

Chapter 2

Scholarly Publications: Proposing and Revising Book Proposals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the stages of preparing a book proposal and offers practical strategies for dealing with securing a publisher, receiving and responding to feedback, and making revisions. 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 currently on the market, 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. Through multiple examples drawn from accepted book proposals, this chapter delineates successful, real life ways to manage these challenges and processes.

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? As a graduate student, I often thought that books were produced by people with intellectual weight who had something meaningful to disclose while my opinions seemed puny by comparison. I did not think I deserved to write a book since I surely had nothing important to contribute although I felt that I had plenty to say about our field.

Few who publish books can be considered to be paradigm shifters. One's intimidation is all too often caused by uninformed expectations. To overcome this, it is necessary to demystify the air of portentousness surrounding the idea of scholarly book publications. 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

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to acknowledge that most of us are committed to our academic field. Our work can extend knowledge or contribute to critical discourse when we need consider the variety of purposes of writing a book. These might include:

1. Updating and reorganizing knowledge and materials already in the public domain.
2. Synthesizing and connecting elements of disciplinary knowledge that have not been connected this way before.
3. Exploring more deeply, in a new manner, or through different or emerging vantage points 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.
6. Validating practices from a diversity of grass-roots practitioners or traditionally marginalized populations.

In this chapter, I describe chief elements that should be present in a book proposal submitted to a scholarly press. Throughout the chapter, I delineate my experiences of publishing seventeen books for five different publishers, and of what happens when the ownership of a publishing group changes hands. I use some excerpts from book proposals to illustrate some of the principles that resulted in acceptance.

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 (Cuddy, 2015). 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 often feel 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. And the hierarchies and competitiveness in the academy present barriers adding to the hesitation of graduate students or assistant professors to add their voices to the scholarly publication chorus.

Five decades later, I 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:

Reinforcing Your Positive Perspective

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.

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