

June / July 2012 Q&A: Non-Fiction

This is a transcript of the audio Q&A, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/qas/july2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this the combined June and July Q&A session for Writer's Huddle. We've only got three questions this time, and they're all on non-fiction, so I'm going to tackle them all on this one session.

Carole: Pitching Guest Post Topics

So the first question is from Carole, who asked about pitching guest posts to bloggers. She pointed out that when she started sending posts out there originally you could just submit the whole post and bloggers would generally take that

Now, it seems to be the case that guidelines are getting more and more restrictive, and more and more blogs want to see a pitch before seeing a whole post, and – as Carole points out – **it's one thing pitching to magazines when you're going to get paid, but for a blog post that you're producing for free it can seem like a whole extra layer of hassle.**

She wanted my thoughts on this, and some advice on how I would pitch a topic to a blog owner who I didn't know.

In my experience, most of the blogs I pitch to are happy to receive a whole post submission. I've definitely come across some who do want a pitch, and in some cases I've pitched a post first, though.

When I do that, I try to keep it very simple.

What to Include in Your Guest Post Pitch

I usually give them the suggested title of the post, and this is always a little bit subject to change, but I try to give them a good title, the best I can do at the time.

Then I give them maybe three to five bullet points, just very briefly, of what I would plan to cover in that post, and I would ask them if they were interested, and if there was anything they'd like me to do slightly differently and so on. I think that's

enough. I think for a 600-700 word blog post you don't want any more than a few bullet points or a very short paragraph, otherwise as Carole points out you can end up pretty much writing the whole post in the body of the email.

Something else that I do with a pitch to somebody I don't know is to mention my credentials. In particular I talk about other blogs I've guest posted for, so major ones like Copyblogger, ProBlogger, Write to Done, Men with Pens, which are all big blogs in the blogging and writing world.

Even if people don't quite recognise your name, they'll definitely recognise the names of those blogs within their particular field, and that can be a way to perhaps get your submission looked at a little more seriously, or perhaps get it pulled to the top of the pile.

When to Give Up on a Potential Guest Posting Location

Like Carole, I think I would give up on a blog which had very complicated guidelines unless it was a very major blog in my field.

If Copyblogger had some particularly complex system they wanted me to jump through, which thankfully they don't, I would probably go through it anyway, because it's worth it to get a guest post on Copyblogger.

If it was a smaller blog and they had really complex requirements, I probably would just look elsewhere. Life is too short, and there are plenty of blogs out there without restrictive requirements that you need to follow.

Relationships Matter (and Can Overcome Guidelines)

Something that I have found (and I know Carole was focusing on blog owners who we don't know) is that when you do know someone, it's easier to get a post accepted, and the relationship tends to trump the guidelines.

There are definitely some blogs that I send posts to regularly where I know that their guidelines might look for something, they maybe want the post in HTML format and I maybe send it to them in a nicely formatted Word document, and I've never had a problem with that.

I think you can be a little bit more relaxed about the guidelines when you do know the blogger and you have had posts accepted before.

Then, one last thing to say here is that if you find it hard to write the pitch before

writing the post, if that doesn't fit with your work-flow, then there's nothing stopping you from writing the post first and then producing a pitch, like a very short summary almost, in retrospect.

Just keep the post on your own computer, don't send it in the first place. Write the pitch as though you are *going* to write the post. Then, if it's accepted then you're ready to go, and you don't need to worry about suddenly finding the time to write the post, and if it's not accepted then you can approach a different blog.

Sue: How to Pitch an Idea to a Non-Fiction Publisher

The next question is from Sue, who was also asking about pitching, but in the context of pitching to a non-fiction publisher.

So, this is looking at a whole book-length proposal, rather than just for a blog post, and Sue asked how long the pitch should be, what it should cover, should you already have started researching, how much detail you should include, and so on.

I guess my answer here is going to be a little bit frustrating, because this does vary from publisher to publisher, and some publishers will have very specific requirements for what they want from a pitch, and some will have vaguer requirements.

Follow the Publisher's Guidelines

Most publishers will have guidelines on their website, or at least will be able to send those guidelines on request, so absolutely I would suggest that you **decide which publisher you are targeting first.**

Who's going to be the best publisher for this particular book? Who do you want to work with? See what guidelines they have, or contact them and ask for their guidelines, because obviously there are some fairly standard elements to non-fiction pitching, and I'll go through those standard ones, but you'll find that a publisher either may not need some of those standard elements, or wants some other things, or wants it structured in a particular way, and so on.

So in general, then, your proposal is going to have to be quite detailed. It's going to have to be much more detailed than a query for fiction, where you'd typically write a synopsis of one or two pages, so to give you just a very rough idea here, to give you one example from my own experience, my original proposal for my *For*

Dummies book, *Publishing E-Books For Dummies*, was about twelve pages, and about 3,500 words, so quite in-depth. Not ridiculously so, but obviously quite a bit of work went into just the proposal stage.

What Goes in a Typical Book Proposal

You're normally looking at these elements within your proposal:

First would be an overview of the book or an introduction to it, so you want to make it sound good, you can be a little bit sales-y, using upbeat marketing language within your proposal. You're selling your book to the publisher here, so sound confident and sound enthusiastic.

Then once you've done an overview of the book, you may then include some biographical details about you, in particular why you're qualified to write the book. If you've got a relevant degree, then that can go there, if you've got 20 years experience in a particular career, then that can go there, if you have written articles, or another book, or something else on this subject, or even if you've got a big blog, or website, or newsletter, then all of this can go in with the details about you.

Another section you'll (in most cases) have to include, is some information about the market for the book, in particular competing titles. This seems to come up in pretty much all the proposal guidelines I've looked at. It includes what other books are on the market and how will your book be different from them.

This is an area where you'll definitely have to do a bit of research, and it can also be quite a helpful way to think about what's already out there, and how you can produce something that will still succeed, even if it's a little bit of a crowded marketplace. It may be that your book will be a little bit more in depth, or it will come from a different angle, or it will be for a different audience, so it's more advanced or it's more basic than what's already out there on the market.

Then something that you may be asked to include, and this seems to be quite common now, is **information on how you can help with the marketing and the promotion of the book.** You might think this is a task for your publisher, and this is something that they should be handling, but it is the case today that publishers do expect authors to get involved with the marketing.

They will be interested in what they call your 'author platform', so if you've got a blog, maybe how many readers you've got on that blog, or if you've got a Twitter

account, how many people are you able to reach.

If you've done a lot of guest posting, like Carole in the last question, you may want to mention any large blogs that you've got a relationship with, so you may be able to promote your book on Copyblogger or ProBlogger, or whatever blog is relevant to your field.

The bulk of your proposal is the chapter outline, and this is where you explain, chapter by chapter, what you plan to cover in your book. So, normally this would be a title for each chapter, a proposed title, and either a short paragraph or a series of bullet points, possibly both, for each chapter, so covering just briefly what the scope of each chapter is, what key information you're going to include in there

That's probably going to require some research, at least in areas where you don't yet know fully what you're going to cover. Hopefully, if you're doing a non-fiction book proposal then it's on a topic that you've got some knowledge and experience of, but there are likely to be at least a few gaps, so you probably do need to be prepared to invest some time in research at this stage, before you get the book accepted. That way you can write a really strong and informative proposal.

There may be other things that you're asked for, so you may be asked to send a sample chapter, or maybe two or three sample chapters. You might be asked for an existing writing sample, so if you've already written a book on a similar topic, or even a blog post, then you can just send that, rather than have to write a whole chapter.

This is going to vary from publisher to publisher, so it's really key, I think, to pick a specific publisher when you're thinking about writing a non-fiction book, to read their specific guidelines, and to write the best possible proposal you can for them.

It is quite a bit of work, and in most cases you will be able to re-use some if not all of your proposal, if you do end up needing to submit to different publishers. If you're going through an agency, rather than applying to a publisher, you can look at their guidelines. You might find these links useful:

[The Bukowski Agency's guidelines on writing non-fiction proposals](#)

[An example proposal from Greenleaf Literary Services](#)

Gretchen: What Word Length do Readers Prefer for Non-Fiction?

Then, the last question is from Gretchen, who asked something which ties in quite well with non-fiction book proposals, which is about how long a non-fiction book should be.

She mentioned that she has a historian friend who has written an almost 500-page biography of a civil war soldier who isn't well known, and wanted me to provide an estimate about what word length the readers prefer.

This is unfortunately one of those unanswerable questions, because non-fiction covers such an incredibly broad range of material, from short gift books to massive academic tomes. There's really no average length, there's no preferred length in general, you need to look within a category.

How Long a Biography Might Be

So, to look at biography as an example, because Gretchen brought that up, some biographies are surprisingly long, and they may seem to be on topics that are quite obscure or might be of limited interest, but to people who've got a particular passion for a specific period of history, or who are very interested in a specific person, they may well want that depth and richness of detail.

It wasn't quite clear from Gretchen's question whether her friend has got a contract for the book, or has approached a publisher. I would be a little surprised and wary if the friend was writing 500 pages without any contract or any idea how this is going to be published.

If they're self publishing that's a bit different, but if they're expecting to find a publisher, it would normally be the case that you do the proposal first and then you get accepted, and in your contract it would be specified how long that book was expected to be.

I don't think that 500 pages sounds unreasonable for a biography, it's probably equating to about 125,000 words, allowing for 250 words to a page. That's a bit long for a book, but it's not outrageously long, so without knowing a bit about the friend and the project, it's hard to say whether that's *too* long.

So, in general, a very very rough rule of thumb, I would say that you should be aiming for somewhere between 50,000 and 75,000 words for a typical non-fiction book, if such a thing exists.

Readers Who Prefer Shorter Books

You can certainly have fewer than 50,000 words – I've read some great non-fiction books that are maybe only about 25,000 to 30,000 words, and one of the things I love about them is they're short, and they're packed with good information, they're quick reads, but they're very valuable.

They don't waffle, they just give me what I want and they give me that information quickly. That's what some readers want, particularly if it's a book that instructs you on how to do something, especially if that's a relatively small limited thing.

If you're thinking of writing a business book for people who are busy executives and so on, you may want to look on the shorter end of the spectrum.

Fiction vs Non-Fiction Lengths

Once you get to 75,000-80,000 words, that's about the length of a typical novel, so if that just about gives you a sense of how long that would be, for a non-fiction book.

I think in general, when we're reading a fiction book, we're looking for a chance to escape and to immerse ourselves in a different world. Unless we're reading a fiction book because we have to for class or something, we're not just looking to get through it and get the information as quickly as possible, we want to enjoy it.

With non-fiction, sometimes we're reading something basically for entertainment or enjoyment, like a biography. Sometimes we're reading it because we want specific information: we want to learn how to accomplish a task, or perhaps it's a self-help book, and we want help perhaps moving on in a particular area of our lives.

In these cases, you need to judge what your particular audience are likely to want – **are they busy people who just need the facts, or are they people who need time and space to reflect and who want to go into depth on some subjects**, or who are going to be helped by some personal anecdotes, or some examples, or some case studies?

Other Considerations About Length

Sometimes there's a bit of an equation between length and value, which is not

necessarily true, but I can see how we tend to think that bigger means more expensive means more valuable.

Something else to keep in mind with non-fiction versus fiction, is that pictures or illustrations or graphics or graphs and so on can take up quite a lot of page space, and they'll bump up the page length. **You might have a book which is quite short in terms of words, but which turns out quite long in terms of pages**, just because of all the illustrations, which obviously wouldn't be the case with a novel.

Planning Your Non-Fiction Book

So, what I'd say for anyone who's thinking of writing a non-fiction book and wondering how long that project will take, or what word count to shoot for, is to **look at other books in the same category as the one that you're thinking of writing**, particularly ones that have sold well.

Are they all quite short or are they all quite long? Is there a big variation in length? Are they aimed at advanced readers or beginner readers? Does that affect the length? And so on...

Just get a sense of what length seems to be popular with readers in that particular area. You might want to take a look at the customer reviews on somewhere like Amazon, so it might be that a book is popular, but a lot of readers find it overly long-winded, for example.

For me, I really enjoyed Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and I picked up some very useful tips, but I did find his writing style a bit wordy, and I felt that the book was just longer than it needed to be, and it could have been a more powerful and compact book, for me as a reader.

I accept that some readers may want a more leisurely experience. They may want lots of examples, and lots of depth, and the ability to even have the same thing repeated a few times so that it sinks in well.

We're all different as readers, really. **I would say that, in today's world, people are looking towards shorter rather than longer books**, so a 50,000 word non-fiction book might well be plenty, a 30,000 book might well be enough, especially if you're looking at digital publication, where obviously there's no printing and producing and shipping overheads on a book.

It's not really economical for publishers to produce really short books in print form,

you can produce a book of literally any length in an e-book format and you can sell it for any price you want, and you may find that if you're experimenting with e-books you want to write some very short books, sell them very cheap, and build up a series like that.

So, there are no rules here. There is no average figure for how long a non-fiction book should be, or for what readers want, and it really will depend on what sort of non-fiction book you're writing, what audience you're going for, and potentially what publisher or even what series you're going with.

Note: Gretchen asked a follow-up question about more specific genres – you can find this and my answer in the Writers' Huddle Q&A forum here:

<http://www.writershuddle.com/forums/qa-sessions/number-of-words-preferred-by-todays-editors>

So, that's all the questions this month.

I'm going to be changing the format of the Q&A, because we've been having fewer questions over the past few months, and I don't want people to be waiting for weeks for a response until we've got enough questions for a recording each time

For the next few months, and we'll see how this goes and maybe review it, **I'll take questions in the Q&A forum itself, and I'll answer them in writing there:**

<http://www.writershuddle.com/forums/qa-sessions>

If there's a question that lends itself to a much bigger discussion, it may form the basis of a seminar or something similar.

If you do have any questions, whether those are related to proposals and to non-fiction, or whether it's related to another topic entirely, please feel free to start a thread in the Q&A forum. I will keep an eye on that forum, and when questions are posted there I will do my very best to answer them in a timely fashion.

I am very happy for other people in the Huddle to chip in with those questions, but if you're perhaps starting a topic that you're expecting to be for just general discussion and you're not necessarily expecting an answer from me personally, then probably the best place for that is in the Writing Chat forum. I'll keep the Q&A forum as a good way for you to reach me directly, and knowing that I'll definitely be reading and responding to your post there.