

Publishing Outside the Box: Popular Press Books

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Abstract Writing and publishing popular press books requires a set of skills, not natural to basic and applied researchers trained to publish in peer-referred behavior analytic journals or to practice behavior analysis in applied settings. This article provides suggestions and examples. These include finding a distinctive idea, securing a contract, hiring an agent (or not), deciding on a publisher, and writing engagingly for a broad audience. The last is the greatest challenge. Among my recommendations are to read good prose, good models, and good books about publishing; talk to experienced colleagues; read aloud to judge the appropriateness of your vocabulary and style; and interject humor, imagery, and drama. Book publishing is a long and difficult process, but it is possible. It has a great potential for bringing behavior analytic research, practice and theory to the attention of the general public.

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Publishing Outside the Box:

Popular Press Books

Writing a book for general audiences—often called a “trade” book (a book to be marketed to “the book selling

trade”) requires a set of skills that often do not come naturally for those of us whose careers have been spent plumbing narrow research topics and honing the language of academic publishing. Yet scientific ideas often come to the attention of nonprofessionals by way of popular nonfiction books. So, how do you break into book publishing? I have a few suggestions based on my own experiences, but these represent a very limited sample. So, my first recommendation is to read published examples of the kind of book you would like to write, read as much as you can about book publishing, and talk to as many people as you can who have direct experience.

The Idea

Before anything else is possible, you need an idea. What will this book be about? To be successful, you must distinguish the topic or presentation from the bewildering field of other books available. Often this means presenting something that is new or counterintuitive, taking a different angle on a familiar topic, or filling a hole in need of filling. Once you think you have a subject that is sufficiently rich to sustain readers’ interest through an entire book, you should do a thorough evaluation of similar books already in print. This market analysis will be an important piece of your book proposal, so it makes sense to do it before you get very far along. One way to convince an agent or a publisher that your book will be unique and successful is to demonstrate your knowledge of the competition and to explain how your book is different from its competitors.

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Getting a Contract

Authors sometimes submit—and publishers often evaluate and commit to publish—full-length, completed book manuscripts, but it is often possible to secure a contract from a publisher on the basis of a book proposal and a few sample chapters. So, once you have formulated your ideas and the shape of the book, you should set out to write three or four chapters. Although it often makes sense to begin at the beginning with an introductory chapter, publishers are more concerned with the body of the manuscript.

It is important to write your book in a way that will appeal to a general readership. For professionals who have spent many years acquiring technical vocabularies and learning the spare, objective syntax of scientific writing, the transition to a simpler, livelier style can be daunting. I recommend reading as much good quality prose as possible, both fiction and nonfiction, so that you begin to hear what a good sentence sounds like. Read your work aloud so that you can maximize your role as listener and better judge how your writing will sound to your reader. Because the vocabulary of spoken speech is more informal than most of the writing, we do, reading aloud can also help you simplify your language and make it more accessible. Finally, your book will have broader appeal and be more successful if you can find ways to inject humor, drama, and appealing imagery into your book, while, at the same time, staying true to the facts of the story.

After you have produced sample chapters you are willing to show to a publisher, you will need two additional documents: (a) a query letter to introduce yourself and your project to a publisher or a literary agent (see below) and (b) a proposal. The proposal will normally need to include an introduction to the project, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the entire book, an analysis of the market for competing books, a brief biographical sketch, and a curriculum vitae. For more advice on writing your proposal and cover letter, see *2013 Writer's Market* (Brewer 2013) or comparable guide. This kind of “cold call” marketing has a very lean schedule of reinforcement, but it is the most common method used by first-time authors.

I was successful in using an alternative to the query letter approach when attempting to get my first book published—*Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Vyse 2013). At the meetings of the American Psychological Association (APA)—and

undoubtedly other organizations, as well—publishers have booths. They also often have editors for easy access to authors they are working with. Many years ago, I simply walked from booth to booth asking if an editor was in attendance at the meeting. Several editors agreed to a brief meeting where I pitched my idea. I was fortunate enough to secure more than one offer and my first book contract followed soon after these conversations at APA.

The Agent Question

There are many advantages to having the services of a literary agent to support you in your quest to produce a successful book. A good literary agent has sufficient experience to help you shape your proposal to best represent your book. When it comes time to negotiating an advance, royalties, and rights, your agent can be a valuable ally. Most importantly, many of the best publishers of trade nonfiction books will only consider projects that are presented by an agent. Unsolicited projects submitted directly by an author are not accepted. In addition, conventional wisdom suggests that the size of the advance offered to an author is a measure of the publisher's commitment to a book and its promotion. Advances are payments of royalties in advance of sales and, as a result, once an advance has been paid, the publisher has an interest in “earning out” the advance through sufficient book sales. Unless you are an experienced author with good negotiation skills, a literary agent is in the best position to strike a favorable deal for an advance—in return for keeping approximately 15 % of the book's royalties.

The primary problem with literary agents—apart from their fees—is that they are hard to find. Authors in search of an agent often send out many queries without so much as an acknowledgment that the email or letter has been received. In addition, having an agent is no guarantee of success. I have written two books for general audiences, both with the same publisher. I pitched the first project (Vyse 2013) directly to an editor and negotiated the contract on my own. For the second project (Vyse 2008), I was represented by a literary agent. Of the two, the book I negotiated on my own has been much more successful. Of course, this is only an individual case, but I know of other fledgling authors who, after expending considerable effort, have been adopted by reputable literary agents, only to have their books placed with second-tier publishing houses, which

would not have required representation by an agent. Unless you have some other advantage working for you (e.g., a highly visible position at a top university or an established record of writing for popular magazines and newspapers), the chances of placing your book with a top publisher are quite slim with or without the help of a literary agent.

Publishing Houses

Having said this, a number of smaller but reputable trade publishing houses will accept proposals from authors who are not represented by agents. If you go this route, keep a few things in mind before agreeing to sign a contract. To be successful in reaching a wide audience, you need to look for two primary characteristics in your prospective publisher. First, the publisher must be capable of producing an attractive book at a competitive price. A typical nonfiction book of between 200 and 300 printed pages should sell for under \$30 in hardcover. If the book is unusually long, the price may creep above this mark, but the added length will inhibit sales. Second, your publisher should provide some promotional support for the book. Again, unless the publisher makes a substantial investment in the project—as reflected, among other things, by the size of your advance—you are unlikely to be sent out on an all-expenses-paid book tour. But your publisher should assign a publicist for your book who can send out review copies; arrange for newspaper, radio, and print interviews; and assist you in a number of smaller tasks. These activities, combined with your own efforts, will be important determinants of the attention your book receives.

A number of smaller publishing houses are capable of satisfying these basic needs and may also offer you a modest advance. For a first-time author, the advance often has greater symbolic value than economic value, but it can help defray some of your expenses in producing a finished manuscript. However, even when your publisher provides both an attractive, reasonably priced book and helps with publicity, a large measure of the success of the book will depend on you. Many first-time authors believe most of the work is done when they hand in their completed manuscripts, but they are mistaken. Some of the hardest work is yet to come. Your energy in promoting the book through social media, media appearances, readings, and talks is essential to drawing attention to you and your book.

The publishing industry is changing rapidly, some of which favors the beginning author. Self-promotion is greatly facilitated by the advent of powerful search engines and social media. Enterprising authors can easily find potential venues for book talks and presentations, as well as promote their work through Facebook and Twitter. In addition, if your book is simultaneously offered as an e-book, it will have even greater impact. Self-publishing an e-book or a print on-demand book is an attractive option in today's world. For example, Amazon.com's CreateSpace subsidiary (<https://www.createspace.com/>) or Lightning Source (<https://www1.lightningsource.com/>) will publish your book in a trade paperback, hardcover, and/or e-book format and offer editorial, design, and marketing services for an extra fee. In the case of CreateSpace, your book can be marketed worldwide through the Amazon.com website. As various forms of e-readers and tablets have become popular alternatives to physical books, many books that have appeared only in digital format have done very well. The news media regularly report stories of self-publishing successes (e.g., Mitchell 2013), but the average author's experience is unclear. In addition, securing a contract with a commercial publishing house carries greater prestige and brings you a number of professional services for free. Finally, no matter how small the royalty or profit, most people believe it is better to be paid than to have to pay to publish. As a result, despite the improved environment in the self-publishing world, self-publishing should probably be seen as a last resort option in most cases.

Conclusion

Book publishing is a long and difficult process, but it is possible. Furthermore—and importantly—it has great potential for bringing behavior analytic theory, research, and practice to the attention of previously unexposed segments of the general public. Because the media pay attention to new books as they appear, writing a book can provide its author with a unique opportunity to bring behavior analysis to a wider audience.

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