A Guide to Publishing Your First Book

The Ins and Outs of Obtaining a Book Contract

—Alana S. Jeydel,
Oregon State University
—Julie Dolan,
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As part of its mission to address issues of recruitment, retention, and integration of women and people of color in the profession, the APSA Task Force on Mentoring periodically publishes articles on some aspect of mentoring that will help political scientists move successfully through the profession. This brief symposium on "Publishing Your First Book" is just one such example of this initiative. For more information about the Task Force and its ongoing projects, contact Linda Lopez, APSA Director of Education and Professional Development Programs, at llopez@apsanet.org.

The right contract can make or break tenure and promotion. The following article presents pearls of wisdom from David Meyer, Clyde Wilcox, Susan Clarke, Terri Givens, Carol Swain, Robert Spitzer, and Peter Labella. We divide these suggestions into two parts—those on obtaining and those on negotiating a contract.

Obtaining a Contract

Write your dissertation like a book! If you are currently writing a dissertation, talk to the chair of your committee about formatting the dissertation more like a book so that it will be easier to market once finished. Review *The Handbook for Academic Authors* (Luey 2002), in particular the chapter on finding the right publisher. Talk to people in your subfield and department. What publishing houses are respected in your subfield, as well as by your department? A contract may only be as useful as its ability to assist you in gaining tenure and promotion. Look to see which publishers advertise in the journals you read. Check book displays at conferences. Ask what series publishers have where your work may fit. Check press web sites. The acquisitions editor is important to finding the right press. Meet the acquisitions editors. Ask colleagues about them; their reputation is crucial to the success of your book. Finally, be sure you can have a good working relationship with the editor—you will be in close contact with this person for a few years! Having a mentor who has read your manuscript and who has connections with the presses you are interested in publishing with can help immensely. Life inevitably gets in the way! It generally takes about two years from the date a contract is signed to the date a book is published—any life events that slow you down during this time will also slow down the date of publication, thus possibly impacting your tenure or promotion stress level. Have a script when approaching an editor at a conference. Think about what you want your book to do and be able to articulate this clearly. Send out a prospectus to LOTS of publishers. The key components of the prospectus include a succinct and intelligible overview of your book, a chapter by chapter outline, a section on the market for your book and its competition, and why the book is needed (Where does it fit in the field and what other fields does it fit into? Would it be helpful in the classroom?). Tell who you are as both a person and an academic, and include your CV. Ask a colleague who has had success with a publisher to loan you their prospectus. Ask colleagues who have published books to read your prospectus before you send it out. Finally, send the prospectus to as many appropriate presses as you can; the more the merrier. Send the prospectus in the summer and try to schedule meetings with publishers at the APSA Annual Meeting. Feel free to politely check in with publishing houses. If you get a nibble from one press, be sure to let the other presses know. Nothing spurs presses like competition. Publish one or two of the chapters as articles (but no more!). This will flag to editors and people in your field that you know something about your topic and that you are publishable. Present chapters at conferences. This is a quick and easy way to get immediate feedback on your research. Some scholars argue that if multiple presses wish to review your entire manuscript, you may send it to only one at a time. Most scholars argue that this rule is passé and that you should resist a press's attempts to enforce it, especially if you are untenured. Send the manuscript to three presses, but tell each press what you are doing. Suggest names of possible reviewers and names of people who should not be asked to review the manuscript. Ask the press how they are going to review your manuscript (e.g., double blind or single blind). If a press likes your manuscript but wants you to address specific reviewers concerns and then send it back out for review, you may ask them to not send it back to a reviewer that you felt made unreasonable requests. If your prospectus or manuscript is rejected don't fret too long. You have received some very useful feedback that will help you in your efforts to refine the prospectus or the manuscript so that you can go out and try again!

Negotiating a Contract

Take the time to get what you want. Talk to colleagues who have negotiated contracts, especially with the press from whom you have an offer, to find out what to look for and what to ask for. Worry more about what the contract does for you and your career than about your monetary advance. Pay attention to the clauses. You have a right to ask for certain things, though asking doesn't mean you will get them! Some items to ask for: **Advances**—which can help you get started or finish your research; **Royalties**—find out what the cut points are for possible negotiation. For instance, do you get 5% on the first 1,000 copies and then 7% for any copies sold between 1,001 and 1,500? **Hardback and paperback simultaneously**—check out what the publisher's plans are in this area and think about the ramifications of this possibility. Having hardback and paperback come out simultaneously has advantages and disadvantages. A later paperback release usually means a new round of publicity. Having only a paperback release means the book will not be reviewed in many general public outlets,

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such as the *New York Times* or the *New Republic*. **Indexing**—most publishers will expect you to pay for indexing, but you may be able to negotiate their paying for it. It is usually cheaper to hire a good graduate student to index your book. **First Right of Refusal**—this basically says that the publisher gets to look at your next book before anyone else. It is a mistake to sign this. **Canceling publication**—be sure to know your publisher's definition of "fit for publication." **Marketing**—find out how the publisher plans to market the book and be part of the marketing plan. For instance, send the book to the book review editors in your field (don't assume the publisher will!). Be sure to get enough free copies so that you can do this. If you can't get any free copies, be sure to ask for a discounted rate. **The Cover**—ask to have a say over the design of the cover. Authors often bemoan the covers of some of their works. If you have the luxury of having several presses interested in your book, consider whether to go with a hungry, less prestigious press that might market your book more than a more prestigious press. Suggest particular people to provide the blurbs for the back cover. The whole process gets easier with your second book!

Reference

Luey, Beth. 2002. *Handbook for Academic Authors,* 4th ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Arranging the Right Book Contract

—David S. Meyer,
University of California, Irvine

Making a realistic assessment of your goals in publishing a book, and matching a publisher with the text and with your goals is the first step in bringing your research effort to completion. Social scientists write books hoping to influence an election, change the political debate, shift an academic focus, get tenure, or get a job. A good book, well-published, can *help* achieve some of these goals—but there are other ways to work toward them. Authors and publishers will be happiest, and readers best served, if authors take stock of the possible, and then market their books to publishers who are best suited to help with the goals they've chosen. Beyond writing the book, the author has three clear tasks: deciding on realistic goals for the book; executing due diligence in finding the right publishing house; and making the gist of the book accessible to an educated, but not necessarily expert, reader by writing a good proposal. Matching expectations to the book will help identify the most appropriate presses.

This is where the author's due diligence becomes critical. When you know the audience that you want your book to reach, start paying attention to which presses reach that audience, advertise in the journals you read, appear at the conferences you attend, and get reviewed in the outlets you care about. Think about which published books most resemble your own and which presses published them. Ask colleagues in your subfield and in your department which presses seem most appropriate for your goals. Such evaluations are impressionistic, so you should get as many as possible to get a good sense of the collective wisdom of the field.

Put together a readable and informative prospectus that explains your book to someone who knows little about your field. Such a prospectus should also display your sense of where the book fits both in the field and in the book market. The prospectus will be more widely and carefully read than your book manuscript, so rewrite, revise, and vet it with colleagues. An effective prospectus runs about 5–12 double-spaced pages, includes an overview of the book, the arguments it makes, and the questions it answers, and outlines roughly how many words, figures, or illustrations the book includes. An annotated table of contents, including a paragraph or two summarizing each chapter, shows how the work will unfold for a reader—and provides editors with a digestible writing sample. Finally, include a section on the likely market for the book, including relevant comparisons to other books. Here, explain who will want to read your book and why.

Shop your prospectus broadly, approaching the publishers who seem most likely to match your book and your objectives. Don't let it sit too long on a publisher's desk without following up by email or phone. When you find interest in your book, negotiate keeping in mind what's most important to you; you can ask about everything (money, publicity, free copies, etc.), but don't let a marginal advantage on a contract issue sour a relationship with the publisher who will do the most for your book and your goals.

Writing a good book is a lot more work than negotiating its publication, but bringing the work to your audience is the last essential step in the research process; don't forget all the hard work you've done when the end is in sight.

Seven Modest Tips on Publishing

—Robert J. Spitzer,
SUNY, Cortland

Getting a book published represents the intersection of mutual self-interest between author and publisher. I have a few suggestions on how to combine these.

Polite persistence, not procrastination.

Academic authors experience frustration when schedules are not maintained, when deadlines pass without acknowledgment, and when phone calls or emails are not returned. This takes on greater importance when renewal, tenure, merit, or promotion decisions loom. Writers can help themselves by not engaging in these behaviors themselves, and by taking affirmative steps to maintain schedules and deadlines if publishers fail to follow up at any point in the book process—from submission of a prospectus to final editorial judgments—with multiple and persistent contacts, if necessary. Authors have every right to expect the same professional courtesies regarding notifications and deadlines that publishers rightly expect.

Multiple submissions.

Aside from authors who have a special relationship, whether formal or informal, with a particular publisher, authors should feel free to submit their book prospectus, and manuscript if invited, to multiple publishers. Publishers prefer sole submissions, but it is perfectly appropriate, even routine, for authors to submit to more than one publisher, especially given long decision timelines and the possibility of using acceptances from more than one publisher to enhance the author's bargaining position.

Publish a dissertation?

Many publishers have express policies against publishing dissertations. Yet publishers do publish dissertations. My interpretation: yes, dissertations are publishable, but only if they do not read like a dissertation, but like a book. Smart dissertation authors proceed with an eye both to committee approval and book publication.

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Publish only a little of the manuscript.

Publishers are rarely interested in a manuscript where much, or most, has already appeared in print. On the other hand, publishing a couple of articles from a manuscript is desirable because it shows you are capable of writing publishable-quality work; it declares to fellow academics your interest and expertise; and it adds to your vita.

Look for book series.

In addition to seeking publishers that publish in your area, look for complementary book series. Unlike those you deal with at the publishing house, a book series editor is usually a university academic. Series editors normally have a least three gate-keeping functions: they may recruit appropriate authors and manuscripts; they review all prospectuses that might be included in the series before the review process proceeds; and they can weigh in on the final decision to publish or not. They may also serve as a manuscript review reader. It is very helpful for an author to have this added contact, in addition to the publishing house editor.

Look for a subvention.

A subvention is money the author raises to help defray the cost of publication. It could come from the author's home university or from grant money. It is not bribery, nor does it influence the normal blind peer review process. But it does help cash-strapped publishers who might look more kindly on a book project of academic merit but limited sales potential. How much? As little as $2,000–3,000 makes a big difference to academic presses in particular.

Don't do it for the money.

You'll be lucky to see any money for a typical academic book. I think of it this way: a hundred years after I'm dead, someone somewhere will go to a library and take out a book I wrote. How cool is that?

The Other End of the Telescope (tips from an editor)

—Peter Labella,
Oxford University Press

I am an acquiring editor for the Higher Education group within Oxford University Press—that is, the books I am most likely to sign are explicitly intended to be used in courses. Nevertheless, most of the following nostrums are applicable in many different publishing situations.

Remember that publishing, alas, is a business.

Your book is your baby, a labor of love, an expression of your enthusiasms and commitment as a researcher, educator, and writer, an accomplishment which can be measured and can provide for promotion and advancement. You will be twice blessed if you find an editor who keeps all that in mind and acts upon that knowledge. But at the same time, your book is to your editor a leap of their own faith, a commitment he or she is making on behalf of their publisher, and its success is important—and increasingly, success is measured quantitatively. That is, did the book appear in a timely fashion, and did it make its sales number? Working with your editor to help assure those things will lead to long lasting and mutually enriching partnerships.

Research potential publishing partners as if you were applying for a job.

Before approaching a publisher, make sure that the book you intend to write fits into the program they seem to be running. Look at the way books are designed and marketed by each individual publisher. That will give you a reasonable set of expectations for what may occur with your book.

Imagine your "core reader," and be able to describe that person or group to an editor.

Talk about your book in terms of market—who needs to read this book? What will it help them know or understand? Which courses might this book be central to, and which might it be tangential to? Be realistic about the potential readership of your book: When a prospective author tells me that they feel as if they have written the definitive scholarly work on X, and that it will be useful in an introductory level college course, and should be marketed as a trade book because it will be of great general interest, I look for an exit.

Passion and commitment for the book are valued highly by publishers.

The sense of passion you have for the work—from the point where you start pitching it to editors/publishers right on through the writing, publishing, and promoting of the book—can help a book become a much bigger success. *The most important way to do this as an author is to write the best book you can, in a timely manner.* But helping the publisher get the word out on your book, by helping with the marketing and promotion, can optimize the experience for all concerned.

Communicate early and often with your editor/publisher.

Editors are obligated to spend much more of their time acquiring, and much less of their time developing, books. Your editor will not read every word you write, and will not edit your work in depth or be a collaborator in that sense with you. Not because we don't want to, but because of the demands of the job. Along with this, we may not be as good as we should about querying how things are going once the contract is signed . . . until the manuscript is late. Stay in touch with your editor, and occasionally drop a note and let them know how things are progressing. If you are bogging down, or another commitment comes on the horizon that will impact your ability to deliver the book, *the sooner the editor knows the better.* Know that as soon as you sign the contract, the agreed upon date assumes some tangible meaning for the editor and for the publisher. Publishers create five-year plans that indicate what we are publishing, and when—and your book is on there, with the contracted date as a guide to when it will be published. Of course, things happen, and books become late (or, somewhat rarely, early!)—but communication between the editor and the author is ideally regular and routine. Should your editor leave during the process of your writing the book (increasingly likely), it is perhaps even more important to make yourself and your book "real" in the eyes

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of their successor.

Publishing a successful book—in every sense of that word—is a richly collaborative process. Enjoy it!

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