

General Advice About Book Publishing



by Marcia Yudkin and Janice Moulton

One acquisitions editor at a university press wrote us, “There are no unsung Miltons lurking in the halls of academy. Maybe Vico was ignored for 200 years, but it’s most unlikely that a first-rate book will go unpublished, and it will be published well.” We think this is somewhat too optimistic; much evidence points to quite a contrary moral. First of all, in the twentieth century publishing is a business. Even at nonprofit university presses, a variety of criteria besides the quality of a manuscript influences the decision of whether or not to publish it. With a little imagination, anyone can dream up an unprofitable project that would not fit the specialization of any existing press. Secondly, compared with journal publishing, book publishing is haphazard and undemocratic. With blind review, a bright but completely unknown author from an obscure college has a fair chance of a journal accepting her article; but that same author, submitting an uninvited book proposal or manuscript of similar quality, has the odds stacked much higher against her. Without understanding the realities of publishing, she might try 20 wrong publishers, or 20 suitable publishers with the wrong approach, fail, and then give up. On the other hand, she can greatly improve her odds of getting published by using a knowledge of how publishing works to her advantage.

33

We recommend that anyone writing or considering writing a book read *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, by sociologists Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kadushin and Walter W. Powell (see “Resources”), particularly chapters 5 and 9. Based on formal and informal interviews with more than 100 editors in different sectors of publishing and more than 200 authors, they explain how various pressures on editors lead them to acquire manuscripts in a manner that slights poorly connected, unsavvy hopefuls. They also document the unbalanced power relation between authors and publishers and its consequences. Anyone who doubts that their conclusions apply to the presses that publish philosophers should also read *Getting into Print: The Decision-Making Process in Scholarly Publishing*, Walter W. Powell’s case study of two scholarly publishing houses (see “Resources”).

What are you writing?

We don’t mean to scare anyone into a cynical, sale-oriented approach to writing a book. We assume that you want to write a book because you believe you have something worthwhile to say and would like to communicate it in print. Our advice consists mainly of adding several steps to those you would probably take anyway and omitting others that editors and other experts on publishing consider unlikely to lead to publication. Rather early in the planning stage of your book project, for example, you should decide what *kind* of book you want to make it. There are three main types: scholarly books, trade books, and textbooks.

GUIDEBOOK FOR PUBLISHING PHILOSOPHY

Scholarly books, both monographs and anthologies, are aimed at libraries and specialists in a certain field and distributed through mail order, some specialized bookstores, and at professional conventions. Trade books, aimed at general (including highly educated) audiences, are distributed primarily through bookstores. They tend to go out of print much sooner than scholarly books, and there are relatively few by philosophers. Textbooks, of course, whether unitary ones or anthologies, sell almost exclusively to college students through college bookstores. In addition to different audiences and distribution systems, each of these kinds of books represents a different set of constraints and opportunities. While royalty rates and contracts for each differ also, the main reason this classification system matters for authors is its relevance for choosing an appropriate publishing house for your book and then contacting it and following through effectively.

Finding out about publishers

Once you have an idea of your topic and target audience, you should start collecting information about potential publishers. While this *Guidebook* includes listings for a number of publishers, this far from exhausts the publishing houses that put out philosophy books. If you become interested in a publisher, you can call or write to request their philosophy catalog and examine it closely, looking to see who they publish, what kinds of books, in what subject areas and at what levels. Notice whether or not there are any philosophy series, and if so, who the series editor is. If you can attend an APA meeting, go and take notes on various publishers' offerings and talk to the representatives there, some of whom may be even be the acquisitions editors. At the exhibits or in your library, look over samples of different publishers' books to see how well executed they are. You may also want to contact some philosophers who have published books with the publishers you are investigating to ask them how satisfied they feel with the process and the result.

One strange fact is that many publishers seem reluctant to specify their preferences even when the preferences are very well established. One acquisitions editor has defended his inability to explain what he called "editorial judgment" thusly: "It's a bit like asking a centipede how he or she can coordinate all those legs. Thinking about it too closely means you can't do it." Surely, formulating and publicizing the preferences that guide a company's choices should pull in more appropriate submissions and discourage inappropriate ones, but until publishers believe that, careful review of their offerings will be critical.

When it comes to matters like how long it takes for a final manuscript to make it into print, or whether or not they will consider *Festschriften*, editors are a good deal more cooperative. If you have these sorts of questions about publishers, call and ask.

Choosing a publisher

We think that you will be more satisfied when your book is published if, from the start, you formulate your goal as not merely getting your book published, but

GENERAL ADVICE ABOUT BOOK PUBLISHING

getting it published well. If yours is a scholarly book, you will want it to accurately reflect the final manuscript you turn in, to be reviewed, to sell to libraries, and to stay in print at least long enough for it to reach its audience. Since relatively few academic authors find themselves with offers from more than one publisher, you should carefully choose a target publisher, or list several in order of priority, before you submit. As Coser, Kadushin and Powell document, once the book is accepted and you have signed a contract, you are in a poor position to protest poor-quality editing, poor-quality bindings, printing or paper, a tasteless cover or a plan to omit an index. The best way to assure that yours will be a quality product is to choose a publisher that does your sort of book well consistently.

You may decide to shoot for the prestige publishers first, or you may decide on another strategy. Suppose, for example, that your book is a new translation of a classic, or on a relatively specialized subject or rather technical; you might be better off aiming at a publisher that has carved out that particular market niche. Not only might the latter be more receptive to your submission, as publishers generally prefer to keep accepting manuscripts in the specialties they have established; the more specialized publisher might also be able to reach the potential audience for your book more effectively.

Price is another factor to consider in drawing up your list of potential publishers. If your book is designed for students, it shouldn't be priced out of their reach. If your book is aimed at your professional peers, you wouldn't want it to threaten the budget of an assistant professor. One author wrote to Janice Moulton for the last edition of the *Guidebook* about the author's book, which was supposed to be available for courses and yet cost \$40 for under 350 pages. The author lamented, "It cannot be required for courses and is virtually unsaleable except to a few affluent libraries....I cannot now utilize portions of the book in Xerox form for my students without violation of the explicit copyright warning." When we asked publishers to report the range of book prices to help make comparisons several editors indicated that they had no idea how much the books their company published cost.

Contacting the publisher

Here is where the research of Coser, Kadushin and Powell is most helpful. They divided the various sources of the manuscripts that editors ended up purchasing into three main categories: (1) those that resulted from the editor's active searching; (2) those that were personally recommended by someone the editor could trust; and (3) "over-the-transom" submissions, those simply mailed in without any prior contact between the author and editor. They found that most editors coped with limited time for a great number of submissions by setting up a priority system, in which they turned first to the category of submissions they could least afford to ignore and gave the other categories whatever time they had left. At all publishing houses, categories (1) and (2) received by far the most attention. Powell, who observed two scholarly publishers for an extended time at close range, found that at "Apple Press," manuscripts in category (1) had a roughly one in three chance of being published, those in category (2) slightly less than one

GUIDEBOOK FOR PUBLISHING PHILOSOPHY

in ten and those in category (3) considerably less than one in a hundred. “The message to authors should be clear,” concluded Coser, Kadushin and Powell (p. 132). “Use whatever contacts you have. Given the large number of projects that cross an editor’s desk, any type of serious, personal recommendation that will attract someone’s attention can only help.”

For academic authors, the recommender who pulled a submission out of the lowest-priority category was either a more well-known mentor, friend or colleague of the author, anyone else the editor happened to know and trust, or a series editor. (Russell, you may recall, intervened and secured the publication of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for his friend and former student.) Powell emphasized that academic authors have a better chance than non-academic authors when submitting a manuscript without any intermediary or prior contact, but his statistics reinforce the recommendation of the earlier book that you should submit “over the transom” only as a last resort.

If you can’t think of or can’t (or don’t want to) persuade a suitable intermediary to help you get the editor’s attention, then it’s especially crucial that you prepare your book submission with care. The following suggestions also apply if you’ve used an intermediary, for even a recommendation by the most eminent philosopher will rarely override a bad proposal or manuscript.

36

First, find out how much material you need to submit. There are three main kinds of preferences. Some textbook and scholarly publishers request only a proposal and detailed outline or table of contents. Others request in addition several sample chapters, which should be the strongest or most characteristic ones, not necessarily the first ones. Textbook publishers will almost never want more than that, because they like to be able to influence the form and content of the book. But many scholarly publishers, particularly some university presses, cannot reply without having had the complete manuscript to read and referee. Submitting less than what a publisher wants will either yield a refusal or a noncommittal request for more material. Submitting more than what a publisher wants, on the other hand may result in a considerable delay when it lands in the editor’s “when-I-have-time” pile.

Second, prepare the submission. Most of the procedural recommendations in the section on journal publishing apply here as well. There is one big difference between journal and book submissions, though; along with making your writing lucid and your typing or printout neat, in the latter case you must also, however genteelly, try to sell the publisher your book. Either in a proposal, or, if you prefer, in a long cover letter that performs the function of a proposal, you must explain what is distinctive about your book, who the potential audience would be and why buyers will prefer your book over other similar ones in its general subject area. For a book you think would be adopted for courses, be specific about courses that it would suit, even estimating the number of those courses and their enrollments if you can. For a monograph that is not designed for courses, you should still give every kind of evidence you can think of (the number of peo-

GENERAL ADVICE ABOUT BOOK PUBLISHING

ple working in that subfield, the groundswell of interest and controversy about journal articles that your book is based on) of who is likely to buy your book and why. Do not assume that publishers know as much as you about current trends in philosophy; their information and impressions may be out of date.

Make sure that your proposal can be understood by an intelligent non-philosopher. Although the editor you are contacting may know quite a lot about philosophy, he or she will probably circulate the proposal to other editors or editorial board members who will also need to be convinced that your book is marketable and important. Your outline or table of contents should be informative enough to show that you have already thought through the book in detail and that your material will be well chosen, complete and logically organized. Ten or even 20 pages for the plan of a book when you are not submitting the whole manuscript is not too much. If you are not submitting the whole manuscript, mention how long you expect it to be and when you expect to complete it. Most publishers want you to enclose your vita as well, and you may also suggest getting together to discuss your project in person, at an APA meeting, for example, or at the office of the publisher. For incomplete projects, editors often like personal contact with authors in order to gauge their ability to complete what they have proposed.

Unlike journals, only a few book publishers strenuously object to simultaneous submissions. Some university presses require in cases of multiple submissions that you promise not to commit yourself to another publisher before their review process is complete. You may want to put those publishers that demand exclusive submissions at the top of your priority list if they say they are quick and at the bottom of your list if they are slow. One reason response times of different houses vary is that some send proposals out to specialists in the project's field, while others reserve that method of review for the final manuscript.

Last, address both the package and your cover letter to an editor by name. Otherwise, especially at a larger house, your submission may be shunted around among different departments or lost. Most publishers will be glad to tell you the name of the editor who handles philosophy submissions if you call them.

Negotiating with the publisher

Many publishers use a two-stage review process: initial screening of the proposal or the proposal and sample chapters, and later formal review, including outside referees' reports, of the complete manuscript. Some of these publishers can offer what is called an "advance contract," basically a promise to publish the book should the final manuscript be acceptable, on the basis of their initial screening. Others encourage certain authors to submit a complete manuscript, but without promising to publish it; they can offer a contract only on the basis of a complete manuscript. Since a publisher may request quite extensive changes in a complete manuscript, the latter is not equivalent to a final manuscript. And every publishing contract contains an escape clause that allows the publisher to back out of the agreement if the final manuscript is not satisfactory. Although this escape clause

is rarely invoked in academic publishing, you should be aware of its existence.

Virtually every other clause in a contract is negotiable to some extent. Do not assume, if you are presented with a preprinted contract form with your name, book title and other particulars typed in, that you must accept the standard printed terms. Any number, phrase or paragraph can be x'd out and another number, phrase or paragraph substituted. Several books listed under "Resources" explain various terms and clauses of publishing contracts in detail. Since agents work on commission, it's probably not convenient to use an agent to help you negotiate your contract. But you may want to ask a lawyer to explain the legal terms in the contract to you, particularly if it's your first contract.

Before you sign the contract is the time to discuss when the book will appear, how the book will be advertised, whether or not you will have the right to approve the cover and text design and whatever other similar factors matter to you. If you agree on something that your editor says is not appropriate to insert in the contract, try to get it down in writing with the editor's signature. This is important not because editors are unreliable and tend to go back on their word, but as a way to prevent misunderstanding. Also, throughout publishing editors change jobs frequently; if your editor leaves the house you contracted with before your book finishes the publication cycle, his or her successor may be reluctant to proceed as you verbally agreed. Anything in writing has more moral weight than a verbal agreement with someone who no longer works there.

After acceptance

After you sign the contract, you will probably receive a production timetable and detailed instructions for preparing the final manuscript. You will have to send off not only what you might think of as the book itself, but also the "front matter"—title page, table of contents, preface and acknowledgments—and permissions to reprint copyrighted material. Not long afterwards, just when you are enjoying being rid of your project, the copy-edited manuscript will arrive in the mail. These days, many publishers use freelance copy editors, and the extent to which they wreak refinement or havoc on your writing varies. In *One Book/Five Ways* (see "Resources") you can see what five different copy editors did to the same two chapters of a manuscript. Their changes range from minor polishing to restyling of almost every sentence. One copy editor deleted material that she considered redundant but that the other four left in; she also explained to the author the reasons for many of her changes, while the other four did not. It's best to keep an open mind about whether or not your prose can bear improvement and to remain calm when you see the extent of the markings on your manuscript. If you find changes that are positively wrong, awkward or misleading, explain why you find them so in a letter to your contact with the publishing house.

Your subsequent responsibilities will include proofreading and, usually, preparing an index. Both of these tasks will have to be completed within a very short time, about two weeks, so make sure you have an idea when the proofs will be arriving. Set aside enough time to do a thorough job or make arrangements

GENERAL ADVICE ABOUT BOOK PUBLISHING

beforehand for someone to help you out. Your publisher will probably give you detailed instructions on how to perform these tasks; you may also find the *Chicago Manual of Style* or other style manuals helpful (see “Resources”). Around this time, the marketing department will send you an author’s questionnaire to fill out. Think through your answers to the questions about journals and magazines for advertising, specific professional groups for mailings, courses for which your book is appropriate and so on, as the marketing department will probably rely on your suggestions in its sales strategy for the book.

Special situations

Dissertations. Contacting a press about publishing your Ph.D. thesis won’t provoke a frenzy of enthusiasm, not even if you are the hottest protégé to come along since Plato, and your mentor has written that ahead to the publisher. You’ll get a better response if you play down the fact that it’s your thesis and make it clear in your proposal and sample material that this is an original, well-written and significant work of philosophy that has already been through several stages of revision. Dissertations that make it into print have usually had boring, pedantic chapters cut and other material added; do the surgery and reconstruction before you submit.

Anthologies. What could be more of a scam than making money and tenure by editing an anthology? If you have the idea that an anthology editor just thinks up a concept while the authors and the publisher do all the work, then you’d better talk to someone who has coordinated contributions from ten or more authors about the tribulations and ordeal that may be involved. For a collection that includes new work, you will be responsible for soliciting articles and ensuring that they are completed on time, of sufficient quality and within the budgeted length. This may require considerable tact and organizational skills. Using already published selections, on the other hand, will involve a lot of correspondence and follow-up; an anthology cannot go into production until you furnish the publisher with all the appropriate copyright permissions.

If you decide you’re up to the task, your proposal should be clear about whether the selections will be new or originally published, whether the appeal will be primarily the authors’ ideas or well-known names or both and how tightly the articles will be connected, as well as the level or background the articles will assume. Estimate the total length of the volume, the average length of selections, and the length of the interpretive introduction you will undoubtedly want to include.

Textbooks. The most market-oriented of the various types of books you might write, textbooks involve some peculiar dangers and requirements. Because sizable profits are at stake, textbook publishers compete fiercely with one another. Beginning in the 1970s, several larger publishers, including McGraw-Hill, Harper and Row, and Little-Brown, tried to improve on the slow, uncertain process of hiring an academic to produce a textbook. A more controlled process evolved of concocting a marketable educational formula, hiring non-academics to do

GUIDEBOOK FOR PUBLISHING PHILOSOPHY

the writing and finding an academic, preferably well known, willing to receive credit as the author. Chapter 10 of *Books* describes and condemns these essentially ghost-written “managed texts” and warns professors not to be deluded into cooperating with them. If a textbook sales representative or editor approaches you about writing a textbook, you owe it to yourself to read this chapter and discuss its points with them before you commit yourself.

Although editors at textbook houses tend to be more aggressive in soliciting authors than editors at scholarly or university presses, they are also receptive to good proposals. Some houses have a bias in favor of authors who teach at large, not necessarily prestigious universities, because such schools often account for most of the textbook orders. If you teach a large course that your proposed book would suit, be sure to mention it. In any case, your research and knowledge of the college market must be evident in both the proposal and the eventual contents once you have won a contract. Remember that professors, not students, decide which books will be ordered for which courses.

Even if you write an entire textbook yourself, in the traditional fashion, many publishers will intervene or at least advise with respect to certain aspects of the content. You will probably have to avoid sexist language (see “Resources”) and remove any inadvertent sexual, racial, ethnic, religious, age, or other stereotypes. For an introductory text, you may also be edited down to a particular reading level. None of these demands are likely to be as silly as the strictures of some elementary-school publishers against the mere mention of any kind of “junk food” (even ice cream!), but still, some people will find them irritating. If you undertake to write a textbook, you should be prepared to tolerate this kind of guidance.