

Getting it Write

Publishing a non-fiction book is the dream of many physicians, and while joining the ranks of authors may be more difficult than you realize, it's not impossible, either. Tips from one doctor/author to get you started.

IN 1668, JOHN MAYNOW

noted, "Disease, as it stalks the land, cannot keep pace with the incurable vice of scribbling

about it." Given our ancestral propensity for writing, it is not surprising that we modern day physicians like to see our words in print. Probably the reason we write is that we are trained to communicate and writing is one of the best ways to do this. After all, it is through



the printed word that we have gained our degrees and much of our knowledge.

Physicians who publish books on health-related top-

ics do so for a variety of reasons including the fact that there is limited time in the office to explain things to patients. There are also many people who need information but who will not seek medical treatment, and thus may never

have access to important health information.

Mary Jane Minkin, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Yale University

School of Medicine, wrote

What Every Woman Needs to Know

About Menopause: The Years Before,

During and After (Yale University Press, 1996) in the

mid 1990's because "at that point there were no

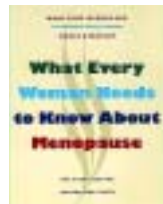
books out on the market that I could recommend to

my patients to read about menopause."

Another reason some doctors like to write is that they feel creatively stifled practicing "evidence based medicine" day in and day out. Dr. Jonathan Edlow, the author of *Bull's Eye—Unraveling the Medical Mystery of Lyme Disease* (Yale University Press, 2003) says he writes because, "I have always enjoyed telling stories. Writing for me, whether magazine articles [or books], is first and foremost about telling a story." Whatever the reason, publishing a book is a terrific way to do something unique and exciting with your career.

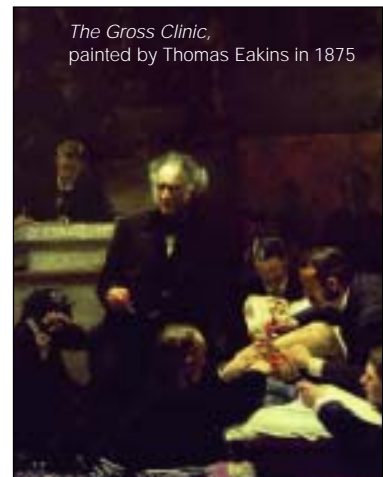
Before you start

Many of my colleagues have asked me how they, too, can publish a book. There are a number of things that I tell them right off the bat. First, similar to the medical profes-



sion, the publishing industry has formal protocols, and people within the industry (e.g., literary agents and editors) expect writers to follow these protocols. Which means that before you begin to consider writing a book, you need to do a little research on how the process works. Second, for a non-fiction book, in almost all instances, you need to write a book proposal. Much like a history and physical examination note, book proposals follow a very specific template. Third, writing a book takes a lot of time. Be sure you have set aside dedicated time to complete the project. This can be a difficult task to accomplish when you have a busy practice. In 1887, Dr. Samuel

Gross lamented in his autobiography, "I generally spent from five to eight hours a day upon my manuscript, subject of course to frequent and sometimes annoying interruptions by patients." Fourth, unless your book is a bestseller, royalties will supplement your income, but will like-



ly be far less than you could have made if you had devoted your time instead to treating patients. And fifth, publishing a book will take you on a journey that is both phenomenal and unpredictable.

How to begin

As you begin the process of writing a non-fiction book, it is important to answer the following questions: Is your idea original? Is it compelling? Can you identify specific groups of people who will likely buy the book? Independent literary agent Justin Fernandez of Cincinnati, Ohio, describes writing books as a "business and an art." The art comes first with conceptualizing what you want to write and for whom you want to write it. To start this

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Writing Resources

BOOKS

Literary Market Place 2004

(Information Today, 2003)

This is a large reference book that is found in most libraries. It includes a comprehensive list of literary agents.

2004 Guide to Literary Agents

(Writers Digest Books, 2003)

Edited by Rachel Vater, this book contains information on hundreds of literary agents. The book offers advice on how to find the right agent and how to contact an agent as well. Information about the agents is helpful and includes contact information, whether they are seeking new clients, what areas they specialize in, and recent published books that they have represented.

The Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers and Literary Agents 2003-2004:

Who they are, what they want and how to win them over By Jeff Herman (Prima Publishing, 2002) An excellent reference book and the one book that I suggest every writer have on his bookshelf. This reference guide contains information on editors, publishing houses (including trade and university presses), literary agent listings and more.

ORGANIZATIONS

American Medical Writers Association

40 West Gude Drive

Suite 101

Rockville, Maryland 20850-1192

www.amwa.org

Association of Authors' Representatives

P.O. Box 237201

Ansonia Station

New York, New York 10003

www.aar-online.org

process, decide what you want to write and then do a search on the books that are already published in this area (I usually do this by searching books on Amazon.com). Then, ask yourself whether your book is different enough from the books already published on the subject. The next thing you need to clarify is who your audience is—publishers will require you to define your target audience. Finally, determine if you will edit the book or write it and if you will work with collaborators. Once you have planned all of this, you are ready to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and begin your book proposal.

THE PROPOSAL

1. Title: Subtitle
2. Overview
3. Markets
4. Competition
5. About the Author
6. Table of Contents
7. Chapter Summaries
8. Sample Chapter (may be optional)



Title and Subtitle

In general, titles should convey what the book is about, contain five or fewer words, create an image, and make a potential book buyer take a closer look. Subtitles are not necessary but are often used. They can be much more lengthy than the title and tell more about the book.

Examples of good non-fiction titles and subtitles include: *Stupid White Men: And Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* and *8 Minutes in the Morning: A Simple Way to Start Your Day That Burns Fat and Sheds the Pounds*. The title and subtitle of your book proposal is what will make an editor or agent read your proposal (or not). But keep in mind, that no matter what title and subtitle you choose, often it will not be the same when the book gets published. Editors determine the titles and they legitimately assert that they have a lot of experience with book titles—knowing

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how to sharpen the book's focus, attract readers, and increase sales.

Overview

The overview may be the only thing the agent or editor reads, so put your very best material right up front. This is your one chance to convince someone that your book is worth publishing. Colleen Mohyde, an agent with the [Doe Coover Agency](#) in Winchester, Massachusetts, notes that "Even if I have five minutes when I start it, [if] I like it, I will keep reading." To get the reader's attention, begin the overview with a powerful statement and write succinctly and compellingly. The overview of a non-fiction book proposal should: (1) be compelling; (2) explain why this book should be written; (3) convince the

editor that you are the person to write it; and (4) summarize how you will write the book.

You may want to begin with a startling statistic that supports your thesis, an anecdote or short story or a clear and concise statement about the thesis of your book. Great overviews are creative, exciting and take risks but do not exaggerate, appear unprofessional or overly pontificate.

Markets

The markets section is where you convince the editor or agent that people will want to read your book. In this section you want to be factual but at the same time optimistic and focused. Strong markets sections have reliable and relevant facts and statis-

tics and describe a targeted market—even if the book is for a general audience. It is important to avoid overgeneralizations, particularly claims such as "this book's audience includes all adult women." For example, a book on breast cancer is certainly a general audience book—women with and without cancer may be interested in reading it; however, more defined markets would include patients with breast cancer, family members of patients, members of breast cancer support groups, hospital libraries, and health-care providers.

Justify each of the groups you describe with facts and statistics that support your claim. How many women have breast cancer? How many breast cancer support groups and national associations are there? Do they have Web sites and could your book be sold on these Web sites or through the groups' newsletters? Do you give talks to women with breast cancer? Do you have your own Web site or newsletter? And so on.

Competition

Sometimes people confuse the markets and the competition sections. The markets section tells the agent or editor who will buy your book while the competition section describes what books are already available on the same or a similar topic. It is important to note that publishers like new books on established topics. Rarely are books published where no competition exists. So, if you want to convince someone to publish your book, then you need to show that there is an

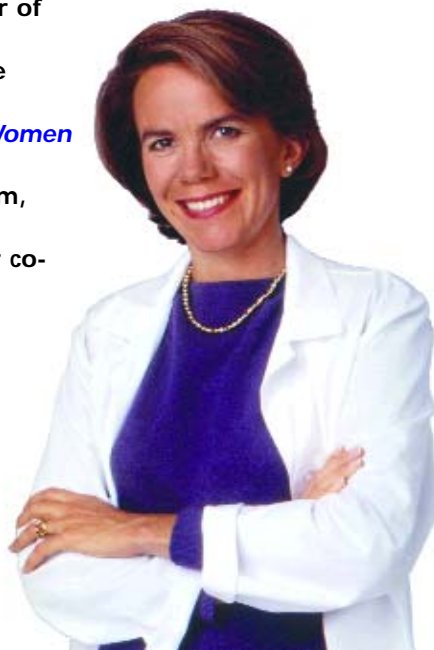
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One way to find an agent who has sold books in your area of expertise is to look at the acknowledgement section of



books with a similar subject. Dr. Miriam Nelson, the author of a number of books including the bestseller *Strong Women Stay Young* (Bantam,

1997), describes how she and her co-author chose an agent: "We both went to the bookstore and we looked at books that we liked. We met with two [agents] and chose one."



interest in this area for book buyers and tell her why your book is better and/or different than the other books already published. Think of this section as a way to show that there will be great interest in this topic and why your book will stand out among the crowd.

About the Author

This section should wow whomever is reading your proposal. This is not the place to be humble, nor is it the place to be egotistical. In this section your credentials should shine without appearing exaggerated. Your medical credentials will be extremely helpful in establishing your expertise, but don't rely on them completely. Convince the agent or editor that you stand out amongst your peers in your specialty and that you are the perfect person to write this compelling book. You need to establish that you are an expert in this field, that you are an excellent writer, and that through your work, you will help to promote the book.

Table of Contents, Chapter Summaries, and Sample Chapter

These sections of the proposal are fairly straightforward. Be sure to organize the book well and to put some time into interesting chapter titles. Short chapter summaries (approximately one to two paragraphs if there are a lot of chapters and up to one page if there are just a few chapters) will help you enormously when it comes to actually writing the book. Put some time into doing a good job on these. Fill them with interesting facts and pertinent information. The sample chapter should be fascinating and flawless.

Other Materials

Supportive materials that you can send with the proposal include a brief letter of introduction, copies of previously published work, curriculum vitae, anything establishing you as an expert, your business card, reviews or publicity about previous books, and your practice/hospital or other promotional materials.

Literary agents and book editors

Acquisition editors are in charge of acquiring books for publishing houses. They generally work for three different types of publishers: technical presses (e.g., medical textbook publishers); university presses (e.g., [Harvard University Press](#)); and, trade presses (e.g., [Random House](#)). Usually a book that a technical press would publish would not find a home with a university press or a trade press; however, there is certainly some crossover. On the other hand, university presses, which have traditionally published just scholarly work, have now moved much more into the general audience market, so there is a lot of overlap between university and trade publishers. For a first-time physician author who is writing a book for the public, a university press is often a good bet for a number of reasons: They may have lower expectations in terms of sales, they frequently keep the books in print longer, and you can approach them on your own without an agent.

In general, literary agents can be thought of as brokers who bring buyers (editors) and sellers (writers) together. Technical and university press editors work much differently than editors at trade publishers who rely heavily on literary agents to sort through a huge number of writers' book proposals. Editors at trade presses typically won't even look at a proposal that is submitted di-

rectly by an author. Keep in mind, though, that there are many exceptions to these general guidelines, and talented authors who are creative and persistent will always find ways to get their books published.

There are three compelling reasons, particularly if you want to publish a book with a big trade house, why you might want to work with a literary agent. First, is that the agent likely has something you don't have and won't easily be able to develop in a timely fashion (if ever) and that is contacts. Moreover, a proposal that is submitted by an agent has a seal of approval already—it has been through the initial screening process, and this tells the editor that it is likely a cut above what is in his slush pile.

The second reason to consider using a literary agent is to negotiate the contract once the book has been sold. One of the first things to negotiate is the author's advance. This is how much the publisher is willing to pay the author (from the anticipated future royalties) before the book is published. If the publisher gives you little or no advance, then the only money he needs to recoup is direct production costs. In this case, your book may not receive a lot of attention from their marketing department. On the other hand, if you have been paid a large advance, then the publisher will need to sell enough copies of your book to cover both your advance and production expenses. This obviously gives the publisher more incentive to promote your book.

Publishing contracts are relatively complex and many writers, especially busy doctors, don't have the time to worry about the details. Agents understand every detail of the contract (there

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is much more to negotiate than just the advance and royalties), and her job is to negotiate every single clause so that it is in your favor. For example, agents also sell your subsidiary rights (these are the additional ways in which a book can be represented), which can include serial rights, foreign rights, dramatic and movie rights, audio and video rights, electronic rights, and syndication and licensing options.

A third reason why many writers opt to use an agent is that they do not want to be in the position of striking a tough deal with an editor and then having to work with that editor on the book itself. A good agent will act as a buffer between you and the editor.

Although literary agents are the most common writers' representatives, occasionally writers will use intellectual property lawyers instead of or in addition to an agent. Attorneys generally will not review your work but will negotiate the terms of the contract for a set fee.

How agents get paid

Literary agents usually take a 15 percent commission on whatever they negotiate for you. This means that if your agent negotiates a \$10,000 advance and 10 percent royalty on the list price, then you receive \$8500 from the advance and 8.5 percent of the list price for each book sold. So, the more money you make, the more compensation your agent receives as well. Obviously there is a strong incentive for your agent to negotiate the best possible financial terms on your book contract.

Not all agents work in the same manner, but there are literary agent standards and ethics. [The Association of Authors' Representatives](#) (AAR) Canon of Ethics states:

1. Agent members need to maintain two separate bank accounts so there is no mixing of clients' and agency's monies;

2. There must be prompt disclosure and payment to the client regarding monies received from sales;

3. Agents are forbidden to charge fees for reading manuscripts (including at conferences); and,

4. Agents cannot receive a secret profit or enter into any arrangement that might be a conflict of interest.

Not everyone agrees with the AAR ethics. For example, there is some dissension in the publishing industry on the issue of whether agents should be compensated for reading a proposal or manuscript that they ultimately deem is not publishable or right for their agency. However, if an agent is reading a lot of book proposals and charging steep fees, then it appears that they are in the book reading business rather than the book selling business. In terms of the accounting, if you work with an agent and you have any suspicions or concerns about how many books you have sold or how much money you should be paid, you can request a report directly from your publisher.

How to find an agent

In his book, *Literary Agents* (John Wiley and Sons, 1996), Michael Larsen dispenses this valuable advice, "You find an agent the same way an agent finds a publisher: by having something to sell and being professional in your approach. Ideally, you want to work with an agent who has expertise in your area (popular fiction, health non-fiction, etc.) When choosing an agent, it is also important to consider how big the

agency is, and how much time and attention you and your work will receive. Jean Thompson Black, an editor at Yale University Press thinks that writers often go with large glitzy agencies and then get lost among the stars that the agency represents. She suggests, "Look for an agent who has a lot of years in the business, runs his or her own shop and does it well." Regina Brooks, owner of the [Serendipity Literary Agency](#) in Brooklyn, New York, agrees with Black and comments that unlike many of her colleagues who work at large agencies, she likes to work with authors who are "new and emerging."

One of the best places to find the names of agents who have sold books in your area of expertise is to look at the acknowledgement section of books with a similar subject. Dr. Miriam Nelson, the author of a number of books including the bestseller *Strong Women Stay Young* (Bantam, 1997), describes how she and her co-author chose an agent: "We both went to the bookstore and we looked at books that we liked. We met with two [agents] and chose one." You can also ask an editor or a fellow writer for a referral. Writers' conferences are another good way to meet agents, editors, and other writers who can offer advice. There are a number of books that you can turn to for help as well. (See "[Writing Resources](#),".) The AAR is also a great resource for finding a literary agent. It is important to note that some of the best agents won't list themselves in any directories, because they don't want to have authors contact them without being referred by someone they know and trust.

Why book proposals are rejected
Book proposals are rejected for a variety of reasons. Some of the more

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common ones include that it is not compelling, it has already been done, it has never been done, it is too expensive to produce, the author is not qualified to write it, the author likely won't promote it, or it is not the right topic or slant for that particular press. Edlow offers colleagues this advice from his own experiences with rejection, "Almost every writer on the planet experiences rejection at one time or another. When I receive a rejection, I almost immediately send out the proposal to another prospective buyer. At the same time, I try to analyze what kernel of truth exists in the rejection letter, so that I can improve the product as much as possible."

Writing a book is challenging and time consuming, but ultimately incredibly rewarding. Dr. Gerald Friedland, who has a new book out, *Heart Attack! Advice for Patients by Patients*, summarizes the rewards of writing, "I would say it is the joy of ferreting out the facts, assembling the material, and watching all of it come to a conclusion in an actual finished project." ■

Julie K. Silver, MD is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and teaches a non-fiction writing and publishing course for physicians at a resort in Falmouth, Massachusetts (www.seak.com). She is the author of numerous books, including the soon-to-be-released Chronic Pain and the Family (Harvard University Press).