

UNIVERSITY PUBLISHERS WANT ORIGINALITY, CONVICTION, AND COMMUNICATION

Associate Provost for Research Mark Welker seized on a suggestion from Assistant Professor Margaret Ewald, Romance Languages, to host a workshop on university press publishing. He realized that if the outcome of humanities and social science research is usually a book, then the successful book proposal is as vital to the university's mission as any other type of grant.

The Publishers Workshop brought two top-flight editors to address and meet individually with faculty. Chuck Grench, Director and Senior Editor at the University of North Carolina Press (Charles_Grench@unc.edu), specializes in US and European, classical and ancient, and business and economic history; law and legal studies; and political and social science. Cathie Brettschneider, Humanities Editor at the University of Virginia Press (cib8b@virginia.edu) specializes in literary, cultural, and religious studies, particularly Victorian and Caribbean, and translation of African and Caribbean francophone literature.

Chuck began by defining the purpose of a book proposal. It's a selling tool, and every year, editors see hundreds, so while they remain optimistic, they must also be skeptical. Each book requires considerable investment of expert time, and acquisitions editors must convince many that the project is worth it. The prospectus should quickly convey that the work is exciting and right for their list.

It consists of a cover letter, project description, and CV. The 1-2 page letter must strike a spark, as it imparts title, content, audience, why it should be published *and* with this publisher, the author's credentials, a time table, and whether it is being submitted elsewhere. An editor may actually suggest a better match and, in any case, cannot waste time on an iffy proposition. Publishing an *orphan*, or a book outside house priorities, is expensive, as it requires different marketing channels, so it would have to be very promising. Use letterhead stationery and a good printer and vet for spelling and grammatical errors. The writing should lure the editor to read on.

Ideally between 2 and 10 pages, the project description includes a synopsis, an annotated table of contents, and enough background for the editor to gauge both its originality and scholarship. Discuss your competition and the book's potential market. Also mention whether it will have tables, photos, or other graphic components. It should not prove that you can be long-winded and obscure. Should you submit a sample chapter at this stage? Not until you're asked; a good outline is sufficient for editors to decide if they want more.

The CV should be up to date, without information about marriage and hobbies, but with your phone number. Editors are interested in where you work, went to school, and publish, but only after they're hooked on the project. While it's good to create an audience and establish your credentials, if 6 out of 8 chapters have already appeared in print, who will feel compelled to buy the book? Further, if the book is based on presentations or articles, it's going to require integration. An unrevised dissertation, probably overannotated and still focused on pleasing the committee, also will not fly. The dissertation is your first book, and it's available through University Microfilms. The publisher is interested in your second book, written out of your independent expertise.

Before you send a prospectus, do your homework. Note the presses that publish work like yours and compile a target list. Consult the publisher's URL to learn the name of the editor who will review your work and then address the packet to that individual by name. Electronic submission is generally impermissible. Asked about the advisability of dropping in or even phoning to schedule a visit, both editors laughed. Wait for an invitation.

Chuck said you should hear back in about a month. At what stage should you submit the prospectus? When you can articulate the content from beginning to end; the time table; and why it should be published. "I'll

have the manuscript ready in 6 months” is fine; anticipating a completion date enables the editor to schedule. On the other hand, “I come up for tenure in 6 months. Can I have a contract or the book by then?” – no.

Chuck walked us through production. First, the acquisitions editor asks for the completed manuscript and passes it to in-house reviewers, who will decide if it is a good size, acceptably written, and whether they want to work on it. If so, it goes to outside reviewers, who will probably ask for revisions that will be negotiated between you and the in-house editors. You can propose outside reviewers, but both editors said they seek their own experts, who share their values. If you do suggest a reviewer, think of someone whose good opinion you would like to have. The book is then reviewed by the full editorial board, and if accepted, page proofs are corrected by you and a copy editor. Final proofs are printed, and the index, tables, and illustrations prepared. Finally, the book in its handsome dust jacket arrives in the mail; celebrate.

Cathie didn’t want to repeat, “What he said”; she spoke about the need to put humanity back into the humanities. She noted that in the aftermath of the World Trade Center catastrophe, people sought enlightenment and solace in poetry and quoted William Carlos Williams’s “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”:
“It is difficult to get news from poems / but people die every day for lack / of what is found there.”

Interpretive writing should reflect poetic imperatives, yet not long ago, MLA papers were ridiculed as effete and trivial. What Cathie looks for in a book is imagination, passion, and restraint. Its questions should have human relevance, and the larger the scope and implications, the better. Fine-tune your arguments and strive to communicate.

The humanities are in trouble. Market forces increasingly drive even university presses. You should know their lists must continually change and be aware of trends. Works that are very theoretical, with no practical application, or narrowly focused are not getting published. Theory and method can be kicked to the notes to show that you’re current on scholarly tools, but they shouldn’t muddy your original ideas or your argument.

A financial contribution from the university can help if the book must be over 500 pages or heavily illustrated, but it won’t make or break the project. It’s standard procedure to ask if you have any funding, university or external; anything from \$1.5K up can improve production values (see Publication and Research Fund, www.wfu.edu/rsp/funding.html). Authors are expected to pay for permissions to reprint graphics. If you cite a whole poem, you will be charged; if you use a line or two, scholarly rates apply; if quoting becomes too expensive, you may be asked to paraphrase. Don’t worry about permissions before you have a contract.

The message from both editors: only the project matters. Write the best possible book and pitch it to the best possible publisher with clarity and conviction.