

# Hard choices Accepting or rejecting authors and manuscripts

Publishing programmes are often described in sweeping terms – ‘the humanities and social sciences’, for example; or ‘academic and general books’; or even ‘the best books in all fields of inquiry’. Yet most of us, by accident or design, end up filling a somewhat more specialised niche – a disciplinary emphasis, perhaps, or an area-studies focus. At University of Hawai‘i Press our location in the middle of the Pacific coincides (not accidentally) with our academic specialisation in Asian and Pacific studies. But for us, as for any publisher, that’s just a starting point. Within the broad framework of a publishing programme, the many choices, both routine and transformational, made by editors and directors determine which manuscripts actually get published and how the list develops.

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Editors have different ways of working, too. One may lean heavily on an advisor’s personal recommendation (even though your chapter seemed a bit...technical), while another will place more weight on the appeal of the manuscript samples themselves.

### Making business sense

A willingness to offer an advance contract when there is little more than a proposal to go on may hinge on an author’s track record of previous publications, the editor’s degree of interest in the topic, or her sense of whether the manuscript will come in with a minimum of supervision on her part. The editor’s investment of time is a major consideration. Many publishers grow their lists by commissioning series whose editors bring both name recognition and specialist expertise to the acquisitions process. Series and their editors differ in their degree of autonomy: some function almost independently with their own editorial boards and funding, while others work closely with their press’ acquisitions editor. In both cases the preferences and interests of the series editors are reflected in the books ultimately published by the press.

A prospective author may be surprised when his very well written manuscript of modest length that appears to be a perfect fit for the publisher’s list is turned down without a formal evaluation. The rationale that routinely surfaces in decline letters – it ‘does not fit our present publishing programme’ – is admittedly somewhat vague, but it usually seems accurate to acquisitions editors, who are several years ahead of the catalogues and already acting on the successes and disappointments of the recent backlist. I once received a proposal that compared the manuscript being offered to two books we had published several years earlier. The comparison was apt, and both books were excellent. Unfortunately their disappointing sales record had caused me to rethink the value of adding to that part of my list.

Titles that are co-published with foreign presses can also skew perceptions of the kind of manuscripts that editors are actively seeking. Co-publications are brought on board for many reasons. Sometimes they are simply books the editors didn’t manage to sign themselves. But other times they are acquired to fill out the list in areas in which the press has less experience or expertise, thereby extending the publisher’s reach. The acquisitions editors may have no particular plans to originate similar books themselves.



Editors’ choices are influenced, too, by the publisher’s resources – issues of staffing and funding, for example. A publisher large enough to field a rights department may compete with confidence for mainstream fiction or a lengthy anthology whose editor needs assistance with permissions. The publisher with a grants officer may be in a position to consider prestigious projects that need major support. A publisher able to fund author advances or expensive up-front costs like color illustrations is more likely to commission lucrative textbooks or an encyclopedia. Less ambitious book projects are also affected by resources, and formal or informal quotas may be applied to areas hit by a sales downturn. Practically speaking, that may mean that the editor who has several interesting, well written, timely manuscripts under consideration on, say, literary criticism must choose to pursue just one.

### Hard times, fresh opportunities

Economic hard times and industry downturns can force publishers to reevaluate their lists and reposition themselves. Sometimes changes are a simple matter of numbers: how many books to publish. Acquiring editors can either open up the flow of manuscripts by considering a wider range of projects or tighten it by focusing on core areas or simply being choosier: sometimes the same evaluator’s report can seem positive or negative depending on what the press is looking for and what standard is set.

But publishers also respond to economic pressures by dropping whole disciplines and subjects or announcing major shifts in focus. From the publisher’s perspective, certain disciplines may have become unproductive or unprofitable, or the urge to forge a presence in new, up-and-coming areas may have forced a retrenchment elsewhere. Interestingly, though, one publisher’s departure from the field may represent an opportunity for another – to gain a foothold in a new area, to acquire prestigious authors who may have seemed out of reach the year before, or simply to make the press known to a wider audience in hopes of future growth. What is viewed as unprofitable – or simply a distraction – at one press, can often fit comfortably at another.

Perhaps authors and publishers can both take heart that our identities are sufficiently flexible and open-ended to encourage and take advantage of new directions.

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MANY SCHOLARS TRY TO GAUGE the level of interest in their topic by submitting inquiries and proposals to multiple publishers. Publishers benefit, of course, because these early proposals – whether a full prospectus via e-mail, a conversation at a conference, or some other encounter – offer us the chance to consider and weigh in on a wide range of topics and approaches. An editor fielding a proposal will initially try to determine the following: Who is the audience? Which of our existing titles does it connect to? Does it take our list in a direction we want to go (if somewhat tangential)? What will it contribute to the prestige of our list or to our bottom line? Is it financially viable?

### A question of discipline

Editors see a lot of proposals and are likely to gravitate to those that are in core disciplines or methodologies reflected in the publisher’s current list. But they are also attracted by proposals that stand out: perhaps the subject or approach seems unusual or especially topical, or the author comes across as particularly well informed and able to present her work in an appealing way. One prospect may cross disciplinary or regional boundaries in a way that seems more marketable than others. Whether to respond with an expression of interest, an encouraging but noncommittal note, or a form-letter decline can be a surprisingly difficult choice and one influenced by many factors.

Publishers differ in their assessments of the market for a given project, of course, but they also tend to target different sectors of that market – even though they may share a roughly similar Asian studies profile. One might have a strong list in policy or development-oriented studies, while another will favour cultural approaches. Those general inclinations influence decision-making at every turn. If an editor is on-the-fence about whether to follow up on a proposal, not really knowing the right readers or sensing that the book might end up being a bit of an orphan can tip the scale.

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Timing plays a role, too. Perhaps Publisher A already has a related book in press and doesn’t feel there is sufficient market for a similar title. Or Publisher B strives for balance and thus doesn’t have a place for yet another fiction translation. However, Publisher C had been considering a push into your area when your proposal arrived.

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