Chapter 1
Preparing Book Proposals for Scholarly Publishers

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ABSTRACT

There are three stages typically involved in submitting a book proposal to a scholarly publisher. The first is to overcome one's sense of impostorship, the feeling that books are written by "real" academics with startlingly original things to say. The second is to write the proposal itself. This involves describing the genesis of the idea for the book, establishing a strong rationale as to why the book ought to be published, and summarizing its succinct purpose. The meat of a proposal is the chapter-by-chapter outline that provides a clear description of the book's contents. Proposals typically end with an analysis of competing texts, a schedule for writing the book, and indications of how a Web presence might be created to support the book. The final stage is to select and then approach a publisher. This chapter describes all these stages in detail and provides multiple examples drawn from book proposals that were accepted.

INTRODUCTION

To many faculty members, publishing a book seems an intimidating prospect. A book? Isn't that for truly original thinkers with weighty and profound contributions to make to my field? I remember as a graduate student thinking that books were produced by people with intellectual weight who had something meaningful to disclose. My own intellect and opinions seemed puny by comparison. I simply did not think I deserved to write a book since I had nothing important to say.

To overcome such intimidation it is necessary to demystify the air of portentousness surrounding the idea of book publication. Most of us are committed to our academic field and to producing work that somehow extends knowledge or contributes to critical discourse. But few who publish books can be considered to be paradigm shifters. So we need to scale back the expectations we place on ourselves to write books that will move the tectonic plates of our discipline. Instead we need to think of a book as serving several possible functions that might include:

1. Organizing material that's already in the public domain in a more helpful way than is currently available.

2. Synthesizing and connecting elements of disciplinary knowledge that have not been connected this way before.
3. Exploring more deeply, or in a new manner, an enduring contradiction, question or problem in the field.
4. Proposing an interesting and exciting future direction for the field of study.
5. Investigating one small and relatively neglected corner or niche in a field of study that has not been documented well up to that point.

In this chapter I outline the chief elements that should be present in a book proposal submitted to a scholarly press. Throughout the chapter I draw on my experience of publishing seventeen books for five different publishers, and of what happens when the ownership of a publishing group changes hands. I also use excerpts from book proposals of my own that were accepted to illustrate some of the general principles I advocate.

GETTING OVER IMPOSTORSHIP

Impostorship is the sense that you are faking a role and that sooner or later people will realize this and discover you to be the impostor you know you are. This phenomenon is widespread in academe. It exists particularly in first generation college students (Davis, 2010; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) and in academics from working class backgrounds (Samarco and Muzzatti, 2005). First time authors are particularly prone to this, feeling that their views are uninteresting to anyone but themselves, and that they possess neither the talent nor the right to go into print. As a beginning author who had never done well as a student (I failed my college entrance exams, eventually graduated in the 35th percentile of my undergraduate class, and failed my master's exam) I was paralyzed with this sense that I had nothing

significant to say and that my poor student record confirmed that fact.

Forty five years later I can look back at that time and identify five strategies that proved particularly useful in convincing myself that authoring a book was not such an outrageous and inappropriate idea:-

1. I would often ask myself "how many truly unhelpful, poorly written, obscure, boring texts have I had to read in my field since my student days?" Usually several sprung to mind. There was one particularly dreadful text that was assigned as required reading in two or three of my graduate courses. I would slog through this monumentally boring book amazed that not only did it get published but that my instructors took it seriously. When I began to draft ideas out for my first book and suffered regular bouts of impostorship it was enormously helpful to look at that awful book (I actually kept it on a shelf near me!) and say to myself "That got published! Why not me?" This book broke no new ground, and purported to be a helpful review of one sector of my scholarly field. But it was very poorly organized, full of repetition and written in the most soulless language. Now I know that introductory or foundations text should not be evaluated according to their literary merit. But this book read like the most boring report you could imagine ever having to slog through. So I am quite serious when I say that keeping copies on a shelf close by of one or two of the dullest, least interesting books that have been inflicted on you in your student days can be a powerful antidote to your impostorship regarding your own prospective authorship.
2. Most of us, when we were doctoral students, were probably intimidated by the prospect of writing a book length document, the dissertation. I always thought that my dissertation had to be the last word on the subject and

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