

My experience publishing my first book

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January 24, 2025

If one wants to publish a book, what is the process? Many early career researchers (me at least) are much more knowledgeable about the process of publishing papers. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because the process really is less straightforward, the answer to this question often feels obscure (or at least it did to me). I am writing this document in the hope that it can be helpful to other early career researchers interested in publishing their first book and who, like me, may not be aware of how it typically goes.

I tried to write everything that I learned in the process that I did not know before. My reasoning is that, if I did not know it, chances are that someone else may also not know it. But, of course, much of the information in here may feel obvious or basic to some.

Part of the information in here comes from what I learned from the experience. Another part comes from very helpful advice that I got from excellent mentors. I am especially thankful to Ben Ansell, Rachel Bernhard, Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom, Giovanni Capoccia, Catherine De Vries, Elias Dinas, Vicky Fouka, Miriam Golden, Jane Green, Sara Hobolt, Ellen Immergut, Nazita Lajevardi, Isabela Mares, Desmond King, and David Rueda for the time they took to help me figuring out this process.

A couple of caveats before I start. First, this document reflects my experience, often because of advice I got. This is not, by any means, to suggest that this is the only way one can go through the process. Second, the document applies to a first book. I suspect the process can change significantly after one has already successfully published a book.

The process in a nutshell I started with having a draft of the full manuscript. Then, I organized a book workshop to discuss it. Based on the feedback I received there, I revised the manuscript and approached editors to ask about the process of submission. Then I submitted a book prospectus for the editor to review. After they accepted to send it out for peer review, I submitted some sample chapters for review. A few months later I received referee reports, on the basis of which I wrote a memo detailing how I was planning to address those comments. On

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the basis of those, I was offered a contract. I revised the manuscript, resubmitted it, and then took care of more procedural aspects (proofs, cover, etc). I elaborate on these stages below.

At what stage to submit How “complete” should a book be before one submits it? As a junior person writing their first book, it is probably best to have the full manuscript written by the time one approaches an editor. I know of people who got contracts without having a full draft, but none when the person is a junior scholar writing their first book.

Part of the draft can be published as papers previously, but there should be sufficient new material in the book. Some people would say that a good rule of thumb is that up to two chapters can be published previously, while others would say something like 30% of the whole length of the book. Note that having some material published in a good journal may actually help get the book published (provides a good signal of the quality of the work).¹

The book workshop A book workshop is an event where scholars gather to read the manuscript and provide feedback on it. I cannot overstate how much of a difference this made. It was crucial for two reasons. First, the process of revision of a book is often fairly light, and not all chapters are sent to reviewers. The book workshop ensures that all the chapters are carefully read and commented on by someone before the book is out. Second, having never published a book, it may be hard to write something book-like at first (I realized during my workshop that I had not). The workshop is crucial to get feedback on the shape of the manuscript as a whole, when you still have time to change it.

There are different ways in which one can organize the workshop. I had a one-day event with (around) one discussant per chapter. It was open to the public, and I sent the draft to everyone who wanted to attend. The discussion of every chapter ended with an open discussion with everyone.

Note that a full day of discussion will result on many (many!) comments. It can feel very daunting to know how to proceed after. I took a week off before I even looked at my notes. And when I did, I took a couple of days just to organize comments.

It was important bear in mind that one cannot address all comments—otherwise it would be a good few years of additional work. This means that one needs to make a decision about which comments are worth addressing, which comments one agrees with but are for another project, and which comments one disagrees with. This being said, I did revise the manuscript in depth as a result of the workshop and, as I said above, that made a huge difference in the final product.

Two notes on choosing workshop participants. First, this depends on whether one has funding available for the event. In my case, I had funding to invite two externals, and invited

¹I thank Mirya Holman for noting this point, and also for bringing the second rule of thumb to my attention.

colleagues based at Oxford (where I was employed at the time) to act as the remaining discussants. This can be done with virtually no funding if one invites only locals. I would be happy to do it in exchange for a drink at the end, and I suspect many others would too. Second, if you need to choose, I feel that it is more important to invite people who have experience writing books (ideally, books that you like) rather than people who work on your topic. This is because, again, part of the struggle is to make the manuscript “book-like”. People who have written books will know how to help you do so. Moreover, a book should be read widely, which means that people who do not exactly work on the same topic will most likely be a crucial part of your audience.

Submitting the proposal to an editor After I had addressed the comments from the workshop, I approached editors. First, I emailed them to ask what the process of submission was. While this seems like a purely procedural step, it is not. This will be the first impression that the editor has of you (and the book). It may be helpful to ask someone senior (ideally, someone who has published with that editor) if they are happy being cc’ed in the email, or to have you say that it was on their advice that you contacted this editor. An obvious possibility is to do so with someone who was a discussant at the book workshop.

Note that many publishing houses have American and European headquarters. If that is the case, you need to choose which to approach. While this may seem irrelevant, it means that the editor you contact will be a different person. They may have different tastes and networks. It may be useful to target the one that you think is more likely to like your manuscript, or the one with whom senior people in your network have previously published.

Unlike in a paper, you can approach several editors at the same time. The advice I got was to not approach more than two. It is unclear how open you need to be about this. I felt uneasy about not making it explicit, so I told both editors that I was also submitting the manuscript to the other publishing house. But my understanding is that this is not necessary.

Then, I submitted the actual proposal. This requires a book prospectus—a document of around 10 pages that summarizes the book, its contributions, literatures it speaks to, etc. The editor will provide you guidance on how to write this, but it is very helpful to ask for those of others. (If you are reading this, feel free to email me and ask for mine.)

Submitting the manuscript for revision If the editor accepts to send the manuscript out to review, you will need to submit some full chapters. My understanding is that typically you will submit the theory chapter (or chapters if you, like me, have more than one) and two empirical chapters. These cannot include the Introduction or Conclusion.

Note that having the editor agree to send the manuscript for revision is a very good signal. Unlike with papers, most books that are sent for review end up being offered a contract. This means that the hardest part is to have the book be sent out for review, and you can think of

achieving that as (roughly) like getting an R&R on a paper. Also unlike papers (in most journals), this is a single-blind process—i.e., reviewers will know who you are.

A note on how to save time in the process. In my case, I was short on time because I was on the job market. Since typically one only needs to submit some chapters for review, a very good piece of advice that I received was to focus on revising those first. Then, I sent them out and worked on revising the remaining chapters while I was waiting for the referee reports. This saved me the time while I was waiting for the reports.

Revising the manuscript After the reviewers send in their reports, you will get a decision from the editor. In my case, I was asked to write a review memo on how I would deal with the comments. Based on this, I was offered a contract. This means that the revised manuscript was not sent back to the reviewers—something that I understand is quite common in the process of publication of books. When I got the contract, I committed to submitting the final manuscript before a specific date.

The contract You have some leverage to negotiate the contract but, on a first book, that leverage is small unless you get offers from several publishing houses. A few things you can probably negotiate, even without a second contract, include: retaining the rights in other languages (very helpful if you are thinking about possible translations), number of free e-books (especially e-books), removing right of first refusal, and the timeline. I am thankful to Mirya Holman and Virginia Oliveros for pointing out these options.

Submitting the revised manuscript and subsequent steps One point to note is that I was asked to submit blurbs (i.e., the pieces of advance praise that are often printed at the back of the book) in the same date that I submitted the full manuscript. This means that the easiest way is to ask people who were in your book workshop to write them (although you can, of course, ask others too).