

TWEED

editing tailored to the academic

Dissertation-to-Book
~ Guide ~

No. 5 INQUIRING MINDS ~ want to ~ PROPOSE

Last time, we clarified our concept of acquisitions editors: what they can and can't do for the aspiring scholarly author.

But how do we approach them with book ideas? It's best to think of broaching the subject in two steps: initial inquiries to presses and then actual book proposals. We'll take each stage in turn. Do neither until you have reconceptualized and, even better, begun to revise your dissertation into a book.

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

~ Conference Conversations ~

Before you even inquire in writing, you may find yourself checking out a publisher's offerings at its conference **exhibitor booth**. Oftentimes the staffers of these booths are editors themselves.

Keep exhibitor-hall interactions **brief**. All you want to do at this point is introduce yourself, express your appreciation of what the press is doing (and say something to reveal that you indeed *know* about the press's offerings), and maybe give a brief description of what you work on.

You can ask if the publisher is looking for your kind of work at the moment. If so, get the representative's business card and **follow up** in a week or two via email. If not, don't worry. Being a professional means networking, and you've still achieved that. Move on to the booth of another publisher in which you are interested.

~ Inquire Your Heart Out ~

Before sending out an actual book proposal, you will want to feel out potential publishers. You aren't proposing at this optional stage; you are gauging a publisher's interest in your project via a short message. Don't be intimidated: you and the press are both looking for the same thing—**fit**.

In the initial written contact, it is reasonable to do the following:

- Introduce yourself and your credentials.
- *Briefly* explain your project. Include its tentative title, intended audience, and projected timetable.
- Give a sense of how far along the project is.
- Make overtures as to why your project fits the publisher. Demonstrate that you are familiar with that house's booklist. You don't want to duplicate something that it has already published. Neither do you want to propose something so outside the press's interests that fit is dubious.
- Pose questions about how to best frame your book idea for that particular publisher.
- Ask if you can write a proposal, provided the acquiring editor has some interest.
- *Don't specify that the project is a revised dissertation*. Lying is never advisable, but the origins of the project need not be disclosed at this point.

Email is usually the appropriate venue for short initial inquiries. Use the publisher's website to find its list of its acquisitions editors. Review the booklists (disciplines, fields, topics) that each oversees. Address your email to the most **appropriate** single editor.

Recognize that you may have misjudged the list of acquisitions editors and you may not have selected the best contact for your work. You can acknowledge this by explaining that, if you've chosen incorrectly, you'd appreciate your inquiry being forwarded to the right person.

Though you'll find out in a later section that manuscripts themselves should only be under review by one publisher at a time, you can inquire at **multiple presses** simultaneously. This is the advantage of sending initial inquiries before shipping out full proposals (which you can also send out to multiple publishers).

Be sure, however, that you are clear that your inquiry is not exclusive. You might write something along the lines of the following: “At this stage, I am letting presses know about my project in order to...” Simultaneous inquiries are an option at this stage, but you do not *have* to submit them at the same time. Be as exclusive as you want—just let the editor in on your strategy.

After your initial inquiry, you will ideally receive a sense of a publisher’s interest in your project and the press’s proposal guidelines (these are usually online as well). In any event, you will have begun a **relationship** with a press that could yield publications for you down the line. You’ll also know where to target your proposal packages.

✧ Proposal Basics ✧

A proposal is a full-fledged sales pitch for your book project and for *you* as an author. Overall, you want to give the sense that this is just the beginning of your long career of significant work. A publisher–author relationship is most beneficial for both parties when it is longstanding.

Normally, a proposal includes the following elements, all sent together:

- query letter (also referred to as a cover letter)
- prospectus
- c.v.

You can send out multiple proposals to your first tier of presses. (See TWEED’s Dissertation-to-Book Guide No. 4 for information on finding appropriate publishers.) Be sure that you tactfully indicate that the submissions are not exclusive.

Remember, too, that every press has its own **manuscript preparation requirements**. Following those ensures timely processing of your proposal, and it indicates that you are playing by the press’s rules. Careless preparation or following some other set of guidelines will not reflect well on your proposal.

These days, publishers differ in their preferred **modes** for proposals. Some welcome email; many respond more favorably to proposals that come by traditional post. Try to get a sense for this via publishers’ websites: most have pages directed toward prospective authors. There you will be able to access a press’s proposal guidelines.

✧ The Query (Cover) Letter ✧

In the query letter, you have the opportunity to frame your project in a way that will engage the

interest of the acquisitions editor and increase your chances of a contract later. Think in terms of conveying your **ability to tell a story, mastery of your subject, and polished style**.

If you submitted an initial inquiry with an acquisitions editor, be sure to frame the proposal as if it is a **continuing conversation**. Remind the editor that you are following up on interest indicated in a prior email.

If you did not submit an initial inquiry as explained in the earlier section of this guide, be sure that you cover all those bases in your proposal letter as well: introductions, brief project description, timetable, and sense of fit.

You need to be forthcoming at this stage that a project is a **revised dissertation**. Mention that you have long (or from the beginning) conceptualized this research as a book. If your advisor helped you think in book terms, mention that. It’s key to stress that you realize that the project needs revision. This signals your awareness of the publishing process and your willingness to work with editors.

When writing your query letter, steer clear of **hyperbole**. Yes, you need to demonstrate that the topic fills a gap in the literature, but empty superlatives about your own work will sound hollow and reveal inexperience.

Is a **conference** in your field coming up? Mention that you will be attending and would be delighted to meet with a representative of the press there.

Be sure to send your query letter on **letterhead** if you have it. Some university departments provide electronic letterhead. If you are submitting online, you can also create your own departmental letterhead files by borrowing the university logo. The sidebar includes a link to a letterhead tutorial by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

✧ The Prospectus ✧

The prospectus is the heart of your proposal package. Lasting 1–5 pages, it covers the following:

- subject: what you are investigating
- concept: your interpretation of the subject—and an argument for why it deserves to be published
- thesis: a specific research problem that leads to precise conclusions
- narrative: an engaging storytelling voice

- platform: justification for *you* being the right one to tell this story
- specific parameters: timetable, length, and special features (including illustrations and figures)
- market: the field of books already out there and how this one fits in
- audience: target buyers
- completion: the amount of writing ready for review

When describing your project, try to transcend the **tone** typically used in academic abstracts. Tell a story, appeal to the senses, infuse the description with significance.

It is perhaps surprising that originality and novelty are not the key features that acquiring editors seek. They want solid scholarship that will find readers. Knowing this, tone down the hyperbole about the uniqueness of the project and avoid **jargon** as you would the plague.

A prospectus need not summarize each chapter, but a sense of the project's **structure** is useful.

As for the **marketing** component, recognize that acquisitions editors certainly know more about selling books than you do. Still, you need to demonstrate awareness of the business side of publishing. Think broadly about readers in you're the wider academy, not just your disciplinary subfield. Walk a fine line, though: not everyone will want to read your book. You don't need to include a long list of potential readers; just give a few ideas so that it's clear that you've given the matter some thought.

The website and newsletters of your professional organization can provide **data** on courses taught in the project's general subject field. This information, along with data about how many professors teach relevant courses, can form the basis of your market assessment. If you need more comprehensive data, check out MDR's website in the sidebar.

✧ *Finishing Touches* ✧

You should also include a **c.v.**, and it can be an abridged one (indicate as much).

Use **stable contact information** for yourself. Publishing can be a slow process, and you want the publishers to be able get a hold of you. If you have a departmental address, that may be the best option.

A **self-addressed, stamped envelope** is not usually required by submission guidelines, but it could help you hear back from the publisher promptly.

Draft many versions of the prospectus. **Revise** and revise again. Enlist the proofreading skills of your colleagues, and consider hiring an editor to shape the content. Use high-quality paper and printing methods.

Expect even an accepted prospectus to be revised again and again, in consultation with the press and in various stages of publication.

✧ *Manuscript and Reviews* ✧

Give editors about a month with your proposal and then politely inquire about its **status**.

✧ *Online RESOURCES* ✧

Query (Cover) Letters

Creating Digital Letterhead: from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* - <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/how-to-create-digital-letterhead-for-your-departmentjob-search/27493>

How to Write a Query Letter: from a literary agent and not *specifically* for scholarly writers - <http://blog.nathanbransford.com/2010/08/how-to-write-query-letter.html>

Prospectuses

University of Cambridge: training for graduate students - <http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/students/training/bookproposal.html>

Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL): writing tips - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/752/06/>

Market Data Retrieval: for specifics about courses and professors in a particular subfield - <http://www.schooldata.com/>

Humor

The Five Stages of Querying: from denial to motivation - <http://stiryourtea.blogspot.com/2010/07/querypolitan-presents-five-stages-of.html>

SlushPile Hell: failed queries and snarky dismissals - <http://slushpilehell.tumblr.com/>

If the first round of publishers passes on your project, the last thing you should do is give up. It's not an absolute statement on the quality of your research. Because of limited resources, presses frequently have to turn down worthy projects. Go to the **next tier** of preferred publishers and start the process again.

If, however, you are fortunate enough to receive a green light from multiple publishers, you'll want to **choose one** to which you'll submit your manuscript. Let the other publishers know that you would like them to hold on your proposal and will contact them again if the first publisher declines to move forward.

Generally, only submit a manuscript to one press at a time. If you feel **multiple submissions** are necessary, then the query letter is the place to ask whether the press cares if you send it to other publishers at the same time.

Don't send a manuscript to your publisher unless it is actually requested.

Typically, the manuscript's first page should include only your name and the project's title. This means that the hallmarks of the dissertation **title page**—advisor, institution, date—should be removed. Doing so will signal that you are no longer an advanced graduate student aspiring to publication. You are a scholar who appreciates the differences between school and publication. Check with your publisher's submission guidelines for precise formatting requirements.

Contracts contingent upon revisions are the most common, so the next step in the process will be outside **reviewing**. Acquiring editors maintain lists of reviewers, but they rotate the names often so that no scholars dominate the shape of the press's booklist.

Reviewers are asked to assess various aspects of a manuscript:

- significance and originality
- strengths and weaknesses
- audience and market
- match between promises made and actual research delivered
- rigor and use of sources
- quality of writing

Reviewers will provide suggestions for **revision**. With your first book manuscript, expect these and accept them graciously. They will improve your book and your relationship with the press.

❧ *It Takes a Village* ❧

Publishers' guidelines for manuscript preparation govern many aspects of word processing that are basically invisible to most users. In addition to standardizing your hyphens and dashes, for instance, you may have to remove all styles from a document or get rid of all places where you inserted two spaces instead of one. If you aren't familiar with these issues or simply don't have the time to tend to them all, an editor can help.

Moreover, scholarly presses generally do not have the resources to fund developmental editing, but many first-book projects need precisely that. Upon reading your proposal—or even as part of a contract with contingencies—a prospective publisher may ask you to hire a developmental editor before moving forward.

If you go through several rounds of inquiry and proposal submissions with various presses but get no traction, you may want to hire a developmental editor like TWEED on your own. Such services can help you create a prospectus—or a full manuscript—that is more in line with what scholarly publishers want.

TWEED wishes you all the best in your journey from dissertation-writer to published author.

❧ TWEED Editing ❧

With personal and professional experience in higher education, TWEED answers the call of the scholarly writer, offering editing tailored for academic success. Katie Van Heest, MA, has a certificate in editing from the University of Chicago and offers an affordable range of services for scholars and students.

TWEED's book preparation services give you a competitive edge. Revising your dissertation for publication? Writing a scholarly monograph or article? TWEED performs developmental editing that realizes the potential of your manuscript or idea. You create your own package from the range of available services: assessment, structural plan, thorough plan implementation, proposal development, consulting, and more.

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