Book Proposals - Workshop

John W. Warren, Head, Mason Publishing Group/George Mason University Press

Before you submit a query letter or proposal:

1. Identify and become familiar with publishers that specialize in your field
While it's true (in general) that most people don't buy books based on the publisher (instead, author reputation, subject matter, reviews, etc.) you should get to know all the publishers that are prominent in your field and their particular niche areas. Don't publish with a publisher if you don't enjoy reading their books!

See, for example, the Association of American University Presses publishes this matrix of AAUP presses and the subject areas for which they have a strong publishing interest—very handy to narrow down relevant publishers within the AAUP member community. See
http://www.aaupnet.org/images/stories/documents/subjectgrid2015.pdf

Acquisitions editors usually attend conferences in their fields—get to know them by meeting them at sessions or stopping by their booth. Even if you can't attend a conference, check the conference's exhibitor's webpage and see what publishers were present. Usually there will be links to the publisher's website and often the editor's contact information.

Critical step: Check the publisher website for their proposal guidelines, if any. The guidelines below will be common with most good publishers' proposals, but specifics will vary. Above all, show that you are familiar with the publisher and what type of titles they publish.
Editors/publishers craft submission guidelines to make the process easier and more streamlined, not to put you through extra hoops.
Examples:
Penn State Univ Press: http://www.psupress.org/author/author_main.html
Georgetown Univ Press: http://press.georgetown.edu/georgetown/our-authors/submitting-proposals
Johns Hopkins Univ Press: http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/guidelines.html

2. Participate in your scholarly community
Join and participate as fully as possible in your field's societies and associations; not only will it provide good networking and career opportunities, but it will help convince potential publishers that you are an important member of your field.
Consider the costs—time and money—of involvement, however. For example, if you receive an invitation to edit a scholarly volume, consider it carefully, particularly if it doesn't count toward your promotion and tenure or if you've never done it before.

Query letter

If you do not already have a personal/professional connection with the publisher, it may save you time/effort to first send a one-page (email) query letter to gauge interest.

- BEFORE submitting, read and follow the instructions for authors provided by the particular publisher you are targeting.
- It's fine to submit a query letter to multiple publishers simultaneously, but if you are submitting a proposal to multiple publishers, it's good to let them know.
- Show that you are familiar with the publisher and their titles
- Helps to have an "in"—someone from your network who has published with the press or has a relationship with the editor. "So and so suggested I contact you about my proposal…"

Important: Send a query email or letter only if you've done your homework and your letter is NOT a fishing expedition.

Book Proposal Basics

- Proposals are straightforward—every proposal should have an overview, competition, market, author, table of contents, and sample chapter.
- The book proposal is a seduction, a romance—remember you are competing against many other proposals, all (almost) equally qualified. Why should the publisher work with you instead of another scholar/writer?
- Don't numb the editor with mind-numbing erudition—this is not geared toward your dissertation committee. Most publishers are not especially keen on works geared only toward uber-specialists.
- What makes your book unique, and why should anyone (to start with, the editor/editorial team/publisher) care about it? Why are you the only person to write this book? Who will read (and in particular buy) your book? Why are you submitting a proposal to this particular publisher (hint, get their name right!)?
- Takes a lot of effort- not a cut/paste job- good proposal is 30-40 pages (but get to the heart of the matter in a 1-2 page synopsis) not including sample chapter(s).
- Each element should be flawless!

Book Proposal Outline

Specific order of components is not as important as including—for most projects—all the elements below.

1. Title page

- Title of Book
- Author
- Photo- author photo/image for book/cover (only if good, and appropriate)
- Contact info (yours or your agent's, if appropriate)

2. Table of contents (the table of contents of the proposal itself, not the book—see below for proposed book TOC/chapter summaries)

3. Overview/summary: **Concise**, one-three page description of the manuscript, including:

- The argument of your book and what makes it special
- Discipline(s)
  - Ask yourself: is it written in a way that people from diverse fields will be able to appreciate? Answer is probably no—what can you do as you write the book to make it more so?
- Audience /Level of readership (helpful note: saying that the audience is "the general reader" or "educated layperson" is not helpful and generally not accurate in most cases)

Don't get bogged down with details. DO get personal -- make the editor/publisher want you. Connect your topic and prose with the passion that led you to write the book. What is your own intellectual history with your topic? Pose a question someone would really want an answer to—and answer it.

4. Author information: one- to max. two pages, include details of your professional standing, previous books, and other relevant publications. Include significant press coverage (especially major media- print, radio, TV). **Not** your curriculum vitae, though you should include that at the end of the proposal, as an appendix, with sample chapter(s).

- Use this section to really sell yourself to the publisher—don't be humble, but don't appear too arrogant or over-confident.
- Have you spent 2 years, or 20 years, researching and writing this book?
- Do you have a "platform"? Do you write a regular column for HufPost, or your local newspaper? Have you been on the Daily Show or the Diane Rehm show?
- Awards and honors
- Previous books
- Head shot

5. Competing works: Compare/contrast your project with competing titles ("No one has ever done this before" is not helpful). One-three pages, depending on amount and significance of competition.

- What books will compete with the proposed book?
- Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the competition. Sales info is valuable—do some research (Amazon rankings are ok, NY Times bestseller info is great. It's generally not helpful to include as competition titles that have not sold well.
- How will your book differ in content? How will it better meet the needs of instructors than the alternatives? What sets you apart from the pack?
- What unique approach(es) to the subject that you have taken?

6. Marketing plan: Many proposals won't include this (Isn't this the publisher's responsibility, many authors will say? No, it's not. Authors must be active in promoting their title if they want it to find an audience.)

- What kinds of things are you prepared to do to market your book?
- What have you already done to market yourself as an author/scholar?

- IDEA- many publishers have an author questionnaire (you can often find online on publisher's websites; if not, find one from a similar publisher): fill this out ahead of time and submit with the proposal!
- For example, what conferences should the book be exhibited at? What associations/membership organizations do you belong to? Do they have listservs, mailing lists, etc? Who should be approached for blurbs? Where should review copies be sent? (Be targeted—New York Times will probably not review your book, sorry)
- Do you have experience on radio/tv? Print?
- Social media experience/expertise. Include your website, twitter, other social media presence of a professional nature (i.e. not your personal Facebook page if it does not contain relevant subject matter)
- See author info above. Make sure in one, or both sections, you convince the publisher that you have a platform.

7. Chapter outline/Table of contents, with (for each chapter) details of contents and length. Include total projected length.

- Table of contents is the book's outline—it should be specific enough to tell the publisher you have a plan for what to write.
- Convince the editor/publisher that you have juicy bits for every chapter—it's not just an extended journal article you are proposing.
- One idea is to create (for yourself, not the publisher) a PowerPoint presentation, with title of chapter as header, and key points as bullet points. Export to MS Word and fill out with descriptive text.

8. Description of special features:

- The number and type of illustrations, photographs, tables, maps, glossary, appendices, etc.
- Whether they will require any special design considerations
- Photo insert: sample graphs or sample photos
- **Multimedia:** Will project have multimedia (Audio, Video, Interactive elements)
    - o Provide a list of the media formats (MP3, Video files, Flash, etc.) and the approximate number of files/tracks of each.
    - o If you plan to include some but they are not yet created, describe how you plan to create them.
- Other aspects that reveal different, original, or interesting aspects of your project.

9. Delivery information:

- Sample chapters or whole manuscript available for review
- Projected completion date (or is the book finished)

10. Suggested readers, including those who might have already read the manuscript. (Some publishers may not appreciate this, but showing that you know the experts in the field will generally never hurt—they obviously don't have to, and seldom actually will, take your suggestions).

11. Sample chapters

- What to include?: not necessarily the first chapter; it should be the best you've got
- For example, introduction, chapter one, conclusion (if possible).

Other considerations:

Textbook:
If your book is to be used as a textbook (e.g. language learning textbook, International Studies 101, or some other required textbook):
Describe the goal and features of the project, including comments that reveal different or original aspects of your project. Describe your pedagogical approach and its competitive advantages. Provide the intended number of contact hours or semesters covered by your materials. Include the table of contents, or a detailed outline describing the content of each chapter/lesson. List the components included (i.e., textbook, workbook, teacher's materials, audio files, video files, interactive exercises, etc.), how many of each, and the estimated length of each (pages, minutes, files, discs). Has it been field-tested, or do you have plans to do so?

- What courses are likely to use the book? Will it be used as a main or supplemental text?
- Will the courses require prerequisites?
- What would the estimated enrollment likely be for these courses? How frequently are they offered?
- What is the education level of the audience (e.g. college juniors and seniors, graduate students)? Will majors, non-majors, or both take the course?
- What developments (e.g. changes in course content) are likely to affect the preparation and marketing of the book?
- Pedagogy: Do you plan to use a special pedagogy for this book? Describe its rationale, implementation, and competitive advantages.

Other things—not always or necessarily required but could make your proposal stand out
- Before submitting, ask a peer in the field do a "pre-peer review" of your proposal (someone with expertise in the field, and hopefully familiarity with the publisher or editor you are submitting to)
- If possible, confirm that you have secured permission for all figures/illustrations/tables, etc.—use Creative Commons sources whenever possible (see http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/) --permissions can be costly and time consuming.
- Find a good title for your book (publisher may change)

AVOID these (unfortunately too common) mistakes
- Lack of familiarity with publisher, discipline, and audience
- Failure to establish your credibility/qualifications
- Grammatical errors—in the cover letter and the article itself. Proofread and correct. Ask a colleague to read. Consider hiring a copy editor (especially if English is not your first language)
- Failure to include substance / what makes your project unique
- Failure to write simply and clearly

- Avoid excessive jargon—use familiar words, short paragraphs. Use some humor (within reason)

Other considerations for proposals—may or may not apply:
- If the proposed book is based on your dissertation, it's crucial that you describe how you are revising the thesis. The dissertation *must* be revised for a publisher to consider—spell it out that you understand that, and how to do it, in your proposal.
- Confirm that your research meet ethical and legal standards of the country or leading professional organizations (particularly if using subject data, grants, etc.)
- If more than one author, confirm that each contributed equally to the book or were actively involved, and agree to submission
- Note funding support received by grants, foundations, or other sources
- Indicate whether any of the material in the manuscript has been presented earlier (paper presented at a scholarly conference, or a thesis / dissertation)

Communicating with Book (or Journal) Editors

- Think about your conversation BEFORE you call. Make a list of questions.
- Research the publisher thoroughly
- Editors are VERY BUSY—don't waste their time with long, wordy emails, frequent calls, or especially with submissions that are not applicable to your project/editing/style—KEEP IT SHORT and TO THE POINT

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For more information about Mason Publishing programs and services, please contact:
- John Warren, Head, Mason Publishing Group/George Mason University Press (jwarre13@gmu.edu; 703-993-3636)
- Claudia Holland, Head, Scholarly Communication and Copyright Office (chollan3@gmu.edu; 703-993-2544)
- Jeri Wieringa, Digital Publishing Production Lead (jwiering@gmu.edu; 703-993-3742)
- Sally Evans, University Dissertations & Theses Coordinator (sevans13@gmu.edu; 703-993-2222); Wendy Mann, Head, Data Services Group (wmann@gmu.edu; 703-993-5272).