

# The High Anxiety of Submitting a Book Proposal

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11-13 minutes

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most held them back from submitting their book proposal to an academic publisher. Some said a lack of knowledge about the process, while others cited a lack of time to polish the proposal. But, by far, the most frequent response: sheer anxiety.

It's a logical reaction for doctoral students and junior academics who (a) sense that so much of their faculty career is riding on this particular document, and (b) aren't at all certain about the expectations and norms of a book proposal. It's part of the "[hidden curriculum](#)" of academic life, and graduate programs provide little-to-no training on how to write one, let alone how to navigate the submission and peer-review process.

At

wouldn't see it that way. And I felt so much pressure to get the proposal document *exactly right*, since I was claiming to be an expert on how to write one.

What I learned from that experience: There's less riding on submitting a "perfect" proposal than most writers think. Above all, acquiring editors are looking at *the idea*. They are asking: "Is this a good premise for a book?" "Would enough people want to read it?"

equipped with a pre-existing audience and name recognition, you might be closer to this bar than you think. If you have a track record of presenting and publishing your work to people who are open to learning from you — whether that's via scholarly journals, mainstream news sites, or social-media channels — then you already have an [author platform](#). And if you are a Ph.D. who has done rigorous scholarly research on your topic, you are very likely more than qualified in the eyes of a scholarly acquisitions editor.

And what about those who don't have an author platform? If you feel you need to do more work to connect with the various audiences you hope to reach with your book, that's OK, too. In your proposal, lay out your plan to build your platform so that by the time your book is available, your potential readers will be ready and waiting for it. Publishers will be impressed that you're already thinking about reaching readers at this point in the game.

**Anxiety No. 3: Peer reviewers will tear your idea and sample**

would expose me as too ignorant to publish a book on the topic.

Going through peer review for my book taught me that I needn't

communications with editors. Writers really believe they need to walk on eggshells, and that's usually not the case. Yes, editors at academic presses must hold every project to competitive standards, but they're all actively hoping for exciting new books and authors to come their way. When editors invest precious time in communicating with you about your book project or scholarly publishing career, that means they see something in you and want you to succeed.

If the editors take it even further and commit to having your proposal peer reviewed, that means the press has a strong interest in publishing your book. They want it to work out almost as much as you do. They become your best advocate, not only with their editorial insights, but also inside their press. If they strongly believe in a project, they will put in the effort to convince those who still need to be convinced. The presentations they make to other staff at the press and ultimately to the press's editorial board will make or break a book's chances of getting approved for publication. Your proposal, and the other materials you provide, helps an editor do that work; then it's the editor who brings it home.

In my case, understanding this behind-the-scenes process helped me to not get discouraged when my editor asked me to revise and resubmit my proposal materials to respond to the critiques from

and resubmit. Once I handed in my revisions, a strong offer to publish my book came through.

My editor's enthusiasm for the book only became more important as we approached its release and especially amid all the promotion (find advice [on book marketing here](#)) that I've continued to do since it came out. If I ever feel doubtful that my book is valuable and appealing — which doesn't happen often anymore, but those feelings can creep in once in a while — I think about the fact that my editor believes in my book 100 percent. Just as my proposal helped my editor advocate for my book inside the press, his support helps me advocate for it to the broader public.

Very few people will write a book proposal for a book about book proposals, but plenty of academics, especially recent Ph.D.s, feel