



Breaking into the Gilded Cage



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Like it or not, anyone wanting to succeed in today's academic world quickly finds themselves running up against three imperatives:

- Academic advancement follows the dictum 'publish or perish'.
- Publishers are the gatekeepers of disseminated knowledge.
- Published works must pay their way.

Together these imperatives form a gilded cage that not only constrains those within it but also often acts to exclude those outsiders looking to enter it. The rights and wrongs of this situation are not discussed here. Other articles in this section describe how authors and publishers can survive and prosper inside this cage; the focus of this article is breaking into the cage in the first place.

Here, I shall give a lot of attention to the transformation of a Ph.D. thesis into a research monograph. Obviously, this is not the only publishing model. Most scholarly books are not derived from theses. Moreover, many theses fail to be published as a book but often are successfully mined for journal articles instead. And sometimes we see scholars publishing material (not just articles but even books) based on their doctoral research long before their thesis is finished. But discussing the thesis in detail allows me to be more comprehensive in my comments, some of which may also be useful to the more experienced author.

Decision time

OK, so you've finished your thesis. Where to now? The normal junior scholar

will have been living off a doctoral grant, which has suddenly disappeared; a new source of income is imperative. For those looking to make a career in the academic world, this is the crunch time. What may be available is a junior teaching position or a post-doctoral grant for a very limited period. But invariably also involved is the expectation that a series of publications will be delivered, not least a monograph. The pressure, then, is on from Day One.

Thesis fatigue, the pressures of new projects, sheer laziness or 'attitude' – there are many reasons for looking to take a short cut. If one really must publish a monograph, why not simply slap a new title on it and run a quick find/replace on the text, swapping all occurrences of 'thesis' or 'dissertation' with 'study' or 'book'? You can (and people do). Just don't expect to get the work published.

Why? Because a thesis is not a monograph. Given that its intended audience is a committee of evaluators and that it is often defended in a mock courtroom battle, a thesis is almost always overly cautious and defensive in its approach. This leads for instance to over-referencing of sources and excessively lengthy theoretical and technical sections. Moreover, a dissertation may have had good critical input from the candidate's supervisor(s) but the final critical evaluation – often by international authorities in the field – only comes after the dissertation has been produced. Add to this the critical contribution made by any good academic publisher and the conclusion is inescapable that a dissertation is quite inferior to a monograph. For these reasons, most publishers decline to publish raw dissertations.

If you cannot get published with a minimum of work, then how much is necessary? As always, that depends – not least on what you are aiming to achieve and what shape your thesis is in. There are some who would argue that a thesis can never be reworked into a monograph; it should best be written from scratch. Arguably, this is true in some cases. But often a thesis is quite close to how the final monograph should appear, only the final polishing process is not an easy one and can become a nightmare.

For this reason, even before you start putting in all the work that is necessary, you need to think ahead.

Thinking strategically

The key thing is that you do not want to waste months (even years) of your life on a book no one wants to publish. You can avoid this by thinking very hard about (and researching) the following points:

- What do you want out of this book?
- What would your readers want out of this book?
- What would your publisher want out of this book?

Fame and fortune aside (they are rarely found in academic publishing), publication of a monograph should bring the junior researcher a lot closer to obtaining that first real job (and may bring career advancement for more senior scholars). Is that enough personal motivation?

What your readers want out of your monograph is quite different. They want to be presented with new material (if not stunning advances) in their field that is offered in an easily accessible form.

They are not interested in sifting through mountains of data or wading across acres of common knowledge to find these golden nuggets.

And what does your publisher expect? Bear in mind that modern commercial realities demand that every publication must pay its way. This usually means that a book needs to address a number of audiences spanning several disciplinary niches.

Thinking about the market

As such, not only will you need to think strategically; you will also need to 'think market' and consider the following points:

Author. Who are you? What qualifies you to write on this subject? Do you belong to any associations whose members might be interested in your book? Have you any experience dealing with the media that might help you promote your book?

Audience. If academic, what are the subject area(s) and readership level? If a wider readership, are there defined niches among the professions and interest groups? Are there specific localities where a wider interest in your book might be likely? Is there any upcoming anniversary that could be tied in to your book?

Purpose. Is the intended use only as a research monograph to inform a specific field or might it double up as a textbook, supplementary text or professional reference work?

Value. What would be the strengths of your book? What benefits would it offer the reader? How does it compare with other books dealing with the same issue (both direct competitors and related works)? How and why is it superior? More appropriate to the reader? More up to date? If breaking new ground, how? If offering a new approach to the subject, how is this beneficial?

To concentrate your thoughts, you will find it useful to write four different descriptions of your book:

- Key points – a list of (say) three short bulleted selling points (especially ideal for a salesperson when presenting your book to a bookseller where typically there is less than 30 seconds to win an order).
- Short description – a 50-word paragraph both describing and indicating the uniqueness of your book (often all the information that an acquisitions librarian has to go on when making a purchase decision).
- Long description – 250-300 words ideally broken into three paragraphs that (a) describe the work in broad,

less-technical terms that a librarian or bookseller might understand; (b) elaborate on this at greater length and in more technical detail for the specialist; and (c) by way of its findings, unique selling points, etc., spell out its value to its intended audience.

- Proposed table of contents – annotated if possible. If what you are proposing is a monograph derived from a thesis, then it is especially useful to map the similarities and differences between the contents of the two works. The table of contents is particularly useful as a 'road map' should you choose to begin writing your monograph at this point.

Preparing the manuscript

Is it wise to invest a lot of time and effort in writing your book without first insuring yourself with a commitment from a publisher? Perhaps not. Submitting a well-written proposal backed by a specimen chapter is all that most publishers want initially. Indeed, it may be enough to make a decision; quite a few publishers are happy to offer a contract to publish an as-yet-unwritten work, their position being safeguarded by a catch-all clause allowing them to cancel publication if the work submitted is not up to expectation. (Such a clause is found in almost every publishing contract.)

If you do decide to go ahead, here are a few brief comments:

Do not look at revision as just a butcher's job. Your book is in fact a diamond that by careful cutting and polishing can be revealed in its full glory.

As regards presentation and readability, follow the KISS rule ('keep it short and simple'). If yours is a typical dissertation, you will need to drastically reduce the length and number of your footnotes.

Finally, remember your readers will determine the success of your book. They must always be borne in mind, treated with courtesy and coaxed along from start to end with interesting text connected by a subtle and organic narrative thread.

Even then, what you will end up with is only the manuscript of a monograph, one that external reviewers will suggest needs strengthening, while in-house editors may require you to restructure and clarify inconsistencies, copyeditors may criticize your language, etc. One proof follows another till finally the finished text is ready to be typeset.

This can be an exhausting process and not all publishers will be well-placed one to help you accomplish this task. Choose your publisher with care. >



> Finding the 'right' publisher

Let's be honest from the beginning and say that there is no right publisher. Your task is to find the one best suited to you. This is simpler than many people think. (The difficulty is to actually persuade that publisher to publish your study.) If you know your subject, you should be the person who knows best. Knowing your intended readership, you should have a good idea as to who publishes books for them. You can often see this, for instance, in the publishers listed in your list of references.

But do not go thinking there is only ever one right publisher. Usually there are several. Narrowing down your choices involves posing yourself several questions.

How important is it to you that the book is published quickly? What about quality? Speed must be achieved at the expense of quality. Getting a monograph out in 6-9 months is usually impossible if a proper job is to be done, and that is without taking into account the time that must be spent on evaluation beforehand. This process is notoriously slow.

Do you want a big publisher offering 'the standard treatment' or a smaller publisher where the service is more personal? Small publishers tend to be quick on their feet but may stumble with resource problems while big publishers are far better resourced and generally able to offer a smooth (if bland) service.

Do you want a commercial publisher or a university press? While ultimately the former is motivated by profit, this focus demands that its operations are fast and its standards very high. Nowadays the university press is also expected to pay its way much more than in the past; it is then also subject to commercial pressures but also to the pressures and restrictions associated with its not-for-profit status.

Do you want a prestigious publisher? A precondition for getting tenure at many American universities is publication of a set number of books at certain, major university presses, even if they do not specialize in the author's field.

A publisher focused on your area of study? Be warned that a publisher focused on your field need not be the best for you. They may have a similar study in press or already published and will certainly discourage any competing work.

A publisher whose books are widely available? A surprising number of American university presses have no presence outside North America; their authors may thus have a large readership at home but abroad they are unknown. On the other hand, a relatively small press like NIAS has been able to create an increasingly high international profile via its global partnerships.

Does it matter if a publisher's books are expensive? If a book is expensive, then it is unlikely to sell many copies. That said, yours may not be a book belonging naturally on the bookshelves of more

than a few individual scholars; its natural home may in fact be the research library, in this case the best vehicle for a wider readership.

In addition, it is worth analysing each publisher's catalogue as you would your own field data. Have they many books relevant to your field? What is the specialization? Is this a mainstream ('me-too') list or one at the forefront of your field? Do you recognize any of the authors? Are they bright young newcomers, aging celebrities cruising before retirement, or what? Where are the books distributed? Do they look overpriced, unlikely to sell many copies? Answering these and similar questions will help you come to a gut reaction about the suitability of each publisher.

After deciding which is your first publisher of choice, you are now at the tricky stage of approaching the publisher, the stage where things can go horribly wrong.

Approaching a publisher

You will have slightly more time than the 30 seconds of a bookseller's attention span to interest an academic publisher in your manuscript – but not a lot more. Seven minutes on average is all the time a manuscript will get in a busy American commercial press. At NIAS we may take a little more time to mull over a proposal but even here the final decision is influenced by initial impressions, the gut reaction.

Working in a publishing house can feel like playing air traffic controller at Heathrow or JFK – but without the salary that goes with it. Given the complexity and chaos of a publishing office, it is not surprising that mistakes occur – many good manuscripts are rejected. What I would argue, however, is that good manuscripts have a high chance of acceptance but this requires that a decent proposal for publication is prepared and offered to the publisher most appropriate for that work. If you are to avoid rejection, it is crucial that you formulate a convincing proposal that not only shows your knowledge of your subject but also your appreciation of what is needed to make the book a success.

What is immediately obvious to me as a publisher is whether the author has indeed thought about who the readers are and offers the book that best serves them. That is the essence of the market analysis described earlier. It is rarely offered.

The book proposal

Whether or not you preface your approach with a 'warm-up' inquiry, ultimately you should make a written approach to the publisher. Ideally this is in the form of a covering letter (if at all possible, addressed to the appropriate commissioning editor) together with a proposal to publish. These two items are best kept separate as the proposal may be referred for an expert opinion. Some authors also submit the full manuscript but that is unnecessary at this stage. Instead, enclose a sample chapter but make sure it is a good chapter that enhances the impact of your proposal.

This also will be enough to indicate your style, command of the language, etc.

As a minimum you need to cover the following points in your proposal:

- contents (a proposed table of contents is useful here)
- description
- subject area and specific discourse
- what's fresh and different (compare with competing works)
- what qualifies you to write on this
- estimated length (a word count is particularly useful)
- the state of the manuscript and your availability to work on it

Some authors send book proposals to two or more publishers simultaneously. Be warned that publishers hate multiple submissions.

The publisher's evaluation and response Now comes a period of relative powerlessness when you must await the publisher's response to your proposal. Usually you will hear something quite quickly, either an immediate rejection or a (form) letter acknowledging receipt of your proposal. Do not assume that the longer a publisher takes to respond to your proposal the more positive that response will be. As a rule of thumb, within a month you should expect a letter either simply acknowledging receipt of your proposal or requesting that you submit your manuscript for more in-

depth evaluation. If nothing has been heard within this period, then you should inquire if your proposal was received and if a decision will soon be forthcoming. If even after prompting no answer is forthcoming, seriously consider cutting your losses and looking elsewhere for a publisher truly right for you.

Evaluation procedures vary between publishers but an idealized process would have these steps that progressively sift out unsuitable proposals:

- Initial vetting and rejection of obviously unrealistic and unsuitable proposals.
- More considered reading of the surviving proposals.
- Informal consultation about the merits of the surviving proposals.

The author is requested to submit the manuscript, which is then referred for evaluation by external readers who are experts in the field. The usual period given is two months but obviously the process can take longer. Here the 'not recommended' rate should be low (especially as publishers cannot afford to burden their reviewers with poor prospects).

The final decision to accept or reject the few survivors is taken. Just who makes this final decision and how depends very much on the publisher.

Rejection is not inevitable

Most book proposals are rejected, especially those received in their thousands by the big and/or prestigious publishing houses. While the rejection rate is high, a quality manuscript that is appropriate to the publisher and presented in a viable and convincing proposal has a good chance of being accepted. No matter that you are a newcomer from an obscure institution, the prospects for your proposed book need not be dismal. Acceptance depends to a large extent on how much forethought and effort you have put into both your proposal and the actual study beforehand.

Further Reading

- Robin Derricourt: *An Author's Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- William Germano: *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001
- Eleanor Harman and Ian Montagnes (eds): *The Thesis and the Book*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003 (2nd edition).
- Gerald Jackson: *Getting Published in Asian Studies*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, forthcoming.
- Beth Luey: *Handbook for Academic Authors*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 (3rd edition).
- *Revising Your Dissertation: Advice from Leading Editors*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. ■