

## How to Sell Publishers a Series of Nonfiction Books for Children

If you have an idea for a non-fiction book for children, chances are you can expand that idea into a series. Write three, six or even eight books rather than one. But you must understand the market for children's non-fiction books or you'll never make a single sale.

Marketing your ideas in the world of non-fiction for children isn't something you can do in an hour using only one or two marketing tools. You must know how to check the market in order to make a sale, for poor marketing results in rejection slips. But proper marketing can almost guarantee sales. Intelligent marketing pays off in unexpected ways. If you discover what your market wants, you can save much time in research and writing. You can also shape your materials to suit the publisher.

If you have an idea for a children's book, by all means write it down. But be willing to discard it or alter it, for your marketing research likely will cause you to rethink your project.

An important first step in selling non-fiction books to the children's market is to go the public library to see what children read. Ask the children's librarian what recently-published books are most popular. Locate these and spend some time examining them.

You'll find out right away that you must make some decisions. For what age group do you want to write? Will you be looking at pre-school books, at those for kindergarten through third grade (called "K-3" in the jargon of the publishers), grades 4-8, intermediate, or high school? Different publishers divide children's ages up in slightly different ways, but the variances are slight.

In my own writing, I have concentrated on grades 4-8, though my market research techniques work for any of the groups.

Once you have decided on an age group to aim for, begin looking at books in earnest. Something you'll discover early on is that many publishers like to put out series of books on related topics. Understanding the basis for series and the nature of such series is crucial for writing and selling non-fiction children's books.

Dozens of publishers are in the business of selling book series to public libraries and school libraries. These books are slick and colorful, expensive to produce and, most important, attractive to children and to librarians in charge of purchasing. A single book in such a series for grades 4-8 might cost from \$15 to \$25, for they typically contain many full-color illustrations.

Often the best-selling series are not books you would find in a book store since the buying public shies away from such fancy price tags. The industry has developed a procedure of selling through sending their catalogs to libraries and through using distributors who understand sales of children's nonfiction. Thus it is that to become acquainted with the nonfiction books children read these days, you must go to a library. School libraries will do, though you will be better served by your local public library.

You will therefore find yourself examining several series of books from a number of different publishers. You must have a systematic method for looking at the books, and you must take notes. I fill in the following form when I examine books:

Publisher:

Title of Series:

Number of Books in Series:

Size of the Books: (measure height and width in inches)

Number of chapters per book:

Layout of chapters: (pages per chapter)

Number of pages per book:

Number of words per page:

Number of words per book:

Index: (number of entries, kind of entries)

Glossary: (number of words, kind of words--are they ones found in dictionaries or are these specialized terms?)

Number of illustrations per book:

Average number of words per sentence:

Average number of words of 3 or more syllables per sentence:

Grade Level: (often not mentioned in the book)

After looking at several book series put out by different publishers, you are ready to take the next step in market research: examine publisher's catalogs.

Finding catalogs is a bit trickier than finding books, but you can do it. Explain your purposes to the children's librarian in the public library and request to see catalogs from children's book publishers. Chances are the librarian will dig through files somewhere and come up with what you need. If you find a librarian uncooperative for any reason, go to another library. Many cities have branch libraries. I have found the staff of branch libraries to be quite helpful with this step of market research. Many have allowed me to examine current catalogs and have simply given me catalogs from the previous year.

You can learn much from the catalogs. One thing I often learn is that my idea for a children's book is so good that virtually all publishers already have a series covering the idea. If I had pushed ahead with the idea without doing market research, I would have written books that would not sell simply because that part of the market is already covered.

The catalogs can tell you the areas of a particular company's gaps--areas that perhaps another publisher covers quite well. Thus reading catalogs can give you an idea for a series of books you had not thought of before.

From some of the catalogs you can get names and addresses for query letters. But if you do not find that information, simply go to the Literary Marketplace in the reference section of the library.

If a particular company already has a series on, say, Native Americans, it will do you no good to query that publisher about another, similar series. Most publishers prefer to push what they have rather than put out another series that would compete with their own books.

One useful bit of information I found from reading catalogs is that several publishers put out series designed for reluctant readers. Books for these kids need to be easy to read without talking down to the reader, and they need to be about topics of great interest to kids. Some catalogs refer to such books as "high-low," meaning high in interest,

low in reading difficulty.

My series on martial arts is composed of such "high-low" books. The audience targeted by the publisher is the male reluctant reader in grades 4-8.

Catalogs can tell you much about the slant of a particular publisher. Some are interested mainly in books about nature. Others deal mainly in what the industry calls "curriculum," meaning the books are educational rather than being recreational reading.

No doubt among the catalogs, you will find a number of publishers whose books you have not seen yet. If any of these companies are ones you might want to write for, locate some of their books in the library and examine them systematically.

Before becoming too serious about a particular publisher, look it up in Literary Marketplace. Some of the larger houses will not look at unagented writers. Others will not consider unsolicited proposals. While it's helpful to know what such publishers have in their catalog, it could be a waste of your time to try to sell to them.

The next step in marketing is to put together a proposal. This will require that you (1) find a saleable topic for a series of books, (2) write titles for each book in the series, (3) write a sample chapter for one of the books, (4) write a generalized description of the series, and (5) compose a cover letter.

This step is a considerable amount of work, so do not undertake it without having done the previous steps with great care. You should have a specific publisher in mind, and you must tailor the proposal for that publisher's needs.

You should also be prepared to be rejected and be willing to rewrite the proposal for other publishers. Because of the cost of printing color illustrations, a series of children's non-fiction books could cost a publisher in excess of \$200 thousand to produce. That's a lot of money to risk on a writer's proposal, so book publishers are understandably careful with accepting proposals.

It is possible to truncate your proposal and thus save you a great deal of work. You might write titles for each book in the series, then write chapter titles for only one of the books, along with a sample chapter. Such a proposal might sell. But you would greatly increase your chances if you included chapter titles for each book.

Your final proposal should (after the brief cover letter) begin with the generalized description of the series. Write this in blocks (see illustration for a sample description). You must include the title of the series, the titles of the books, the suggested audience, and the proposed format. If the publisher puts out books containing glossaries and indices, by all means mention them in your brief description. You might also include another section entitled "The Competition." Here you would mention a successful series on a similar topic put out by another publisher. Explain briefly how your series would be different and better.

Follow the general description with a sample chapter from one of the books. It does not have to be the first chapter. Next will be the titles of the chapters for each of the books. A final section of the proposal would give your publishing credits or your credentials for writing the series. If you have nothing impressive for this section, do not include it. A well-written proposal will serve as credentials enough.

After you have written a thorough proposal, your cover letter can--and should--be brief. In a single sentence explain what you offer to write. Also mention that you have examined the publisher's catalog. If you have any information that might help you sell the series, mention it. For example, in researching my series on martial arts, I discovered that the most frequently stolen books from the children's book section of the local public library are those on martial arts. I included that information in my cover letter as evidence that there is a demand for such books.

You might also mention that you will use a readability index to help insure your writing meets the grade requirement

in reading difficulty. Some publishers require the use of the Frye Index, something you can compute by counting certain elements in a sample of writing. Some word processors have a built-in readability index. If your has one, mention it. But keep the cover letter to a single page; let the proposal do your selling.

Be sure to include your phone number. Some publishers prefer to conduct important business on the phone rather than writing letters. Mail your proposal flat, in a large envelope, and, of course, include an SASE.

Doing market research once isn't enough. You must do the process over and over, from year to year. You must know what publishers are buying from writers, and you must know the hot trends in publishing. One hot trend right now is books with some multi-cultural slant. From elementary schools through universities, the term "multi-cultural" is a current buzzword. Schools are pushing multi-cultural education; school libraries are scrambling to buy books on multi-cultural topics; and publishers are actively looking for writers to supply them with series of books with the term "multi-cultural" in the titles.

Once you have sold one series, you will find it easier to sell others. And once you become part of the "stable" of writers for a particular company, the publisher will approach you with topics. Never, though, will you be finished with market research, if you want to be a successful writer for the children's non-fiction book market.