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The High Anxiety of Submitting a Book Proposal

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A few months ago, I polled my Twitter followers to ask what factor

most held them back from submitting their book proposal to an academic publisher. Some said a lack of knowledge about the process, while others cited a lack of time to polish the proposal. But, by far, the most frequent response: sheer anxiety.

It's a logical reaction for doctoral students and junior academics who (a) sense that so much of their faculty career is riding on this particular document, and (b) aren't at all certain about the expectations and norms of a book proposal. It's part of the "hidden curriculum" of academic life, and graduate programs provide little-to-no training on how to write one, let alone how to navigate the submission and peer-review process.

As author of *The Book Proposal Book: A Guide for Scholarly Authors*, published just last summer, I've worked with hundreds of prospective authors. My first column on these pages offered advice on "6 Types of Book Proposals that Don't Get Contracts." Now I hope to offer some reassurance: You can let go of the following anxieties that may be stopping you from taking that first step toward publication.

Anxiety No. 1: Your proposal isn't perfect yet. Hitting "send" on a book proposal is not easy for anyone, but let me tell you, there's a special kind of anxiety that comes with submitting a book proposal for a book about how to write a scholarly book proposal. After all, it's my job as a consultant and developmental editor to translate the norms of publishing and educate authors about how to get their scholarship in print. When I pitched my second book, I knew I was well positioned to put this information down on paper in a how-to guide, but I was still worried that publishing insiders

wouldn't see it that way. And I felt so much pressure to get the proposal document *exactly right*, since I was claiming to be an expert on how to write one.

What I learned from that experience: There's less riding on submitting a "perfect" proposal than most writers think. Above all, acquiring editors are looking at *the idea*. They are asking: "Is this a good premise for a book?" "Would enough people want to read it?" "Can we figure out how to position this book in the market to make sure it reaches its intended audience?"

This holds true whether you're writing a how-to guide or a research monograph. The proposal is just the beginning of a conversation between you and your publisher. Of course the proposal has to clearly and succinctly convey the main idea of your book (find advice here and here on the nuts and bolts of drafting a proposal), and make a case that readers exist out there who will appreciate your idea. But you don't have to have all the answers about your manuscript figured out yet.

Anxiety No. 2: You aren't qualified to write a scholarly book. In addition to questions about the content of the proposed book, editors are also wondering about its author: "Is this the right person to write this book right now?"

No, despite your suspicions, that question doesn't secretly translate to: "Is this person an academic celebrity with a huge platform?" Acquisition editors really are asking: "Does this person seem like someone with the ability to make this book the best that it can be for readers, and the willingness to collaborate even if it's not quite there yet?"

While publishers are eager to collaborate with authors who come

equipped with a pre-existing audience and name recognition, you might be closer to this bar than you think. If you have a track record of presenting and publishing your work to people who are open to learning from you — whether that's via scholarly journals, mainstream news sites, or social-media channels — then you already have an author platform. And if you are a Ph.D. who has done rigorous scholarly research on your topic, you are very likely more than qualified in the eyes of a scholarly acquisitions editor.

And what about those who don't have an author platform? If you feel you need to do more work to connect with the various audiences you hope to reach with your book, that's OK, too. In your proposal, lay out your plan to build your platform so that by the time your book is available, your potential readers will be ready and waiting for it. Publishers will be impressed that you're already thinking about reaching readers at this point in the game.

Anxiety No. 3: Peer reviewers will tear your idea and sample chapters apart. An acquisitions editor appreciating your project and giving you a chance is just the first hurdle, of course. Before offering you a contract, the publisher who is considering your work will ask expert readers to peer review your proposal and sample chapters as well.

In the case of my how-to guide about book proposals, the proposal and manuscript were reviewed by two veterans of the publishing industry (that was the only information initially shared with me about the reviewers' identities). I was extremely anxious about this part of the process, because I thought the reviewers would discover and object to all the gaps in my knowledge about publishing. I had never worked in-house in book acquisitions, and my imposter syndrome had me worried that the peer reviews

would expose me as too ignorant to publish a book on the topic.

Going through peer review for my book taught me that I needn't have worried about being eviscerated if — or more likely, when — the reviewers discovered mistakes. The purpose of peer review, in fact, is to have experts help you see where the holes are in your knowledge and point you in the right direction to fill them. Reviewer responses also help you locate where you may need to better explain the knowledge you already have. If you can let go of the bruised ego you might feel when someone says they disagree with you or suggests you have more to learn about a particular issue, you will have less to fear from peer reviews.

Even if your peer reviewers seem terribly harsh and negative (they may be biased for any number of reasons or just suffer from a severe lack of tact), know that they don't have the last word. The editor may still see potential in your project, and give you the opportunity to write a memo responding to the reviewers' concerns and making the case that, with revisions, you can still produce a publishable book. Your job here isn't to rebut everything the reviewers say or prove that you were right all along. It's the publisher's editorial board you need to convince of your book's potential, not the individual reviewers.

And if your manuscript still isn't approved for publication, you can always submit it to another academic press. Its criteria for publication may differ based on many factors. A single rejection is not the end of the road for your book.

Anxiety No. 4: Any missteps in the proposal phase will tank your chances at publication. Academic writers tell me they are anxious not just about the book proposal itself but also about their

communications with editors. Writers really believe they need to walk on eggshells, and that's usually not the case. Yes, editors at academic presses must hold every project to competitive standards, but they're all actively hoping for exciting new books and authors to come their way. When editors invest precious time in communicating with you about your book project or scholarly publishing career, that means they see something in you and want you to succeed.

If the editors take it even further and commit to having your proposal peer reviewed, that means the press has a strong interest in publishing your book. They want it to work out almost as much as you do. They become your best advocate, not only with their editorial insights, but also inside their press. If they strongly believe in a project, they will put in the effort to convince those who still need to be convinced. The presentations they make to other staff at the press and ultimately to the press's editorial board will make or break a book's chances of getting approved for publication. Your proposal, and the other materials you provide, helps an editor do that work; then it's the editor who brings it home.

In my case, understanding this behind-the-scenes process helped me to not get discouraged when my editor asked me to revise and resubmit my proposal materials to respond to the critiques from the first round of peer reviews. I could have assumed that my editor's request for revisions was an indication that he was only lukewarm on the project. But instead, I told myself that he was asking me to make the changes in order to provide him with even more solid support when it was time for him to do his work of getting approval to make me a strong offer. So I agreed to revise

and resubmit. Once I handed in my revisions, a strong offer to publish my book came through.

My editor's enthusiasm for the book only became more important as we approached its release and especially amid all the promotion (find advice on book marketing here) that I've continued to do since it came out. If I ever feel doubtful that my book is valuable and appealing — which doesn't happen often anymore, but those feelings can creep in once in a while — I think about the fact that my editor believes in my book 100 percent. Just as my proposal helped my editor advocate for my book inside the press, his support helps me advocate for it to the broader public.

Very few people will write a book proposal for a book about book proposals, but plenty of academics, especially recent Ph.D.s, feel nervous about proving their book's worth in drafting and submitting a proposal. It can often feel like you are proving your own worth in the process. It's important to remember that your worth as a person has nothing to do with whether a handful of people at a given publisher like your proposal.

You may be experiencing other anxieties beyond the ones I've mentioned here. I can't take all uncertainty and trepidation out of this process, but I hope to have shifted your mind-set just enough to help you get that proposal you've been fretting over out the door.

And if you're lucky, you'll connect with an editor who believes in your book — maybe even more than you do.