

WRITING A WINNING BOOK PROPOSAL

BY MICHAEL S. HYATT

Even if you have previously had a book published, you'll find tremendous value in preparing a formal book proposal. It will go a long way toward helping you to clarify your own thinking about the subject before you begin the actual writing process.



If there's one thing a publisher hates to see, it's a manuscript. Surprised? Most authors are. The fact is that publishers return most manuscripts to the author without ever having read them. Publishers simply do not have the time or staff to wade through the enormous number of manuscripts they receive from hopeful authors.

What a publisher really wants is a *book proposal*. Although you should include at least two sample chapters in your proposal, you should not finish writing the *entire* manuscript until the acquiring editor has approved the book's basic premise and structure, and the publisher has accepted the project for publication.

At Thomas Nelson Publishers we strongly believe in the creative interaction between author and editor. Out of this process come the best manuscripts. You'll find that most other publishers feel this way, too. Consequently, we want to give the author as much input as early in the writing process as possible. A book proposal gives us that opportunity.

So then, how do you prepare a good book proposal? From our experience,

in addition to a captivating cover letter, it needs to include four distinct elements (see fig. 1 on p. 2 for a complete outline):

1. Title Page
2. Proposal Overview
3. Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis
4. Two Sample Chapters

This kind of proposal will accomplish two things. First of all, it will help us better evaluate your book idea and decide whether or not we want to pursue the project further. Second, even if you have previously had a book published, you'll find tremendous value in preparing a formal book proposal. It will go a long way toward helping you to clarify your own thinking about the subject before you get too involved in the actual writing process.

In order to illustrate these principles, let's create a book proposal. Be sure to keep in mind, though, that this is only a hypothetical book proposal—an example. It is not an absolute formula to be followed blindly. (Also, if you want to write a *fiction* book proposal, the format will be

Figure 1: Complete Book Proposal Outline

Title Page

Proposal Overview

I. The Content

- A. Premise
- B. Unique Selling Proposition
- c. Overview
- D. Manuscript
 - 1. Manuscript Status
 - 2. Special Features
 - 3. Anticipated Manuscript Length
 - 4. Anticipated Manuscript Completion Date

II. The Market

- A. Demographic Description
- B. Psychographic Description
- C. Affinity Group
- D. Competition

III. The Author

- A. Background
- B. Previous Writing
- C. Personal Marketing

Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis

Two Sample Chapters

slightly different.) Though all good proposals mirror its basic content, each bears its own distinctive flavor as well. Now with that in mind, let's get to work.

For the sake of illustration, let's assume that you are a Christian financial planner. Through the years, you've observed that many of your clients' financial problems are the result of never having received adequate training in money management during childhood. You're convinced that if Christian parents would do a better job of training in this area, it would spare them—and their children—a tremendous amount of grief later in life.

Because of your conviction, you've worked hard to train your own children. You've even developed a seminar around this theme and taught it in a few churches. The response has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

Before long, several of your friends encourage you to write a book on the subject. Initially, you're flattered, and soon you begin to give the idea serious consideration. But where do you start? A book is such an enormous project! And how do you go about getting it published? The answer to both questions is a written *book proposal*.

Before you actually begin writing a book, you have to decide two things: what you want to say, and to whom you want to say it. In other words, you must determine the book's *content* and identify the book's *audience*. Once you've determined these things, it's time to go to work on the book's title.

Create the Title Page

We can't overemphasize the importance of developing a strong, catchy title. If the editor isn't "hooked" by the

title, he will never open your proposal to see what is inside.

The purpose of the working title is to focus your thinking as you develop the book idea. The working title should clearly encapsulate the book's premise. It might state the promise to the reader if he reads the book. It might even state the consequences if he doesn't. Sometimes the title will also include a subtitle.

Let's consider the hypothetical book we introduced. After a little work, you come up with the following working title:

Helping Your Children Become Financially Responsible

After a little more thought, you add the following subtitle:

What Every Parent Should Know

This title clearly encapsulates the book's premise and communicates the promise to the reader.

Once you've come up with a title you need to remember that a working title is just that: a working title. It's tentative. You may decide to revise it later. Sometimes, the publisher will want to revise it. In any event, its purpose now is simply to focus the development of your book idea and to clearly—and quickly—communicate your book's basic idea.

Type the title neatly centered on one page. You should enter the subtitle on a separate line, directly under the title. Also, type the date you are submitting the proposal. Finally, type your name, address, and phone numbers near the bottom of the page. If you want, you can add an e-mail address (see fig. 2 on p. 3).

Write a Proposal Overview

The proposal overview consists of three distinct sections:

1. The Content (What is the book about?)

2. The Market (Who will buy this book?)
3. The Author (Why are you the best possible author for this book?)

It should be no more than three to five single-spaced pages in length (see fig. 3-7, beginning on p. 4, for an example).

1. The Content

Once an editor flips past the title page, he then wants to know what the book is about. You can best communicate this by stating the book's premise, setting forth a few other details about your book.

Premise. The premise is a two- or three-sentence statement of the book's basic concept or thesis. Usually, it identifies the need and then proposes a solution.

Let's return to the hypothetical book. What's the need you're trying to address? Isn't it the lack of training in money management that children are receiving from their parents? Or, to turn it around a bit, isn't it the failure of parents to teach their children how to become financially responsible that concerns you? After a little work, you come up with the following premise:

Most children will leave their homes upon graduation from high school with little—if any—training in money management. As a result, they are likely to experience many years of struggle and frustration. The purpose of this book is to equip parents to teach their children the attitudes, principles and skills they need in order to enjoy a life free of financial hassle and heartache.

Not Bad. You've identified the problem, and you've said exactly what the book will do to solve it. And you've done it in three sentences!

Developing a good premise is one of the most difficult challenges of good

writing. It is, however, absolutely vital. Without it, your writing will lack clarity and focus. With it, your writing is more likely to be strong and forceful. It is well worth investing the time necessary to write a strong premise.

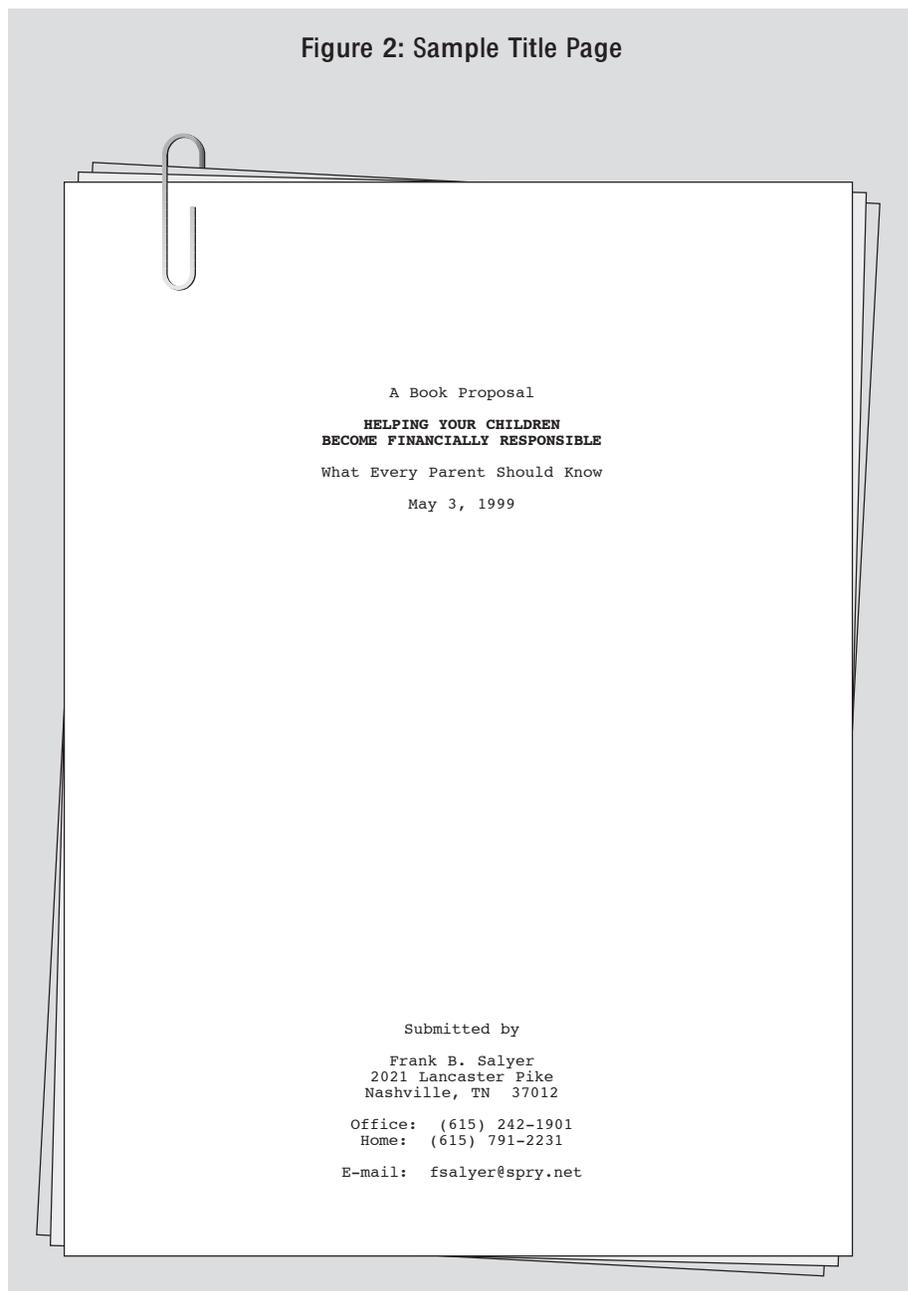
Unique Selling Proposition. Now that you have a premise, you need to focus on how the reader will benefit from reading your book. This is what publishers often refer to as the book's "take away" value—what the reader can expect to "take away" after reading the

book. It is sometimes referred to as the book's *unique selling proposition*, or USP. This proposition clearly identifies what the reader will gain by reading the book (i.e., the book's *benefits*) and how the book will deliver it (i.e., the book's *features*).

The simplest way to arrive at a solid USP is to complete this sentence (fill in the information between the brackets):

If consumers in the target market purchase and read [name of book],

Figure 2: Sample Title Page



then they will [list the book's benefits], because the book will [list the book's features].

Now let's turn to our hypothetical book project, and create a compelling USP:

If consumers in the target market purchase and read *Helping Your Children Become Financially Responsible*,

Then they will:

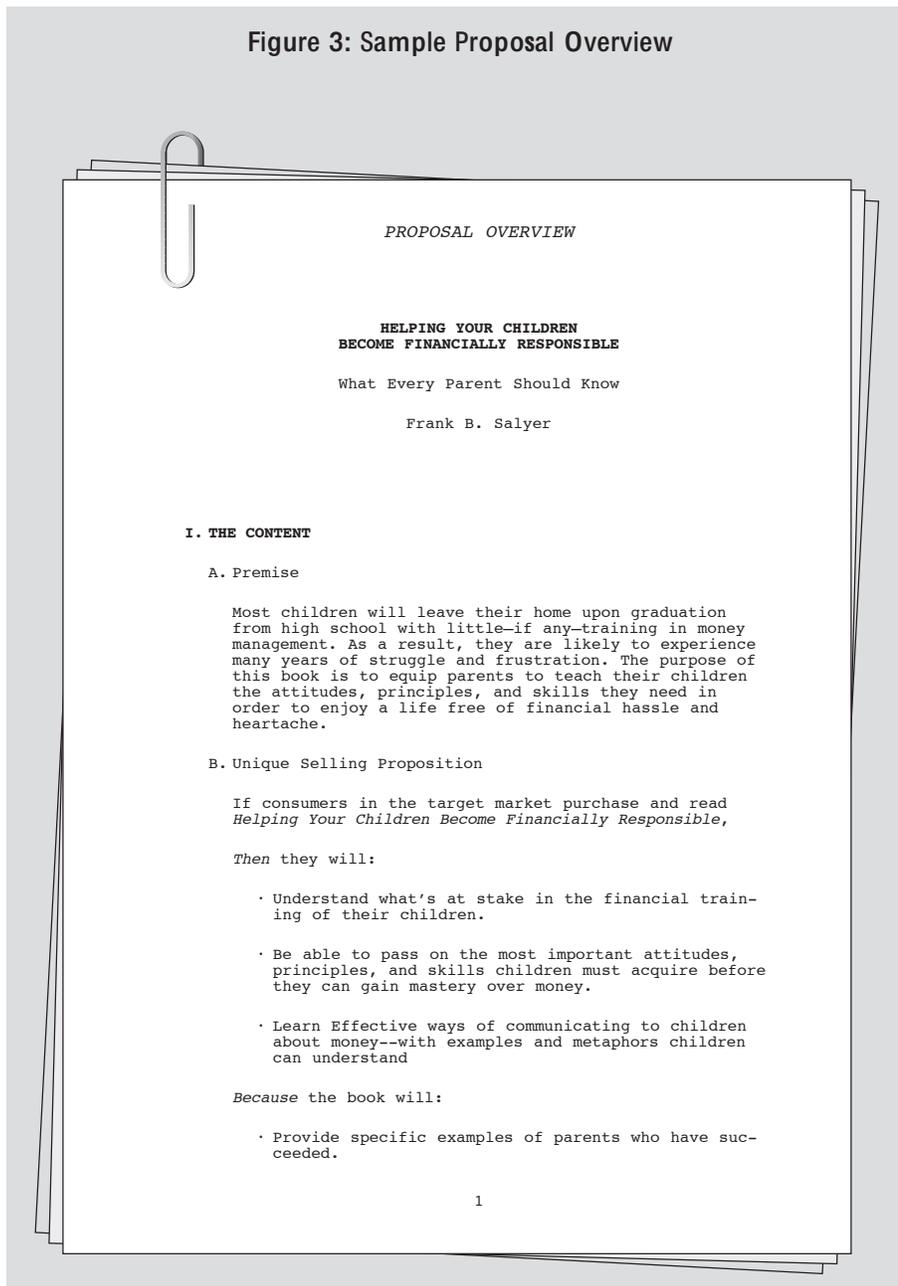
- Understand what's at stake in the financial training of their children.
- Be able to pass on the most important attitudes, principles, and skills children must acquire before they can gain mastery over the money.
- Learn effective ways of communicating to children about money—with examples and metaphors children can understand.

Because the book will:

- Provide specific examples of parents who have succeeded.
- Outline a simple technique for money management.
- Build parents' confidence in their ability to teach their own children.

This kind of unique selling proposition clearly communicates to the editor reviewing your proposal that you know what you want the reader to get out of the book.

Figure 3: Sample Proposal Overview



Overview. Once you have a solid premise and a clearly stated USP, you need to amplify them through the development of a general outline. At this point, you don't need a detailed, chapter-by-chapter synopsis (this will come later). You just need to be able to communicate the book's overall flow. Your goal is to give the editor reviewing your proposal the "big picture."

As a general rule, a nonfiction book should include at least three sections: (1) description of the problem or need, (2) presentation of the solution, and (3) amplification of the solution through concrete applications.

As you develop the proposal for *Helping Your Children become Financially Responsible*, you need to identify the major sections. After looking back through your seminar notes, you come up with five:

- Part I: The Road to Frustration and Misery
- Part II: Five Attitudes Your Children Must Acquire
- Part III: Five Principles Your Children Must Learn
- Part IV: Three Skills Your Children Must Master
- Part V: The Envelope System of Cash Management

Of course you will also need an introduction and a conclusion. But

the three basic parts are there: Part I will describe the problem or need, Parts II–IV will present the solution, and Part V will amplify the solution through a concrete application. Now that you have the major sections, you need to add a brief annotation to each, explaining in general terms what you intend to cover (again, see Figures 4 and 5).

Manuscript. Under this section, you need to cover the other details related to the manuscript. These would include the following:

1. Manuscript status: Where does the manuscript stand? Have you begun writing? How many chapters are finished?

2. Special features: Are there charts, graphs, tables, illustrations, photographs, etc.?

3. Anticipated number of manuscript pages or words: Generally speaking, each chapter should run between eighteen and twenty-two double-spaced manuscript pages and should be typed in a pica (10-pitch) font. In order to arrive at the approximate length of the manuscript, simply multiply the number of chapters by what you think will be your average number of pages per chapter. If you prefer, you can also state the length of the manuscript in number of words. Depending on the font you use, the typical double-spaced manuscript page will contain approximately 500 to 600 words. Most modern “word processors” have a word count feature that will automatically give you a total.

4. Anticipated manuscript completion date: When do you anticipate completing the manuscript? In other words, when will it be ready to submit to your editor? You might want to set a goal of so many pages or words per day, week, or month. Make sure you set a realistic date.

2. The Market

Once you’ve determined the book’s content, it’s time to identify the book’s

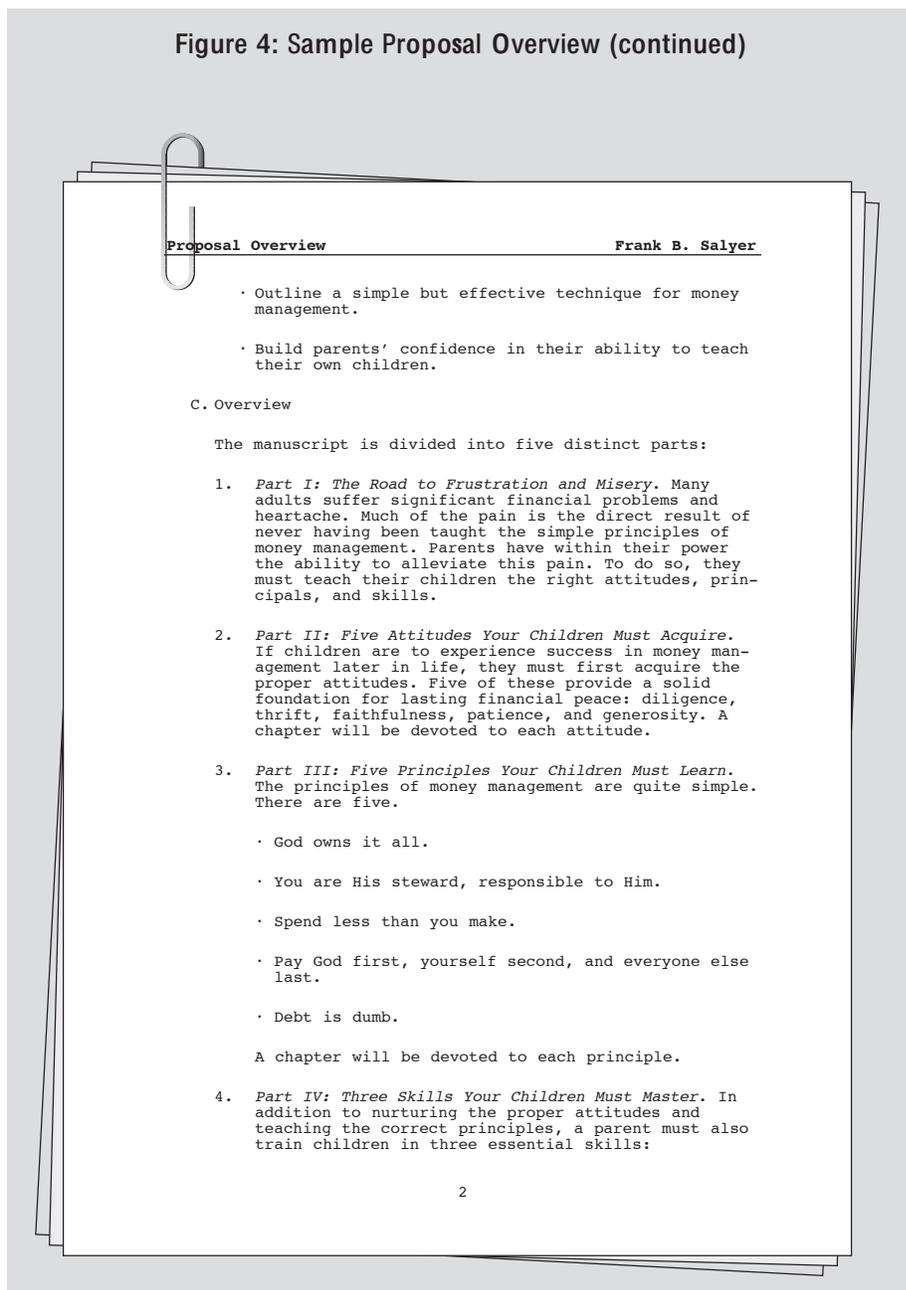
audience. To a large degree, you’ve already done this, especially in developing the premise. However, in this part of the proposal, you need to be more specific. A good definition of the audience includes both its characteristics and its motivation. Let’s look at these one at a time.

Characteristics. This is sometimes called the demographic description. The term *demographics* refers to the external, objective characteristics of your audience. It includes such things

as gender, age, education-level, socioeconomic status, geographic location (if any), religious affiliations, and so forth. In other words, you must determine if the book is for men, women, or both. Is it for Christians or a more general audience (Christians and non-Christians)? What is the reader’s average age, income, political affiliation, theological orientation, and educational background? Try to describe the characteristics of the typical prospect.

Let’s take another look at our hypothetical book, *Helping Your Children*

Figure 4: Sample Proposal Overview (continued)



Become Financially Responsible. The first thing you'll want to consider is the kind of people who have already shown an interest in your message. (If you haven't delivered the message orally, you'll have to describe the kind of people you *think* would be interested.) After jotting a few ideas down on paper, you come up with the following demographic description:

The audience for this book will be middle- to upper-middle-class Christian parents with at least a high

school education who have children ages five through fifteen.

All you need now is a psychographic description to put "meat on the bones." In other words, you need to make your description three-dimensional.

Motivations. This is sometimes called the *psychographic* description. The term psychographics refers to the study of the motivations that lead people to consider your product and ultimately

purchase it. While demographics involve the external, objective characteristics of your audience, psychographics involve the internal, subjective characteristics of your audience. Demographics tells you *who* and psychographics tells you *why*. For example, why would the reader want to buy your book? What are his frustrations? What motivates him? What does he expect to get out of the book?

Again, let's look at our hypothetical book. What needs and frustrations are characteristic of the target audience? You've already said that the child has a need to learn money management. But the child is not going to be the one buying the book; his parents are. What are their needs? After a little thought you come up with this:

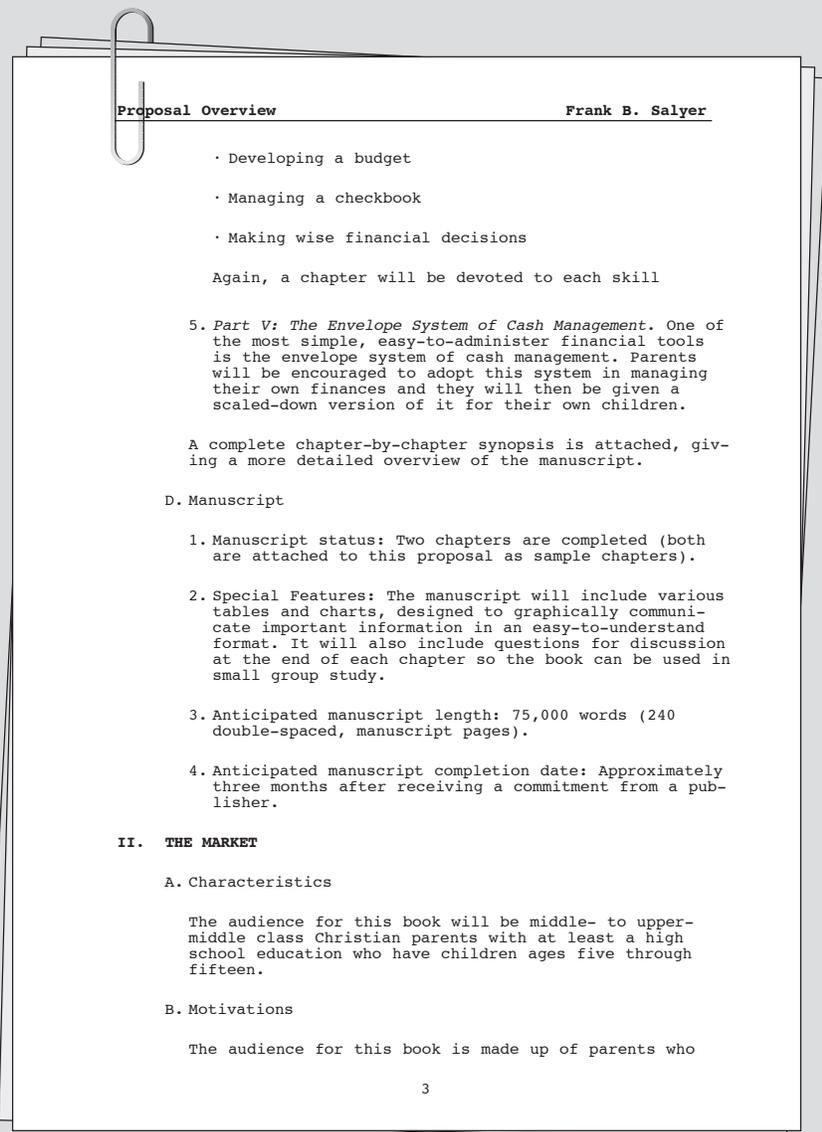
The audience for this book is made up of parents who have experienced frustration in their own lives as it relates to money management and, because they love their children, would like to spare them the same grief.

Now by combining these two definitions—the demographic and the psychographic—you will give the publisher a concrete idea of the audience you have in mind. But just as important, it will be an immense help to you as you begin writing the book. Specifically, it will guide you in your selection of appropriate vocabulary and illustrations.

Affinity Groups. The term *affinity* refers to "a natural attraction or feeling of kinship." An affinity group is a body of people who will likely have some attraction to your book based on their behavioral history. Generally, you will think of and list several affinity groups. For example, if you were writing a book on marriage, a natural affinity group would be *Focus on the Family* radio listeners. If you were writing a book on starting a new business, a possible affinity group would be subscribers to *Income Opportunities* magazine.

Now consider our hypothetical book. What groups of people will

Figure 5: Sample Proposal Overview (continued)



likely be attracted to your message? After a little thought, you come up with the following:

1. Listeners of Larry Burkett's *Money Management* radio show.
2. Listeners of Dave Ramsey's *Financial Peace* radio show.
3. Listeners of James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* radio show.
4. Subscribers of *Money* magazine.
5. Subscribers of *Parenting* magazine.
6. Readers of financial books.
7. People who have a professional relationship with a stockbroker.
8. People who have a professional relationship with a financial planner.
9. Financial counselors.

Notice that each group listed is identified by objective behavior. These are groups that (a) will be most likely to respond positively to your book's message and (b) the publisher can get to via one marketing vehicle or another.

Competition. Before you commit a great deal of time and energy to writing a book, you need to know what else is available. Why waste your time writing a book that has already been written? As Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators, used to say, "Don't do anything that others can do or will do when there is so much of importance to be done that others cannot or will not do."

You may need to go to a bookstore and simply browse the shelves for books that address your subject or are in some way similar to the one you are proposing. Or you may want to flip through several current catalogs of the major publishers. It might even be a good idea to scan the subject and title listings in *Books in Print*.

The issue here is twofold:

1. Is there a proven market for this kind of book, and if so,
2. How does this book differ from other books like it? Differentiating your book from others is critically important.

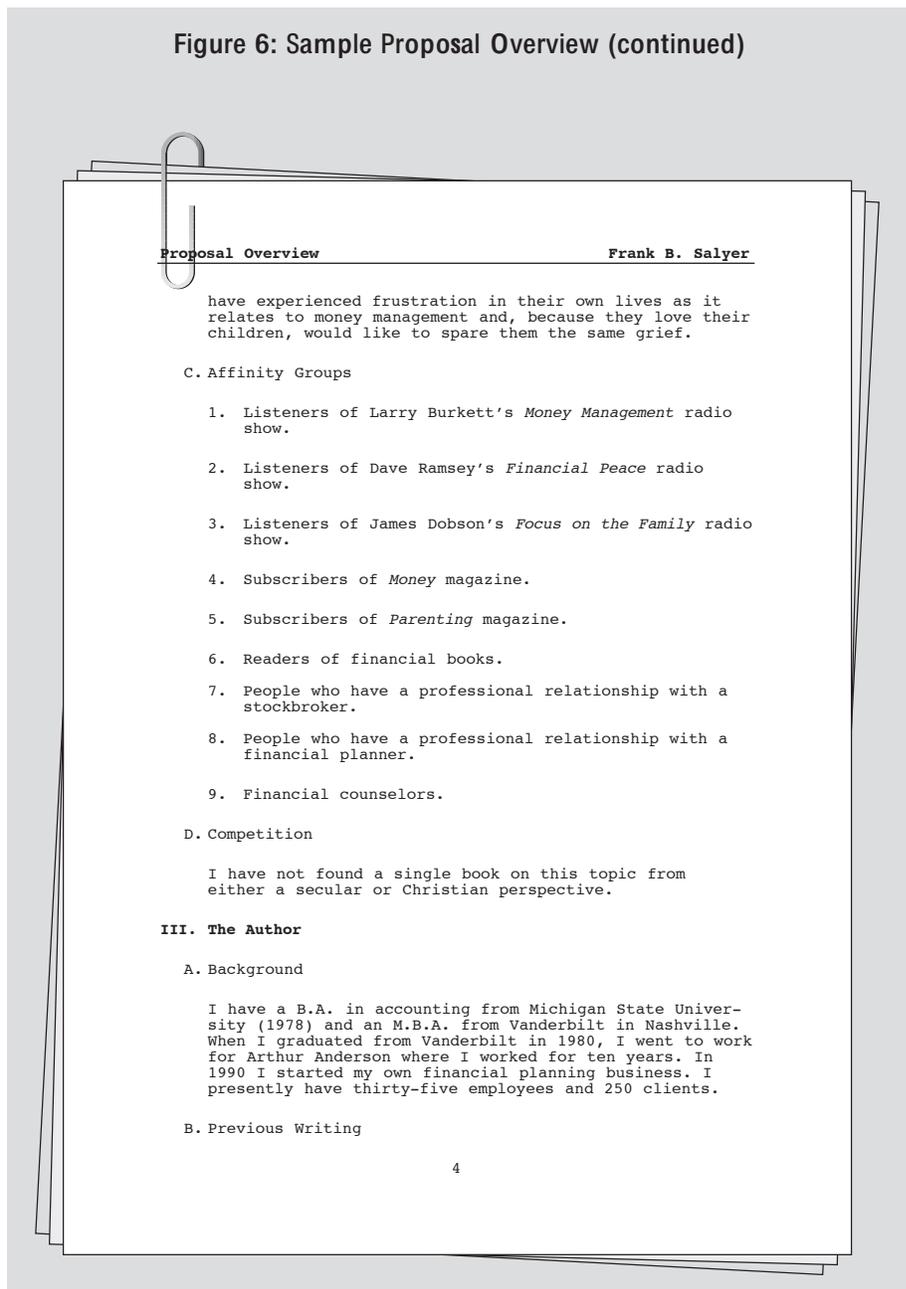
Now that you've described the book and its audience, you need to take a little time and help the publisher get acquainted with you, the author.

3. The Author

Assuming the editor is interested in the content and believes that there might, in fact, be a market, the next thing he wants to know is why you are qualified to write it and what you are willing to do to help promote it.

Background. Describe your background, particularly as it relates to the subject of your book. Tell the publisher why you feel you are qualified to write the book. You may want to

Figure 6: Sample Proposal Overview (continued)



include a brief resume. Your academic credentials may be important, but you may have other qualifications that are just as relevant. If so, be sure to mention them.

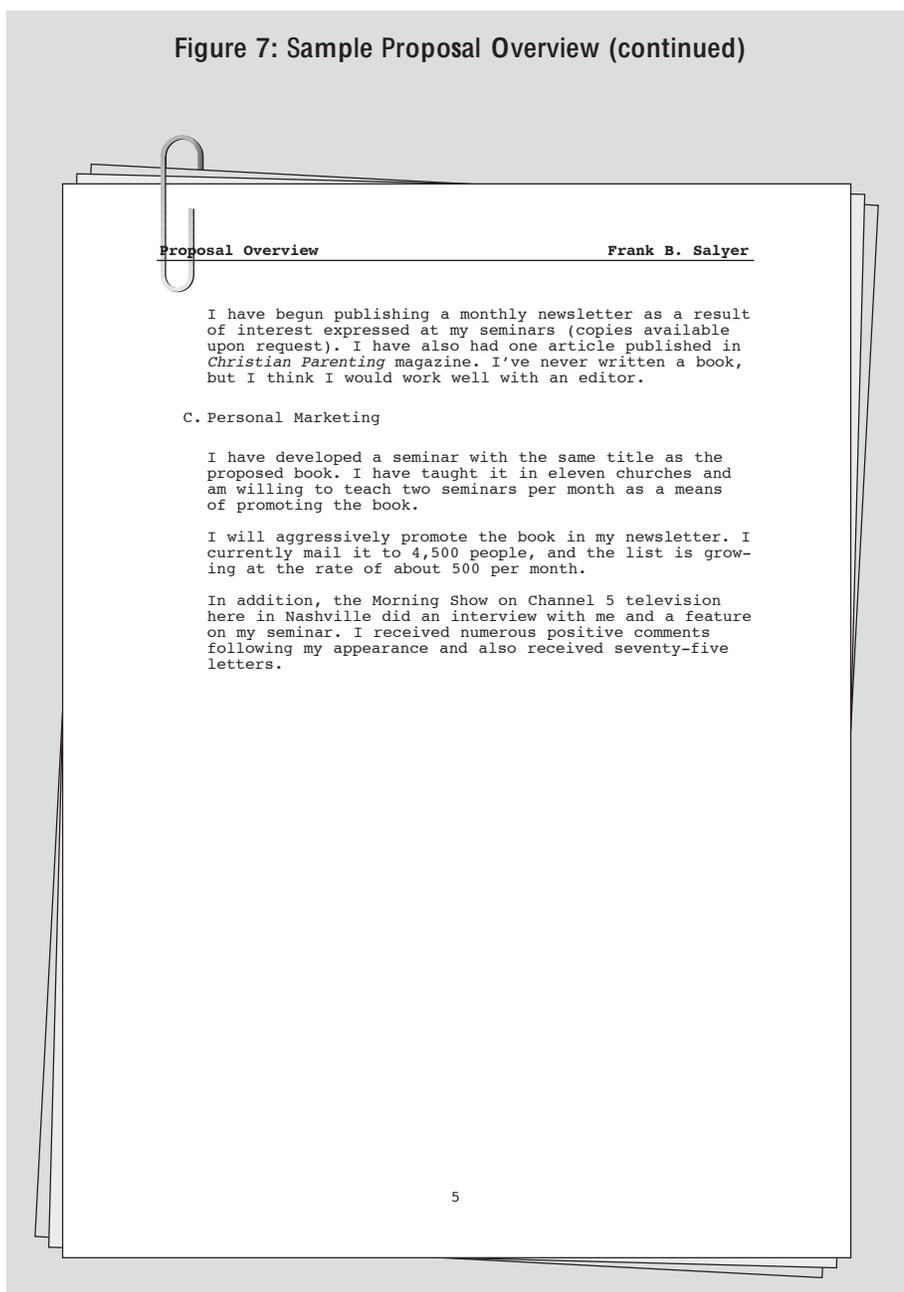
Previous Writing. Tell the publisher about your previous writing. Have you written a book or magazine article before? If so, what was it, who published it, and how did it do? Let the publisher know that samples of your written work are available upon request.

If you've never written before, that's fine, too; there's a first time for everyone. Just make sure you give specific reasons why you are the person to write the book.

Personal Marketing. A publisher cannot possibly do everything necessary to make your book successful. And most won't even try. Increasingly, publishers want to know what you can do to help promote the book. Consider the following:

- ▶ What important contacts do you have that might be willing to endorse the book?
- ▶ Are you presently speaking on the subject matter contained in the book? Are you willing to speak more? How many times per year? In what types of venues (e.g., churches, conferences, corporate seminars, etc.)?
- ▶ Are you planning to write articles based on the book?
- ▶ Would you be willing to create a Web site?
- ▶ Do you have any regular media opportunities? Television or radio appearances? Even a regular show?

Figure 7: Sample Proposal Overview (continued)



Develop a Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis

The purpose of a chapter-by-chapter synopsis or annotated outline is to give you (and the editor) an overview of the book's structure. It should include section titles, chapter titles, and a two- or three-sentence description under each chapter title of what will be covered in that particular chapter (see Figure 8 on p. 9). In addition, this will convince the editor that you know where you are going—and how you are going to get there.

You should pay particular attention to chapter titles. Like the book's overall title, each chapter title must be interesting and intriguing. In today's environment, the mass media have negatively affected the attention span of the reading public. People rarely read a book in one sitting. Every time they pick the book back up, the next chapter title has to convince them to keep reading. Therefore, it is extremely important that your chapter titles "pull" the reader back into the book.

Write Two Sample Chapters

If you've done your work well, the editor is now genuinely interested in your proposal. There is only one question remaining: Can this author really write? The only way to demonstrate this is to include two sample chapters (see fig. 9 on p. 10). These chapters book don't have to be the first two in the book; and they don't even have to be consecutive. But they must be good. This is your audition for the publishing company and everything must go without a hitch.

I don't have space to tell you everything you need to know about writing, but here are a few quick pointers:

- ▶ Each chapter should be at least eighteen and no more than twenty-two double-spaced pages (approximately 9,000 to 15,000 words)
- ▶ Begin each chapter with an attention-getting anecdote. Readers love stories, and there is no better way to pull the reader into the content of your chapter than with one.
- ▶ Break up the chapter using subheads. A good rule of thumb is to use at least one subhead every two pages.
- ▶ If possible, also include an anecdote or illustration somewhere under each subhead.
- ▶ Use active voice whenever possible. If you don't know the difference between active and passive voice, get a good grammar book and spend some time studying it.
- ▶ Carefully check the spelling and grammar of each chapter. Your word processor will likely give you a good start. But if these areas aren't your strong suit, hire a copy editor who can do it for you. This will cost you a little money, but it will be well worth the investment.

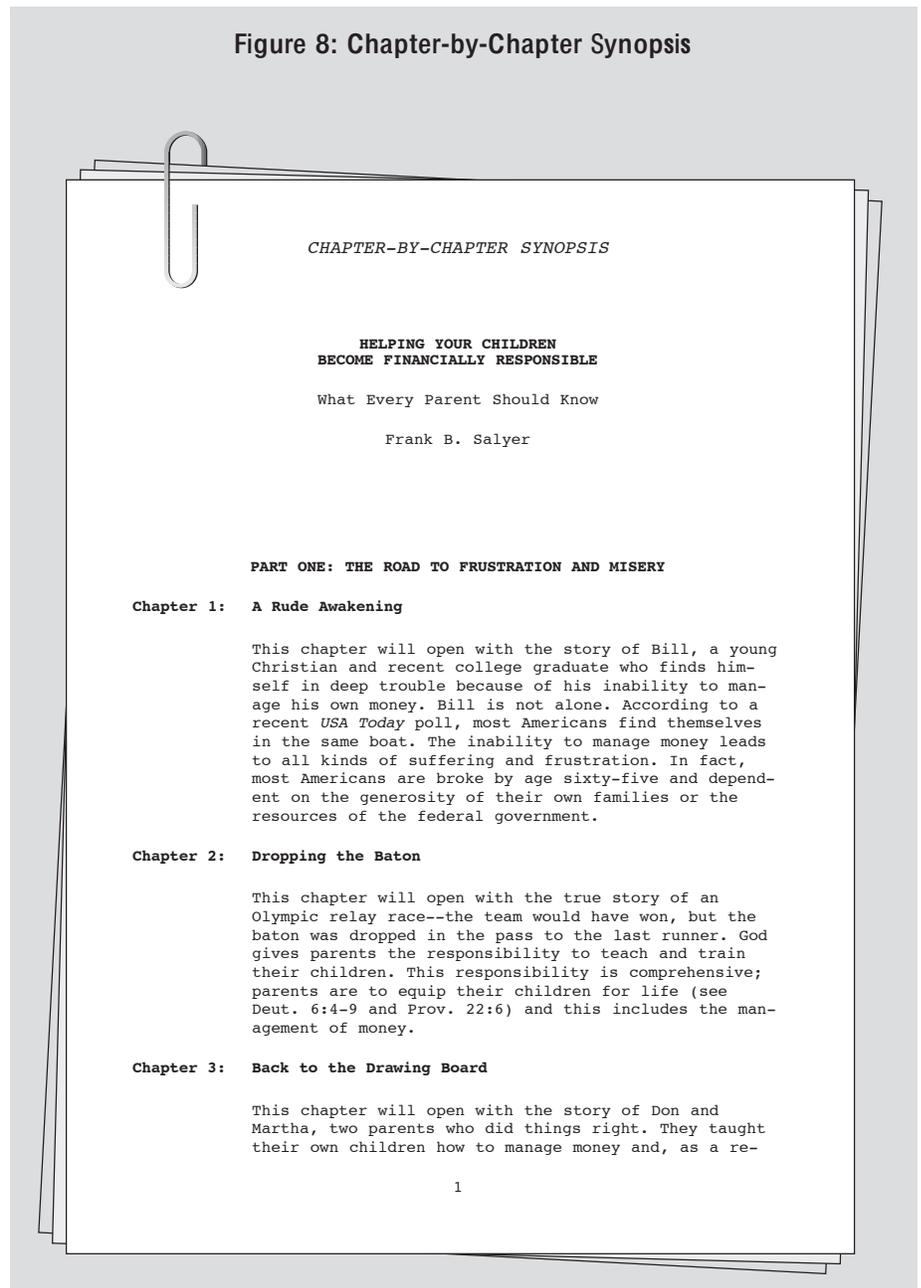
A Few Words of Caution

Remember, your proposal may be the only opportunity you will have to sell yourself and your concept to the publisher. Make every word count. Make certain that you come across well. First impressions make for lasting impressions. Therefore, take careful note of the following do's and don'ts:

- ▶ Do be polite, respectful, and friendly; don't make demands or launch into diatribes.

- ▶ Do make your proposal stylistically lucid, clear, and direct; don't write with lurid ornateness, showing off your voluminous vocabulary.
- ▶ Do make certain that the proposal is neatly typed and systematically organized; don't send the publisher a faded printout from a second-rate dot-matrix printer, a shoebox of scraps, or a collection of random notes you've accumulated over the last ten years.

Figure 8: Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis



- ▶ Do make sure all your facts and figures, names and dates, people and places, are accurately noted; don't force the publisher to sift the wheat from the chaff.
- ▶ Do engage in a little market research, sending your proposal only to publishers whose backlist and editorial objectives match the predisposition of your project; don't simply mail out a query to every book house listed in the latest edition of *Writer's Market*. Also don't send simultaneous submissions to any house unless you note this in a cover letter.

Conclusion

Preparing a book proposal like the one outlined here will require a considerable investment of time and thought on your part. However, this kind of investment will pay substantial dividends later when you begin the actual process of writing. More important, perhaps, it will go a long way toward actually improving your chances of getting published. Who knows? The next book you read may be your own!

Michael S. Hyatt is Senior Vice President and Associate Publisher of Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc.'s Book Division. In this capacity he is responsible for all product development, including author acquisitions, editorial development and author relations. He has been involved in the publishing industry for nearly twenty years. Prior to coming to Thomas Nelson, he was a partner in the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Inc. (now Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.). He is the author of two books: The Millennium Bug: How to Survive the Coming Chaos (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1998) and Y2K: The Day the World Shut Down: A Novel (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998). He and his wife, Gail, have been married for twenty years and have five daughters.

Figure 9: Sample Chapter

