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Introduction

As a group, scholarly authors—even experienced ones—have a lot to learn about the book proposal as a genre and the publishing process more generally. It’s not for lack of interest. In my work as a developmental editor and publishing consultant for academic writers, I’ve spent innumerable hours educating clients about the purposes and norms of the book proposal and found myself giving the same advice again and again. I’ve heard the refrain “Why didn’t anyone teach us this!?” more times than I can count. This has signaled to me that academic writers need a concise guide to the book publishing context and how to navigate it at the proposal stage. I wanted to give such writers a practical handbook to walk them through the process of crafting their pitches and to demystify the tacit expectations that make the proposal genre different from other, more familiar, types of academic writing. An author who understands the power of a strong proposal in the publishing process is an author with more power over the fate of their book.

The guide you’re now reading is an integrated program that will take you through each step of researching and writing a proposal that will sell your book to an editor at a scholarly press. Even if you’ve published a book before, I think you will find information here that you didn’t know the first time around. Maybe you’re just starting to think about your next book; beginning with the proposal and the steps outlined in this handbook is an excellent way to map out the project before you draft the manuscript. Whatever stage you’re at with your current project and your publishing career, I hope that using this guide will help you gain meaningful insight into your own research and the message you want to share with the world. You’ll not only write a powerful proposal, you’ll write a powerful book.

Who This Book Is For

The reader I address in this book is a scholar with an academic background, probably with a PhD or on their way to getting one, or more generally interested in participating in a broad intellectual conversation. You may be trying to publish your first book or your fourth. You may be affiliated with a university

or you may be an independent scholar. You may be working in the humanities, social sciences, STEM fields, or interdisciplinary areas, aiming to make an original contribution to scholarly knowledge and discourse. This guide is therefore directed at helping you pitch your project to scholarly publishers, rather than mainstream commercial publishing houses.¹ The advice here is also geared toward authors writing books based on their original research. You may find this guide helpful if you are hoping to pitch a textbook, edited anthology, or some other kind of book aimed at a scholarly audience, but I don't address those scenarios explicitly here.² I focus on U.S. publishers in this guide, though you'll probably find that many of the principles I share will apply in other settings as well.

I'm here to give you some best practices for packaging your research to meet the needs of scholarly book publishers and readers, so that you have the greatest chance of reaching them with your message. Although the book proposal seems like a simple and straightforward document to publishing professionals who read them every day, the proposal is often unfamiliar territory for authors themselves. You probably know from experience that junior scholars learn the norms of publishing informally and haphazardly, and then it often only happens if you can find allies who will recognize and decode the "hidden curriculum" for you.³ Senior faculty and publishing staff are overcommitted, rarely having as much time as they would like to read drafts and offer advice. I've written this guide to fill in the gaps and level the playing field, as much as any one book could do.

Many publishing professionals mean well and intend to consider all book projects on their own merits. Even so, patterns exist in which certain scholars tend to enjoy the presumption of competence in academic contexts, while others may be scrutinized more closely by those in power or assumed not to belong at all, as the many contributors to the volume *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* have pointed out. Structural forces (and some individuals) within academia have worked to marginalize and oppress Black scholars, Indigenous scholars, other scholars of

1. If you want to write a nonfiction trade book, the kind that might command a big advance and garner tens of thousands of readers beyond the academy, there are other resources out there to help you do that. As a place to start, I recommend the materials on Jane Friedman's website, janefriedman.com, as well as her book, *The Business of Being a Writer*.

2. Beth Luey's *Handbook for Academic Authors* contains chapters addressing textbooks and edited volumes. I recommend that book as a supplement to this one if you want to learn about how such books get published.

3. Jackson, *Life In Classrooms*.

color, women scholars, queer scholars, trans scholars, disabled scholars, scholars from poor and working-class backgrounds, and scholars at the intersections of these categories. This marginalization and oppression compounds with the publishing industry's own problems of racism, elitism, and other toxic dynamics that are unfortunately so familiar in the academy and beyond it. In calling attention to this, I don't mean to discount the work scholarly presses have done to publish books by writers from underrepresented and historically excluded groups, books that have shaped fields and advanced causes for social justice. It's undeniable, though, that social capital and entrenched systems of power still count for a lot in decisions about who and what gets published and promoted.

A handbook is not a solution to the structural defects of academia or publishing at large. Yet I hope that *this* handbook will assist you—especially if you're a scholar who has been marginalized, oppressed, or abused in academia—in going forth with the confidence that you've produced a proposal worthy of serious consideration by the kinds of publishing professionals you'd want to collaborate with on your book. They are out there, and I hope the knowledge you gain from this guide will help you find them.

How to Use This Book

I've structured this guide so that you can follow the progression of the chapters in order as you draft and pitch your scholarly book proposal. I begin by showing you how a book idea becomes a manuscript under contract and how to select appropriate presses for your particular project (chapter 1). The next several chapters will guide you through drafting the elements that will make up your book proposal package, including your letter of introduction (chapter 2); a discussion of similar books (chapter 3); a description of your target audiences (chapter 4); an effective overview of your project and its thesis (chapters 5 and 6); compelling chapter summaries (chapter 7); and all the other information that publishers commonly request (chapters 10 and 11). Along the way, I explain how good titles and a strong voice can help sell your book, first to publishers and then to readers (chapters 8 and 9). Finally, I walk you through how to approach publishers when you're ready (chapter 12), and I offer advice on how to navigate the submission, peer review, contract, production, and promotion processes (chapters 13 and 14).

While this progression of chapters will work well for some readers, you should feel free to consult the chapters of this book in any order. If you're already somewhere in the middle of working on your proposal or you just need help in a particular area, you should be able to dip into the table of contents

and find the information you need. I've designed this guide with the rhythms and constraints of scholarly life in mind, because I understand that you're probably trying to fit work on your book proposal in between many other professional and personal activities. The discrete steps presented across the book will allow you to assemble a proposal out of manageable building blocks that you can complete at your own pace, even if you only have a few spare minutes per week. If you set larger blocks of time aside, you can probably have a complete proposal ready to discuss with publishers in just a week or two. I've put the steps in an intentional order to help you craft your proposal most efficiently, but you may choose to tackle the steps in any sequence and at any pace that makes sense to you. I hope that you'll keep this book close at hand throughout your publishing career so that you can consult it as a reference as questions arise. Always remember that the index is your friend.

Each chapter begins with a brief narrative discussion of the topic at hand, followed by a step or set of steps to complete. To offer further assistance and context, I offer "Time-Tested Tips" drawn from common pitfalls and successes. Each chapter ends with a set of answers to questions frequently asked by prospective authors. These tips and questions are also presented in a list, broken down by chapter, toward the end of the book, so you can locate them later for quick reference if you need to.

In addition to the main chapters, this guide includes several tools to assist you in crafting your proposal and navigating your publication journey. Comprehensive checklists synthesize all the steps and tips from across the main chapters to provide a master list of the elements to be included in your book proposal package. You can use the checklists to perform a final quality check on your proposal after you've assembled it or to organize your work plan from the beginning. You will also find sample documents—two prospectuses, a letter of introduction, and a response to reader reports—that you can use as models for your own. These are real documents my clients have used successfully, and I've highlighted areas of particular effectiveness and appeal so that you can emulate them if you wish. Suggestions for further reading will point you toward books you may find helpful at various stages in your writing and publishing process. Downloadable worksheets and other resources to assist you in completing the steps laid out in *The Book Proposal Book* can be found online at bookproposalbook.com.

In creating this guide, I draw on my years of experience working with hundreds of academic writers on their book manuscripts and book proposals. My clients have signed contracts and published award-winning books with dozens of competitive university presses. I am in direct contact with aspiring authors

every day, and they approach me with the issues they hesitate to discuss with colleagues, mentors, and acquisitions editors. My advice is based on what I have seen work for authors and on numerous conversations with acquisitions editors themselves.

I also draw on my experience as a scholarly author. Three years after completing my PhD, I published a book⁴ based on my doctoral dissertation, and I well remember what it was like to fumble through the often-confusing process on my own, despite having generous editors and mentors to help. I understand the challenges you're facing as you set out to write and pitch your scholarly book, because I've faced many of these challenges myself. I can't take all the anxiety out of submitting your hard work for judgment by others, but I hope to eliminate a good deal of the uncertainty from this endeavor for you.

Any publishing professional will tell you that there is no singular "right" way to write a successful book proposal (though they'll usually grant that there are plenty of wrong ways). For this reason, general advice will only take you so far. While this book takes a practical approach, offering templates and tips that might seem prescriptive at first blush, keep in mind that they are just there to give you a point of departure. Different editors have different preferences, and while I've tried to synthesize those into the broadest possible recommendations, there will always be room for variation. Indeed, I've seen many authors successfully publish scholarly books without following every piece of advice I will present here. I also acknowledge that this guide is limited to helping you navigate the scholarly publishing system that currently exists, not imagining a better system that could be pushed for and one day realized. All that said, I believe that having a sense of the present unwritten "rules" of scholarly publishing will set you up to push and break them to best effect, should you decide to do so. The way you plan and pitch your book is ultimately up to you, but I will do my best to get you started on the right foot.

4. Portwood-Stacer, *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism*.

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