

This is what a non-fiction book proposal should contain. If it's a memoir, the protagonist is you. Either way, the elements of a proposal are the same, and what you're trying to convey -- *that you have a great story to tell and the skill to tell it* -- is universal.

The first thing the editor should see is the most compelling moment of the book -- usually the moment where the worm turns and the plot takes off. This should be pretty short -- two pages? -- and extremely compelling. You drop the reader into a moment and yank him out at just the moment he wants it to go on. You want the reader panting for more. Many non-fiction books begin this way, with a disembodied moment from within the story designed to make the reader want to read the whole thing and find out where that moment goes.

Then there's a copy break, and what follows is about four to seven pages describing your book. This is barstool-to-barstool writing -- about what the book is, the nature of the journey that the protagonist follows, whether it's in first or third person, where it starts, where it ends, and what it all means. This is very direct writing, extremely deconstructive and explicit about what the book is and does. You need to convey here not just what happens in the book, but how it all fits together,

narratively. The protagonist needs to be transformed by the end of the book, and you need to demonstrate how that happens in these pages.

Then comes Chapter One, and then one or two more sample chapters. They can be chapters two and three, but don't have to be.

Then, write one-paragraph descriptions of all the other chapters. This is important: In addition to saying what happens in each chapter, each of these descriptive paragraphs must say how the chapter moves the story forward -- how it advances the narrative arc that you described in your description of the book. The protagonist has to be in one clearly understood space at the start of the book and a different one at the end. The book is his journey from one to the other. And the paragraphs describing the chapters need to show that you understand how to move the story along that arc.

If this is memoir, let me add one more thing: The difference between a successful memoir and one that fails to sell is universality. Yes, the book is about you. But the reader has to be able to see himself in it. It is very easy -- terrifyingly easy -- to lapse into self-absorption while writing a memoir. So while you're writing about yourself, you

also have to keep the reader in mind. What's entertaining? To what can he relate? This is tricky business, and you won't get it right in the first draft. That's okay. We need to have a first draft in order to start the real work.

Last thing: Don't write a market analysis. You don't need to do that at all. Just tell the editors about your book; they'll figure out where it fits into the market. (They're in the publishing business and you're not; why do they need you to explain the business to them?)