

An Editor's Book Publishing Tips for the Uninitiated  
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Perhaps the most critical step in the professional lives of historians is publishing that first book, yet historians rarely talk about the publication process within their departments. The key to success is not an insider's secret. Getting published is something that can be learned—just like interviewing, applying for grants, and constructing a syllabus. For those who imagine the publishing world as the Land of Oz and picture editors as shadowy figures behind the curtain, what follows is meant to erect some guideposts that can help point the way to the Emerald City.

Research, Research, Research

Like learning the tricks of the trade for doing archival research, finding out about publishers is a matter of doing your homework, and homework, naturally, begins at home. Look at your bookshelves: the publishers' names on the spines of your books will orient you towards the presses that put out the books that have been most influential in your choice of topic and approach. Check out the copyright years for some of these books. Were they published in the last three years, or are they twenty years old? Presses are often consistent in publishing in parts of disciplines, but they can change direction for a variety of reasons, among them the inception or shutting down of a series and the hiring or departure of an editor with a particular set of interests. Try to identify presses that have published books similar to yours in recent years.

Publishers go to great lengths to promote their lists to academics, and would-be authors should take advantage of their efforts. Presses mail discipline catalogues, seasonal catalogues, and sale catalogues throughout the year, typically to anyone who has purchased a book from them or signed up on a mailing list. More often than not, these catalogues can be found in the

exhibit halls at scholarly meetings and discarded around departmental mailboxes. Many are also posted on publishers' websites, where you can view both a publisher's frontlist (new titles) and backlist (all titles more than a year old). Increasingly, marketers are using electronic marketing in lieu of or in addition to traditional paper mailings, and you can sign up on websites to receive periodic listings of new books in, say, American history. It is also useful to look at professional journals. The publishers' advertising in these journals can give you a snapshot of new titles, and the reviews will give you a critical perspective on new publications from a variety of presses over a period of a few years.

Publishers also show off their new titles to authors and potential authors at professional conferences. Historians have dozens of conferences annually (some disciplines have one or at most two), but you will find the largest array of presses at meetings of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. You can use these meetings—and the ads in the programs for them—to collect a great deal of material about a potential home for your first book. Because of exhibiting and staffing costs, which are especially high when meetings are held in exotic locations or have smaller attendances, not every press will sponsor its own table at every meeting, so don't forget to spend time looking at the combined book exhibit tables staffed by such companies as Scholar's Choice, Library of Social Science, and Associated Book Exhibit.

At these meetings, you may see acquisitions editors and, particularly at smaller conferences, find that they have time to chat informally. The major conferences are not usually the best places for this; editors have often made appointments well in advance with authors they are working with and may have so many commitments that they can't field questions. You should, however, be able to pick up a business card for the appropriate acquisitions editor or ask those who are staffing the booth about the right person to contact. Some potential authors

believe it is necessary to meet an editor before he/she will consider a project, but I give consideration to strong proposals regardless of whether I have encountered the author in person.

You may also learn about a series for which your work might be a good fit. Series are subsections of a publisher's list in the field, usually revolving around a theme or period, and are often recruited for by academics. Series editors may simply recommend new authors to acquisitions editors, perhaps after hearing conference papers or reading journal articles, or they may play a more hands-on role in developing manuscripts with authors. Series have mushroomed in the university press world, and you may discover new ones through flyers at conferences or direct contact with a series editor. Whether a series is necessary for your book or will add value to it is something you will need to determine. However, the press is still the publisher, and it retains the right to make an offer and determine the terms, not the series editors.

Don't forget about a critical method of gathering information: oral history. Ask your friends and colleagues about their publishing experiences. Your advisor may have published a first book twenty years ago, in a vastly different publishing world, or he/she may have been commissioned to write books recently, so don't neglect to ask people you know who have published first books in the past few years and some accomplished authors a cohort or so ahead of you. The academics I know are all too happy to talk about the nitty-gritty of their publishing experiences and especially what went wrong. As you ask around, keep in mind that *no one* is 100 percent happy with a publisher and thinks the press did everything it could to promote his or her book. But through these conversations, you will pick up valuable information about what to expect and what questions to ask so that you may avoid some of the problems others have experienced.

There are no major drawbacks to educating yourself about world of publishing before the need to publish suddenly becomes a “front burner” issue. Doing so will help you make better choices as you are working on your dissertation and may get you started on thinking about future book projects. It will also mean that you are not flying blind or relying on urban legends when the time for dealing with presses arrives.

### Making Contact: When and How

There is no single right answer to when it is best to begin contacting publishers. In general, though, I advise a period of seasoning for the dissertation. Step back, put it in a drawer, and don't look at it for a period of weeks or even months. You need time to gain critical distance from what you have just completed before you can envision taking it apart and jettisoning parts of what you have spent years working on. That advice does not, however, take into account other factors, like a job search, but hiring committees tend to be accepting of newly filed dissertations in a way that acquisitions editors typically are not.

Even though a lot of potential authors assure me that “my advisor told me to write my dissertation like a book,” there is a difference between the two. At the most fundamental level, the dissertation is written to prove mastery of material to a small group of advisors who have nurtured your project from its inception and helped you through research and development. Book publishers assume you have achieved mastery of your material; they are looking for your original contribution. Editors know that finishing up and filing a dissertation is sometimes (usually?) done in a rush, that there are things you meant to do, wanted to do, and simply ran out of time to do. Taking advice from your dissertation committee and applying it to your work is time well

spent. It will no doubt make yours a stronger first book, so implement it, and don't wait to get the same advice during a publisher's review process.

While there is a great deal more to be said on the topic of revising a dissertation, you can carry out minimal revision on your own by looking critically at a few structural elements of your dissertation. Recasting the introduction is usually necessary. These openers often contain literature reviews and extremely chunky footnotes pointing out the lacunae in other works. This is the place to make sure that your own argument comes through clearly and compellingly; it is not the place to point out all the problems with other books. Does your introduction explain what the flow of your manuscript is and how the chapters fit together? Next, take a look at your table of contents. Are your chapter titles clear, or are they jargon-filled? Are your chapters of more or less even length? Are your footnotes/endnotes predominantly citations, or do you use them to work in additional information and to have conversations with the literature you could not work into the text? If the latter, work on cutting these down now.

This is also a good time to assess the length of your manuscript, if you haven't done so already. Use the word-count function of your word-processing program to figure out how long what you have written is (and don't forget the notes). While there is no "magic number," publishers look most favorably on books in the neighborhood of 100,000-110,000 words, which translates into a book of around 300 pages. That is not an arbitrary figure. Production costs are all predicated on length, and a much larger page count can make it difficult to price a book at the level a press thinks optimal for its market. More important, if a book has course adoption potential, greater length may make its appearance on syllabi unlikely. (Think about the longest book you can assign to your students.) While there are reasons why some books must be long, more often than not dissertations are over-examined and overwritten. Although it may be

painful to cut back material you have spent years in the archives discovering, it is a sobering fact that publishers are attentive to book length and their publishing decisions will, to a degree, be linked to this factor. Of course, there are also dissertations that are thin and may benefit from having an expanded time frame or an additional chapter.

The bottom line is this: you want to put your best foot forward when you submit to publishers. There are no second chances for editors to take a first look at a project. If what they see is an unrevised dissertation that isn't ready for review, it is rare that they can or will invest in reviewing a project, even if they have chatted with you in the past and expressed interest in seeing your manuscript.

The proper way to approach a publisher is through a proposal. Even if you have 535 pristine pages ready to mail, resist that urge at all costs. Do not send your full manuscript unless an editor asks for it. A clearly written, well-argued proposal best enables an editor to determine whether your book is suitable for the publishing program he/she oversees and whether he/she wants to see more of your project. This is not the time or place to be overly informal. An introduction or excerpt from your manuscript with a brief note saying, "As promised, here it is!" is not a substitute for a proposal.

Not every good proposal is precisely the same, but here are some elements that good proposals include:

1. A cover letter. If you have letterhead stationery for your institution, use it. Address your letter to the editor by name (and if you are writing several letters at once, make sure the name matches the publisher). Make sure your contact information (including e-mail) is clear. Briefly state your qualifications. Give the title of your work and a succinct statement of your

book's argument, and make the purpose of the letter explicit. What you are asking editor to do? Be honest about the status of the manuscript. How complete is it? Describe the state of play—is yours a solo submission or a multiple query? If it is a multiple query, you must tell editors this. Not all presses will allow multiple submissions. Also, inform the editor if you have a subvention (money towards publication from an outside source) or if you have unique timetable requirements (i.e., your tenure clock is ticking very fast, or your book is about an event with an upcoming important anniversary).

## 2. A prospectus.

### Overview

A prospectus should include a brief description of your book. It should be written in the style in which you intend to write the book, and it should explain the book's central argument and lay out its arc. What kind of contribution does the work make? Be more specific than “it makes a contribution to the literature” or “it brings two different strands of the literature together.” Talk about what kind of contribution it will make to understanding the historical issues at hand and challenging or nuancing the established narratives of the field.

### Annotated table of contents

Give chapter titles and explain what each one contains, including the argument each advances.

### Sources

Briefly describe your sources. Say what kinds of archival documents, collections, libraries, oral histories, etc. you are drawing on, and highlight any that are particularly new.

### Market

Discuss the intended audience for your book. Is it written primarily for scholars? If so, what discipline(s)? Professionals (if so, what fields)? Students (if so, what level)? General/trade readers? (This is rare for a revised dissertation.) If particular scholarly or professional organizations are target audiences, identify them. Be as specific and realistic as possible. Few books appeal to all of these markets, and if an author claims that his or her book is for everyone, it is often a sign to an editor that he/she is overreaching and will be unrealistic about the market throughout the publishing process. There is nothing wrong with identifying a particular subfield and saying that your book is a monograph intended for specialists in this area.

#### Comparable/competitive books

List three or four books that might be comparable to or competitive with yours (include author, title, publisher, publication date) and briefly explain how your book is like or unlike these. It is exceedingly rare for there to be no book even remotely like yours. If you have trouble doing this, think about what book yours would likely be sitting with on a library bookshelf, or what books might take similar approaches but might not necessarily be on your precise topic.

#### Nuts and bolts

Finally, give the anticipated details of your finished book. Spell out the number of words your manuscript will have (always include text, notes, and bibliography), not the number of pages your dissertation has or what the font type and margins are. Give the number and type of illustrations you hope to include. Also, lay out your intended timetable. Be honest about whether it is ready for consideration or still needs work. If any part of the dissertation has been published in a different form, say so. This might mean that a version of Chapter 5 has

appeared as a journal article. While editors tend to not want to publish books from which the key research has already been in print for a core audience, they know that articles are part of building a c.v. and are not apt to be troubled by a journal article or two. Having gotten through a refereed journal process is a sign that your research has already favorably attracted the attention of a number of specialists in the field.

Also include in your submission package:

3. Your curriculum vitae.
4. A sample chapter (optional). If an editor wants to read more, he/she will definitely ask for it.

I strongly advise sharing the draft of your proposal with some eagle-eyed friends or members of a writing group. They will likely catch your typos and pick up on places where you are not effectively conveying your ideas to someone who doesn't have the same specialty you do. Remember, editors are generalists, so you need to make yourself comprehensible to someone who does not know the ins and outs of your topic. Editors are busy and see a lot of projects. You need to hook them fast with your proposal, so make sure that your cover letter and the overview in your prospectus are in tip-top shape.

When you are ready, my advice is to print all of these materials and send them through the mail. Using paper may sound old-fashioned, but no one minds getting proposals in hard copy. Just because you can send your project via e-mail attachment doesn't mean that all editors want to receive it that way. (Even within a press, editors vary on this policy, but many university press websites say that proposals sent via attachment are not acceptable.) Think about it this way: you are creating more work for the editor, since he/she has to print out your materials, expending time that could otherwise be spent reading and engaging with your proposal. You do not have to

call or write to say that you are sending your proposal. Nor should you plan to hand-deliver these materials at a conference, where the chances of them getting misplaced are greater. (It is unlikely they are going to be read during the conference anyway, and they will just add more weight to your—and your prospective editor’s—suitcase.)

You do not have to ask university press editors if you can submit your proposal. While commercial/trade presses generally do not accept materials for projects they have not requested or received via an agent, university presses and scholarly commercial publishers do read projects that come (in industry lingo) “across the transom.”

### What to Expect

How long before you hear back from a publisher? That depends on the press, the time of year, and an individual editor’s workload, but a month to six weeks from receipt of project is reasonable. You may get a letter thanking you for submitting your project but declining to review it for the list. These letters are not typically custom-tailored for each project, and you should not expect or request feedback from an editor on what you could do better in making a submission or improving your proposal. Rejection is a normal part of the submission process, and although this project may not be a match with this particular publisher, future works of yours might be, so it pays not to burn any bridges. Remember, editors are looking for the best fit with their lists, depending on what else is in production or under contract at a given time, and they have more viable projects cross their desks than they can possibly pursue.

If all goes well, you will hear back from at least one press expressing interest in your project and asking to see more. Depending on the press and the project, the editor might ask you

to send a sample chapter or a full manuscript. Be open with the editor about what is ready for review or how long it might take you to prepare your manuscript to send. If planned revisions will take a matter of weeks or a few months, the editor may advise doing this work before sending it. What he/she is looking for is a double-spaced manuscript (unbound), printed out single-sided, preferably with endnotes.

If you have submitted your proposal to multiple presses and gotten feedback from one that it would like to review your project formally, e-mail any other press you are keen on to check that your proposal was received and to let that editor know that another press is interested. A press may demand exclusive review, in which case you have to decide if this is the publisher under whose imprint you most want your book to appear, should things go smoothly in the review process. Assuming that the publishers allow multiple submissions, it will be up to you to decide if you want your manuscript to go through multiple sets of peer review. Consider your timetable (for professional reasons, do you need to have a contract by a particular date?) and your decision-making process (do you make endless pro and con lists whenever you have to make choices?). Should two presses pursue review processes, you do need to inform them that you are doing this and to wait until both processes are complete before you accept an offer. Publishers are investing time and money in these reviews, and you need to give them the opportunity to come to a decision.

The review process is a vetting procedure by specialists, and it is part of the “value added” that makes a university press a university press. That isn’t to say that commercial imprints don’t carry weight with tenure committees, but the peer review process and a university press imprint are important to many hiring and tenuring committees. At most presses, the peer review process means that a manuscript goes to at least two readers and sometimes three if it is

interdisciplinary or if an editor feels that different kinds of feedback might be helpful. This is a blind review process—you don't know who reviewers are unless they decide to reveal their identity—but it isn't double-blind, as journals can be, so the reviewers will know who you are. I ask authors if they would like to recommend potential readers (though I am not obligated to go with those people) and if there is anyone they would not want to have evaluate their manuscript for any reason (I don't always know about professional feuds).

The review process is not just a hoop to jump through to gain a contract. It is a rare opportunity to get in-depth feedback on your manuscript as a book-in-the-making from experts who have not previously been associated with your dissertation. Their comments may range from analysis of your argument to advice on structure, criticism of your prose style, and assessment of your contribution to the field. Even though presses pay readers in books or in cash, this kind of prepublication input is invaluable to writers at all stages of their careers. Later on, these anonymous readers might very well become part of your close intellectual cohort.

I generally give reviewers six to eight weeks with a manuscript, but that can vary based on time of year and the length of the manuscript. While a timely review is important, getting the best reader possible is an equally high priority. Reviewers are asked to respond to a series of questions posed by the editor but can discard this structure and go way beyond the original questions in giving feedback.

When the reviews come back, the editor will decide how to proceed, based on a reading of the reports, his or her own assessment of the manuscript and discussions with colleagues. When you receive these reports, they may at first seem overwhelming in length and depth. But remember: you want this kind of criticism now, while you can productively use it in revising your manuscript, not printed in a review after your book comes out.

What happens after the reviews come in may vary slightly depending on the press, and the editor should help guide you through this process. If you are unclear on what will happen next, ask. Sometimes the reviews are not strong enough for the publisher to continue at this point, but statistically that is not the common outcome. If your manuscript is not rejected, you should be asked to write a response to the reviews. It makes good sense to spend some time analyzing the reports for commonalities. Begin by thinking about the strengths pointed out in your project before reconsidering parts that have been critiqued. You need not agree with all the changes recommended for your manuscript, but you need to write a defense of your position in these instances and perhaps think of some ways to clarify your choices if you think a reviewer has misunderstood your intent. This written response to the reviews will become part of the package that an editor presents in-house about your project, but it is not shown to the reviewers.

Publishers' deliberations usually occur on two levels. There is generally an editorial board meeting involving editors, marketers, sales people, publicists, and rights staff, most of whom will have read a summary of your work in advance. An editor will present your project, including the book budget the editor has constructed. Collectively the board will decide whether or not to offer a contract and what that offer will look like. How often the editorial board meets varies by press. In addition, a faculty board (known at some presses as delegates or syndics) reviews all projects at university presses. They are the body that approves the imprint of the university being stamped on every book that the press publishes.

If your project receives final approval, you will be offered a contract for your book. While space will not permit extensive discussion of the terms of a contract, there are key things you should look for: delivery date, length, number of illustrations, royalties, advance, and paperback terms. There may be some room for negotiation, but it is likely not vast. You should

not expect to get rich off your first book, but you should expect to make money over time as your book sells. A first book does financially reward you in ways beyond book sales as well: it establishes your scholarly reputation, can be essential to getting a job, may get you a promotion, and is likely a key consideration for tenure.

In the event that you have been offered more than one contract, you'll most likely be making a decision based on a combination of contract specifics as well as intangibles. While the latter cannot be quantified, I cannot underestimate its importance. During the review process, you have likely learned a good deal about working with a specific editor, a relationship that is at least as important as the contractual agreement you sign for your book. This is going to be a working relationship lasting several years, and you want to be sure that you find someone who shared your vision of your project and will be supportive in helping you shape the best work of which you are capable.

There is a great deal more to publishing a first book than I have covered here. For more information, I strongly recommend William Germano's concise yet comprehensive *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books* (Chicago, 2001). But I hope this essay will give you a better sense of direction as you take your first steps along the publishing path, and I hope it has helped unmask and expose the mysterious figures who are furiously and frantically pulling the levers, dials, and switches at the presses where you are most likely to publish your first book.

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