



# Partial or complete?

The author of 40 books explains why it sometimes pays to shop your manuscript before it's completed

**S**O HERE YOU are at page 157 of your nonfiction book. Or maybe it's chapter 8 of your novel. Looking ahead to the 400 pages yet to be written, you wonder if it's going to be worth it. And naturally, you wonder what's the best way to find out.

You could show what you have to a friend or fellow writer. Or you might send it to a professional critiquing service. But while any of those resources can find problems or cheer you on, none can tell you if the work will be published. The only person who can do that is the editor who buys your book.

Does this mean you must expend the effort and time to finish your book, and then wait months after submitting it before knowing if your work is worthwhile?

Not at all. There is a faster route. Instead of waiting until your manuscript is complete, you can submit a book proposal or "partial" (sample chapters and an outline along with the proposal).

But *should* you do this? Isn't a completed manuscript a better bet? Sometimes. Either approach has its advantages and disadvantages, and there are other variables to consider. Some have to do with your work habits and how you feel about the book. Others involve editorial preferences.

## Do a gut check

THE FIRST person to ask whether you should submit a proposal or partial is yourself. Are you certain

you can finish the book? You may be sailing along at page 120, but will you be writing as effortlessly at page 450? Do you know where your novel is going and how it will end? You should, because if you submit a partial and it's accepted, the publisher might contract you to finish the book.

If you're not sure that you can complete the book—in terms of either content or page count—perhaps you should just finish the manuscript before sending it out. Several writers of my acquaintance who have published a dozen or more books work this way. They point out that illness, writer's block or other events out of their control might delay or prevent their completing a work, so they avoid showing their work until they have a completed manuscript. And some among them feel that only the complete manuscript can exhibit its strengths and appeal. Not all those who prefer to write to completion are fast writers. But they are patient.

I disagree with this, but there are things to be said for having a complete manuscript, which we'll discuss in a few paragraphs.

## When partials make sense

THERE ARE several advantages to submitting a proposal or partial—for all parties involved. Perhaps the most obvious advantage has to do with time. An editor or agent can go through a partial a lot faster than an entire manu-

script, which is why some ask to see a partial even if a completed manuscript is available.

Saving time is probably why many agents—often more beleaguered by unsolicited submissions than editors—review only queries. Scott Hoffman at Folio Literary Management in New York City uses this approach; he asks potential clients to submit a one-page e-mail query letter. "If your query piques my interest," he says, "I'll follow up with detailed instructions on what to send and how."

Barbara Bova at the Barbara Bova Literary Agency in Naples, Fla., prefers contact by regular mail, noting that "We prefer well-written queries." If a project seems viable, Bova, who works primarily with novelists, will ask to see more.

But queries can be limited, especially from the author's viewpoint. Three or four paragraphs aren't always enough to portray the scope and pacing of a book. And a query letter doesn't necessarily showcase writing talent.

Many (perhaps most) agents and editors prefer a proposal over a query because, if nothing else, sample chapters give them an idea of how well the writer can write. Sample chapters also show how effective a writer is at translating what she describes in a query or outline into finished pages.

Most editors are hands-on, and this is perhaps the strongest argument in favor of submitting

partials. It's a lot easier for a writer to implement an editor's suggestions as she writes, rather than tear apart and rebuild the manuscript after the fact. And some editors are adamant about providing input as a book is written. Bill Pollock, publisher and acquisitions editor at No Starch Press in San Francisco, echoes this feeling. "When an author sends me a complete manuscript," he maintains, "I figure it's too late to work with them on their writing." Pollock, who publishes nonfiction books, says this applies even to authors working on their first book.

Jack Heffron, editor in chief at Emmis Books in Cincinnati, likes to see proposals, too, but only for certain kinds of books. "For a prescriptive or informative project, I just need a proposal," he says, "because I'll probably want to work with the writer in shaping the book to fit our list."

For many of us, there's an extra plus in submitting partials. The interaction with editors eliminates the feeling of working in a vacuum; even if a contract isn't offered, there's always the possibility of getting useful feedback.

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### When partials fall short

GIVEN THAT submitting a partial has so many advantages, is it worthwhile to write a book to completion before submitting it? It can be. Some publishers are hesitant to schedule a book until they have the manuscript in hand, so submitting a finished manuscript may mean you get into print sooner. (And there's always the chance that your manuscript might arrive just when another author has failed to deliver a book, thus leaving a

hole in the publisher's list that your book can conveniently fill.)

Many editors feel that only a completed manuscript can convey a book's strengths and appeal. Just as a query letter cannot exhibit the scope of a book, so it is that sample chapters do not always do a book justice.

This is particularly true for first novelists, according to Betsy Mitchell, editor in chief at Del Rey Books. Mitchell is adamant about first novelists finishing their work. "I definitely want to see a completed manuscript of a first novel," she says. To her, it is

ing is that for a writer without a proven track record, your best bet is to finish the book—and failing that, to at least submit a detailed outline for where the novel is going. Even for writers with proven records, you'll need a substantial chunk of the manuscript, in my opinion, to sell—at least a hundred pages. The one caveat being the 'high-concept' novel—Steve Alten's book *Meg*, about the giant prehistoric ancestors of the shark, being a good example of that, where the premise is the story."

The need to see the entire manuscript is not restricted to

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## It's a lot easier for a writer to implement an editor's suggestions as she writes.

important to know that the writer is capable of completing a novel—something that an enthusiastic writer may take as a given. "Finishing is possibly the hardest part of the job," she says.

For Mitchell, a finished manuscript means she doesn't have to try to predict how an author will implement the planned story. "A completed manuscript also shows to advantage the author's plotting skills and ability to handle the emotional arc of a story."

Previously published authors may be a different story. "Authors who have had several novels published are in a different situation," Mitchell says. "Unless an author is planning to make a major shift away from the type of books he/she has written, several chapters as a submission is fine, as far as I'm concerned."

David Stern, a former editor at Pocket Books, concurs. "My feel-

novels. Some kinds of nonfiction books—especially creative nonfiction—show better as completed manuscripts. Emmis Books' Heffron, who deals with several types of nonfiction, notes that "For a memoir or any type of narrative nonfiction, I need to see the entire manuscript or at least a significant chunk of it."

Of course, your eventual goal is to complete the manuscript, with or without a contract. So if you do submit a partial, don't stop writing while waiting for a reply. Every page you write brings you one page closer to being able to show your book to those editors and agents who require completed manuscripts. #

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### Michael A. Banks

Michael A. Banks is the author of 40 books, and co-author of the upcoming *Crosley: Two Brothers and a Business Empire that Transformed the Nation*.