

# TWEED

editing tailored to the academic

*Dissertation-to-Book  
Guide*

*The Curious Beasts* No. 4  
*that are*  
**SCHOLARLY PRESSES  
& ACQUISITIONS  
EDITORS**

Once you have a plan for revising your dissertation, you can take the exciting step of making initial contact with potential publishers. Eventually you will send a book proposal and then a manuscript. Before you shop around your scholarly work, though, you need to know your audience: publishers and editors.

Who are these curious beasts who hold the keys to academic prestige? In this guide, we'll explore the multiform terrain of scholarly publishing, from finding appropriate presses to connecting with the right folks and making a great impression on them.

You may find the definitions of key terms in Guide No. 1 useful. Visit <http://www.tweedediting.com>.

## *You Want to Be Acquired*

Put bluntly, acquisitions editors serve as gatekeepers of publishing. Also called acquiring editors, these folks seek out new talent and new projects on behalf of their employer, the publisher. Your first contact at a scholarly press will most likely be an acquiring editor.

Though acquiring editors have only so much time to orient you to the process of shopping around a manuscript, you can certainly write an acquisitions editor with some very preliminary questions about the publisher and its interests in projects like yours. The next TWEED Guide will cover approaching editors in short emails and query letters. For now, knowing what their jobs entail will make your communication stand out from the droves of other aspiring authors.

Acquisitions editors come from many walks of life—from experience in sales, marketing, copyediting, and sometimes even the particular field for which they acquire new titles. When you write for them, you must write to grab the attention of those from a **variety of backgrounds**. Usually, this means stretching beyond your comfort zone (1) to pitch your project as having a wide draw and (2) to explain it to those without what you might

consider the requisite background knowledge for appreciating your work.

First, though, what does an acquisitions editor really *do*? She is in charge of **creating a book list**—a press's offerings in a general subject area. One press might have book lists in religion and anthropology, while another curates book lists in astrophysics and biochemistry. A single acquiring editor may be responsible for one subject area or many, depending on the structure and size of the publishing house.

To fill out the book list, acquiring editors have to think about **the big picture**: Where should the press at large be going? What does the future of a subfield hold for publishing at this particular press? They seek out trends from the academic community, looking for what's hot but not fluffy or faddish. Every acquisitions editor is looking to fill out the list, finding projects that fit the direction of the press but offer something new, perhaps filling a gap or blazing a new trail in scholarship.

Remember, scholarly books are by and large not big sellers. Editors would love to acquire manuscripts that will turn into books that fly off shelves, but their constant goal is really to build the **prestige** of the publisher.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when dealing with acquisitions editors is that they don't represent their own opinions, views, or interests. Ultimately, **they represent publishing houses**. Never take a no from an editor personally. You can't always predict or influence the direction of a press. In fact, the editor can't always control that, either.

As with finding a graduate program and a great job, **fit** is ultimately the most important factor in a relationship between author and publisher. Any scholarly press worth its salt will be interested in much more than the book you are pitching now. Acquisitions editors want to know if you will be a

desirable addition to the publisher's **stable of authors**. After all, if you have a good experience with them, you are likely to send them your next—and better—book, too.

Your **graduate advisor** or colleagues may put you in touch with an acquisitions editor. Or your mentor might just mention to the press that you are a hot, up-and-coming commodity that should be pursued. That's one way that fit happens in an organic way.

Sometimes editors will seek you out directly. Many acquiring editors at scholarly presses keep up with **dissertation abstracts** available in databases. Exciting new ideas get traction.

More likely, though, you will show initiative and track down publishers with which you feel a kinship. And you will strike up a conversation with an editor or two. Anticipating what they will want to know from you—and what they would love to see in your book proposal—will **set you apart**.

### ❧ *What Editors Look For* ❧

Acquisitions editors take many factors into account when weighing their interest in manuscripts and proposals. Some of the questions that go through an acquiring editor's mind follow.

- How **original** is the concept and its execution? Without reinventing the wheel, one can still offer a fresh take and even create a new subgenre. Staleness is never a desirable quality.
- Does the manuscript or proposal **explain without condescension**, patronizing, or dumbing down?
- Is there an **argument**? Perhaps you think this is a silly question, but rest assured: many an author has shopped a manuscript that has a topic but not any clear statement about that subject.
- Is the project's **organization** logical, clear, and even elegant?
- Is the **style** interesting to read?
- Is the **dissertation revised**? Very few acquisitions editors will consider a manuscript that's basically an unrevised thesis. Show that you have (re)conceptualized the project as a *book* and that someone else has read it over and helped you shape and polish it a bit.

- Can the **scholarly apparatus** be buried? See earlier guides for more discussion of the undesirable hallmarks of work generated by the academy.
- Are the chapters relatively the same length? This is an indicator of good **pacing**.
- Does the author have a publishing **track record**? First-timers are not necessarily at a disadvantage, but known quantities are often attractive to publishers—unless a previous book bombed in the eyes of the academy. That's not your situation, of course!
- Does the author **value the editing process**? Will this author grow with the publisher's investment of time and money?

Having sought out the services of an independent editor in the past signals to acquisitions editors that you are willing to put time into shaping and polishing what will essentially be the publisher's product. On your own, you can hire an editor to perform a pre-assessment of your manuscript or proposal. Screening your writing for all of these concerns will make your project that much more desirable to the acquiring editors whom you contact.

### ❧ *Targeting the Right Presses* ❧

There is no publishing relationship—no proper fit—without the commitment of the author. That's why it's up to you to find an outlet for your writing that suits your goals, stature, and subject.

- Look at **your own library**. What publishers put out books that are attractive to you and shape your research? On a more basic level, which publishers are respected in your field?
- Procure a copy of the **Association of American University Presses' annual directory** for a listing of publishers. It includes information about individual presses' organizational structure and submission guidelines. Most importantly, the directory includes a subject grid, which lays out the presses that publish in each area. You can download the grid for free at <http://www.aaupnet.org/resources/publications.html>.
- Check out the **publishers' displays** in the exhibition halls (book fairs) of your academic association's annual meeting. Which presses'

books interest you most? At which booths are readers really congregating?

- Look at the front and back pages of the **major journals** in your field. Many publishers position themselves there. You can get quite a feel for a house's character and commitment to your field by inspecting their journal advertisements.
- Examine **publisher catalogs**. You can sign up to receive these at press websites, or you can stock up on them at your scholarly association's next conference. See if you find a natural place for your project in their subject areas and current offerings.
- Peruse your university **library holdings**. Which publishers show up on the spines of the volumes in your field's shelves?
- Ask your mentors and colleagues if they have had positive (or negative) experiences with any publishers in particular. Keep your ear to the ground, in other words. **Candid conversations** are invaluable. Remember that what might not have worked for someone else might be a productive fit for you.

After you have amassed a trove of information about the publishers working in your subject area, make a list of **priorities** for yourself. What qualities in a publishing house are most important to you?

- Prestige
- Robust list of current offerings in your field
- Recommendations from colleagues
- Connection, contact, or networking already established
- Expressed interest in you and your work
- Exciting monograph series in your area
- Supportive editing relationships

- Aggressive marketing campaigns (relatively—this is still academic publishing we're talking about!)
- Reputation for innovation
- Type of scholarly publisher: university press, academic commercial house (such as Routledge or Blackwell), or trade publisher (such as HarperCollins or Random House)
- Geographic location
- Attractive book design
- Cutting-edge technological opportunities such as e-book versions, website budgets, and social media promotion
- Reasonable submission guidelines
- Friendliness in initial contact
- Royalties (generally quite low for scholarly presses)
- Concerns unique to you and your situation

Once you have an idea of the attributes that you value most, use the publishing materials and your own notes to make a **tiered list** of potential publishers. Aim for a list of about a half dozen presses that you are excited about. Then find a half dozen more that you could see meeting your expectations.

In the next guide, you will learn the nuts and bolts of crafting effective initial communications—e-mails and query letters—and successful scholarly book proposals.

*Stay tuned for*

**TWEED Dissertation-to-Book Guide № 5:  
*Inquiring Minds Want to Propose***

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