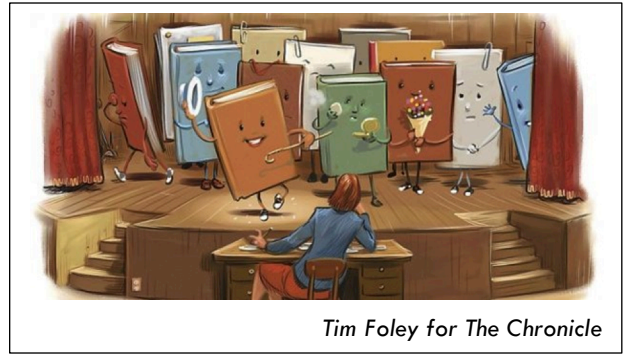


The Reality of Writing a Good Book Proposal

Rachel Toor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 11, 2013.

Writing a book proposal may not be exactly like appearing on a reality-TV show, but thinking about it in that way might help to remind you what you're up against.

In case you spend your Monday nights reading the pre-Socratic philosophers or sequencing genes and have missed the riveting TV series *The Bachelor*, here's how it works: One bachelor is pursued by 25 bachelorettes (or vice versa). All the contestants have been screened well and seem close enough to appropriate on first blush. During casting sessions, the staff culled hundreds (thousands?) of contenders who were too short, too fat, too poor, too brown, too pale, too stinky, too dumb, and too smart and sent them off with a line like, "You're great, but we just don't think you'd be a good fit for this particular bachelor/ette."



Tim Foley for *The Chronicle*

I like watching the show because, well, my brow is low, but also because it seems like a pretty close representation of what my life was like as a university-press acquisitions editor. If you take away the sexy clothes, the hijinks in hot tubs, and the dashing away in helicopters, it's more similar than you might think.

In publishing offices, once most of the easy-to-reject and crazy proposals are shooed away, you're left with a bunch of attractive, viable-seeming candidates. There's nothing wrong with most of them, at least on a quick first read. They fit the categories in which your company publishes, and often come with recommendations from people you trust. They trail long CVs crammed with all the right stuff.

In other words, there are a lot of potentially good choices. Surfeit creates opportunities for pickiness, and taste plays a big part in selection. Often on reality shows, even when there's nothing wrong with a person—not one annoying tic, no weird clothing choices, no arrogant and snarky remarks directed at other contestants—he is sent packing because all but one hopeful is going home. Just so. Not every strong manuscript submission is going to result in an offer of publication. There are a whole lot of other sexy, slinky fishes in that sea.

Some academics forget that when they send in manuscripts and book proposals. They seem to think that showing up in the equivalent of tatty jeans, with unwashed hair and without an intriguing opening gambit will suffice. It's the work that's being evaluated, they think, and that speaks for itself. Why should you have to get all gussied up to merit evaluation?

Because, hopeful friends, that's the way it works.

The basic format for writing a book proposal couldn't be more straightforward. It's so standard you might be lulled into believing it's simply a matter of filling in the blanks. Every proposal—and you can find examples in a nanosecond by Googling—should contain the following sections: overview, competition, market, author, table of contents, and sample chapter.

The important thing to remember is that a book proposal contains an invitation, a seduction, and an unromantic assessment of where you stand relative to others. You have to work to get the editor interested in you, and then outline exactly who will buy the book once you've written it.

When you decide to write a book proposal, you must be able to answer some basic questions. Usually you won't get a second chance to go back and clarify, or add things that you neglected to include. Before you even think about approaching a publisher, you have to know: What's the topic? What's the argument, and why should anyone care about it? Why are you the person to write this book? Who will read (i.e., buy) it? And finally, why are you submitting a proposal to this publisher? Once you can answer those questions, you are ready to start working on the proposal.

That can take a long time and require a lot of hard thinking. A good proposal can run 30 to 40 pages, not including the sample chapter. And it's not a cut-and-paste job. Even if you've already written the manuscript, a strong submission package should contain all of the elements I've mentioned. Your goal is to make it easy for the editor to say yes.

Recently, as I was preparing a talk on book publishing, I had an idea. It makes such good sense that it now seems obvious. Just before a book is published, the marketing department asks the writer to fill out an author's questionnaire. My current best advice on how to write a proposal is to work backward: Fill out an author's questionnaire early on as you're preparing your book proposal, and you will have an excellent and thorough submission packet.

It's easy to come by a sample author's questionnaire; many are available on publishers' Web sites, and they're all pretty much the same. The questions start out easy—name, rank, contact information—and then get harder. Filling out an author's questionnaire will guide you toward thinking in specifics about the market for your book.

The questionnaire will ask you to list recent books on your topic, and then to explain how yours differs. Take that question seriously. The old "No one has ever done this before" isn't useful, just as the answer to the question about the potential audience can't be "The general educated reader." There is no such thing. You must figure out exactly who will feel a need to buy your book. That means giving detailed responses.

You'll be asked about how the book can be used in the classroom. Find out which universities—which professors, even—are offering courses that might adopt your book, even if it's not meant to be a textbook. In which academic departments might your book find a home? Ask yourself: If I want my book to be read across disciplines, is it written in a way that people from diverse fields will be able to appreciate? The answer is probably no, though you may not realize or want to admit it. So what can you do to change that as you work on the book?

Think about the conferences where your book might be put on display. I can't tell you how many times I was yelled at, as a wee and powerless editorial assistant, by authors whose books weren't on display at a conference. First, please don't yell at wee ones. Then, people, understand: It's your job to list the meetings you think the book should be sent to and to make sure, when you're approaching publishers, that they have a presence in those areas.

What are the organizations to which you belong? Do they have electronic mailing lists? Newsletters? Web sites and blogs? Discussion forums? Are there awards or prizes the book should be submitted for? Are there special events or anniversaries that your book can be tied to? Do the groups that sponsor such prizes have annual meetings? Answering those questions early on, as you're writing the book proposal, will help both you and the publisher understand the market for which your book is intended and how to reach it.

Who should be approached for blurbs? Whose name, on the back cover of your book, would thrill you? Which of the publisher's authors might provide a good endorsement?

Where should review copies be sent? If you've published previous books, where have they been reviewed? Of the journals in your field that accept advertising, which are the most effective in terms of reaching readers? Putting an expensive ad in *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* is not likely to be a good use of scarce marketing dollars. What targeted publications do your potential readers subscribe to? Have portions of the book been previously published? If so, where?

Perhaps the hardest part of filing out the author's questionnaire is describing your own book. It will ask you for a cover-copy-length description (250 or so words), which, in engaging and accessible prose, should make clear the main points of the book and highlight the things that distinguish it from other books. Then you have to write a one- or two-sentence pitch—in even more engaging and accessible prose—that boils it down to about 50 words. Test it out on people who don't love you. See if they're interested.

If you do all of that tedious work, and incorporate it into the market section of your book proposal, the editor is going to have a much easier time persuading her colleagues to send you a contract. Plus, you're going to have to do all of that work eventually if you want anyone to actually buy the book. And let's not kid ourselves. Even scholarly books have to have a market.

In a future column, I'll discuss the rest of the submission package, including the part that's hardest to write—the overview section.

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