



Crafting a Compelling Premise Statement

I have a book in my heart that will expose the wily sticky web of poverty in the life of a young single mother I know. A client of mine is pitching a book about extending radical hospitality to folks who live outside. A seasoned writer friend is passionate about writing a book on misogyny.

There's just one problem with these three particular books: people don't buy and books they *should* read; people buy and read books they *can't not* read. They buy and read books that offer a fresh solution to a problem they're facing. Readers buy and read books that meet a felt need.

And I promise you that no one is pining to be bummed out, stressed out, or called out.

Of all the proposals I've read, very few have landed in my inbox boasting strong premise statements. Literary agent Jevon Bolden concurs, "I don't see very good premises. What usually happens is people are unable to nail a premise well. So I'll get a paragraph. They have a difficult time getting to what the book is about and how it is unique."

In order to say "yes," an agent or publisher must see that your book has a *unique premise*. A "premise statement" is a one-sentence assertion of the book's fresh concept. This is your solution to meet the reader's felt need. You want this clear tight announcement to make a publisher pause and say, "Hmm, I haven't heard it that way before."

I challenge clients, and I am challenging you, to capture the fresh angle of your book in a compelling one-sentence premise. This novel big idea—that meets the reader's need—gives the reader a reason to buy and read your book! It captures the attention of the reader, agent, or publisher and it distinguishes your book from others. And that's not all: your premise statement is the rudder that guides every page and chapter of your manuscript. A strong premise is critical to the success of your book.

Here are the three secrets to crafting a winning premise statement:

1. A compelling premise is simple, clear, and easy to grasp.
2. A compelling premise is saying something fresh and unique.
3. A compelling premise meets the reader's need.

A Strong Premise Statement Must Do These Three Things

1. A compelling premise is simple, clear, and easy to grasp.

The job of your 1-sentence premise is to clearly and succinctly communicate the unique message of your book. **Use as few words as possible to communicate most effectively.**

For example, the premise of *Unsqueezed*, a book on beauty and body image, is: *God made your body to be instrumental, not just ornamental.*

Tip: *Make your premise so clear that after hearing it once, a friend could repeat it back to you!*

2. A compelling premise is saying something fresh and unique.

A sharp editor named Stephanie Smith explains what it means to pitch a book with a unique slant, or *angle*:

“An *angle* is simply this: it’s a fresh frame for timeless truth. It’s creative, unexpected, a pinch provocative, and able to power up vital conversations people are compelled to join. It’s the signature of great writing. And it makes all the difference in standing out beyond overdone, underdeveloped, dime-a-dozen concepts.”

And I really want you to catch this part: “a fresh frame for a timeless truth.” Make sense?

Lots of writers have written “my hard childhood,” “you’re enough,” and “love your neighbor”—vital topics that meet readers’ needs. That books like these have already been published doesn’t *exclude* you from writing about these subjects, but it does mean that you need to be offering a clear fresh solution that will serve readers. If you’re not offering a unique premise, you make it harder for a publisher to say “yes.”

To give you the idea, here are a few examples of “big ideas” that have a fresh or unexpected slant:

- “The secret to online dating is to choose the person you initially find boring.”
- “A single sentence can change your child’s destiny: *I am for you.*”
- “When you serve others, you find yourself.
- “Buy less; live more.”

A unique angle like each of these, “a fresh frame for a timeless truth,” makes the agent, the acquisitions editor, the reader say, “Hmmm...I haven’t heard it that way before.” Say something fresh in a way that others haven’t said it.

Tip: *You are not always the best judge of whether your book concept, or big idea, is unique and compelling. So run it past some honest folks!*

Ask them:

- Do you know of any other books that are saying this same thing?
- What is it that I'm saying that you haven't heard elsewhere?

3. A compelling premise meets the reader's need.

Your audience has a problem, and you've got a solution.

Because people buy and read books that meet a felt need, your job is to: know your reader, understand her need, and offer her takeaway value that meets that need. To ensure that you're serving the reader in this way, craft a premise statement that makes your unique solution to the reader's problem clear. Publishers must see that your book meets readers' needs and offers the reader real takeaway value.

Tip: *You must be able to name the reader's need and clearly articulate how your book meets her need.*

Do the Work

So what about the single mother, the folks who live outside, and the unsuspecting misogynists? Does this mean that these books *can't* be written?

Nope. If Malcolm Gladwell wrote any of those three books, they'd be come bestsellers.

But if you're not Malcolm Gladwell, what I need you to hear is that you have to *work hard* at crafting, and massaging, and honing, and workshopping, and test-driving your premise statement to ensure that it has traction!

Writer friend, your project may be worthy. It may contain an irresistible gem. But it's not the job of the agent or publisher to root around your entire proposal to excavate that treasure for you. It's also not the job of the reader. If the reader can't easily identify the premise, or "big idea," of your book, she won't buy it and she won't read it. It is *your job* to mine that gem and offer it plainly—to an agent, to a publisher, to the reader—as an irresistible premise statement.

DO IT: Craft a Compelling Premise Statement

Here's my premise statement:

- It is simple, clear, and easy to grasp. (Can a friend repeat it back, after hearing it once?)
- It is saying something fresh and unique. (Have other writers said the same thing? What are you saying that's different from other communicators?)
- It is meeting the reader's felt need.

You got this,
Margot

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