



Mark Waldman's

Six Figure Book Camp

Writing the Perfect Proposal: Structure, Function, and Step-by-Step Instructions

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Let me be blunt: If you send your completed manuscript to an agent or a publisher, it will go directly into the trash. Yet every day hundreds of writers violate this rule, and it tells everyone in the industry that they didn't do their homework. Agents and publishers need a concise 20-50 page *business plan*, double-spaced, that includes the following essential elements:

- **Title Page:** This includes your working title, subtitle, author's name and contact information, and the agent representing you (if you have one).
- **Pitch Page:** An optional one-paragraph summary of your book's focus, concept, and audience. This is your 60 second elevator pitch – your *hook* – and it resembles the inside flap of a hardcover book or the back page of a softcover book. It is a key element in the overview section, and it is used in the creation of a query letter.
- **Overview:** A one or two page description of your proposed book, written in a dynamic narrative style. The first few paragraphs need to be exciting and provocative as you describe what the book is about, who the specific audience is, and what the reader will gain by buying this particular book. The overview should also include any unique qualifications the author may have.
- **About the Author:** A one or two page biography of the author listing credentials, expertise in the area addressed by the book, previous writing credits, awards, and a brief summary of previous television, radio, and media coverage. Fame, celebrity, financial wizardry, and academic affiliations increase the sales potential of your proposal.
- **Competitive Books:** Use Amazon.com or Amazon.uk to create one paragraph summaries of five competing books that address the same topic you are writing about. Focus on the most recent and commercially successful books in the field, and explain how your book is different, better, or fills a need not addressed by these other books.
- **Manuscript Specifications:** A one-paragraph statement describing the projected length of the book, writing style, and delivery date of the finished manuscript.
- **Marketing and Promotional Plan:** Describe in detail the specific ways you will be involved in promoting this book (talks, blogs, conferences, internet advertising, media presence, supporting academic or professional papers, etc.). Only state those strategies that you have done in the past. In other words, you must document the degree of success you have had selling other books, services, or products. A professional marketing strategy can double or triple your advance.

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- **Table of Contents:** List each chapter, subheading, and section of your book, including any appendices you plan to include.
- **Chapter Summaries:** 1-2 page dynamic narrative descriptions of what each chapter will address, written in the style that you will use in your book.
- **Sample Chapter:** 5-10 pages of the best writing you can do. The briefer, the better; less chance of the editor finding fault with your literary skills.

Ten Preparatory Steps to Take Before You Write Your Proposal:

1. **Identify “Your” Book:** What do you really want to write about, and what book would you be the most qualified to write about, based on your work expertise. Often the book you want to write about will be different from the one you are qualified to write. Publishers prefer that you are a recognized expert in the field you are writing about. If not, they will want to see that you have an exceptionally original approach, and that you are a highly skilled writer. EXPERTISE + GOOD WRITING + CREATIVITY = LARGE ADVANCE. If you only have one of these skills, coauthor your book with a person with complementary talents. Note: Memoirs are harder to sell than other nonfiction genres because your writing must be excellent and your story must be structured like a novel. With a memoir, you will often need to submit the first, middle, and last chapters of your book.
2. **Create a WOW Title:** Our research shows that being in a near trance-state (relaxed and mindfully aware of the constant flow of thoughts and feelings) generates the best and most interesting ideas. This “bookstorming” strategy works best when you do it with another person, who will write down the ten or twenty possible titles that spontaneously flow through your consciousness when you maintain this deeply relaxed and focused state. Keep the titles short: ideally four words or less.
3. **Create a “What-How-Why” Subtitle:** Again, using the bookstorming strategy, create a separate list of ten possible subtitles. This can be a long phrase telling the reader what they will get or find in your book.
4. **Create Ten Chapter Titles:** Continue doing the exercise above and write down a series of potential chapter titles. Often, you’ll find that many of the titles you came up with in Step 2 can be used. Make them clever *and* descriptive. You can also create a subheading for each chapter title in the same way you created a subtitle for the book.
5. **Bullet-Point Three Key Concepts for Each Chapter:** First write a single sentence describing what each chapter addresses. Then put down, as bullet points, the key ideas, concepts, lessons, techniques, or experiences the reader will be exposed to. Narrow your selection down to three, but remember: chapter needs

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- only to address one key principle. Don't overwhelm the reader with too much information, or your manuscript will sound like a textbook.
6. **Visit a Bookstore:** Walk down the aisle containing books in the genre you are writing about, and see which titles jump out at you. Compare their titles to yours. Study the subtitles and then look at the table of contents. Use this information to revise your title, subtitle, and chapter headings.
 7. **Go to Amazon.com:** Study the titles of bestselling books, then do an Amazon.com search to see if the title has been used before. If it's recent, or overused, find another title. Look to see if books similar to your topic have been bestsellers in the past. If not, consider a different topic. Look for low Amazon.com ranking numbers and see if they got reviews from *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal*.
 8. **Start a PowerPoint Presentation:** Put each title on a separate slide and find a single provocative image for each one. This is an optional step but one that research suggests can help you organize your book more effectively than using the typical written outline.
 9. **Write Your Chapter Summaries:** Make your first sentence "Wow." You must capture the jaded agent or editor who has just read 50 weak proposals. The first paragraph should be written as though it were the opening paragraph in your finished book. The second paragraph describes to the publisher what that chapter is about, citing key points that will excite the editor to want to read more.
 10. **Write a Single Paragraph Book Pitch:** I actually recommend that you do this step before, during, and after the previous ones. The final paragraph you create will be used by the marketing department to describe your book to the bookstore buyers. Don't make exaggerated promises, but make it original and provocative. Include the title, subtitle, and the three key points your book will address. Define your audience in a single sentence or phrase, and explain what the reader will get from the book in a single sentence. For example: "*The Magic of Money* is a modern-day *Think and Grow Rich* book that will improve the functioning of your brain."

Write a Knockout Opening Page

The Overview: It's usually only a few pages long, but the first three paragraphs of the overview must accomplish three things: capture the publisher's attention by making an enticing and deliverable promise, identify the readership that the publisher caters to, and to do so in a succinct writing style that is similar to other bestselling books in that genre. In other words, you have to shape your style of writing to fit the temperament of the editor who will decide whether or not to buy the book you are proposing. And because every editor has their preferences and prejudices, it becomes the agent's responsibility to

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fit your writing style to the editors they personally know. This is why all agents will usually submit proposals to several dozen editors at once.

Identify a best selling book that comes closest to your own writing style, and then mimic that book's structure. Study the opening paragraphs. In some overviews, writers will begin with a personal or anecdotal story. Others will "cut to the chase" and include a personal story in the introduction or in several chapter summaries. The overview is similar to the introductory chapter, but it needs to be more concise and immediately identify what the reader will get from the book.

The first page must identify the audience and the need for this book at this particular time. You must make a promise and then explain how the reader will be able to achieve that promise through your book. Additional paragraphs will identify the unique elements of your book in a way that makes it clearly stand out from the competition. You can also include a bullet point list of what the reader will learn or get from the book, and any original material or research that will be included in the book. An additional paragraph must explain why you, the author, are uniquely qualified to write this book.

You can be creative in how you arrange these various paragraphs, for in doing so, you display to the editor your versatility as a writer. In other words, don't make boilerplate generic proposal.

For your first draft of the overview, I want you to get all of the above information down onto a single sheet of paper. That's about three paragraphs in length. To summarize: The overview is written primarily for the editor, *not the reader!* You want to include key phrases that capture the focus of your book, your credentials and/or expertise, and a concise description of who the target audience is and why they would want to buy this book. Write, as closely as possible, in the style that you will use in your book.

Don't be Modest!

The Author Section: Here you want to present every aspect of yourself that will convince an editor that you are the best person in the world to write the book and blow away the competition. Your credentials and expertise should relate, in some fashion, to the area addressed by the book. Include previous book and magazine articles you have published (and if you haven't published before, start submitting articles to very small magazines and journals – they really make a difference in the eyes of most editors). Include blog history, media presentations, and conferences you have spoken at. Include anything else that makes you stand out from the crowd in a believable way.

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Know Your Competition Inside and Out

Competitive Book Section List five popular books that are similar in content to the proposed book. Explain how your book differs, and how it is better. This is crucial: it shows the editor that you know what the competition is and how successful similar books have been. It also helps the marketing team evaluate if the book is right for their audience, so carefully study the book proposals that I'll be sending you under separate cover. This is actually one of the easiest sections to complete, and you should do it first to make sure your book has a large audience to market to. Don't make the mistake of claiming that there are no books like yours. If it's true, there's no shelf to put it on in the bookstore.

Identify Your Niche

Audience: This section identifies which groups of people are most likely to buy this book. Claims that the book is for everyone will turn editors off, so be certain you know who your audience will be. Be very specific and target each group of readers that your book will particularly appeal to. For example, if you write a book that has a spiritual component, you'll have to describe which audience you want to reach: New Thought, Christian, secular spirituality, etc. Few spiritual books attract readers from multiple religions and traditions. This, by the way, is one of the most difficult sections that most writers struggle with. A visit to your local bookstore will help to identify your niche.

Accomplished Marketers Sell More Books and Get the Largest Advances in the Industry

Special Marketing and Promotional Opportunities: This section outlines your skills at promoting the book. Include all talks, lectures, articles, and media exposure you've recently had. Don't tell the editor what you *will* do; show the editor what you *have* done to previously promote your work. If you have a strong internet following (Facebook, YouTube, a popular blogging website, etc.) give comprehensive details, including the size of your email lists. If you have affiliate markets and joint-venture partners, list them (but you may need letters from them ahead of time that they will help promote your book to their lists). If you have prior book marketing experience, describe in detail exactly what you plan to do, and how you will execute it. This section can run from 1-10 pages long, depending on your marketing experience and expertise.

A word of warning: There are many marketing mavens – some who are very famous – who tell you how to push your book to the top of an Amazon.com bestselling list, but this rarely translates into meaningful sales. And if you exaggerate, your entire project can be put in jeopardy. Example: Neither Andy Newberg nor I have strong

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marketing skills, nor do we have social media platforms. So in the example proposals I'm giving you, our marketing platform only describes the number of keynote lectures, television and radio shows, and special events or media attention we received in the last two years. It's not much, but since we consistently end up on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and consistently get featured in major magazines and with Oprah, publishers are willing to gamble giving us some of the largest advances that science writers have received. But even then, we're only as good as the sales of our last book. If sales begin to fade – something that eventually happens to 99% of all high-profile authors – the advances begin to decline.

Boring, Brief, but Essential

Manuscript Specifications: The typical nonfiction book runs between 180-260 pages, or 60,000-80,000 words. There is a trend in New York to go toward smaller books, but anything below 150 pages will often be rejected. How long will it take you to write a book from scratch? The average author who has written several books will take between 12-18 months. I rarely will commit to anything less than 9 months, even though publishers may offer you more money if your topic is particularly timely. My personal record: I wrote an entire book in 5 months, but I also wrote for 10 hours a day for half that time. Make sure you have time to devote to writing your book if you have a full-time job and family to attend to. If you miss your deadline, you may have to return your advance.

The Meat and Potatoes of Your Proposal

Brief Chapter Summaries: Editors are carnivores, but they eat/read fast, so you have to give them the core elements in the briefest yet most powerful way. Chapter summaries can run from a half-page to 2 pages long, and they need to contain key “sound-bite” phrases that are catchy and inspirational while accurately conveying what the reader will get. Also, make sure that each chapter builds on the previous one. In other words, make your book unfold like a story, and consider these general guidelines:

- ***The first couple of sentences of each chapter:*** Make it WOW! There are four key elements to structuring a well-written sentence: being *concise*, bringing *emphasis* to specific words or phrases, creating *variation* by changing the length and pattern of each sentence in a paragraph, and creating a pleasing *rhythm* which the person will “hear” while reading. Please study the 44 pages on sentences in *The New Oxford Guide to Writing* (191-235). You can download a pdf copy here <http://ebookbrowse.com/gdoc.php?id=327148158&url=3bc13563d28bf33106054aaa5c55b4f2>

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- ***The first paragraph:*** Write in the style that you will use in your book. You might tell a story that captures a core element of the chapter, or begin with a startling fact, or make an enticing promise to the reader.
- ***The final paragraph:*** Describe what the reader will get from this chapter. For example, you might start by writing “In this chapter, the author will...” Include bullet points of the key elements and anything that is new or original, especially when compared to competitive books.
- ***Write Visually:*** Paint descriptive images with your words and capture emotions, especially in the first paragraphs of each chapter. Consider using personal stories or anecdotes. Here is where the lessons of fiction writing can be directly applied to a nonfiction book.
- ***Make your final chapter transformative:*** Encourage the reader to take the next step (which might actually be what your next book will address), or paint an inspiring vision about the future. In nonfiction books, hope and optimism sells more copies than reality and gloom, so end on a positive note.

The Ultimate Litmus Test

Chapter Sample: The most important chapter to submit, especially if you have not published a commercial book in the past, is the introduction. This is where you'll need to practice the best of your writing skills, and if need be, to hire a ghostwriter to assist you. Fortunately, an introductory chapter can be short: 10 pages or less.

But there's a catch: You really won't know what the best introduction is until you've finished the entire book! But that's okay, because editors know that you'll be deleting some chapters from your proposed table of contents and adding others. Just make sure you discuss any changes with your editor beforehand. If you don't, and they don't like your finished manuscript, they will then have the right to demand that you rewrite it, or to return any advance you received.

I also recommend that you include several Appendices. You can keep them vague and general, but I want you to consider using them as marketing opportunities. This is the place where you can advertise products and services related to your book, and to guide readers to your websites. The next time you're at a bookstore, study some of the bestselling books written by authors who are expert internet marketers. Study their appendices and start planning this section before you sell your proposal. This is where the real money is at, and its part of your platform for how you plan to use your book after it has been published. It also opens the door for getting your next book published with far greater ease.

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AN EXAMPLE of a Proposal's TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Overview and/or Positioning	Page
New Research Presented in this Book	Page
Audience	Page
About the Authors	Page
Special Marketing and Promotional Opportunities	Page
12-Step Strategic Marketing Plan	Page
Table of Contents and Chapter Summaries	
Introduction:	Page
PART ONE: (Create and give a name to each chapter section; agents and editors want this)	
1. (Chapter Titles Here)	Page
2.	Page
3.	Page
4.	Page
5.	Page
6.	Page
PART TWO:	
7.	Page
8.	Page
9.	Page
10.	Page
11.	Page
Epilogue:	Page
Sample Worksheets and Sidebars	Page
Appendices:	Page

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Final Notes: Don't reinvent the wheel. There are a half-dozen book proposal styles that have been proven to be successful, and you can even go to <http://www.bpwiz.biz> where you can follow a simple online template for creating a book proposal and query letter. It's free, and was developed by Jeff and Deborah Herman, cofounders of the Jeff Herman Literary Agency.

With any proposal, you can be creative, but don't veer too far astray. Keep your creativity on the conservative side. Understate yourself and let your experience carry the weight. Most important, don't be arrogant or cute. And don't ever argue with an agent. It can burn bridges that will serve you well down the road. Don't expect them to call you or send you more than a paragraph if they choose to pass on your book. If you ever have the opportunity to visit an agent's or editor's office, you'll understand why because you can't even be sure that there's a desk under all of that unanswered mail.

A book proposal is a business plan, and your professionalism must be stronger than your enthusiasm. It describes the business of making and promoting your book, and it will be circulated to key people in all of the divisions of the publishing house before a single dollar is promised as an advance. It will go to marketing, publicity, and sales. It will be discussed with the other editors who are also trying to place their favorite proposals on the docket. It will also end up in the offices of their legal department to scout out potential suits.

Ultimately, the acceptance or rejection of your book will rest on a committee vote, with as many as a dozen voices expressing their interest and concerns. And the larger the advance, the more people will be involved. Then, if accepted, they may ask you to fly out to New York to meet with the key people who will bring your book to the world. It's a weird world, and an exciting world, and I hope that I've given you an inkling of how it really works.

But here's the beauty of this process: by the time you finish crafting the perfect proposal, your writing skills will have grown exponentially and you'll find that you've become more of an expert simply by articulating with clarity what each chapter of your book will cover. Thus your proposal becomes the blueprint for the book you really need to write.

Brendan Cahill, a former senior editor at Grove Atlantic Press, said that a great proposal must be "about a topic that's broad enough for a general readership. The writer needs to be, if not expert, then well informed about the given topic and to have done the initial thought work – legwork – that it takes to be able to render that experience in a thoughtful and intelligent way." He added that the author must "also to have the narrative techniques, skills, and be able to express the story in a way that will appeal to readers."

Queries and Cover Letters: Today, most New York publishers will not accept query letters or proposals from un-agented authors. Even the large well-established agents will rarely consider unsolicited proposals and will usually have assistants screen the 100-200

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query letters they receive each day. Thus the only way for a new author to be reviewed by a well-known agent is through a personal referral from one of their represented authors. In this situation, a query letter is not needed.

Personally, I hate them and I've never written a single one. For me, I found it easier to make friends with people who had relationships with publishers, editors, and agents, and I asked them to make introductions for me. I started at the bottom and worked up, befriending newbie agents and working with editors of academic journals. It took years of "plotting" before I finally was interviewed by Jeremy Tarcher, and he was the mentor that helped me reach my dream of publishing a book. But there are dozens of others to whom I owe the deepest gratitude, for each one helped to open a small door that took me to the next level: from a self-published editor of newsletters, to the founding editor of an academic review journal, to a developmental editor at several publishing houses, and finally to my friendships with literary agents and authors from every dimension of life.

Success was slow, and it remains as precarious as the day I sold my first proposal, but if I were to boil all my knowledge down to one key point, this is what it would be:

Write the Book You *Need* to Write, No Matter What!

Readers are fickle, and trends come and go. That's why no one – even the most gifted publisher – can predict if a specific book will become a bestseller. If they could, publishers would not be resting on the precarious edge of bankruptcy, which has been the status quo since the 1800s when the New York book world was born. And yet, despite all the doomsayers predicting the end of the printed book, there are more commercially printed books being printed than in 2003, when the first eBook came out. Today the average buyer pays 99 cents or less for a typical eBook, whereas readers still plop down \$25 or more for a hardback book that will soon come out in paperback for nearly half the price.

Publishers are gamblers, and they use their intuition in the hopes of turning a talented unknown writer into a 21st Century Hemingway or *Chicken Soup* phenomenon. Maybe the next star will be a recovering teenager, or a whistle-blowing journalist intent on making people a little more honest and accountable. Or maybe it will be you. But there is another golden rule for authors young and old: the best writing always comes from the heart.

So write the book you need write, and publish it yourself if worse comes to worse. But if you succeed, be prepared for a journey that may make you regret that you ever got an advance. And the larger that advance, the more hoops you're going to have to jump through. For example: you probably won't see your book on the bookstore shelf for two years, more or less. Why? First, it takes most authors at least a year to write, and most of us have "day" jobs to attend to. Second, it takes between 9-12 months of

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preparation by the publisher to transform your manuscript into a book. Here's the typical drill, one that I've intimately experienced with nearly every book I've written:

1. Let's say you turn your completed manuscript in on January 1st, New Year's Day. Your editor at the publishing house takes six weeks to read it and cover your manuscript with red marks.
2. It's February 14th – Valentine's Day! – and your editor's letter arrives. Her "suggestions" can be massive: revise the introductory chapter, delete two chapters that made the book too long, reframe, illustrate, clarify, and rewrite again and again. Then she tells you that you have six weeks to rewrite half of your book. Valentine's Day becomes "Nightmare on Elm Street," with Freddy Krueger at the editorial helm. It's enough to make you want to return the whole damned advance!
3. March 1: You just got your second down payment on your advance (yes, they spread payments over several years). Hooray! It's three months late, but it makes you feel okay about spending twelve hours a day rewriting your manuscript.
4. The Ides of March: your editor suddenly announces that the president of the publishing house hates your title, and the one they recommend one makes you want to puke. You don't argue, because if you fight for your title, they won't promote your book. You feel like Julius Caesar, slowly being stabbed to death by Brutus Publishing, Inc.
5. April Fools Day: you turn in your manuscript and the art department sends you a proof of the cover of your book. It's atrocious, but when they ask your opinion, you wisely give your approval. Otherwise, they won't spend money marketing your book.
6. April 20th: Your editor approves your revised manuscript, but tells you that you have to trash your most favorite chapter – you know the one she asked you delete the first time around. You do it because....that's right: they'll put less energy into promoting your book!
7. May Day: everything is approved! But then the copy editor sends back your manuscript with several hundred tags and notes: all the places where you didn't say something clearly, had a bad transition between paragraphs, and made weird grammatical goofs. No big deal! Except they need everything fixed and back in the office in three days so they can make the proofs and send them out for endorsements. Again, no problem....except it takes you thirty hours to complete. That's six hours of sleep in three day. I once had a copy editor who decided to delete 800 of the 1000 endnotes that supported the claims I made in *How God Changes Your Brain*. I had to renumber them on every page of the book, and it took ten days to complete (by the way, my

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- editor loved all the endnotes in that book, but hated them in the next! Go figure!).
8. May 10th: the publisher's attorney tells you that you need permission for every reference you made to what someone else had said. No problem, except you have to turn everything in by yesterday. So instead, you just throw out critical parts of the book.
 9. Mothers Day: It came! The book doctors deliver your "baby," a mock up of your book, typeset, with a color cover. You're ecstatic....until you notice they spelled your name wrong throughout the entire book. But that's not the worst part. You now have to read through every page again looking for typos, misplaced sidebars, and mistakes you never noticed in the earlier drafts. No problem: you can still make changes that they'll charge you for. After all, it was your mistake, not theirs!
 10. Father's Day: They send you the "almost-ready-to-go-to-the-printers" final/final copy, which you have to reread for the umpteenth time. Worse, the art department says that most of your drawings and photos won't reproduce, so they had to throw them away. You don't care, mumbling something about just taking the bastard child of a book away and drowning it in a vat of ink.
 11. July 4th: Half the people you asked to endorse your book didn't respond, so you write your own testimonials and call in favors from your celebrity friends. They tweak everything and approve it, knowing that you'll have to do the same for them one day.
 12. Labor Day: "Good news!" your editor writes. Bulgaria just bought the foreign rights to your book. A great advance – \$500 – but it's still a thrill. Your labor is beginning to pay off!
 13. Halloween: Your editor just became a ghost, having quit and joined another publishing company. You're assigned a new editor who sends you a brief note that she read your book, but "doesn't get it." Oh god, you think, what could possibly go wrong next?
 14. Thanksgiving: You are thankful that no more bad news came out of New York. On the other hand, your new editor hasn't responded to your emails for nearly an entire month. Good news, perhaps?
 15. Christmas Eve: It arrives! A brown box with twenty beautiful copies of your book. Suddenly it all seems worthwhile, and so you decide to celebrate by writing another proposal. Maybe – just maybe – you can get it to your agent by New Year's Eve!

Welcome to the New York publishing world – a business model that Seth Godin said should never exist. He's right, but it doesn't matter, because I know I won't stop writing until the day I die. I'm hooked. I write because I have to write and I write because I want to write, and the success is just a little icing on the cake.

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I sometimes fantasize about writing an exposé about the New York publishing world, as the renowned journalist Bob Woodward once suggested to his publisher – a man so famous and powerful I dare not mention his name. He was intrigued by Bob's suggestion. After all, this was the reporter who brought President Nixon down.

There was a long period of silence. Then the publisher slowly leaned back in his chair and interlaced his hands into a fist.

"I have the perfect title for your book," he announced.

"And what is that?" asked Bob, knowing the power that perfect title can bring.

A small sneer crept across the publisher's face as he slowly uttered the following words: "*My...Last...Book!*"

Write because you want to write, and write because you have to write. It's the best thing you can do for your brain, and if it helps to change the lives of even a handful of people, then it's worth every effort you can give.

To inspire, entertain, and educate – that's what a nonfiction book should do.

Yours in the Spirit of Writing,

Mark Robert Waldman