

**Q: Steve – I am drafting a business proposal and am finding it very difficult. How honest should I be – can I gloss over some stuff? How long does it need to be? Help!**

**Ari**

**A:** Whether it was drafting the proposal that got me my first book deal or, just last year, the one that got me a speaking deal that made a huge difference, business proposals have made a huge difference in my business.

A good proposal can change your business by landing that new client or contract and thereby take your business to the next level.

While any business proposal is necessarily unique, great proposals have a few things in common. Below I share what I think those common traits are, but first it is vital to understand that business proposals serve two simultaneous and equally important functions:

- First, a good business proposal explains your idea, simply and logically. It will be easy to read and understand. It will explain to the reader, who may know nothing about this idea, what the proposition is and how it will work. It will also avoid jargon and hyperbole.
- Second, a good business proposal is a sales tool. Of course you must be honest about the proposition, but so too, you need to put in the best possible light. The whole point is to show the reader how it is in *his or her self-interest* to agree to what you are proposing. That means that the document must be persuasive, intriguing, well-written, and compelling. Don't hype, and don't hide the downsides (counter them instead), but also, be bold and don't undersell.

Here are what great business proposals have in common:

**1. They are based on a great idea:** Try as you might to spruce up a mediocre idea, the fact is that people see through that pretty quickly. Great proposals are based on great ideas. Your job in the proposal is to show the reader that it is in fact a great idea. In this case, the old adage is very true: You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

**2. They follow convention:** Your proposal will of course be unique to your idea, but by the same token, any proposal would likely include much of the following:

- **Executive Summary:** Here you explain the basic idea in a few paragraphs, or maybe a few pages (at most.)
- **Background:** Here you offer some information about you and your business, and how you got to this point.
- **The Proposal:** This is the meat of the document: What is the idea, specifically? What are you asking of the reader and his or her company?
- **Market Analysis:** Why is there a need for this plan and how does it fill a market need?

- **Benefits:** This is critical – what does the reader’s business get out of this relationship? Be creative and come up with as many benefits as you can.
- **Timeline:** What needs to happen when for this to work?
- **Marketing Plan:** If appropriate.
- **Finances:** If you are asking for money, the reader must have seen very clearly already why the idea is a winner. If you have done that, explaining what it will cost will be much easier.
- **Conclusion:** Stress the benefits once more.

**3. It won’t be too long:** We are all busy these days, and that is probably even truer for the person reading your proposal, so don’t be verbose. In fact lately, I have begun to create a short PowerPoint of my proposals (10 slides or so) that hit the highlights. If someone gets really interested after viewing that, then they can read the longer version. And in any case, not everyone digests words easily – some people are more visual for instance.

That said, you need to say in your proposal what needs to be said. That may take five pages or thirty. It all depends.

**4. It is passionate:** Again, don’t oversell, but remember that you are trying to convince someone of something. Passion often helps get you past initial reluctance.

**5. It is professional:** This means that it is well-written, contains no typos, is formatted properly, and so on. You are asking people to take you seriously, so act the part.

**Today’s Tip:** One book you may want to read that can help is *Selling to Big Companies* by Jill Konrath.