

## Author, Editor, Audience

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### Abstract


Book publishing is a relational business where editors help authors gain audience for mutual benefit. This essay provides insight for authors on how they can make the most of their book publishing experience through their relationship with their editor.

**Keywords:** Author; editor; audience; publishing; books.

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There is a saying in book publishing, attributed to the late Roger Straus of Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, that “we publish authors, not books.” (Alter, 2018) Unlike journal editors who rely on review and revision for gate keeping and triage, book editors make initial decisions about what to publish based the author’s potential to contribute to the press’s short- and long-term mission, message, and brand identity. An example of what publishers call list-building, this choice is made by an editor before any review takes place.

Book publishing is a relational business. It is less about a specific work than about maintaining connections with authors over time and developing their body of work. A book editor wants to deepen their understanding of who the author is and what they want to do with their work in order to expand the scope and size of the author’s readership. This affords the author an opportunity to increase the influence of their ideas in a way that they could not accomplish on their own, while the publisher seeks to improve their reputation for publishing meaningful and important work (and sell a few copies along the way in order to keep the lights on).

What this means is that authors and editors share the mutual objective of cultivating audience, but this doesn’t always materialize.<sup>1</sup> One reason is that authors fail to take advantage of the opportunity that this relationship offers, settling instead for a transactional dynamic afforded by the necessity of peer review and revision familiar in article publishing. A relationship that should be triadic between an author and editor working together to engage an audience becomes dyadic, between an author and editor directed towards getting a manuscript through a bureaucratic approval process with book readers and buyers left largely as an afterthought.

Too often, authors set their expectations low and settle for a baseline of editor engagement. What does this look like? Insofar as all university press books undergo peer review, an editor’s role in the details of revision can and should be fairly limited. Since the assessment of content is largely outsourced to the professionals in the field, the editor’s role is to advise the author, as necessary, how to parse, manage, and incorporate the information they’ve received from the reviewers, some of which may be contradictory. With some experience, the editor should be able to accomplish this task with little difficulty, as consistent patterns for text revision appear regularly.

Take the advice from Reader 1, take the advice from Reader 2, find the overlap in the spaces in which they disagree, and commit to one direction or the other. Add more explanation where needed, and reduce the explanation when it gets repetitive. Begin the introduction with a strong, relatable example that readers can connect with. State the book’s motivating question and its answer clearly and early. Ensure that there is a narrative arc intended to change the reader’s view on the subject from beginning to end and a chapter structure that contributes to its development. Find the balance between the theoretical contribution and the descriptive examples so that the lesson of the book can be applicable to other cases but without minimizing the details. Situate the book within a scholarly discourse without reviewing the literature, as all work builds on what has come before it. Use the conclusion both as a summation of what has been covered as well as an opportunity to suggest the future of the subject which others might use as a point of departure.

From a process standpoint, this is all sound advice that I give routinely, but it doesn’t really get to the more difficult personal and market-oriented aspects of cultivating readership, mentioned earlier, which peer review is not suited to support. What should an author be aware of beyond the changes suggested during peer review as they revise their manuscript for pro-

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1. Some publishers and editors are better suited to cultivating relationships than others. The fewer books a publisher works on at a time, the more individual attention an author should receive.

duction and publication? How can an editor help an author publish their book to maximum effect?

A book editor's job, first and foremost at any type of press, is to help an author make their book a success. What counts as success is subjective from publisher to publisher and may even be subjective for publishing staff, depending on their departmental and individual responsibilities. From an editor's perspective, a successful book is one in which the publisher has accomplished something with the author that the author could not have accomplished on their own.<sup>2</sup>

There are two unique ways an editor helps an author improve their book. The first is individual and the second social. The individual way is to help the author to understand what it would mean to fulfill their personal goal for the book. What would have to happen for the author to meet or, better yet, exceed the goal they have set for themselves? The social way concerns the book's audience. Who are the book's readers and what does the author need to do to get them to buy and read their book? A truly successful book is one for which the author has achieved their goal for the book while, at the same time, the book has found a readership, effectively meeting or exceeding their individual and social expectations. For career academic authors, this is by no means an easy task on either front for reasons that are endemic to the profession.

Professional expectations can intrude upon and eclipse an author's individual goals. Books are instrumental to careers, and meeting professional expectations and obligations can overshadow and even overtake the author's personal aims. A book can secure a job, tenure, or promotion, and these are meaningful accomplishments, but they are not about intellectual self-expression. Further, the ultimate judgment of worth and determination of professional progress does not fall to the author but to their colleagues. Academics are particularly attuned to and accomplished at meeting the expectations of others for occupational progression. A good editor is a helpful mediator, a voice of external validation that allows the author to balance their full set of needs. Ideally an editor will lead the author to a place in which they can meet their professional obligations, contribute to worldly knowledge, and at the same time, communicate their ideas in a way that the author finds personally fulfilling.

Though it is by no means guaranteed, the individual success of the book is the easier of the two goals. For starters, social success requires satisfying more than one person. There is no person more invested in a book than its author. True, not all authors have realistic expectations, and some people are never satisfied with anything, but this is rare. In my experience, the bigger challenge is that plenty of very good books don't find a readership for all kinds of reasons beyond the control of the author and publisher. Fortunately, unlike commercial non-fiction, scholarly books are insulated from the pure whims of the market and the news cycle. The book is part of a discourse that began before its publication and will continue long after it. Unfortunately, the potential audience size for academic books, even ones that have some commercial market, is limited to those readers interested and aware of the topic and capable of engaging with it at the level and depth that the author is. In more esoteric scholarly subjects this reader pool is potentially only a few hundred people in the first year.<sup>3</sup> Academic books

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2. By "editor," I mean the acquiring editor. There are various other people associated with book publishing who have "editor" in their title, including copyeditor, production editor, and developmental editor, all responsible for a specific aspect of the publishing process.

3. It should come as no surprise then that university press book publishing is a deficit producing business model, reliant on institutional subsidies, revenue gap closing endowments, diversified yet complimentary portfolio of revenue streams like journals or business-to-business services, or some combination of all that cover for

have a predictable floor and limitations on ceiling in terms of audience size.

With this in mind, an editor can provide an author with a market perspective. What are the right expectations and what needs to be done to meet them? Anecdotally, authors tend to overestimate the number of peers in their field who will buy and read their book as well as the capacity and interests of the generalist reader. Understandably, authors are close to their subjects and have difficulty understanding what someone unfamiliar with their book's topic needs to know before it could interest them. Beyond this, there is a baseline level of knowledge across academia that even smart, college-educated people simply don't have. At the same time, authors tend to underestimate the number of potential readers in adjacent fields and, more importantly, students as potential readers in their own field. A publisher's sales are generally 30% frontlist and 70% backlist, meaning that most of a publisher's sales come from books that are more than a year old, and many of those older books sell routinely, year after year, through course adoptions. An editor can work with an author to make their book more appealing for teaching. At the same time, while a readership of professionals within a field may be limited, there is always the possibility of scholars and students just outside the field who may be interested in the book's topic.

The key to having a good perspective on a book's market potential is to think in concentric circles from sub-discipline outward. An author needs to establish the audience they wish to reach and work with their editor on the kinds of textual revision that will help to reach that group. As a rule of thumb, an editor should be able to help an author move their text to the next wider circle, all while affirming that successful academic books are measured by decade, not season, and that an audience that appreciates a work for its contribution to scholarship in their field, no matter how small it may be, is still an important, incremental addition to the body of human knowledge.

In sum, whether or not a book is improved by an editor's work, is truly known only by the author and publisher. A seemingly successful book — one that received positive reviews or sold many copies — can end up a disappointment if it fails to live up to the author's personal expectations or if the publisher miscalculated the book's market size. A book that has seemingly made no apparent mark on the world may still leave an author unexpectedly pleased because, in the end, they were able to say exactly what they wanted to say in a way that was better than they had hoped. The best sellers on a publisher's backlist are rarely obvious to outsiders. They are the books that continue to sell year after year with little to no new attention.

Were a book's revisions successful? It is ultimately the author who decides if they truly improved the book and to what degree. From the start, a good editor knows this to be true, listens, and offers advice accordingly. But the end results — if the book was successful — are only knowable if the conversation between author and editor continues and deepens, and this relational dynamic is precisely what Roger Straus meant when he said, "we publish authors, not books."

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book publishing losses.

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