

Author Directions: Navigating your success in Book Proposals

Key Tips on How to Write a Successful Book Proposal



Introduction

An academic book proposal is a document which provides an initial overview of a book project, usually in advance of completing a book manuscript. The proposal will initially be read by an Editor in order to assess the suitability of a book project for their publishing programme (or “list”). The proposal may also undergo a review process in which reviewers are engaged to provide feedback that can be used to develop the project from proposal to finalized manuscript. Understanding these elements will increase the likelihood of a publisher offering a contract, whilst saving time and effort when it comes to writing/editing the book.

We have taken insights from our global editorial team across Routledge and CRC Press to develop guidance on how to prepare a successful book proposal. In doing so, we’ve identified four important themes. Following these will increase your chances of publishing success from conception to publication.

Key tips on how to write a successful book proposal:

1. Topic: why is the subject of the book important?
2. Audience: who will read the book and who will recommend it?
3. Position: how will the book sit alongside existing literature and what does it add?
4. Structure: how can the structure of the book facilitate its aims?
5. Finalizing your proposal

Topic

Explain why the topic is important in today’s climate; tie it into events in the news; recent scholarly discussions in journals; etc.

—Ellen Boyne, Editor, Routledge

First and foremost, it is essential to elucidate the topic of the book and demonstrate why it’s relevant and important. This can be substantiated via different means – quantitatively, it’s possible to illustrate the importance of a scholarly topic by looking at measures like citations, course/module numbers, and numbers of related publications. In many cases, it will also be useful to examine how the topic intersects with different disciplines and assess the extent to which there are different schools of thought at play.

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Audience

Understanding your motives for writing will influence your route to publication, and shape your work for the right audience.

—*Natalja Mortensen, Senior Editor, Routledge*

Working on an adapted Anna Karenina principle, all successful scholarly books are alike in the same way – their authors understand their audience. Thus, a key element of a book proposal involves identifying the primary audience for the book. Books which successfully reach a wide variety of audiences are rare indeed. To simplify this question, let's look at three core audiences:

- 1. Scholars:** this audience includes advanced students, early career and established researchers. Such readers actively search for relevant new material in their specialist areas – how do you ensure your book appeals to them?
- 2. Students:** this audience are only likely to buy a book if it is recommended for their class – in this case, appealing to the lecturer/instructor is as important as appealing to the student:
 - An instructor will ask themselves whether a textbook will fit their course, whether the level will be appropriate, and whether assigning the textbook will save them time
 - A student will ask whether the book is required reading and even if so, whether they really need their own copy!
- 3. Practitioners:** this audience is more disparate, and can be trickier to reach – ask yourself whether your book will genuinely offer a service to this readership that's not available elsewhere.

Publishers are slightly suspicious of anything that has no competition – it begs the question as to why not and if there is in fact a market for the book.

—*Jo Koster, Senior Publisher, CRC Press*

Beyond this simple understanding of core audiences, there is potential for crossover. It's best to be honest about whether and how your book can appeal to more than one audience.

Some books travel better than others. As a global publisher, we are keen to exploit our strengths and sell the book internationally. If there are key regions where your book is likely to succeed, now's the time to highlight that and explain why an audience in a specific territory will find your book valuable.

Position

Don't be afraid to take on established competition which has not kept up with the needs of the market. A well timed, well researched competitor can be the death of neglected titles.

—Jo Koster, Senior Publisher, CRC Press

Demonstrating an understanding of the position that your book will take in the market will significantly enhance its likelihood of success. This involves an awareness of what is already available to readers, amplified by a clear expression of what makes your book different from this crowd. In many cases, it is useful to think of the existing literature as “competition”. An assessment of your competition can be broken down as follows:

1. Literature review
 - Do a thorough search – online, in bookstores and in the library
 - Ask your colleagues what books they are reading or using
 - Look at student feedback on existing books where available/appropriate
2. Prepare a competition table
 - Using your literature review, list the key competing titles identifying what's unique about them alongside what makes your book different/better (written for a different audience, new approach, etc.)
 - Include basic bibliographic details for each book (publisher, price, publication year)
3. For a practitioner oriented book, investigate whether potential readers of your book could use a solution other than a book to solve the problem addressed by your own work

Be sure to recommend books within the last 5-10 years.

—Marc Gutierrez, Editor, CRC Press

Structure

For both single authored books and edited books, brief chapter abstracts are required. These may be all that the reviewer has to go on, so please provide a good indication of the proposed content.

—Matt Friberg, Editor, Routledge

As Vladimir Nabokov once said, “style and structure are the essence of a book.” Taking into consideration the topic, audience and position of the book, its structure is arguably an author's main tool to achieve its aims. Significant and ongoing changes to the market for academic

books driven by digital disruption, notably in reader behaviour, are important to keep in mind when formulating a draft structure:

1. Chapter titles should, where possible, position themselves clearly to enhance the overall discoverability of the book
2. Supplementing the table of contents with chapter synopses will ensure you are keeping topic, audience and position in mind and will provide reviewers with sufficient material to supply useful feedback
3. Consistency is key – chapter features such as introductions and summaries should be included across the board, or not at all
4. Pedagogical features are a tool to engage and retain readers faced with information overload – boxes, case studies, and illustrations should be considered
5. Contributor details (even if tentative) should be supplied at proposal stage as this helps illustrate international and disciplinary coverage
6. A sample chapter, though not always necessary, can help assess writing style and ensure that feedback can be provided to tie the book proposal to its execution

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Finalizing Your Proposal

Treat your proposal as an advertisement for you, your ideas and what you have to offer. It should grab attention and make your proposition attractive.

—Natalja Mortensen, Senior Editor, Routledge

The mission of a good publisher is to connect authors with readers. The advice in this snapshot hopefully facilitates that, but a conversation with the relevant editor is often a vital stage in order to bring together your subject expertise with their publishing expertise. From the perspective of the editor, such conversations can be key to sharpening your proposal in a few key areas:

1. **Title:** The main title of the book should position it clearly without reference to other bibliographic information, and should be as short as feasible.
2. **Length:** More often than not, book proposals are just a few pages in length, supplemented in some cases by more information on authors and/or a sample chapter.
3. **Review:** The review process is a tool to ensure that a resulting book finds its audience.
4. **Data:** Quantifiable data on citations, course sizes, and other areas can be very helpful.
5. **Presentation:** Take the time to check spelling and grammar. Use simple formatting and traditional fonts and provide it in Word, not as a PDF.

Use simple formatting and traditional fonts. Don't get "fancy."

—Ellen Boyne, Editor, Routledge

And Finally

Having provided you with the key tips, it's perhaps useful also to reflect on the publisher's perspective when it comes to features of book proposals that tend to sound alarm bells. As such, we've put together this handy guide:

| What authors say | What publishers hear |
|--|---|
| "My book has no competition." | "I have not researched the market." "There is no market for my book." |
| "My manuscript is complete." | "I do not wish to engage with constructive criticism." "I want you to read my entire manuscript, but I will not make any changes." |
| "The book will be read by everybody." | "The book will be read by nobody." |
| "The book will appeal to students, researchers and practitioners." | "The book will disappoint students, researchers, and practitioners." |

Conclusion

All themes highlighted in this piece will develop guidance on how to put your proposal together. Remember, when putting your proposal together, to think about your topic (why is it relevant and important?), audience (who is your primary reader?), position (look at the market – why is your book unique?), and structure (what is the content of the book?). If you consider using these themes when putting your proposal together, you should be on your way to writing a successful proposal.

You can often find out what an individual publishing company is looking for in a proposal from their website. Also, available on the publisher's website should be details of the commissioning editors working in a particular area; you can contact them for advice regarding proposal submission. All stages in the publishing process are a huge commitment – do not underestimate the time it will take to write a book (probably at least a year, with contributed books going at the rate of the slowest contributor), and you'll be expected to take a very active part in all processes and marketing pre- and post-publication – think of it as a partnership.

Thinking about publishing with Taylor & Francis? Visit our [Resources for Authors](#) page to learn about the benefits of publishing with us.

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Links

Resources for Authors: <https://www.routledge.com/resources/authors>

“Author Directions: Navigating Your Success” Series:
<https://www.routledge.com/collections/12386>