even the biggest publishers, are becoming squeezed and any significant marketing opportunities a writer can bring will be a big advantage in their bid to secure a book deal. In fact, publisher Michael Hyatt says he intentionally seeks out writers with a significant online presence.

Offline Aspects

To begin you should be listing all offline contacts you have access to that will set you aside from other writers. All publishers will have a marketing department with access to many traditional newspapers and magazines. However, if you have fast-track access to offline organisations, which are relevant to your book, this is a huge bonus. For example, if you have written a book about rock climbing and are the editor of a world-renowned rock climbing magazine, then this needs to go into your pitch.

The importance here is relevance. The better access you can have to a potential target reader, the more attractive you will appear to the publisher.

Online Aspects

The need for an online presence is well established. Before pitching you should have a well established blog/website, as well as active social media channels. However, when detailing your on line aspect it is essential that you offer precise and detailed information.

Blog: Include your blog/website name and url (web address). If you have a blog, make sure you have posted regularly in the weeks running up to pitching. There is nothing worse than a dead blog! It is also essential that you provide some kind of stats to show the reach of your blog. Don't be worried by your numbers, your blog is what it is. However, do remember that it is relatively easy to work out the traffic coming to a blog, so you might as well be upfront about your efforts. I would suggest you include the following stats:

- **Unique visitors per month.** This is the number of unique individuals who have visited your blog in the last 30 days. For example, one individual may visit your blog three times in one week. However, this would only count as one unique visitor. Note: RSS and email subscribers do not count toward your total. For a true count, you must add the number of subscribers you have to this monthly total.
- **Page views per month.** This is the number of pages your visitors have viewed in the last month. If you divide this number by your total unique visitors, you will get the average number of pages viewed by each visitor.
- **Percent change in the last 12 months.** This is the rate of growth in the last 12 months. Publishers want to know if your audience is growing and at what rate. Here's the formula: unique visitors in the last 30 days, minus your unique visitors for the same period 12 months ago, divided by your unique visitors for the same period 12 months ago, multiplied by 100.
- **Average number of comments per post.** This is a little trickier, because not all commenting systems keep track of this stat. Disqus, the system I use (and highly recommend) provides an "analytics snapshot" that tells me how many comments I received today, last month, and all time.
- **Total number of blog subscribers.** The people who subscribe via email or RSS represent your most loyal readers or 'super-fans'. They have made the effort to sign up to receive your content. More importantly, they have given you permission to push content to them. This permission-based asset is arguably the most important asset you have as an author.

Twitter: Include your twitter name. It is OK to just say, for example, @bubblecow. you don't need to include a link to your account. Also include your follower numbers at time of sending. Finally, I would also look to include a social metric such as your Klout score.

Facebook: Include the url and total number of subscribers.

Other: If you are active on other channels (Quora, YouTube, Google+ etc.) then you should be including links to your profiles and some kind of figure to define your influence. My rule of thumb here would be to only include channels in which you are active. Resist the temptation to throw in that old Mysapce page, when you have even looked at it in years.

Summary

- List all relevant offline contacts.
- Included meaningful stats.
- Be creative!

Lesson 12 - Odds and Ends

In this lesson we will look at a number of issues that will help you negotiate some of the more difficult or confusing questions that may arise whilst preparing your book proposal..

By this point you should have a workable query letter. This lesson aims to try and answer some of the common questions that arise in regards to a query letter...

How Do You Pitch a Series of Books?

It is very common for fiction writers to have an idea for a series of books. After all, a series can be a very attractive prospect for potential agents and publishers. However, this raises an important question as to the best way to pitch your series of books.

As a general rule of thumb my advice to writers pitching a book series is that your approach is dependent on how many books of the series are actually written.

If you have written just one book, but have the outline/synopsis/vague idea for a series of follow-on books, then pitch just one book. By this I mean that your pitch should focus very heavily on your written book, with just a small section in the cover letter explaining that you see the book as part of a series. Don't include any information beyond this simple statement. You are selling a single book NOT a series.

If you have written more than one book then your pitch is for the whole series. Your book proposal will focus on the books as a set, with a separate synopsis for each title, or one synopsis covering all the books, it's your choice. The important difference here is that you are selling a book series, not a single book.

A single book with the potential for a series is one **product**, a series that has already been written is an entirely different **product**.

Why Does it Matter?

Well in the first instance, everyone (well not everyone but you know what I mean) says their book is part of a series. This is far more common in certain genres, but is still commonplace across the board. The problem is that if your series is not written then your claim is just hot air. Agents/publishers need to see a product, and yes the potential for a series will strengthen that product's appeal, but ultimately it is sales that will determine the number of follow-on books that are produced.

So you may have a great idea for a ten-book series of novels, but the publisher has seen it all before. Unless you have a book series that is actually written, then make the series aspect of your pitch nothing more than an added bonus.

What if the Book is Already Self-Published?

Twelve months ago I would have said this was an issue, but today this has changed. A blog post on the BubbleCow blog looked into this question in depth. I suggest you have a good look at the comments since they add real value. It is now not uncommon for an agent or publisher to seriously consider a book that has already been published. However, it is all going to come down to sales. If you have sold 10,000 books in two weeks then agents will come running. The flipside is that if you have sold just a handful then questions will be raised.

If you are pitching a book that has been self-published, at some point the issue of sales will come up. My advice is that if the book has impressive sales, then they should be listed in detail in your pitch. If the sales are less impressive, then still say it has been self-published, but avoid adding exact numbers. However, be aware that the agent/publisher will ask — this will be your chance to explain the reasons for the poor sales.

Part 2: Synopsis

Lesson 13 - What is a Synopsis?

When it comes to preparing a book proposal, the biggest obstacle that many writers face is the dreaded synopsis. At BubbleCow, we hear on a daily basis from writers who just don't know where to start when it comes to writing a synopsis. It is not uncommon to hear of writers who have struggled for weeks, or even months, to wrestle their story into some kind of meaningful summary.

I would like to say that this guide will make writing a book synopsis easy. I would also like to say that by following the lessons you will suddenly be able to knock up a winning synopsis without even breaking a sweat. I would like to say this, but I would be lying. Writing a synopsis is tough and there is no short cut!

This said, what the following lesson **will do** is teach you how to write a book synopsis. They will give you the tools and framework you need to construct a synopsis that fulfils an agent's or publisher's wildest dream. There may be no short cut for writing a good synopsis, but the following lessons will provide you with all that you need to ensure that you don't waste time on a synopsis that simply doesn't cut the mustard.

So What is a Synopsis?

In its most simple form a synopsis is an outline of your novel. It introduces all the key characters and events, whilst outlining the narrative arc from the start to the end. Perhaps the best way to understand a synopsis is to understand why agents and publishers insist that you include one in your book proposal.

The role of the synopsis is as follows:

1. To provide a complete summary of your book's narrative arc.
2. To reassure the agent/publisher that your book fits within their publishing portfolio.
3. To provide a document that can be used to secure a commission for your novel.

A Synopsis Provides a Summary

Agents and publishers face a paradox. Though they are busy and their time is stretched, they still need new books and new writers to feed the publishing machine. The book proposal has been developed as a time-effective method of assessing new books. In many ways the book proposal is as much about removing books that are unsuitable as finding those that are suitable. The book proposal process means that unsuitable books are pruned from the proposal system as quickly as possible.

The first 'gate' is the query letter. Assuming that your letter is well written, it will show to the agent/publisher that your book is of the correct genre, has a potentially interesting narrative, and is written by an interesting writer who is aware of the market. Having progressed past the query letter stage, the next hurdle is the synopsis.

Your synopsis will allow the agent/publisher to confirm or deny that your book's narrative has enough potential to invest further time assessing your novel. All without having to read the actual book! However, even if you have ticked all the boxes with the query letter, if your synopsis is not up to scratch then rejection looms.

A Synopsis Reassures

In previous lessons we have developed the idea that publishers are highly specialised in certain genres. In reality, the situation is far more complex and subtle than this. Many publishers will have their own publishing ethos and agenda. They will be looking to publish certain 'types' of books. This may not even be the same types of books as they have published previously. For example, you may come across a publisher that has had great success publishing 'vampire' novels. When you look closely at their recent publications you see vampire title after vampire title. Therefore, if you have written a vampire book, this publisher may seem the natural choice. However, behind the scenes, the publisher may have decided to move away from vampires and are looking for books about werewolves. This means that your vampire book, though of the correct genre, will not be suitable for their future plans.

This may seem depressing on the surface, since the general public often have little indication on where publishers are intending to go with their

next books. The good news is that agents do! In the example above, a good agent will know the publisher in question is looking for books about werewolves and will be looking for novels about that topic. Should you have written a book about werewolves and submit to the agent, then bingo — right place at the right time.

Therefore, one role of a synopsis is to communicate the deeper narrative arc of a novel, without agents and publishers having to spend a whole day reading your manuscript. It allows them to quickly find and identify novels that are of potential interest. The flipside is that it also allows them to quickly reject novels with narratives that agents feel are not commercial (agent code for publishers are looking for something different).

A Synopsis Helps Secure a Book Deal

If you are able to secure representation by an agent, and if your book is submitted to a publisher who shows interest, then the synopsis is a vital part of the commissioning process. What tends to happen at a publisher is that an editor assesses your work in the first instance. If they feel your book has potential for the publisher, it is then presented to a committee of other, often more senior editors. It is these editors who assess the potential of your book. Should they feel your book matches their plans, then a deal is offered.

Part of this assessment process is your synopsis. Rather than each commissioning editor reading your book, they will often read just the synopsis, and you this to form an initial impression. This means that your synopsis is an essential document. It means that time invested in your synopsis now will pay off in the long term.

Lesson 14 - Using The 5 Key Elements

In the previous section where we looked at writing your query letter, we examined the role of Randy Ingermanson's Snowflake Concept in discovering the structure of your novel. We first looked at how it could be used to develop an elevator pitch and then expanded further on the concept when writing a brief synopsis. In this lesson we are going to once again return to the Snowflake Concept and use the Five Key Elements to act as the skeleton when writing your full synopsis.

In the previous lesson we looked at the role of the synopsis and discovered that it was a document that not only provided a summary of your book's plot, but also reassured publishers that your book will fit into their portfolio and that the synopsis could be used to promote your book internally. The aim of this lesson is to give you a solid, workable framework from which you can write a synopsis that provides agents and publishers with all the information they require to make an informed decision about your book. It will also help you avoid writing a synopsis that fails to outline all the key characters and all the major plot events.

At this point I would suggest that you go back and re-read Writing A Brief Synopsis. I would also suggest you take a quick look at what Randy Ingermanson has to say regarding the Snowflake Method.

To recap, the Five Key Elements approach asks five questions, which when answered by a writer will pull out the essential aspects of a novel. The questions are as follows:

1. Who's the main character?
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action?
3. What is the main character's aim?
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal?
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever?

You should have already answered these questions and it is these answers we are going to use to develop the synopsis.

The Start, the Middle and the End

Most successful novels, and almost all successful films, operate using a variant of a classic three-act structure. In its most simple terms this is the concept of the start, the middle and the end. Here is a very rough (and I mean very rough) outline of a typical three-act structure:

- **START:** The inciting incident occurs, this is an event in which the protagonist is forced to act
- **MIDDLE:** The protagonist attempts to resolve the inciting incident but faces ever-increasing difficulties
- **END:** The inciting incident is resolved by the protagonist

The Five Key Elements approach is designed to use the five key questions to allow you to clearly define your novel's start, middle and end. If we now combine the five key questions and the three act structure we get the following:

- **START:** The inciting incident (Question 2) occurs, this is an event in which the protagonist (Question 1) is forced to act
- **MIDDLE:** The protagonist attempts to resolve the inciting incident but faces ever-increasing difficulties (Questions 3 and 4)
- **END:** The inciting incident is resolved by the protagonist (Question 5)

Example:

Let's use a very basic police drama as an example. The plot is pretty straightforward. Bob Smith is a cop who doesn't play by the rules but gets the job done. He is divorced and likes a drink. When a serial killer strikes for the second time in Bob Smith's city, it is up to the cop to track down the killer. OK — let's apply the five questions:

1. Who's the main character? Bob Smith
2. What is the situation that is forcing the main character to take action?
Second murder
3. What is the main character's aim? To capture the killer
4. What is stopping the character from achieving their goal? Don't know who the killer is, must follow the clues
5. What is the pinnacle of the story, the moment at which the character's goal may be lost forever? Meets the killer in a violent showdown

This may seem like a very simplistic breakdown of the story, but when writing a synopsis it is best to work from the bottom upwards. If you are able to sketch out the start, middle and end of your novel it will be far easier to expand this into a 3-5 page synopsis.

Think in Acts

Having answered the Five Key Elements questions and mapped out your novel's start, middle and end, it is now time to look at your plot in detail. The best way to think about your novel when writing a synopsis is in acts and scenes. If you have followed the start, middle and end process detailed above, you will have a natural three-act structure, with Act I the start, Act II the middle and Act III the end. Let's apply this to our example:

Example:

ACT I (start): The serial killer strikes for a second time and it falls to Bob Smith to solve the murder

ACT II (middle): Bob Smith follows the clues found at the murder scene until slowly uncovering the identity of the murderer

ACT III (end): The murderer is tracked down to an old deserted warehouse. Bob Smith kills the murderer in a showdown. The motive for the killings is revealed

I strongly suggest that at this point, you split your novel into acts. I understand that you may feel your novel doesn't fit the three act structure and that's fine. However, it will still naturally split into scenes. There are models for five-act novels, or even more. Yet what is important when writing your synopsis, is not the act structure, but the fact that you have clearly identified the acts in your book.

Think in Scenes

A scene is a passage of your novel in which the protagonist undergoes some kind of change. This might be emotional, they may learn something new or it may simply be a change in circumstances. In their own way, a scene is a story in itself. A good indication of a scene is that it can be lifted from a book and stand alone. Each scene will have a start, middle and end. It will also have an element of conflict.

Your next step is to split your acts into scenes. There is no rule to number of scenes per act and each scene can be a different length. In fact, each act can be a different length (in a classic three act structure Act 1 and 3 tend to be of similar length and both shorter than the longer Act 2). In fact, you will probably find that you have a ready-made scene breakdown in the form of your chapters. There is a strong possibility that you have naturally formed chapters from scenes.

Example:

I have resisted the temptation of plotting out a full novel and have instead included the breakdown of the first three scenes of Act 1:

ACT 1 – scene 1: Bob Smith is woken to be told of a murder. The reader learns that Bob Smith is single and the disorganised nature of his living arrangements point towards a disorganised life. (Change: learns of murder — inciting incident)

ACT 1 – scene 2: Bob Smith arrives at the murder scene. The victim and the circumstances of the death are similar to a past murder. (Change: learns that a serial killer is active)

ACT 1 – scene 3: Bob Smith attends the post mortem. He discovers the victim was stabbed with an unusual knife, perhaps ceremonial. He also discovers a note in the victim's mouth with a biblical text inscribed. (Change: learns vital clues)

This example gives you an outline you can use to plot out your own novel's scene and act structure. From this outline you will be able to produce your synopsis.

Summarise Your Plot

Having identified your novel's act structure and then listed the scenes within each act, you are finally in a position to write your synopsis. There is no easy way to do this and the long and short is that you are going to have to summarise down the key events. We will talk more in the next lesson about the length of your synopsis, but as a rule of thumb you are heading for between 2-5 pages (double spaced).

To add to the complexity, you don't want to be talking about acts and scenes in the synopsis. Your synopsis needs to be a reflection of your novel with its own narrative arc (start, middle and end). To help you visualise the kind of document you will produce, I have summarised the example we have used above. One word of warning here. Our example contains just one character and none of the complexity that you will find in a full novel. However, the example below will act as a workable guide.

BOB SMITH, a middle age cop with relationship issues and a problem with drink, is called to the scene of a grisly murder. On arrival he finds the corpse of a mutilated young girl. After only a brief examination he recognises the method of her death. Another girl was killed in a similar manner only weeks before and Bob Smith is sure he has a serial killer in his city. The post mortem confirms Bob's fears, whilst also revealing the killer used a strange ceremonial knife and left a note containing a biblical quote in the mouth of the dead girl.

Summary

- Use the Five Key Elements questions
- Split into acts and scenes
- Ensure synopsis has its own start, middle and end

Lesson 15 - Questions and Answers

In the previous lesson we went into detail about how you can use acts and scenes to produce a framework from which your synopsis can be written. In this lesson we address some of the common questions posed regarding a synopsis.

Double or Single Line Spacing?

In a pre-internet world, where all submissions were printed and posted, agents and publishers would insist that documents were double spaced. The world has moved on but many agents/publishers are still insisting on double spacing. I suspect the main reason for this is that your synopsis will be printed out and double spacing leaves room for mark-up. It is for this reason that I strongly suggest that you double space your synopsis. This said, I would also suggest you always check the agent/publisher's guidelines before submitting.

How Long Should a Synopsis Be?

Agents, publishers and writers all seem to have a view on the 'correct' length for a synopsis. Before we examine this question in a bit more detail let me say just one thing, there is no correct answer. If your synopsis covers all the key plot points, major characters and is not too long or too short, then it will be OK.

As a general rule you should be aiming for a synopsis length of between 2 and 10 pages (double spaced). If you want a target length then I would aim at not exceeding 5 pages unless absolutely necessary. In fact, I would go one step further and say that if you can hit 3-5 pages in length then you will please just about everyone.

There is a school of thought that says the 2-page synopsis is the perfect length. I have never come across a decent argument as to why '2 pages', and my view is that it often puts too much pressure on a writer to try and bring the synopsis down to such a short size.

I have also come across a number of writers who opt for a two synopsis approach. They will write a longer 5-page (ish) synopsis and also include a short 1-page summary. For me, and anyone following this guide, I would

strongly suggest you don't take this approach. Remember, the query letter contains a one-paragraph synopsis, so if the agent/publisher has got to the point of reading your synopsis they need a substantial document that presents all the information.

Which Tense?

Your synopsis should be written in present tense. This is the industry standard. The example from the previous lesson demonstrates this...

BOB SMITH, a middle age cop with relationship issues and a problem with drink, is called to the scene of a grisly murder. On arrival he finds the corpse of a mutilated young girl. After only a brief examination he recognises the method of her death. Another girl was killed in a similar manner only weeks before and Bob Smith is sure he has a serial killer in his city. The post mortem confirms Bob's fears, whilst also revealing the killer used a strange ceremonial knife and left a note containing a biblical quote in the mouth of the dead girl.

Anything else?

The first time you introduce a major character in your synopsis, you should put the character's name in capital letters

Part 3: Extract

Lesson 16 - What is an Extract?

If you have managed to get this far then you should have written your query letter and constructed your synopsis. The third and final part of the book proposal is the extract.

The whole point of your book proposal has been to push the agent and publisher to the point at which they are willing to read your extract. Your query letter and synopsis will have demonstrated that you represent a real 'commercial' opportunity, however it will all be for nothing if your extract is not up to scratch.

You Only Have to be Good Enough

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell examines the roll of intelligence and ability in the success of any given project. In essence, his findings are simple. Gladwell concludes that as long as the individual met a certain 'standard' in their chosen field, then success was dependent on other factors. In other words, as long as your writing ability and technical ability are 'good enough' then it will be other factors that decide on the success of your book. However, if your writing is not up to the required level, then rejection will follow. This means that writing Shakespearian-standard prose will not bring certain success, but a mistake-riddled manuscript with poor narrative is bound for rejection.

This means that it is your duty as a writer to ensure that your extract is the best it can possibly be at the time of submission. No agent or publisher is expecting a manuscript to land on their desk print-ready. Editors are aware that all books need work prior to publication. Every novel will be copy-edited at least once and will also receive a close proofread. However, agents and publishers are cost sensitive and they are looking for manuscripts that need as little work as possible. Gone are the days when an agent or publisher would spend years nurturing a writer; today they are looking for a fast turnaround.

The long and short is that no matter how well written your book proposal, if your extract is not 'good enough' it will be rejected.

The Structure of Your Extract

Agents and publishers can be difficult beasts at times and each will have their own ideas on what your book proposal should look like. I would insist that before sending an extract to a publisher or agent that you read their submission guidelines carefully. However, as a general rule of thumb your extract should be:

- A sensible font in 10 or 12 point (I would suggest Arial or Times New Roman)
- Double spaced
- Three chapters or fifty pages (double spaced)
- The first chapters in your book

These rules are always over ruled by a specific agent or publisher's own guidelines.

Ensuring that your extract is the opening of the book has two distinct advantages. The first is that the first 50 pages of your novel should contain your inciting incident. This is the event that causes the protagonist to react and sets up the narrative arc. The second is that including non-sequential chapters just raises too many questions. The agent will wonder why you haven't given them sequential chapters, perhaps even worrying that you are trying to hide a slow or clumsy opening. A third bonus reason is that the opening section of your book is arguably the most important. If you can't hook an agent or publisher with this extract, what hope do you have with your reader?

In the remaining lessons we will look at ways to ensure your book is the best it can possibly be at the time of submission.

Lesson 17 - Self-editing

In this lesson we will begin the process of preparing your extract for submission. In the lesson I will explain the principles of editing and show you how self-editing will help you to produce the best document possible. Effective self-editing will help you to avoid submitting a manuscript that is riddled with obvious typos and silly errors.

Agents and publishers are inundated with manuscripts on a daily basis. In fact, they see so many manuscripts, and have so few publishing slots available, that they are in fact looking for reasons to say no, not yes. It is easier for an agent/publisher to discover fault with a book and find an excuse to reject than it is to say yes. This means that it is your duty as a writer to give the agent/publisher no reason to say no!

This puts agents/publishers in a very strong position. A few years ago, you would often hear of an agent/publisher working closely with an author. They would nurture the writer, working on the novel, moulding it into shape. However, these days are quickly disappearing. For an agent/publisher, any time spent editing a book simply costs money, and cuts into profits. As it stands, any time spent working with a writer is time that could be spent publishing books or negotiating deals. The result is that agents/publishers are looking for books that are as close to 'publication-ready' as possible.

This means that a well-edited book, which needs little in-house editing input, is a very interesting prospect for any publisher. Therefore, all other things being equal, a well-edited book stands a far better chance of publication over a book that needs work.

This may not be fair, and may not be good for the industry, but it is the current situation. It means that it has become a writer's duty to make their book as close to 'publication-ready' as possible.

Understanding the Editing Process is Key

If your book was to be prepared for publication by a publishing house, it would pass through a four editing steps process prior to printing.

- Structural editing
- Stylistic editing
- Copy-editing
- Proofreading

The aim is simply to produce a book that is accessible and readable. Yet, the editing process is as much an art as a science and includes a large amount of 'gut feel'. This said, self-editing (and even professional editing) hangs around three key questions. These questions are constantly posed in the editor's mind (be that the writer or a third party). Only by consistently applying these questions can a good edit be performed.

- Is the book's organisation and content suitable for the intended audience, medium, market, and purpose? [Structural]
- How can the book's meaning be clarified, the flow improved and the language smoothed? [Stylistic]
- Have you ensured the correctness, consistency, accuracy, and completeness of the document? [Copy]

Self-Editing Tips

When self-editing there are a number of tips and tricks you can use to make the job that little bit easier.

Be Consistent

Writing a book is a long process that often spans years. During this period it is easy for writers to lose track of some of the minor plot details. However, it is vital that a writer makes every effort to maintain consistency throughout the writing process. The problem is that readers will notice mistakes. If you tell your readers that a character has blue eyes in the opening chapter, and then six chapters later you say they are brown, the reader will remember.

My tip is to use character reference sheets. These are simply lists of the key aspects for all of your characters. On these sheets you should record all the key facts — age, description, eye colour etc. Also include any details that might be important such as relationships with other characters, home address and other details you develop. One additional tip is to get into the habit of updating your sheets as you build the characters.

Use Simple Grammar

Not all writers are grammar experts. In fact, the reality is that many writers struggle with grammar. Our tip is to keep it simple. The correct use of the period (full stop) and comma will get you out of most tough spots. Learning the rules of the correct use of the apostrophe is also crucial, as is the grammar/punctuation of speech. However, beyond this you are getting onto dangerous ground. If you are unsure of the correct usage of the semi-colon, then don't use it (even if Microsoft Word insists otherwise).

Formatting

Consistent formatting is an important, but often overlooked, part of editing. By this we are talking about titles, subtitles, indenting, text font etc. You need to pay attention to anything that appears on the page. One way to get around inconsistencies is to use the 'style' function of your word processing package. Another way is to simply pay attention each time you start a new section, type in a header or change font. Being aware is half the battle.

Tense Usage

When talking to our editors the issue of tense was highlighted as a common problem. The switching of tenses (past to present/present to past) is something that happens to all writers. It is for this reason that you must pay particular attention to this problem. This is one of those things that readers tend to spot.

Read Out Aloud

This is a tip that I think every editor worth their salt will pass onto writers. Once your work is completed read it out aloud. Personally, I use a software program called TextAloud. This allows me to follow the text as the computer reads it out (in a robot voice). Reading your work out aloud will help you to spot silly mistakes but also the sentences that don't flow. Another tip is to print your work out and read it from paper. I am not sure why (something to do with screen resolution?) but this seems to help spot mistakes.

Be harsh — cut the dead wood

All of our editors agreed that this is one area that many writers find very difficult. Cutting back is a vital and very powerful skill for writers to develop. The foundation to the exercise should be for the writer to look at each section and ask 'do I need this?' Overly wordy sentences, extended paragraphs and repetition should all be removed. In addition, ANY section that fails to move the plot forward should be cut. I have seen novels where whole characters have been removed. Cutting back the work is painful but if done correctly will improve your book tenfold.

Read each line as a line, then a paragraph, then a section, then a chapter...

If you have carried out all the steps above, and you are happy with your novel, then it's time to start again. This time you need to go through the novel on a line by line basis. You may find it helps to wait for a couple of weeks before you try to re-edit. This time around you need to scrutinise each sentence in turn, fine-tuning as you go. Then, when finished, go back and look at the text paragraph by paragraph. Be critical. Next, examine each section, then chapter and so on....

More Self-editing Tips

Perhaps the biggest problem writers face when editing their own work is simply getting too close. Even when holding the questions listed above in your mind, writers can still find it just too hard to detach themselves. But this is understandable, in fact I would go as far as saying this is essential.

The essence of any COPY edit is grammar and spelling but this is NOT an edit. An edit is so much more. It is important that a writer avoids becoming obsessed with spelling. Yes, spelling is important, and yes you must be as accurate as possible. However, grammar is just part of the puzzle. A good edit consists of all three questions listed above — spelling is just one aspect.

One potentially powerful option open to writers is to use friends and family to help with the edit. My advice here is clear. Firstly, be very precise with friends and family in just what you require from them. They can act as great proofreaders, but if this is the job you want them to carry out, then be clear. Tell them all you want is feedback on grammar and spelling only. Secondly, be selective about what you implement from friends and family feedback. Even the best intentioned feedback can be damaging and ill advised. Be prepared to listen, but also be prepared to ignore. After all, it is your book.

In the next lesson, we will considering further the use of friends and family to edit your book in greater detail.

Lesson 18 - Using Beta Readers

In the previous lesson we examined the best way to self-edit your work and highlighted the 'best practice' methods that will ensure your efforts in editing are not wasted. In this lesson we turn our attention to beta readers. If you follow the guidelines set out in this lesson you will learn the best way to interact with beta readers, ensuring you don't waste time and end up with results that will not improve your novel.

Beta Reader is a relatively new term and is given to a reader who assesses a novel in the stages prior to submission. A beta reader is given the novel with the understanding that they will read the book and provide feedback the writer can use to improve the manuscript. The idea being that by allowing a small number of beta readers to view their manuscript, a reader has the opportunity to correct any major issues before moving onto the next stage.

Picking Beta Readers

There are no hard and fast rules for picking beta readers, though I would add the following suggestions:

1. Avoid very close friends and family
2. Aim for a small number (3-5) of very good readers, rather than a large number offering average feedback
3. If possible arrange to meet them face-to-face to discuss your book (if not then phone/Skype is second best)
4. Pick readers who are your target market or, if this is not possible, choose readers that understand your genre
5. Make sure they can read your novel within a time frame that fits your needs.

Making the Most of the Feedback

Having picked your beta readers and given them your novel, the next step is to get feedback. At first glance this can seem like a straightforward process, but it is full of potential pitfalls.

The first problem is ensuring the reader is able to give valuable feedback. As I said above, close family and friends are not the best choice. The problem is that your mum/dad/husband/wife/friend all want your novel to be great; they also like you and don't want to hurt your feelings. This means feedback from this 'inner circle' is all but useless. For the best, most honest and most valuable feedback you need to break out of this circle and into the big bad world. The key is to make an effort to seek out the kind of people who would actually read your book in real life. It is these people, real readers, who will give you the kind of feedback that really counts.

When collecting your feedback make sure you listen more than you talk. Getting feedback via email or a Word doc is great, but actually speaking with your reader is the best possible solution. This gives you a chance to watch their body language and prompt them for more insightful answers. However, when interacting with readers you must resist the temptation to explain, just listen. Ask open-ended questions — it is these types of questions that will give you the best results. Typically who/what/when/where/why/how questions all work well. Asking, 'Did you like chapter 2?' will produce a limited response. However asking, 'What did you like about chapter 2?' or even better, 'What didn't you like about chapter 2?' will produce the best possible feedback.

If you truly seek genuine and valuable feedback then you need to be ready to face the bitter truth. Not everything you hear will be nice. In fact, if all you hear are nice things then you are doing it all wrong. You want to hear about the bits of your work that are rubbish. You need to know which characters are two-dimensional, which scenes don't work and where the reader lost interest. Will this feedback hurt? Too right it will! It will sting for days... But it will make you a better writer.

Not all feedback is created equal, and not all readers are capable of giving you the kind of feedback you need. It is therefore essential that you are able to filter the feedback, be it good or bad. Resist the temptation to

leap into action. Instead of reacting instantly to one comment, take a step back and assess. The first step is to make sure you get enough feedback. One reader is not enough, you need at least three readers to have assessed your book before you go making major changes. If you get enough feedback then you can concentrate on looking for trends and patterns in the reader's comments. If all the feedback says Chapter 1 is too short, then it's time to revisit Chapter 1. However, if just one reader says Chapter 1 is too short, it's probably best to ignore this comment and make no changes.

In the next section we consider the pros and cons of paying for professional feedback.

Lesson 19 - Getting Professional Help

In the previous lesson we examined the role of beta readers in helping you to assess and improve your novel. We now turn our attention to the idea of paying for professional help and consider the potential benefits for your book proposal.

When consider paying a professional to assess your novel you have three alternatives. These alternatives each have their own advantages and disadvantages and this lesson sets these out in a fashion that will allow you to make a decision with regards to which will be most suitable for your novel.

Copy Editing

Copy editing is an essential part of any writer's life. Whether a writer is self-publishing or preparing their book for submission to an agent or publisher, they will at some point, consider employing a professional copy editor.

The single most important aspect of BubbleCow's editing service is that it is designed to look at each line and word of your book, and then provide the advice, feedback and guidance you need to correct errors both big and small. **The goal of the copy edit is to provide editorial feedback that, when applied to your extract, will bring it to a publishable standard.**

BubbleCow's copy-editing service has been designed to provide a 'publisher'-style edit, which leaves your manuscript as close to 'print-ready' as possible. This means that our copy edit will leave you confident that your manuscript is ready to move to the next stage.

If your book was being prepared for publication by a publishing house, it would pass through a four-step editing process – structural editing, stylistic editing, copy editing and proofreading. Our service combines the three types of edit (structural, stylistic and copy) to provide you with a 'publisher' standard in-depth line edit. The edit involves one of our professional and experienced editors reading through your work, line by line, and asking themselves the following questions:

- Is the book's organisation and content suitable for the intended audience, medium, market, and purpose? [Structural]
- How can the book's meaning be clarified, the flow improved and the language smoothed?[Stylistic]
- Have you ensured the correctness, consistency, accuracy, and completeness of the document? [Copy]

In reality this means that we will not only be looking to correct grammar and punctuation, but also paying attention to the narrative flow, potential plot holes and the overall 'feel' of the book in relation to its genre and readership.

We have built our line-editing process around the professionally recognised line-editing standards and processes used by all major publishing companies worldwide.

What can you expect to pay? We charge \$10/1000 words (or £7/1000).

Bubblecow.net

Proofreading

The aim of proofreading is simple and that is to correct your grammar and punctuation. A proofreader will examine each word of your manuscript and apply a set of agreed rules. These rules will vary depending on the country of submission. This is important. If you are submitting to a US agent, then you need to make sure that the proofreader is applying American grammar and punctuation rules. A good proofreader will be able to switch between different 'house' styles. As an example, BubbleCow's internal proofreader is equally proficient working with documents destined for the US and UK markets.

What proofreading will not do is fix structural issues. Though they may identify potential problems and plot holes (though this is not part of their job), they will not suggest ways in which they can be corrected.

What can you expect to pay? We charge \$6/1000 words (or £4/1000).

Reader's Report

The final type of editorial feedback is the reader's report. This sees an editor (though probably not a copy editor) reading your work and providing general feedback regarding your novel. These types of reports tend to focus on bigger issues and will give you a good indication of what is, and is not, working in your novel. This can be useful and as a general rule this type of feedback is cheaper than a copy edit. However, I would add a word of warning. The biggest issue for me is that reader's reports tend not to tell you how to fix the problems they highlight. They may make suggestions, but it is left very much to the writer to fix these problems.

As with all the services listed in this lesson, it is essential that you make an effort to find the right company for you. This is a combination of price, experience of the editor/proofreader with your genre and desired outcome.

What can you expect to pay? Somewhere between \$500 and \$800 (£300 – £500).

