

Contact publishers

Examine recent lists of new titles, and check which publishers recur frequently in your bibliography. Check out the book display at conferences. Talk to editors, colleagues, advisers, about their experience (which may not be relevant—you'll need to discriminate). If you think your work is a plausible fit for list strengths of particular presses, send a description of your book, a table of contents, a brief c.v., and information about length (a wordcount), target audiences, and plans for illustrations.

Do the same with several plausible publishers. Each website will say something about what the particular press wants. Some refuse to accept proposals by email. If you're in North America, I want hardcopy; if you're elsewhere, I'll accept a project description as an email attachment.

Submit a proposal

The description can be in a letter or as a more formal prospectus. Either way, the editor wants a brief account of the argument and the evidence/research on which it's based. What's new and exciting here? Why should we invest scarce capital in publishing it? A letter or proposal provides us something to evaluate. It also gives you a chance to think about the readerships for your work, to describe your manuscript's strengths and unique features, and to explain why we would be the right publisher. You may find that the exercise of condensing your thoughts into proposal form is helpful. The proposal does not need to be long – in a letter, a couple of pages; in a more formal proposal, 4-5 pages. Remember, the more engagingly written the proposal, the more likely we are to engage with it.

We do not expect that you will submit your proposal to only one press. At this stage you're surveying the landscape, finding out which of the publishers in which you're interested are actually interested in your work. Eventually you'll have to decide where to submit the complete manuscript for review. Many presses won't be willing to commission formal reviews in competition with another publisher. But that step comes later.

What to include in your proposal

- Address your proposal to the correct editor at the Press.
- Describe your research in a page or two, eschewing academic jargon and presenting the main thrust of your work clearly and simply.
- Describe any similar books. How does yours stand apart? What conversations does your work engage?
- Mention any books on our list that are complementary to yours.
- Identify your audiences. If you imagine course use, list a few actual courses at different universities and their enrollment figures where possible. If you think that the book is an important scholarly monograph, explain its contribution. If it's "general interest," be prepared to back up that claim.

- If the project started life as a dissertation, when did you defend and who was on your committee? Important: what major revisions have you made or are you going to make?
- Give a word count for the current version of the manuscript and indicate other apparatus: photos, tables, graphs, figures, maps, etc. If the book includes illustrations, why are they necessary?
- Are parts of the manuscript previously published? Note how much, and what major changes you intend to make. The more that has appeared elsewhere, even in somewhat different form, the less attractive the book will be.
- Say when the manuscript will be ready for review. Set a realistic deadline--there is no point in offering a tighter deadline than you can handle.
- Include an annotated table of contents.
- Include a summary c.v.
- Does your college or university have a subvention program to support scholarly publications by its faculty members? If so, note the fact.

What happens next

You should expect a response in a few weeks; the shorter the description, the quicker the response should be. Don't be devastated by a "no thanks" letter. The editor may invite submission of the complete manuscript for formal review; perhaps you'll get a request for a sample chapter; have one ready to send. NB if the editor offers you a contract on the basis of the project description, be very, very suspicious.

Assume, if the editor offers formal review of the whole manuscript, that you should NOT send the manuscript to another publisher. If you want to do so, ask—and don't be surprised to be told no. The other side of this coin: expect to be told (or ask) about the period of time you'll be offering the project on an exclusive basis.

Ask about how the particular press makes its decision whether to publish. If you don't ask, you have no recourse when surprises happen. There will be surprises. Not all will be pleasant.

If you are offered a contract, congratulations! But please read it carefully before you sign it.

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