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Writing a Good Book Proposal

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Please do get in touch with me if you have an idea for a book that you would like to discuss. My contact details are as follows:

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Note: The following document was written originally for presentation at a student conference on 'Getting Published'. To an experienced author, the advice detailed below will be 'old news' (indeed, it may even be a little too basic for first-time authors) but to those at the start of their book-publishing careers, this document may answer many of your questions.

Beginnings – where do book ideas come from?

The idea for a book often stems from one of the following sources:

- **research** you are carrying out yourself or with colleagues which results in you producing work you think may be of benefit to a wider audience
- you realise that there is **a gap in the market** because you cannot find what you are looking for to help you in your own teaching or research. This is a gap you feel qualified to fill
- you are **teaching a course** and have excellent course notes that might be turned into a textbook with relative ease
- you have **delivered training** and have had requests for copies of your workshop handouts
- you know of **existing successful books** in the market that you feel you can improve upon
- a **publisher** gets in touch with you with a writing an idea or a request for help in a given subject area

First steps – what type of book will it be?

Deciding on the type of book you want to publish is vital to your chance of getting yourself a contract and publishing a successful book. Matching the right type of book to the right kind of market is key:

- decide on the kind of material you want to produce – will it be a textbook, an academic book, a professional book, a handbook or a journal article?

Different types of book

- Textbooks (Core)
- Textbooks (Modular)
- Textbook (Supplementary)
- Monographs
- Handbooks
- Study Skills/Student Reference
- Professional Books
- 'Trade' books

Definitions

Core Textbooks – a core textbook is a student-focussed text designed to accompany a core undergraduate (and occasionally graduate) course that will be required reading for that course. An example might be an 'Introductory Sociology' textbook that will be required reading for all first-year Sociology undergraduates on their introductory courses. Such books can be very long and are full of student-centred features such as questions, boxes and summaries and are time-consuming and expensive to produce. However, they can often make the author(s) and the publisher a lot of money and therein lies the incentive for doing core textbooks.

Modular Textbooks – a modular textbook is in many ways similar to a core textbook, in that it is student and course-focussed, and is not a vehicle for original thinking or research. However, 'modular' textbooks tend to vary from their rivals a little more than core textbooks, and this is because they are written for more varied, higher level, courses, where there remains a greater variety of course provision between universities.

Sales are lower than core textbooks, and the level of editorial intervention is likely to remain high as the publisher seeks to ensure that the textbook still covers all the commonly taught essentials.

Supplementary Textbooks – a supplementary textbook is a high-level student book, geared to more specialised courses at either undergraduate or postgraduate level, and often contain some more original and challenging material than is the case in a 'modular' or 'core' textbook. Sales of 'supps' (as they are called) tend to be much lower than for 'core' or 'modular' texts.

Monographs – a monograph is a book based upon an original body of research carried out by the author (most commonly on the basis of PhD work or research carried out under a fellowship). They are specialised and high level, and tend to sell very poorly. Increasingly it is very difficult to find publishers who will publish monographs as they

are increasingly unprofitable as the international academic library market cuts back on its book purchases.

Academic books – Academic books are written for the academic market but differ from monographs on not being based on any one data-set, but are more general in their appeal and wide-ranging in the sources they draw on. Like monographs, however, academic books are becoming increasingly less profitable as the library market cuts back on spending.

Handbooks – Handbooks tend to be large, academically-oriented, edited compendia of originally commissioned chapters on a given academic area, and as such should be seen as state-of-the-field statements of academic excellence. Their market is academics, not students, and they are expensive and often geared for markets large enough for there to be a high level of collective academic interest and practice.

Study Skills/Student Reference – Study Skills books and Student Reference books are student-focussed titles that are not geared to courses. Instead, **Study Skills** books are focussed on the practical and pastoral needs of the students and tend to be sold through bookshops rather than via course tutors (as is the case with many textbooks). Common subjects might include 'Essay Writing' tips or 'How to Write a PhD'. **Student Reference** books are more academic in subject, but are not course-focussed. Typical titles might include dictionaries or guides to sources of funding.

Professional books – Professional books are focussed upon specific training courses/needs that are geared towards a professional qualification such as counselling, nursing, teaching or police work.

'Trade' books – 'Trade' books are written for the popular market (which tends to mean the High Street bookshops and increasingly supermarkets too) and tend to be published by specialist 'trade' publishers (Penguin, HarperCollins, Orion etc) operating with a high print run and high discount rate. Celebrity academics often make a great deal of money with 'trade' publishing (Simon Schama, Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Dawkins are notable trade writers) but this is a difficult market for writers to gain entry into. Sage is not a 'trade' publisher, so you might want to consider approaching other publishers if you want to publish a 'trade' book that lies outside the field of Study Skills (see above).

WARNING! Do not try to write a proposal that mixes genres and markets!!!!

How do you find out what type of book to write for which market?

Doing your Research

Doing some initial research before you write a proposal is vital to increase your chances of writing a successful book proposal. Here are some strategies for conducting your research:

- visit a good bookshop & look at similar books in the same area

- talk to the buyer in the appropriate section of the bookshop if you can, as they will know what customers are looking for
- get a sense of the market - how do the books look, what style are they written in, who are they aimed at, how long are they?
- find out what competition you have, and think about what your book can offer that others do not
- ask colleagues or students what they would find useful in a publication covering the area you want to write in (this will help shape the content of your publication)
- decide whether or not you'll work on the idea alone or with a colleague or number of colleagues
- Ask your editor whether it's a sound idea. They will be able to help you with planning your proposal and alert you to the chances of getting a contract
- Look online for courses and organisations that relate to your area. If you are proposing a textbook, spend a day Google searching for course content to make sure your proposed contents will be a good match for similar courses in other universities
- Look on Amazon to try to work out what the best-selling books are in your area and see what you can learn from the contents/style/features of the best-sellers

A few words of warning

If you want to write a book, **always** make sure you get a contract before devoting too much time to the book as **publishers rarely publish unsolicited manuscripts**.

Each year, we at Sage receive hundreds of unsolicited manuscripts. Authors have often spent many years completing the manuscript and it can be a devastating experience to not find a publisher after all that work – so **always always speak to an editor about submitting a proposal before you spend too much time in planning your book**

Putting your ideas onto paper

At this early stage, the best thing you can do is write a short proposal outline of 2/3 pages length, outlining your rough ideas. You can send this to a publisher and they will get back to you and let you know that you're on the right track before you devote lots of time and energy to more research and writing a 'worked' proposal.

- try to either have an initial chat with your editor, or email them with a **very brief outline** of what you have in mind (2/3 pages will do at this stage)
- try to get a feel for what they are looking for and whether or not they are interested in your idea
- try to follow the proposal guide that we send you -this will help you provide them with the sort of information we need in order to assess your project
- sit down (with your co-authors if you're doing it as a team) and set about writing a brief outline proposal
- include some sample writing and a sample chapter if you have one

What happens if we like your idea and want to take things further?

The 'worked' proposal

- You will be asked, if you have not already done so to submit a 'worked proposal', containing lots of information about the book, its contents, its approach, its market (and often a sample chapter to two too) etc
- Normally you will be asked to submit this proposal along the lines of a *pro forma* document supplied by the publisher

What happens when the commissioning editor is happy with your proposal and wishes to proceed with the project?

The review process and the editorial meeting

- your proposal will be sent out to a selection of external readers, who will assess the project on a number of points such as suitability of content for the intended market, market need for the product, suitability of writing style etc.
- a decision is made on whether to take your project forward (usually to an editorial meeting) to get you an offer to publish OR your material is felt to be unsuitable and your project is declined

What happens at the editorial meeting?

- The editorial meeting represents the formal moment when your proposal is presented to representatives of the publisher for formal approval to issue a contract
- Your proposal will be presented and defended by the commissioning editor, and they are likely to be interrogated on the pros and cons of publishing your proposal by senior representatives from the Marketing Dept, the Sales Dept, the Production Dept and by the Editorial director. During the meeting, the commissioning editor serves essentially as your and the proposal's advocate and defender
- The editorial cttee are concerned with investigating the probable profitability of the proposal (no editorial board will publish a book they expect will make a loss)
- The profitability of your proposal will be assessed in relation to the fit of your proposal to the market, the quality of writing, the expected costs of production (dependent on length of ms, number of colours, figures etc) and the size and habits of the market
- As a consequence, some extremely good proposals will be rejected because the market is too small, or the book is too large to be profitable, regardless of the book's internal merits
- The editorial cttee present at the meeting will also suggest changes (make the book shorter, for instance, or make it more international) and will suggest contract terms or contract clauses to the editor. Often, the issue of a contract is dependent on an author agreeing to these changes or these clauses

The commissioning editor is on your side! It is in their interests as much as it is in yours to get you a contract.

What happens if you are offered a contract?

You will be offered a contract to publish the book and the following terms will need to be agreed upon:

- delivery date for final manuscript
- size of book
- title of book
- royalty rate
- advance against royalty rate

Contracts will of course cover all sorts of other details.

What happens during the writing process?

- your commissioning editor will offer advice and guidance as required
- you may be asked to produce drafts of chapters at specific times
- draft chapters may be read by external readers and advice offered on how to shape the content and what sort of writing style to aim for
- you will be asked to keep your editor informed of changes to the book's content and changes to your writing timetable, and you may even be required to get her/his approval for any changes not stipulated in the contract

What happens when you're ready to deliver the final manuscript?

- usually you will be expected to prepare a paper copy and an electronic version of your text
- this must be the final version of your manuscript, as it will be taken forward and put into production

What happens during production?

- the manuscript is worked on by a copyeditor and they get back to you with any queries
- you get to see proofs of the book and check that everything is as you want it to be
- the book is sent to press and then finally copies become available

What happens upon publication (and afterwards)?

- marketing is stepped up (although pre-publication marketing will have been going on for some time)
- there may be a book launch, if appropriate, upon publication
- you will be supported in various ways by the marketing department: author flyers featuring the book can be produced for you, if for example you are attending an event where you would be able to give them out to an audience; the book is sent out for review to various journals, magazines and websites