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A CHECKLIST OF CONSIDERATIONS FOR WRITING A BOOK PROPOSAL: MEETING TENURE CRITERIA

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With an apparently increasing emphasis on research, writing and publication in tenure criteria for academic librarians who hold faculty status, illustrated in the study by Park and Riggs (1991), tenure-track academic librarians should not overlook book publication as a possible alternative to the publication of journal articles, as an outlet for their research.

Similarly, they should not overlook or minimize the importance of putting together an effective proposal package to sell their book ideas to publishers. While Buchman (1987) and others have acknowledged that there is not one way to put a proposal package together--and therefore no magic formula exists--there are a number of items the librarian/researcher must seriously consider before mailing off his or her completed proposal package to a publisher.

First consideration: Conciseness. First and foremost, write the clearest and most concise overall description of your proposed book, as humanly possible, without leaving out any essential information. Describe such things as the overall purpose of the work, its subject matter, methodology, organization, and scope. If your work is in progress, you must envision what it will look like when it is completed, before you ever attempt writing a book proposal. It is important to keep your focus when writing for someone else. Publishers see hundreds, if not thousands of proposals. They will quickly put aside ones that fails to be clear and concise.

Second consideration: What are the book's value-added features? How is your work different or better than the rest? It is critical to describe what features in your work set it apart from the rest of the competition. When you are describing the book's special features, think of yourself as a salesperson, not as a researcher. A major selling point might be your book's special features. Thus, take the necessary time to describe to the publisher what features make it truly unique. For instance, does your book include valuable drawings, charts, or graphs? Does it contain a comprehensive index? Why is this information valuable? Who is the intended audience? By supplying this critical information, in effect, you are helping the publisher make his or her decision.

Third consideration: What are the market considerations? Aid your cause greatly by very closely studying the current marketplace to see what is available on your subject. Knowing what is out there, combined with knowing all there is to know about your own work, will serve you well. Letting the publisher know you have done your homework will earn you his or her respect, thus gaining well deserved credibility. I cannot emphasize enough how important this is.

Fourth consideration: What is the status of the book? You do not have to wait until your book is completed to pitch your project to a publisher. In fact, I suggest you start querying publishers as early in the research process as possible. One strategy you might use is to develop several ideas simultaneously; then go ahead with the one idea that sells. I know this approach may not appeal to all. If you feel more comfortable developing your one pet idea, all I can say is, go for it. When you have completed three or four chapters, though, try to sell the idea to a publisher.

Fifth consideration: Including a table of contents or an outline is equivalent to dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's. It is just one more way to let the publisher know that you are a professional, whether it is your first book or not.

Sixth consideration: Include your vita in the proposal package. Describe your background, outlining your education, your previous publications, and your qualifications to prepare this publication. Do not include a lot of irrelevant information. Trust me, it will just get in the way. So, with the clean, crisp, concise completed proposal package in hand, the publisher is in a good position to make a sound, prompt publishing decision on your work, hopefully, in your favor.

Remember, at each step of the preparation of your proposal, put yourself in the place of the publisher. You wrote the book for a particular audience. Make sure your proposal is written for a particular audience, too--the publisher! In the final analysis, ensure that you and the publisher see eye to eye. It is really best for all concerned.

As Stewart (1993) noted, with more and more academic librarians engaging themselves in research and publication activities, it will not be long before their dossiers will look quite similar to the teaching faculty.

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