



Guide to Writing a Successful Academic Book Proposal

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Preface

Writing about your research often feels harder than doing the research itself. It takes courage to pick up a broad brush and boldly sketch the big picture of your subject and why it matters. It certainly takes some different skills than those you use in doing the research or even teaching your subject.

This ebook tackles the tough questions I've heard most often in my years of working with academic authors. I'll share ways of thinking about making the case for your book's significance or "rationale," as that is often called, and offer practical advice on timelines and deadlines, as well as on how to organize your book to best convey its meaning and reach your audience. In this ebook, you'll learn about the following topics:

- Successful Academic Book Proposals
- Making the Case for Your Book
- Why Does Your Book Matter?
- Approaching Academic Book Editors
- Deciding When to Pitch Your Book
- Finding the Right Structure for Your Book
- Defining Your Audience
- Do You Need a Literary Agent?

At the very end of this book, there is a chapter on How an ACW Writing Coach Can Help You With Your Book Proposal and a listing of helpful references and resources.



I. Successful Academic Book Proposals

I'd like to begin with a few suggestions for what you can do at any stage of your academic career to better understand what academic editors look for in book proposals.

Learn More About Scholarly Publishing

Learn a little more about scholarly publishing through the *American Association of American University Presses* (AAUP) and by following publishing news in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Both of these websites offer useful articles and other resources on the history of scholarly publishing and how recent developments shape the choices academic authors face today. Here are links to two especially useful pages from the AAUP and *The Chronicle*: [Finding a Publisher](#) and [Weekly List of New Books in Scholarly Publishing](#).

It's never too early, in terms of your own publishing, to spend a little time becoming familiar with what presses are publishing in your field. Look for trends in *The Chronicle's* lists of new publications and notice the language and phrasing of the brief descriptions of new books. (Though this content is for *Chronicle* subscribers only, many university libraries do subscribe; so you may have access through your university's library). Also, remember to check with the major professional association in your field for information about publishers who cover your discipline and common publishing practices within your field.

If you are considering writing an academic book, I encourage you to take these steps:

- **Develop a list of bookmarked resources**, like the ones suggested above, tailored to the publishing news in your field, and
- **Set aside fifteen minutes each week**, maybe on Friday afternoons, to read over updates and news in publishing.



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Just make it a habit. The bottom line is that taking time to research university presses and understand their interests is worth doing. This information can help lay a foundation for your relationships with editors and ease your way into the process of writing a book proposal.



II. Making the Case for Your Book

The most critical part of academic book proposals is often the hardest to write. Publishers sometimes refer to it as the “rationale.” This explanation of the purpose of your book often follows the general project description, near the beginning of the book proposal.

Articulate Your Book’s Rationale

Though no perfect formula or template for articulating a book’s rationale exists, it is your best shot at conveying the essence of your project and winning the interest of academic editors. To better understand the specific ground covered in the rationale, consider this excerpt from the University of California Press’s instructions for authors:

Be sure to include what you consider to be the outstanding, distinctive, or unique features of the work. This narrative description should explain the proposed book’s purpose, themes, arguments, scope, contribution to scholarship, and place in the literature. Please state your argument concisely and clearly.

No small order there! But, ultimately, these specifics boil down to one question, succinctly expressed by Cambridge University Press:

Why does a book need to be written on your proposed topic?

As that question implies, the rationale is a kind of justification of your book’s existence, an explanation of its *raison d’être*. And, to make matters worse, publishers expect authors to convey this in just a few sentences!

No wonder this task provokes something akin to an existential crisis, with all the accompanying angst and dread. This kind of gut reaction is entirely understandable. Academic authors, after all, have invested years in meticulous investigation of narrowly framed research questions and may be under the gun of career-related deadlines.

The trick is not to get struck or derailed by this initial emotional response. The following suggestions can help you confront this daunting question and make your most compelling case for your book.

Notice Differences Between Publishing and Scholarship Language



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First, take time to notice some of the differences between the language of publishing and the language of scholarship. Read the book jacket copy of academic books you admire. You might start with books on your own shelf and then branch out to analyze descriptions in publications like *Choice* (an important publication for university librarians who, after all, represent the largest market for academic books).

Don't forget to also browse the descriptions of recent books on websites of your favorite university presses. Below, for example, is an abbreviated description of a recent book.

The University of Chicago Press's describes Mark Barrow's *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (2009) in this way.

As Mark V. Barrow reveals in *Nature's Ghosts*, the threat of species loss has haunted Americans since the early days of the republic. . . . A sweeping, beautifully illustrated historical narrative that unites the fascinating stories of endangered animals and the dedicated individuals who have studied and struggled to protect them, *Nature's Ghosts* offers an unprecedented view of what we've lost—and a stark reminder of the hard work of preservation still ahead.

Notice the phrasing here. Jot down terms, particularly verbs, which you may not typically use to describe your work, but which are compelling and render the big picture. Though you may well use different phrases to accurately bring your own argument to life, aim for direct, vivid language.

Of course, the description quoted above is promotional copy for advertising. In actual book proposals, most authors would rightly avoid phrases like “sweeping” or “beautifully illustrated.” However, such word choices as “threat,” “haunted,” and “stark reminder” convey the interest and importance of the subject. Similarly, the statement that this book offers “an unprecedented view” also implies it deserves a place in that press's catalogue or maybe even on our own bookshelves

But, if your own way of thinking about your project still seems miles away from such broad and bold descriptions, here's another exercise to get you started.

Clarify Why Your Project Is Important

Take a few minutes to reconnect with why you began this project in the first place. Free write about these questions.



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- What was most interesting to you when you began this research? (The question is not about what your advisors affirmed as interesting, but about your own gut sense.)
- Why did this topic fascinate you?
- What do you think is most important about your research now?

[Harvard University Press](#) also recommends five additional questions to get scholars in the right frame of mind to write clearly and vividly about their projects.

- What problems are you setting out to solve?
- What confusions do you wish to clarify?
- What previously unknown or unfortunately neglected story are you planning to tell?
- How is this book different from all other books?
- Why does that matter? To whom?



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This last question raises the most complex issue of all. “To whom” the book will matter is key to its significance and success. But, of course this is a subjective issue. The next chapter breaks down this tricky question of significance and maps the potential arenas where your project may matter most.



III. Why Does Your Book Matter?

Successful book proposals offer a convincing argument or “rationale” for the book’s existence, as noted in the last chapter. But demonstrating that a book will matter to audiences can be tricky. Significance, after all, is subjective. Some may even argue that it, like beauty, is ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

Think, for instance, of a book that has had a tremendous impact on your own field of research—the classic text or the iconoclastic one that sparked a schism.

As you write your proposal, these books may loom in the back of your mind like mountains in the distance. When T.S. Elliot described truly great works as “existing monuments” that seem to “form an ideal order among themselves,” he voiced the way such books can come to seem almost as eternal and enduring as the landscape.

That sense that the great works are “great” in and of themselves, however, is an illusion (as Elliot himself argued in his famous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”). Each book was made at a particular moment, in a particular place, by a particular person or group of people. These books came to matter, in large part, because of the ways they related to earlier “great” works and to each other.

Taking the long view of history may feel like a luxury to busy academic authors, but it provides an important insight. The bottom line, at least when it comes to books, is that significance is fundamentally relational.

How Does Your Book Fit Into the Larger Context?

As you draft an explanation of why your book matters, consider how it relates to larger contexts. Most often, the significance of a project lies in how it relates to



three cornerstones of scholarly publishing:

- State of the discipline
- Background of the author
- Mission of the press

Take time to brainstorm or free write about these issues. You might even try to sketch a conceptual map of these relations, as you prepare to write your proposal. Try to define the specific ways your book relates to your field (or fields). This relationship is often expressed in one or the following forms:

- As a new perspective
- As synthesis, analysis, and translation
- As a correction or filling of a gap

As a New Perspective. Some books offer a new angle for understanding. For example, consider the way digital mapping technology provides a new perspective on American history in *Mastering Iron: The Struggle to Modernize an American Industry 1800-1868* by Anne Kelly Knowles (University of Chicago Press, 2013), which integrates GIS data into its historical scholarship.

As Synthesis, Analysis, and Translation. Another type of contribution comes from books that weave together different strands of research on a topic. This type of work may be by a single author or appear as an edited collection, such as *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, edited by Bessel A. Van der Kolk, et al. (Guilford Press, 1996), which offers a synthesis and translation of research for clinicians and other mental health workers.

As a Correction or Filling of a Gap. Another way books advance understanding in a field is by pointing out omissions or filling a gap in the



scholarship, as does Karen Stolley's *Domesticating Empire: Enlightenment in Spanish America* (forthcoming in December 2013 from Vanderbilt University Press), which explores how and why almost a whole century of writing by Latin American authors has been largely forgotten.

How Does Your Book Relate to Your Professional Identity?

In addition to articulating how your book relates to your discipline, you may also want to describe its meaning in relation to your professional experience and identity as a scholar. Is your work informed by earlier research projects, for instance, or by your teaching or experience in clinical practice?

In some cases, the author's background is inseparable from why his or her book matters. Consider the 2012 book from Princeton University Press, *Finance and the Good Society* by economist Robert Shiller, who famously predicted the recent disasters in both the real estate and stock markets.

How Does Your Book Relate to the Mission of Your Target Press?

Last but not least, reflect on how your project relates to a particular academic press's publishing history and mission. Of course, you should look most closely at how your target press defines itself and the list of books it publishes. But, if you need a general overview of what university presses do, check out [this helpful blog entry](#), by Jason Weidemann, Senior Acquisitions Editor of the University of Minnesota Press.

In addition to reading about what presses that publish in your field are interested in, look for an ongoing scholarly conversation to which your book speaks. Often, a special "series" published by a university press showcases such scholarly dialogues. Take a look at Duke University Press's series, for example, ["American Encounters/Global Interactions."](#)

The press's website explains that this series aims "to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between historians of U.S. international relations and area studies specialists" and "encourages scholarship based on multi-archive historical research" while it "promotes critical inquiry into issues of subjectivity and narrative." Translation: this may be the right fit for your project if you're an historian writing on American power and international relations, especially if you draw upon the resources of multiple archives.



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In summary, to write compellingly about why your book matters, think through several things: how your project contributes to the broader field; how it draws on your professional experience and identity as a scholar; and how it fits with the interests of the university presses that you are approaching.

Articulate Your Book's Rationale Simply and Concisely

To get a feel for the right tone before you write, spend some time reading book-jacket copy and reviews of scholarly books you admire. Then, aim to express your book's rationale as simply and concisely as possible. Avoid jargon, in particular, whenever you can.

For further reading on this topic, check out William Germano's chapter on book proposals in [Getting it Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious About Serious Books](#). Germano offers a wealth of useful advice, such as this final suggestion: Once you can clearly articulate the stakes of your project, try to distill a super-short version. It can be handy to have an official, formal explanation in manuscript form and one that's just the right size for an elevator ride or cocktail party conversation.



IV. Approaching Academic Book Editors

Authors sometimes worry about unintentionally offending academic editors or committing some faux pas. The following suggestions address the concerns I hear most often from authors about how to initiate contact with editors and build a strong working relationship.

Adapt Your Query Letter to the Specific Editor

A “query letter” is simply a brief letter that asks if the editor may be interested in considering your project. Since this letter conveys a first impression of you and your project, take the time to do some research before writing.

Some query letters, unfortunately, begin something like this:

Dear Editor: I hope you will consider the enclosed five hundred-page manuscript for publication with your press.

Not finding out the name of the appropriate acquisition editor implies a lack of initiative and interest. How would you feel, after all, about receiving a letter from a stranger that begins with “Dear Professor” or “Dear Teacher”? Chances are this 500-page manuscript is headed straight for the recycling bin.

Be sure your own letter uses the current acquisition editor’s name for the press you are contacting. You can locate the names of editors and their fields of interest on most publishers’ websites. If you have trouble finding the appropriate editor’s name, call the press’s general phone number and ask.

Seek out Editors at Professional Meetings

Conferences provide another way you can establish initial contact with an editor. When you approach an editor in the book display area, don’t make the mistake of presenting a thick portfolio of material about your project or your vita.

Instead, take a few minutes to introduce yourself and ask about what ideas or trends that editor is most interested in now. Usually, editors will ask about your own work too. This is a golden opportunity to briefly describe your topic and what’s most intriguing to you



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about it. You may get an invitation, then, to send a fuller description. Many editors welcome an email from authors at this point. Keep it simple and succinct. For example:

Dear Robert,

It was a pleasure to talk with you at last week's AAR conference in Atlanta. Thanks so much for expressing interest in my project. I am attaching the five-page project description, sample chapter, and copy of my CV that you requested. I'm looking forward to hearing more of your thoughts about my project.

If you're not lucky enough to have such an encounter at a professional gathering, contacting editors out of the blue is perfectly acceptable too. Just do your research and send only the documents requested by that press for an initial submission.

Use Professional Connections

Colleagues can help open the door too. Often, editors pay particular attention to unexpected queries if the author mentions a mutual connection. Do you have colleagues or friends who have published with that press or are simply very well known in your field? Consider asking them if they would recommend that you talk with a specific editor. If they do, mention very early in your query letter that you are getting in touch on the suggestion of that person.

Communicate Candidly, Clearly, and Politely

If several editors express interest in your book, you may be tempted to make what is called "simultaneous submissions." This is tricky territory, so let's break it down.

It's perfectly acceptable (and often wise) to send out multiple query letters to gauge interest in your project; but, when a press sends your manuscript out for peer review, the situation changes. The press is investing resources in seriously considering your work. If you are under a deadline to get a book contract for the job market or for promotion, having your manuscript in peer review at several presses may seem especially appealing. Publishers, though, resent this move, especially if you have led them to believe you are working only with them.



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If two or more presses ask to send your manuscript out for peer review, count your blessings. Then, decide which press is your top choice, and communicate clearly and politely with all the editors involved. They will probably appreciate your frankness. Plus, it can increase your top press's interest in your project because it may look more like a "hot commodity." Clear communication between authors and editors, however, is a two-way street. You should always feel free to ask questions about specifics related to your book.

Ask for Specifics on Your Role and the Publisher's Role

If any part of the publishing process seems murky to you, ask your editor to walk you through the typical steps to publication at that press. Editors, in general, don't intend to keep authors in the dark. But they are busy and may not ponder what you know and don't know about the process.

Ask for clarification about what happens at each stage of the publishing process—from peer review, contract, copy-editing, and marketing. Ask about electronic versions of your book as well as print versions, in particular. After all, you can help your press produce a successful book on time only if you thoroughly understand what you will be called upon to do and when.

Respond to Copy-Editing Queries

Carol Fisher Saller in her book, *The Subversive Copy Editor*, and on her [website](#) offer practical suggestions that can help you get the most out of copyediting—a stage of the publishing process that many authors dread. Saller reminds us that the relationship between academic authors and academic presses is a partnership essential to the success of both.



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Ultimately, you and your publisher both want a successful book launch. Viewing your relationship with your publisher as a partnership and looking for win-win solutions to any challenges that arise will help you sail more smoothly through the whole publishing process.



V. Deciding When to Pitch Your Book

When writers ask me “When’s the best time to pitch my book?” often they are trying to figure out how much of the manuscript they need to have completed before approaching a publisher.

For academic authors, career stage is usually the most critical factor in deciding when to approach editors at university presses. If you are writing your first book and drawing on your dissertation research, editors generally prefer that you contact them when your revision is close to completion. For an overview of how book manuscripts typically differ from dissertations, check out these [helpful guidelines](#) from McGill-Queen’s University Press.

If you are writing your second academic book or have a track record of article publications, however, the situation looks different. You may well want to begin a conversation with an acquisitions editor earlier in the process of developing your manuscript. Editors sometimes like to collaborate with authors to shape a project in ways that advance key debates in the field. So, if you have some substantial publications under your belt, consider reaching out to publishers when you can provide at least the following three things:

- A solid sense of your project’s rationale.
- A plan for organizing the book
- A sample chapter or draft of an introduction.

Senior scholars and authors working in particularly hot areas of research, by the way, often find they don’t have to initiate the conversation at all. Sweet, eh! Acquisition editors may well reach out to you at a conference or through email. Sometimes they want to float ideas for projects that follow the trajectory of your previous work, or they simply may be curious about where your new research is headed.

Whatever the stage of your career, if you want to reach a wider audience than most scholarly books do, you may want to consider another factor that can alter your timing. Publishing a trade or “crossover” book for a broad audience sometimes requires working



with a literary agent. Professional agents can represent your interests in negotiations with respected commercial houses, such as Viking Press, Farrar, Straus, or Giroux.

Literary agents usually like to begin working with authors at a somewhat earlier stage of the book's development. They tend to focus first on the importance of crafting a longer, beautifully written proposal that demonstrates the project's potential for wide appeal. For more on how to tell if you need to work with a literary agent for your next project, stay tuned. The last chapter will tackle that topic.

Finally, the amount of support you have for finishing your project should also figure into your calculation of the right time to pitch your book. Consider, for instance, the following:

- Do you have a sabbatical coming up?
- Do you expect to receive a summer grant that will allow you complete necessary archival or field research?
- Do you have the support of a writing coach or a peer writing group to provide constructive feedback and accountability to help you meet deadlines?

Having these kinds of resources to support your progress may increase your confidence (and your editor's) in the accuracy of your estimate for when a final draft will be ready.

Ultimately, the process of publishing a book is more like a dance than a steady march. Stepping out on the floor and finding your rhythm requires coordination of several elements—from institutional deadlines for promotion, to the timing of sabbaticals or summer opportunities for intensive writing, to the harnessing of other potential resources to make your timetable for finishing your book truly realistic.



VI. Finding the Right Structure for Your Book

Think of an academic book that made you say “Wow!” as you finished reading it—a book that was stunningly compelling for you. Got that image in mind?

Now, what can you remember about the organization of that book?

Generally, what we remember most about compelling books is their originality or masterful presentation of extensive, persuasive data. Such qualities, of course, matter tremendously. A less obvious quality, though, can also greatly enhance a book’s impact. Without a structure that reveals the argument’s coherence, even brilliant ideas may fail to register with readers.

Logically Structure Your Book

Highly effective organization allows readers to perceive a meaningful sequence in the order of chapters, rather than a string of somewhat related arguments. A strong sense of coherence across chapters, after all, is a key distinction between books and journal articles. Unlike a single issue of a journal, we expect a book’s sections to build thematically on each other to illuminate the author’s central idea or question.

Sometimes, a glance at a book’s table of contents reveals a meaningful pattern that builds from beginning to end. However, a sound, underlying rationale for the order of chapters often is augmented in passages within the text itself. Such moments in the text help readers connect the dots. They help readers perceive, for instance, why chapter three logically follows chapter two or how chapter four calls forth the substance of chapter five.

Sadly, no single formula for organizing a manuscript works for all projects. I encourage you to closely study the structure that underlies several academic books you admire. Make notes of techniques you can adopt and adapt. What’s fun (or frustrating, depending on your personality) is that there is room for creativity here as you experiment with various techniques to strengthen the coherence of your book’s structure.

Integrate the Demands of Argument and Audience



To find the right path for structuring your work, try to keep two things simultaneously in mind:

- The big-picture version of your argument and
- The most likely audience for your book.

When the demands of argument and audience are skillfully integrated, the reader finishes the book with a sense that every bit of included material was essential to convey the argument and there was not a single unnecessary page. *Wow!*

Admittedly, such “wow” experiences are rare. Even excellent books often fail to fully sustain this ideal of perfect craft. Yet, it is important to hold this ideal as a goal when you are struggling with what to leave in or cut and how to weave chapters together.

To weave chapters together well, many editors stress the importance of a “through-line.” Basically, a great through-line makes it easy to see how all the pieces of evidence come together to illuminate the book’s central claim. If you’re building a book manuscript from your dissertation research, check out William Germano’s *From Dissertation to Book* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). Even if you’re working on your second or third book, you may well appreciate Germano’s advice on through-lines in Chapter Seven because he shows how to bring this lofty metaphor down to the level of your desktop.

However, some techniques that work beautifully in one project flop miserably in a different project. So, if the image of a through-line doesn’t resonate with you as a way to find the right structure for your work, there are plenty of other ways of describing it.

Relying on metaphors to explain something so critical to a book’s success may feel, I imagine, frustrating to some academic authors. However, figurative language is one of the best tools we’ve got to convey the subtle truths of slippery concepts about structure. Some editors and writing teachers describe a great book structure as the barely visible string that connects precious pearls into a necklace. Others talk about a “narrative arc.” I like to think of structure as a strong needle of thought that stitches my pages together, enabling them to last over time and endure much use.

Visualize the Content of Your Book



If you feel uncertain about how to find the right structure for your book, don't lose heart! For many writers, these issues remain a bit murky during the process of drafting the book. Often, it is only after a full draft is produced that the process of clarifying the structure truly takes off. If you feel stuck, try this exercise to visualize your book's content.

1. Make a spatial map of elements of your book's argument. You can do this digitally or just draw a map on paper.
2. Draw lines between related points, literally connecting the dots of argument.
3. Then, rethink the book's organization. Would it make sense, for example, to group a series of dots or points closer together? Are some points, in the end, redundant or simply not needed to make your over-arching claim?

When wrestling with these questions, try to imagine what your readers need to know and when they need to know it in order to find your argument compelling. Getting feedback on your manuscript from colleagues, an editor, or a writing coach are ways to help you identify what gaps need to be addressed.

Here's one hint: adding overt transition statements can often make apparent gaps disappear. Because authors implicitly (if sometimes subconsciously) know how the pieces of their work relate to each other, it may be fairly late in the process of developing a manuscript that they realize they have not fully articulated those connections on the actual page.

Think of such transitions—to offer a final metaphor—as functioning in your book as joints function in the body. The soft tissues of joints connect the muscles and bones of our legs to our hips, for example. This feat of biological organization enables us to move, run—even jump. Skillful transitions, similarly, can help your argument “jump” from the page to the reader's mind.

In the final analysis, building the right structure for your book matters for one simple reason. It not only meaningfully connects diverse aspects of the book's argument, but also increases the chances of meaningfully connecting writer and reader.



VII. Defining Your Audience

Who is the primary audience for your book? Obviously, identifying this audience will be essential to marketing the book effectively. But it can also help you move past thorny questions that often stall authors in the process of developing their manuscripts.

Who Will Most Likely Read Your Book?

Understanding your audience is a kind of “X” factor that can enhance your ability to resolve many of the challenges this eBook has explored—from articulating your project’s “rationale” and why it matters, to finding appropriate presses and effectively organizing the contents to maximize your book’s coherence. Being able to imagine your audience’s level of familiarity with your topic and the likely assumptions or biases of this audience can help you make critical decisions about what evidence you must include and how to present it in compelling ways for your readership.

Being realistic, though, about who is most likely to read your book is critical. Because authors are often passionate about their work, it may be tempting to imagine that it will appeal both to specialists and a more general audience of well-educated readers. A book that tries to please everyone often truly succeeds with no one, however. It may help you to realize that your book is not necessarily the only book you will ever write. If this project succeeds, it can in fact build a stronger platform for your credibility, which may open doors to other projects and additional audiences.

To help you think in realistic and concrete terms of who might be likely readers for your book, try some of the following exercises:

- Make up a list of professional societies whose members’ interests intersect with your book’s topic.
- Make a list of undergraduate or graduate courses for which your book may be appropriate.
- Browse reviews of recent books in your field. Pay attention to how reviewers describe the usefulness of each of these books to particular sub-fields or groups of practicing professionals.



- Check out the book-jacket copy of books you consider to be models for your project. Pay special attention to any mention of readers who would benefit from each of these books. Then, imagine how you might write your own book-jacket copy.

Does Your Primary Audience Align With Your Professional Goals?

Being realistic about your primary audience often requires considering two additional issues.

- Does your concept of your audience align well with your larger career goals? In other words, what do you want this book to do for you in terms of your career? Many universities, for instance, tend to discount books written for broad or nonacademic audiences when it comes to tenure and promotion.
- Some of the most interesting scholarship today is interdisciplinary in nature. Because publishers, like universities, retain some of the traditional divisions among fields in the ways they categorize projects, interdisciplinary books sometimes still face special hurdles. If you face this challenge, look for rhetorical strategies as you develop your manuscript to help you speak effectively across the disciplines that constitute your audience.

Answers to these questions about audience, of course, must be tailored to your individual project and career goals. I encourage authors to actively seek out conversations to help them discern the most reasonable primary and secondary audiences for their projects. Consider discussing these questions with academic mentors and colleagues who have recently published similar books. You might also explore these questions with coaches who specialize in academic writing and editorial contacts at scholarly presses.



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Finally, if you believe your book may be best suited for a broader audience—readers beyond, as well as within, the academy—you may want to consult a professional literary agent. The last chapter takes up the subject of books that cross over to a general readership and provides tips to help you decide if that’s really the right avenue for you.



VIII. Do You Need a Literary Agent?

Though most books published by university presses address specific, small audiences of specialists, some academic books have the potential to “cross over” and attract readers far beyond the limits of research disciplines. Consider, for example, Andrew Delbanco’s analysis of controversial changes in higher education in *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton University Press: 2014).

In the jargon of publishing, such projects are called “trade” or “true trade” books, signifying their potential for sales to broader audiences. As Delbanco’s book demonstrates, some university presses take pride in bringing out significant trade books, as well as strictly academic titles. The good news for scholars is that they are usually welcome to work with and negotiate directly with university press editors on crossover books as well as on more scholarly ones.

If you’re working on a book that you sense could attract a large audience, you may also want to bring it to the attention of well-respected commercial publishers that make up the for-profit side of the industry—Farrar, Straus & Giroux; Penguin Press; Basic Books; or Bloomsbury Press to name just a few. In order to have your work considered by a commercial publishing house, however, you must be represented by a professional literary agent.

Though most literary agents negotiate contracts with commercial publishing houses, some specialize in representing public intellectuals and negotiate with editors at university presses in addition to their counterparts in commercial presses. Ultimately, the agent’s job is to find the best fit and best deal for the author.

The website, agentquery.com, is a good place for you to learn more about how literary agents work and to find sound advice about how and when to contact



agents. (Hint: most books written by researchers would fall into the category on this site of “serious non-fiction.”) But, before you invest too much time in learning about the world of commercial publishing, consider two key questions:

- Does publishing a trade book fit well with the current stage of your career and long-term goals? Many universities, for instance, do not necessarily count trade books, especially for junior faculty, in the same way they count traditional scholarship in promotion and tenure decisions.
- Are you working on a “big book”?

“Big” here does not refer to number of pages or amount of data, but rather to the size and significance of the ideas driving the argument. For example, think of the recent buzz generated by Susan Cain’s book, *Quiet*, which argues our culture is systematically biased against introverted personalities (Crown Publishers: 2012). This book tackles a large and complex topic and has ready-made appeal for a large portion of Americans, since roughly one third of adults identify themselves as introverts.

Figuring out whether your project really has the potential to pull in a broad audience can be tricky. Consider seeking out someone within your circle of colleagues who has a reputation for public scholarship and may be willing to share what he or she has learned. If your university claims to promote public scholarship, ask your dean if the administration may be willing to invite a literary agent who works with academic authors to campus to give a talk to faculty.



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IX. How an Academic Writing Coach Can Help You With Your Book Proposal

If you would like to work with a coach on crafting your book proposal, an ACW Writing Coach can help you:

- Articulate the rationale and significance of your book
- Find the best structure to convey their argument
- Select appropriate presses to contact
- Build relationships with acquisition editors
- Polish your cover letter, book proposal and sample chapter
- Address peer review

And, if your book has crossover potential, a writing coach help you discern if it is likely to be well published and marketed by a university press. If a commercial press is a better outlet for your book, a coach can help you identify literary agents experienced in representing academic authors and likely to be interested in your topic.



X. References/Resources

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Herman, J., & Herman, D. L. (2001). *Write the perfect book proposal: Ten that sold and why*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Lerner, B. (2010). *The forest for the trees: An editor's advice to writers* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Rabiner, S. (2002). *Thinking like your editor: How to write great, serious nonfiction and get it published*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Saller, C.F. (2009). *The subversive copy editor*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Links

The website agentquery.com is a good place to learn more about how literary agents work and to find sound advice about how and when to contact agents.

<http://agentquery.com/>

The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) provides resources on finding a publisher.

<http://www.aaupnet.org/resources/for-authors-a-faculty/finding-a-publisher>

Choice Magazine, a publication for university librarians, is a good source of reviews of current academic books.

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/choice/home>

The Chronicle of Higher Education provides a weekly list of new academic books.



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<http://chronicle.com/article/Weekly-Book-List-March-18/235685>

Here are examples of instructions to book authors. University of California Press:

<http://www.ucpress.edu/resources.php?p=guidelines>

Cambridge University Press:

<http://authornet.cambridge.org/information/proposaluk/hss/>

Harvard University Press:

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/resources/authors/proposal.html>

The infographic in this blog is helpful to understand what university presses do.

<http://www.uminpressblog.com/2013/03/what-do-university-presses-do.html?spref=fb>

This link provides information on manuscripts based on dissertations.

<http://www.mqup.ca/manuscripts-based-on-dissertations-pages-169.php>



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Academic Book Proposal Template and Tips

By Amy Benson Brown

Most academic writers first get the attention to an editor at a university press by sharing a book proposal with him or her. This document, also called a prospectus, briefly describes your project, why it matters, how it contributes to on-going scholarly conversations, and who will read it. Seems logical enough, right? Everyone I know, though, struggles at first with writing the proposal because little in our training has prepared us to write this kind of document. Book proposals are not scholarship; they are writing about scholarship; they are meta-discourse. I hope the template below, which outlines a structure for the proposal and offers some tips for writing it, will help de-mystify the proposal-writing process. In addition to being a key step toward finding a home for your book, writing the proposal can help you clarify your own thinking about why your book matters. For more detailed advice, also download the PDF *Guide to Writing a Successful Book Proposal* from my AWPC website.

Always tailor the structure of your book proposal to the guidelines offered by the university press you are approaching. If you visit the websites of a few presses, you'll notice that these guidelines do vary somewhat from press to press. The structure I have distilled here reflects what I most commonly see as the backbone of successful proposals. Typically, book proposals feature five sections.

Structure of the Proposal

I Book Description (4-5 paragraphs)

This section introduces the editor to your book's topic, rationale, argument, and structure.

II Table of Contents with brief chapter summaries (1 paragraph per chapter)

This section provides more information about the structure and argument.



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III Comparable Works (3-4 paragraphs)

This section, sometimes called “Competing Works,” describes books similar to your own and explains how yours differs and advances conversations in the literature.

IV Audience (1-2 paragraphs)

This section describes the types of readers who will be interested in this work.

V Status (1 paragraph)

This section states how much of the project is currently available for review, when the full manuscript will be ready, its estimated length, and any illustrations or tables to be included.

10 Tips for Writing the Proposal

- Write this document to read quickly and be understood immediately.
- Read the book-jacket or promotional copy of scholarly books you admire to get a feel for an appropriately engaging tone.
- Ask colleagues who have published recently to share their proposals with you.
- Clearly assert the reason this book needs to exist in the first paragraph.
- Convey how this project contributes to, extends, or challenges existing literature on this topic.
- In the chapter summaries, briefly describe what each chapter does rather than making the chapter’s argument in miniature.
- Convey the through-line of the book’s argument in the chapter summaries.
- If this project grew out of your dissertation, say how you have expanded or reshaped the manuscript.
- Describe the audience in ways that presses can imagine marketing it to those readers.
- Read out loud to see where you need to simplify and clarify your prose.