Basic Advice for Novice Authors

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During a time in which academics experience increasing pressure to publish, it is all the more important that a potential author understand the nature of academic publishing. An experienced author-editor summarizes the fundamental questions involved in the search for a publisher and explores the important rules – written and unwritten – that govern the author–publisher relationship. An earlier version of this article was published in the Journal of Scholarly Publishing in January 1992.

Firstly, authors should learn about the business of publishing. Such knowledge will help them find appropriate outlets for their work, understand what services various presses offer, and prepare to fulfil their own responsibilities in these days of increasing automation and rising costs. Manuscripts dealing with topics of broad appeal may attract one of the high-volume trade publishers, though most academic books are written for professors and graduate students and therefore have narrower audiences. University presses are committed to serious scholarship, though they can no longer ignore sales potential and have had to close their doors to books so specialized as to interest only a small circle of scholars. Books on the more rarefied topics should be produced by short-run publishers whose work often appears under the imprint of a monograph series; such focused series are almost invariably run by experts in the
thick of the field. These presses frequently do the best job of publishing and marketing work for a limited audience.

Authors’ desires for public exposure must conform to the realities of publishing. The first step is to give clear-headed consideration to the strengths of various publishers and to the personal benefits authors wish to receive from their books. For example, I recently read a manuscript with broad topical appeal which should have been published by a high-profile trade publisher. The author felt, however, that without an agent she could ill afford the potentially long, drawn-out process of finding a prestigious publishing house. She chose instead to settle for a small press who required subventions but promised both a rapid decision and an expeditious publication. By opting for the familiar over the unknown, the author gave up the possibility of high-volume sales – but also avoided the anguish of knowing that her manuscript would probably end up on a slush desk, where ‘over the transom’ submissions generally land at the big, better-known houses. Such trade-offs may be possible and are to be considered.

Generally, there is more prestige in publishing with a well-known trade house. If one believes one’s work has potential for wide readership, and has the time and patience necessary to secure a niche in the hotly competitive commercial market, this avenue should be attempted. A good university press may, however, be the wiser choice, since its editors know the academic market and are accustomed to dealing with professors. It is usually more prestigious to publish with a university press than with a monograph series. Still, as mentioned above, a monograph series specializing in a particular field may be more appropriate because of editors’ special skills and contacts. Because small press editors are usually active themselves in their area of publication, they should know how to address manuscripts they receive. They may also give more personal attention to authors and their work. Perhaps more important, while a monograph series will usually keep books in print and available for decades, trade publishers and, less frequently perhaps,
university presses remainder unsold books within a few years after the initial high-volume sales cease. Authors have to balance relevant considerations of this nature.

Obviously, writers want to have their work in print as soon as possible and at no financial cost to themselves. They may have thought the matter through no further than that, but other needs are just as real and often just as pressing. Professors are responsible for communicating their knowledge. Of course, they convey this knowledge to their students, but to share with their colleagues across the field, it is vitally important that their books are reviewed, listed in appropriate bibliographies and catalogues, and displayed at conferences. Effectively targeted mailers, therefore, are essential. A well-placed space ad or two might also be helpful, though David Lee Rubin, publisher of Rookwood Press, once reminded me that while ads may increase the press’s prestige and do wonders for an author’s ego, they seldom sell enough books to justify the expense.

By no means least important in the hierarchy of authorial desires, publishing scholars deserve to have their effort rewarded suitably – whether with monetary payment, promotion to a higher rank, or recognition. Authors must be concerned about every one of these factors and should learn what benefits different kinds of publishers offer. It may be necessary to accept some less-than-ideal situations in order to secure the press the author deems most desirable. Few beginning authors can find a publisher willing or able to meet all their goals.

Once a writer feels convinced that the manuscript is not only accurate, complete, honest, useful, professionally formatted, and well written, major decisions remain. A list of presses potentially interested in the manuscript, and able to produce and market the book to the author’s expectations, should be compiled. Careful evaluation of publishers’ missions can save time. Should one pursue publication with a trade, university, monograph, or even an electronic press? Though the latter is probably not yet sufficiently well established for most academics, the others need to be considered. A major trade publisher will
probably not be drawn to a study of ladybugs’ flight paths or Baudelaire’s father, while subjects of this kind may be just the thing for a particular monograph series. The astute author can glean some information about publishers through research on a press’s web page and in the library. Publishers’ catalogues are revealing: Does a press’s list of publications include similar or related books? Publishers often welcome the opportunity to market several offerings together, for they would appeal to the same buyers and thus spread advertising expenses. Also, when a press has an extensive list in a certain area, specialist buyers often seek out its related offerings.

Authors should be able to find out whether or not a series succeeds in having its books listed in the major bibliographies and reviewed in the appropriate journals. I know of a volume published in Germany which should have been widely read, but because the press did little to announce its publication, I learned of it only several years after publication in a subsequent article by the author. In another case, a publisher let a book go out of print before the reviews were all out. And, to tell one final horror story, the first book of a former colleague, who is now one of the top people in his field, was reviewed only once, a state of affairs that caused his promotion to full professor to be held up for years. It was a good book, but the series in which he published was known as a dissertation mill and not highly esteemed. As a result, journals that regularly reviewed related books apparently decided not to bother with it. Furthermore, the publisher distributed very few copies of the book for review. Marketing directors know that only one in ten volumes sent to appropriate journals will elicit a review. Nonetheless, as I have learned from inquiries, few academic presses send out more than fifteen or twenty copies. Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages (PUMRL), the series I edited, distributed between thirty and forty. An effective press will solicit the author’s help in deciding which journals to include in the mailing, and some editors (and authors) regularly call on
the goodwill of their journal editor friends and acquaintances to ask that reviews be arranged.

Does the press or series advertise in suitable journals? Does it exploit the possibilities of promotion on the Internet and World Wide Web? Do its books appear at conference exhibits? More important, does it regularly send out direct mail advertisements? If authors or their advisers do not receive mailers from a particular series at least once a year, I would hesitate to submit manuscripts to it. Both experienced and novice authors want their books in the hands of scholars, a happy pass that will occur only if potential buyers know about the new publication. While many libraries have standing orders with some presses and series, these alone are never enough to assure a wide reading audience. Direct mail publicity and book exhibits are essential to the effective marketing of academic books.

Authors concerned about the reputation of their books should never send manuscripts to a vanity press, because such publishers usually care more about the amount of the subvention than about the manuscript’s quality. Even though these presses may receive and publish a good manuscript now and then, the questionable reputation of the press taints the books, which all too often die a quick and silent death. Presses should have manuscripts externally evaluated or ‘juried’ by specialists who know the field well enough to judge the quality of the work accurately. Such readers frequently make worthwhile suggestions to improve the manuscript. Although some presses often require support from the author or author’s home institution to cover expenses, academic presses differ from vanity presses in their rigorous evaluation of manuscripts, of which they generally accept somewhere between one in five and one in ten submissions. Former professors and other professional acquaintances are often a fount of useful information on names and reputations an author should consider when deciding where to send a manuscript.

Ask other authors, mentors, colleagues, and friends whether
or not a specific publisher is prompt in evaluating work. Three months to reach a decision for or against publication is desirable; six is not unreasonable. But when the delay stretches beyond that, there should be an explanation. It is acceptable for an author to query a press about a manuscript three to four months after its submission has been acknowledged. The editor’s response will give the author an indication of when a further query would be in order. Reputable presses will acknowledge receipt of a manuscript and respond to queries. On two occasions, presses have taken eighteen months to make a decision on a book of mine. Even if the editors have difficulty with over-committed, ill, or thoughtless readers (which sometimes happens; despite regular reminders during my tenure as a monograph editor, one reader took six and a half months to evaluate a manuscript), six months should suffice for an editor to issue a contract or return the manuscript. Several years ago, I received a letter from a friend telling me that the editor of a university press had promised him a decision by the end of the week on the manuscript he had submitted three months earlier. Either my colleague or the editor was confused, because several days later I received a letter from that editor asking me to evaluate the manuscript. I rather suspect that the submission had been lost on a desk. Well-established professionals in the field will know which presses take an unreasonable amount of time to reach a decision for or against publication.

Once authors have established and ranked the lists of presses that satisfy their requirements, they should write to ask whether or not the publishers would be interested in considering their manuscript. It is perfectly ethical to query five or six at a time (though in North America actual submissions should be limited to one press at a time unless permission for multiple submissions has been granted). The letter of inquiry should be on institutional letterhead (if the author has the right to use it), and the text should be relatively short, to the point, and engaging. A page or a page and a half should suffice to give the writer’s credentials and a brief synopsis of the offering. Include
a two- or three-page summary or outline of the book and a brief *curriculum vitae* that stresses publications and major professional successes (leave out courses taught, papers offered, and reviews written, unless there is a pressing reason to include them). It is vital that this material be extremely well written, since it may be the author’s only chance of securing an editor’s attention. Some people send a sample chapter or two, but do not send the entire manuscript. If return of materials is desired, postage should be enclosed (I usually fasten it to the letter with a paper-clip). For European presses, one may send a cheque, money order, or international coupons, though given the high cost of postage it may be best to suggest discarding the submitted copy in the case of requests for changes or rejection. A stamped, self-addressed envelope (SASE) should always be included, even when the return of the manuscript is not requested: editors appreciate the courtesy. Authors should ask the press to give some indication of the length of time between acceptance and publication. A twelve-month delay is possible, though it requires everyone’s co-operation, but more than two years is excessive. Beginning authors of very specialized work should probably not expect royalties. At the novice stage it is far more important that the book be published and read by appropriate people. Such initial success will pay off royally in the long run.

When a press answers a query favourably, it is important to respond professionally. Answer any questions and give a return address. Submit only a neat, legible manuscript. Careless proofreading usually leads to quick rejection. Today, a clear photocopy is acceptable, though the press may request assurance that the author is not submitting another copy elsewhere. If two copies are expected, send two. If the publisher wants your text on disk, comply with the request.

Ideally, the editor has carefully considered the earlier query and invited the author to send the entire manuscript only after being assured that it corresponds, on the surface at least, to the press’s needs. In the best of all possible worlds, after inviting submission of the entire manuscript, the editor quickly verifies
its appropriateness both to the press’s list and to future plans. A manuscript’s suitability for a future publishing plan may be decisive, though it has little or nothing to do with the merit of the manuscript. Again ideally, the acquisitions editor will send out the manuscript for external evaluation only after such basic decisions have been made. Specialist readers should by training and orientation be capable of giving a manuscript a competent reading, though it does not always happen. The evaluator may have a bad day, may be over-impressed by minor problems early on in the manuscript (as was Gide when he rejected Proust’s manuscript of *Du côté de chez Swann*), may in fact be an ignoramus or so committed to a particular approach that even-handed evaluation is impossible. If everything goes well, the manuscript will be sent out for a second reading, perhaps a third, before making its way to the editorial board for the final decision. Of course, not all submissions are accepted. At any point in these proceedings things may go awry. Although one of my manuscripts received two very positive evaluations at one university press, for instance, it was turned down without explanation when it reached the editorial board. I still do not know why. The next press that considered the manuscript accepted it, and the book was well reviewed. Later, it was reprinted twice, before being reissued in a second edition.

Changes are almost always requested, more or less emphatically, before manuscripts are accepted, and authors should consider such suggestions with humility. Prima donnas seldom write great scholarly books. Still, editors sometimes require changes that cannot be made without distorting the work. Authors then have no choice but to argue their case (which I have seldom done, though I know those who have appealed successfully) or withdraw the manuscript and try another publisher. When the manuscript is turned down, presses will usually send along copies of the anonymous evaluations for the author to study at leisure, though occasionally one must ask for them. The ability to learn from rejection, the courage to persist in the quest for a publisher (to try again repeatedly, if necessary) marks
the successful professional. Persistence pays. One of the most surprising and helpful experiences of my life came one evening early in my career when two well-published professors of international reputation began in my hearing to compare the ways editors had turned down their work. Several of the stories were amusing, but most were not. Some of the rejections were decidedly vicious. It may help to recall that every author has had work refused and has felt professionally and personally rejected, sometimes often. The only people who do not receive rejection letters or slips are those who do not submit their writings.

Should everything go well and the book is accepted, the author’s work is not done. He or she is expected to submit a manuscript that is neat and that incorporates the evaluators’ suggestions (with a letter explaining briefly what has or has not been done). After the revisions are approved, the best presses send the manuscript to a copy editor, who will note spelling mistakes, typos, grammatical errors and infelicities, and ask many questions pertaining to clarity. While the author and editor may have differences of opinion, a polite note will generally clear them up. Certainly, every author I have known has learned much from the copy editor.

Authors should be willing to help sell their books. It is false economy to save money by sending author’s copies only to your mother. Buy enough additional copies, at whatever discount the press offers, to ensure that the book will reach the readers most important to its reputation (though only the press should send review copies to journals). Promotional material provided by the press should also be distributed suitably. Friends will want to know about the book, as will experts in the field. The idea, of course, is to spread the word as far as possible in the target audience. Often this leads to more reviews, citations, and quotations, all of which can enhance sales of the work. With the author’s help, a book stands a better chance of reaching the appropriate audience, who one hopes will be impressed.

During the entire process, it helps if the author understands something of the difficulties confronting scholarly publishers.
Most presses are struggling against the current to provide a much-needed service. Monograph series that specialize in literary studies confront particular difficulties. It is a tough business, in which no one is getting rich. Dedication and self-sacrifice are the rule. Editors and editorial boards often work for nothing but the hope that they are accomplishing something worthwhile. If specialist readers are paid anything to evaluate authors’ work, it is usually a ludicrously low sum, pennies per hour of effort. Though the academic book market is well segmented – technical vocabulary meaning that marketers know who buys publications – it is very thin. That is, the potential readers and their libraries are spread across the world, with seldom more than a few buyers in one place. Professors do not purchase great numbers of books, and libraries have to make hard purchase choices with limited funds. As a result, sales are sparse. What is worse, the profits are often low or non-existent. Academic publishing is a high-risk enterprise, indeed.

Anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of business knows that there are only three standard cures for low or non-existent profits: the press must decrease costs, widen the margin between cost and selling price, or increase the volume of sales. In general, the low sales of scholarly books on specialized topics like literature decree limited print runs of from 200 to 700 copies. Unfortunately, as the number of books published in the run goes down, the unit cost per volume rises, increasing the costs that must be recouped from each volume sold.

Although the obvious solution to low sales is to sell more books, no one is quite sure how to exploit the academic market more successfully. If published space advertisements seldom justify the expense, direct-mail advertising is sensitive to increases in mailing costs and has limited results (response rates often average 1 or 2 per cent). Every increase in the price of postage decreases its cost-effectiveness. Few publishers hope to make dramatic improvements in the sales of books on such things as literary criticism, especially at present, when exciting new critical schools of a few years ago quickly become passé.
and hold little interest. Price – at least within limits – does not seem to be the decisive factor in sales. Still, prices cannot be raised outrageously. A number of my colleagues, for example, have not even asked their libraries to order a certain Swiss publisher’s reprints because of the staggering prices. Certainly, scholars seldom if ever buy such expensive volumes themselves. On the other hand, low prices do not seem to stimulate buying significantly. One monograph series went broke a few years ago despite very reasonable prices.

What then does a publisher do? If cutting the price does not increase sales volume, raising prices meets sales resistance, and no one seems to have any strikingly effective ways to find buyers, one can cut costs. Here again, given that publishers have seldom been profligate or never profligate for long, there are limited avenues for cost reduction. The expenses of paper, bindings, and other physical features can be reduced only so much. People who like books, like books of quality. I, for example, have long tried to avoid asking my students to buy the lower quality paperbacks, because it infuriates me to see the books in tatters after a second reading. We expect high-quality bindings, acid-free paper, and if not hard at least durable covers, so that even soft cover books will have a long, useful life in our hands and on our shelves. Publishers can and often do keep prices within reason by soliciting several international bids for printing, storage, and distribution, but this takes time, and, as we all know, time is limited and has its own costs.

Monograph series have certain advantages over university and trade publishers when it comes to keeping costs within limits. They are usually small operations with dedicated helpers who donate lots of free time. Books are often stored, not in expensive warehouses, but under beds. Many monograph series have reduced costs by cutting editing to the bone. Reviewers who flog publishers for clumsy style and typos are behind the times, since these days the author is more commonly responsible for such matters. As publishers increasingly insist that authors present their manuscripts either as photo-ready
copy or in machine-readable form, authors become even more directly related to their finished books. Although the university presses that published my most recent books, for example, used copy editors, I was asked in two instances to enter the changes onto a disk myself. The results of decreased editing and professional typesetting are often regrettable: annoying misspellings, grammatical errors, or stylistic infelicities; too much or too little leading (interlinear space); infrequent or incorrect hyphenation; running heads that are either unattractive, uninformative, or absent. Printers and typesetters once took care of widows, orphans, and rivers of disruptive white space as a matter of course. Today, because of automation, such problems often need to be corrected by authors and editors. While all presses hope costs are being cut in ways that will not affect quality, they are successful only to the degree that, when necessary, scholars are sufficiently well trained or motivated to be their own copy editors.

The only other solution calls for increasing the publisher’s capitalization. Occasionally, the press may secure additional internal money either from a host institution or from the editor’s family or second job. One publisher told me glumly about a colleague who, having won a lottery, was asked whether he was going to retire and live the good life. He responded, ‘No, I think I’ll just keep on publishing until it’s all gone.’ Trade publishers once took profits from bestsellers to subsidize an occasional ‘public service’ volume of poetry or criticism. In the current economic climate, marked by corporations siphoning funds during reorganizations and leveraged buy-outs, such philanthropic activity has become almost non-existent. A few major university presses rely on their own golden eggs to generate operating funds. One thinks of Oxford’s Scofield Bible, an edition of the King James Version first published in 1909 and still widely used, or Chicago’s Manual of Style. But most university presses, though they have gone on bended knee to the great sugar daddy in the administration building, get little
additional support – and even risk losing what they have, since universities are themselves under financial pressure and have been known to take the short-sighted view that publishing represents a non-essential function. In fact, successful publishing ventures are an important indication of an outstanding university.

That leaves external funding, and we arrive at subsidy publishing. Increasingly, university presses and monograph series look to agencies like the Canadian Federation of the Humanities or the US National Endowment for the Humanities, to the author’s home institution, or to the authors themselves to meet the heavy costs of short-run publishing. Most often, the press expects the subvention to meet production costs, today between $3000 and $5000 for a 200 page book. Some subventions are less. I have heard of author’s subventions as low as $950 and as high as $8000.

Book publication is a difficult business that requires struggling more or less successfully to keep many needs in balance. The issue is not ‘to publish or not to publish,’ nor is it even ‘publish or perish.’ The issue is how to publish in such a way that the author and the field benefit for many years to come. Then everyone is happy – printer, publisher, editor, and author. That seldom happens, however, unless everyone knows what to expect and works together for successful publication.

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2 Electronic publishing continues to be the subject of much controversy. For a positive view, see John Unsworth, ‘Electronic Scholarship; or, Scholarly Publishing and the Public,’ Scholarly Publishing 28.1 (October 1996): 3–12. For a negative view, see Sven Birkerts, The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (Boston: Faber and Faber 1994).

3 William Germano’s guidance on finding and approaching presses is excellent, with many a useful insight for preparing the manuscript for publication: see Getting It Published (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001) 43–96. Good advice on these and other aspects of publishing is found in Alida Allison, Terri Frongia, et al., The Grad Student’s Guide to Getting Published (New York: Prentice Hall 1992) 153–85; Ralph E. Matkin and T.F. Riggar, Persist and Publish: Helpful Hints for Academic Writing and Publishing (Boulder: University Press of Colorado 1991) 94–108; Mary Frank Fox,

4 Useful suggestions may be found in Trumbull Rogers, ‘Make My Day: A Reasonable Request,’ Scholarly Publishing 22.1 (October 1990): 40–44.