

Navigating the Academic Book-Publishing Process

Nilay Saiya, *Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

ABSTRACT

Many younger scholars have experience writing research articles and grant proposals but know relatively little about academic book publishing. Graduate training often provides little guidance to students regarding how to navigate the academic book-publishing process. This is unfortunate given that book publishing differs dramatically from publishing research articles. Drawing on the author's own experiences and conversations with editors, this article provides concrete advice for first-time authors who hope to publish a scholarly book with a university press. The specific topics discussed include crafting proposals, finding appropriate presses, reaching out to editors, the peer-review process, securing and negotiating contracts, and production.

Many younger scholars have experience writing research articles and grant proposals but know relatively little about academic book publishing. Graduate training often provides little guidance to students regarding how to navigate the academic book-publishing process. There are understandable reasons why. Most important, the immediate goal of graduate programs is to place students in the best position possible to secure tenure-track academic jobs. Graduate programs and PhD-student advisors thus emphasize the importance of publishing peer-reviewed journal articles (often considered a prerequisite for securing a tenure-track position). Unfortunately, this emphasis on writing research articles is rarely accompanied by similar guidance for publishing an academic book—that is, a monograph published by a university press or an academic trade press that makes an original contribution to the field—which often is viewed as something that will be produced years into an academic career. As a result, the process of publishing an academic book remains mysterious for newly minted PhDs, especially considering that publishing a book differs dramatically from publishing a research article.

Several good general resources are available to academics who hope to publish their first book, including Germano's (2005) classic, *From Dissertation to Book*; Rabiner's (2002) *Thinking Like Your Editor*; and Luey's (2007) *Revising Your Dissertation*. Many of these resources, however, tend to focus on the writing and revising process rather than on the *publishing* process—that is, how first-time authors can publish their finished product with an academic press. Books such as Germano's (2016) *Getting it Published* offer sound general advice for publishing but are not tailored for

political scientists seeking to publish their first academic book. Other resources such as Portwood-Spencer's (2021) *The Book Proposal Book* devote attention to one specific aspect of the publishing process, as did the articles in a symposium published in this journal in 2005 (Jeydel and Dolan 2005; Meyer 2005; Spitzer 2005). Drawing on the author's own experiences, this article provides step-by-step advice for first-time authors attempting to navigate the entire publication process with the goal of publishing a scholarly book in political science.


THE ACADEMIC BOOK-PUBLISHING PROCESS

You have spent years writing and revising your dissertation and finally are ready to have it published. Which press should you approach? How do you pitch your book to an editor? What can you do to maximize your chances that the editor will decide to send your manuscript for external review? These questions can be daunting for first-time authors. The remainder of this article demystifies the academic book-publishing process by providing hopeful authors with concrete advice for moving forward with their book manuscripts.

CRAFTING THE PROPOSAL

The first step in securing a publisher for a book is to craft a proposal—a document that succinctly explains what the book is about, why it is important, and what makes it a good fit for a particular press. Although there is no set template, most proposals should contain the following sections:

- brief summary of the book (i.e., what the book is about)
- significance of the book (i.e., why the book is important)
- summaries of each chapter (i.e., what each chapter is about)

Nilay Saiya  is assistant professor of public policy and global affairs at Nanyang Technological University. He can be reached at nilay.saiya@ntu.edu.sg.

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doi:10.1017/S1049096522000725

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- competing/complimentary works (i.e., the most important previously published books with which the manuscript is in conversation)
- potential peer reviewers (i.e., known quantities in the book's subject area)
- audience for the book (i.e., both scholarly and general)
- dissemination strategy (i.e., how the author will promote the book)
- proposed specifications (i.e., word count and number of graphics)
- author information (i.e., current affiliation, PhD-granting institution, and field of study)

Proposals ideally should be single-spaced and between five and 10 pages in length.

The proposal is an especially important part of the academic book-publishing process; therefore, authors are strongly advised against rushing into it. The proposal is the first document that editors (and reviewers) consider and, on the basis of it, an editor decides whether to send the manuscript for review. Authors want to make a good impression and give themselves the best chance of proceeding to the next step in the publishing process. It also is important that editors likely will select one of the peer reviewers that the author suggested in the proposal. Therefore, it is important that authors carefully identify potential readers whom they believe will review their work rigorously but favorably. (Authors may not include in their list of potential peer reviewers anyone from their graduate school, home institution, or coauthors.) Aspiring authors can solicit successful proposals from colleagues in their department, graduate-school peers, and mentors and use

individual authors. Different presses specialize in different subjects; editors think about not only the quality of a manuscript but also how well it fits with their established lists. In their proposal, authors can signal that their manuscript is a good fit for a particular press by including works previously published by that press.

Another way to identify potential publishers is to review the specialized series that they publish. For example, in my field of religion, politics, and violence, both Cambridge University Press and Cornell University Press have specialized series on "religion and politics" and "religion and conflict," respectively. Either of these series would make an ideal home for someone who studies religious violence.

APPROACHING EDITORS

After identifying suitable presses, the next step is to approach editors. Most presses have a single acquisitions editor for multiple social sciences. Sometimes this editor also acquires titles in related disciplines (e.g., history). The names and contact information for these editors are listed on publishers' websites.

A common route that many first-time authors pursue in approaching editors involves sending an unsolicited query letter or attempting to arrange a meeting with an editor at a major conference. From my experience, I do not believe these methods are ideal. Editors receive hundreds of queries from hopeful authors every year, the overwhelming majority of which they must reject. An editor at a top-tier press once told me that he ultimately rejected approximately 99% of "cold" submissions. Attempting to arrange a meeting with an editor at a major conference also can be problematic. Anyone who has ventured into the book exhibit hall at the annual meeting of the American Political Science

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them as a template for crafting their own. Before they approach presses, first-time authors also should circulate their proposal to trusted mentors or colleagues who have experience in publishing scholarly books.

FINDING A PRESS

The next step in publishing a book manuscript is finding a suitable press. The most obvious way to identify appropriate presses, of course, is for authors to examine their own bookcase and determine which presses have a history of publishing quality books in their field. Even among the four fields of political science, there can be variation in what is considered a top-tier press. In the field of international relations (IR), for example, a recent survey of scholars revealed that among university presses, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Princeton University Press, and Cornell University Press had the "greatest influence on the way IR scholars think about international relations" (Maliniak et al. 2017). In the field of American politics, University of Chicago Press appears to take precedence over Cornell University Press. In certain concentrations within political theory, Harvard University Press is considered a top-tier press. After the top-tier presses, there is significant variation among subfields, depending on the area of focus. In summary, appropriate presses can vary greatly among

Association or the International Studies Association knows that publisher booths are filled with eager authors pitching their book ideas. Editors typically meet with dozens of hopeful authors at these conferences for a very short time and collect a pile of proposals. Although arranging meetings with editors at conferences will not impede authors—and may even yield results depending on the situation—a prospective author will have difficulty standing out to editors in this scenario.

First-time authors must be more strategic in how they approach editors. Most important, they should attempt to find an "inside track" at a press with which they hope to publish. Ideally, this would be a senior scholar who is unconnected to the author but nevertheless is familiar with the author's scholarship and previously worked with the editor at the targeted press. In the case of my first book, on my behalf two senior scholars emailed an editor with whom they previously had worked, introducing me and explaining the value of my book (Saiya 2018). The next day, I sent the editor an email, to which he responded immediately and asked to see a proposal. I have found that editors are more likely to be responsive under these conditions than when they receive cold query letters from individuals that they do not know. One editor at a top-tier press explained to me that a letter of support from a trusted source vouching for a manuscript can make all the

difference when editors decide which projects to pursue. This point cannot be overstated.

Of course, not all authors are fortunate enough to have an inside connection at a desired press. In this case, two factors can prove important. First is for authors to have a track record of publishing in leading journals in their field. This signals to an

convince an editor that a manuscript should be sent out for external review than it is to survive those reviews.

The second way that the peer-review process differs for book manuscripts is that it is single blind (i.e., reviewers know the identity of an author but the author does not know the identities of reviewers). For journal submissions, the review process generally

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editor that an author is capable of producing good research that scholars find valuable. As one editor told me, for example, he would always take seriously a proposal from someone who had published in the *American Political Science Review*! A second factor that sets authors apart is to clearly show an editor how their book fits with the list that the editor is attempting to curate and books that the press has published recently. This requires first-time authors to research past titles that specific editors have published and to explain how their own book fits within this broader body of work—a simple task but one that first-time authors often do not consider.

Authors should note that unlike journal-article submissions, multiple book-proposal submissions are permissible. I suggest approaching editors in batches. An author can do this by creating a rank-ordered list of 20 presses and approaching them four or five at a time, starting at the top of the list. If after two weeks authors have not received any positive responses, they then can move on to the next group. This approach allows authors to send tailored letters to each editor, maximizing their chances of an editor wanting to see a full proposal—which already should be written and ready to send at a moment's notice. The initial letter written by authors to editors should be simple—ideally following a letter from a senior scholar familiar with the author's work—briefly introducing themselves and explaining their book and its importance in a couple of sentences and why it would be a good fit for that particular press and editor. Authors should conclude their letter by asking whether the editor would like to see a proposal. Authors should never send a full manuscript to an editor until the editor explicitly asks for it.

THE PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

The peer-review process is different for books than research articles in two major ways. First, the press compensates reviewers to review manuscripts. When editors are willing to expend resources to have a manuscript reviewed, it is because they are hopeful that the book can be published with their press. For this

is double blind (i.e., authors and reviewers do not know one another's identity) and sometimes triple blind (i.e., editors and reviewers do not know the author's identity and the author does not know the reviewers' identity).

In the ideal circumstance, a first-time author may have two presses interested in sending a manuscript out for review. Authors who are in this enviable position should request permission from the editors at both presses to have the manuscript reviewed simultaneously. If a simultaneous review violates the policy of either press, then the author should grant exclusivity to the more preferable of the two presses to have the manuscript reviewed.

After receiving the reports from two or three reviewers, editors generally make one of three decisions. First, editors might find that the reviews are so unfavorable that the publication process cannot be continued. In this case, an author is advised to carefully consider the advice provided by the reviewers before approaching another press. After all, an editor at another press might send the manuscript to one or more of the same reviewers; therefore, authors will want to ensure that they have done their best to address the reviewers' concerns from the first press. Fortunately, this outcome is less common than the other two.

The second decision editors might reach is to offer an author the equivalent of a "revise and resubmit." Authors should approach this decision as they would a revise and resubmit for an academic journal article except that the process likely will be much longer. Reviewer comments on book manuscripts tend to be more exhaustive than for research articles, so it naturally will take authors more time to revise the book manuscript. In this case, authors will be asked to provide a detailed "revision memo," much like they would for a research article, showing point by point how they have addressed the issues raised by reviewers. The editor then sends the manuscript for review again. As noted previously, because presses compensate their reviewers and cannot afford several rounds of review, this likely will be the final chance that an author has to satisfy the reviewers. If the reviewers are sufficiently supportive of the revised manuscript, the author will

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reason, it is an extremely positive sign for an editor to agree to send out a manuscript for external review. At this stage, prospective authors already have overcome the greatest barrier to publishing their book: convincing editors that it is publishable with their press. Of course, as with research articles, negative reviews can derail the publication process, but unenthusiastic reviews do not necessarily doom book manuscripts as they would articles submitted to top-tier journals. In summary, it is more difficult to

proceed to the next step of the process; if not, the author likely will have to find another press.

The third and most positive outcome of the review process is that reviewers recommend publishing the book with revisions. At most academic presses, the book contract must be approved by an editorial board composed of faculty from that press's university, which will evaluate the reviewers' reports and the author's response and then vote on whether a contract should be offered.

In this case, authors must write a plan of action, detailing how they intend to address the comments from external reviewers. From my discussions with editors, it is uncommon for an editorial board to reject a manuscript that has the support of both the external reviewers and the editor. However, it does happen, and the approval process can take time, even if the editorial board is ultimately supportive of publication. If the editorial board approves publication, the press will offer the author a contract.

THE BOOK CONTRACT

The book contract contains important information that an author should examine closely. It stipulates the deadline for the delivery of the final draft, manuscript specifications, publisher's obligations, and standard terms and conditions. It also specifies the word count, royalty rate, and other relevant information.

First-time authors often are keen to know what they can negotiate in the contract. The short answer is: not much. Most presses will not exceed their standard royalty rates, especially for first-time authors, and an extra percentage or two on the royalty rate for an academic book will not amount to much in the long run. Authors can attempt to request additional free copies and a paperback release of the book (even this can be difficult). First-time authors are advised to avoid absurd requests. Editors are limited when it comes to negotiating contracts, and academic book publishing has a shadow of the future. Authors do not want to alienate an editor at a press with whom they hope to publish a future book. Furthermore, first-time authors should recognize that the real value of their book lies in the boost it gives to their career and the opportunity to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience. Therefore, any concessions that a press might be able to make pales in comparison to these ultimate goals.

PRODUCTION

After an author has returned a signed contract to the editor, a project editor will be in touch in due course. The project editor first will ask the author to complete several forms. These typically include an author's questionnaire (i.e., a document that asks for an author's biography, a summary and selling points of the work, contacts for back-of-the-book blurbs, and marketing information); an author cover questionnaire; a chapter abstracts form; and manuscript submission guidelines. If authors are recycling previously published material, they must obtain permissions from the appropriate journal publishers. These documents should be returned immediately to the press. The final manuscript can be sent later, but it must be by the deadline agreed to between the author and the editor. Most important, in preparing their manuscript, authors should follow closely the instructions provided by the press. This is especially important for manuscripts that contain many tables and figures. Care taken in following the manuscript preparation guidelines can avoid needless delays.

Submission of these forms and the manuscript begins the production phase. During this phase, authors have three major tasks to complete. The first is to answer the copyeditor's queries. This is the final opportunity for authors to make changes to the manuscript; therefore, it is imperative that this step be accomplished carefully. Authors are advised to avoid any rewriting because this would require new copyediting, thereby delaying publication.

The second task involves the author reviewing the manuscript page proofs. Authors should meticulously read the book cover to

cover, searching for grammatical, spelling, and typesetting errors. The third task is for authors to create an index. The time spent on this task varies based on the level of detail that the author wants. Most word-processing software has built-in indexing functions to generate an index. If possible, authors may opt to use their research funds to outsource the index to a professional. I chose this route for my second book (Saiya 2022) and observed a noticeable difference in the quality of this index compared to the one I prepared myself for my first book (Saiya 2018). It is important that the index can be completed only in the proof stage so that pagination will be correct.

POST-PUBLICATION

After their book has been published, authors will want it to be as widely read as possible. Because academic presses market books to a different (and much narrower) audience than trade presses, authors are largely responsible for ensuring that the book is received by people that they want to read it. Although the press will send the book to journals for reviews, display them at conference booths, advertise them in catalogues, and solicit blurbs, it also will encourage authors to make use of social media, popular outlets, and interviews to generate interest. Authors also should accept speaking invitations and attempt to organize a book panel at a major conference to stimulate interest in their book.

OTHER ISSUES

Many other issues involved in the academic book-publishing process have not been discussed previously. I briefly address three of these issues in the following subsections.

When to Approach Editors

Opinions vary on when is the best time to send a query letter to an editor. Some scholars suggest as early as three months before the author expects to complete a final manuscript draft. I believe that it is best for first-time authors to have finished their draft manuscript before approaching presses. In the case of first books, editors want to send a complete manuscript to external reviewers. Moreover, completing a full draft manuscript can take substantially longer than first-time authors anticipate. An author does not want an editor to lose interest in a project because the manuscript could not be delivered on time. For these reasons, it may be counterproductive to approach an editor before finishing the manuscript.

Material from Previous Publications

First-time authors often want to know how much material they can reproduce from prior publications. There is no set answer to this question; the suggested maximum ranges from 20% to 40%. Editors understand that even if some material has been published previously, it will have a substantially different form when incorporated into a book and that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That said, authors obviously want to avoid simply transposing their previously published articles as chapters in the book. As a general rule, authors should limit their recycled material to less than 25% of the completed manuscript.

Length of Time to Publication

First-time authors must recognize that the entire book-publishing process takes much longer than they might expect (or hope).

Delays can occur at any point in the process, from the editor's evaluation of the proposal, to peer review, to obtaining final approval from the board, to production—not to mention delays on the part of the author. The entire process can take years. Authors generally can expect to wait between eight and 12 months after the final manuscript submission to see their book in print.

CONCLUSION

Publishing an academic book is a difficult and time-consuming process, significantly more difficult and much different than writing a research article. However, it also is one of the most rewarding milestones in the life of a scholar. Books allow authors to explore major issues and make expanded arguments in ways that simply are not possible in a research article. The joy for authors of holding their first published book and knowing the impact that it will have on their field may well make this challenging journey worth the effort. Books also carry the potential of speaking to broader swaths of the population beyond an author's immediate research community in ways that research articles cannot. Despite the self-evident importance of scholarly books, however, for many the formula for successfully navigating the academic book-publishing process remains shrouded in mystery. This article demystifies the process for aspiring authors by providing concrete, step-by-step advice for navigating the academic book-publishing gauntlet.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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