

Pitching Your Book to a Small Press

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

You've decided you would rather write a trade book (a book for a popular audience) instead of a scholarly monograph. You've decided that you would like to publish your book with a traditional small press (rather than self-publishing or publishing with a Big Five press). You've researched presses and selected a few that are a good fit for your book, and you've read their guidelines carefully. Wonderful news! You're ready to start the process of getting your book into the hands of editors.

As an acquisitions editor of a traditional small press that publishes trade nonfiction, I love receiving submissions from current and former academics. As a former academic myself, I know all of the strengths we bring to the publishing table; as a group, we tend to work hard, support our ideas with research and enjoy sustained effort on a single project. You need all these skills if you're going to write a trade book.

But at the same time, many of the submissions I receive from former academics have similar weaknesses. I want to tell you how to avoid these mistakes, especially since so many of them are easy to avoid.

What do you do first?

Write a Query Letter

A query letter is a particular letter you write to get an editor to consider your book. An effective query letter might be the most difficult single-page document you write. It is not a book proposal. It is three or four paragraphs, sent as an email, that sells you and your book in the space of three minutes—the amount of time it takes an editor to read the email.

Jane Friedman, a popular writing mentor whose blog and books are gospel to authors of every level of experience, has a wonderful guide for how to write nonfiction query letters (and fiction ones as well). It's available at <https://www.janefriedman.com/the-complete-guide-to-query-letters-nonfiction/>.

Although there are different types of nonfiction, my favorite kind of nonfiction to publish is narrative-driven nonfiction, such as memoir, personal essay collections, narrative nonfiction and the like.

Friedman provides the elements of a strong query for this type of nonfiction, which I'll recount here in detail.

First, you must provide a hook, which is "a compelling description of the narrative," which I always prefer to read first. Your query letter to me should always begin with something like this: "Dear Dr. Pryal: When I was six years old, I fell off the bridge into the Alligator River. As my head sank beneath the brackish water..." The point is, start your query with something that makes me want to keep reading. After you've hooked me with your story, you can zoom out and tell me in general terms what your book is about. That information should take the first two paragraphs of your query, and no more.

Toward the end of these first two paragraphs, you have to show why a general reader would care about your topic

and frame your book in that way. Imagine an editor asking this question: "So what?" You might have conducted the very best research in the world about your topic, but if you can't answer the "so what?" question for a trade press editor, then your book will never be published.

The third paragraph tells me, in Friedman's terms, "what you're selling." That is, "the genre/category, anticipated word count, title/subtitle" and other details of your book. My press only accepts completed manuscripts, so you won't be telling me how much you have completed. But other publishers accept books on proposal, so they'll want to know how long it will take you to write your book.

The final paragraph is about you and your audience. As Friedman writes, your audience is your target audience, "who will buy this book and why?" and, importantly, "it CANNOT be everyone and anyone" (emphasis hers). And, finally, include "your bio, platform and credentials to write the book."

Sell Yourself

Friedman's final element of a query is so important I want to tell you more about it: you.

Whether you are pitching your book to a major publisher via agent or to a small press, you have to sell yourself, not just your book. As Friedman explains, authors must "give some thought to their author platform, or their ability to market and promote their book to an existing audience they can reach, without the publisher's help, through online or offline activities." She suggests putting this information in your query letter so that an editor knows what you are bringing to the table.

Although a small press editor might be more willing to take a risk on a lesser-known author, small press editors do need to know that you can help market your book and how you will.

Leave Jargon Behind

Great news! I've requested your manuscript. I can't wait to read it. I've loaded it on my iPad, opened your book, and, BAM, I'm punched in the face with the "teleological juxtaposition of the elucidation of the ways in which the phenomenological components of subjugated spaces."

When I was a professor, I published lots and lots of scholarly articles. Yet even then, I never wrote words like that. Now that I edit a trade press, I definitely don't want to bother readers with jargon. And the fact is, no reader will buy a book filled with words that they can't make sense of. I have a scholarly colleague from a department I used to work in, and we joke that our fellow scholars, those in our own subfield, rely on jargon because they don't know any better way to write about their ideas.

Jargon isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course. Sometimes specialized terminology is necessary. But if there is a plainer way to talk about an idea, you should prefer the plainer way. The plainer way is accessible to the greater number of people, and if the meaning is the same, then having more people understand our ideas is preferred.

But if there is a plainer way to talk about an idea, you should prefer the plainer way.

continued on page 14

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*

to director of admissions at the University of Notre Dame IN.

- **Dr. Stephanie J. Rowley** moves from associate VP for research at the University of Michigan to provost, dean of the college and VP for academic affairs at the Teachers College at Columbia University NY.

- **Dr. LoriAnn Sanchez** becomes dean of the College of Education at Northwest Nazarene University ID.

- **Dr. Sherrill Smith** becomes dean of the Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing at the University of Wyoming.

- **Dr. Stephanie Sparling Williams** moves from assistant curator for the Addison Gallery of American

Art at Phillips Academy MA to associate curator for the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum MA.

- **Shayna Stahl** becomes associate director of bands and director of athletic bands at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

- **Dr. Melissa Sturge-Apple** becomes dean of graduate education and vice provost at the University of Rochester NY.

- **Virginia Teachey** moves from assistant dean for finance and business management in the College of Engineering at North Carolina State University to vice chancellor for finance and administration at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

- **Suzanne Walsh** becomes president of Bennett College NC.

- **Kathi Dantley Warren** moves from associate VP of development to VP for development and alumni relations at Rice University TX.

- **Dr. Allyson L. Watson** becomes dean of the College of Education at Florida A&M University.

- **Dr. Pamela Richardson Wilks** becomes chief of staff and assistant to the president for strategic initiatives at Edward Waters College FL.

- **Dr. Frances Williams** moves from associate dean for graduate studies and research in the College of Engineering to associate VP for research and sponsored programs at Tennessee State University.

- **Dr. Mary Beth Williams** moves from senior associate dean of undergraduate education to senior associate dean of instruction and curricula in the Eberly College of Science at Pennsylvania State University.

- **Dr. Joy Williamson-Lott** becomes dean of the Graduate School at the University of Washington.

- **Adrienne Wyatt** moves from registrar at Jarvis Christian College GA to registrar at Lincoln University MO.

- **Dr. Lynette Yarger** becomes assistant dean for equity and inclusion for the Schreyer Honors College at Pennsylvania State University. 



Washington University in St. Louis

ARTS & SCIENCES

Arts & Sciences Positions

Washington University in St. Louis seeks individuals who are excellent scholars and teachers for the following positions in Arts & Sciences. The appointments are expected to begin in the 2020-2021 academic year.

For additional information about our departments and programs, please visit <https://artsci.wustl.edu/>.

Washington University in St. Louis
Faculty of Arts & Sciences
St. Louis, Missouri

- **Anthropology** – Assistant Professor in the field of global health
- **Biology** – Assistant Professor in the field of cellular and developmental biology
- **Chemistry** – Assistant Professor in all fields of study
- **Earth and Planetary Sciences** – All ranks in the field of earth and planetary studies
- **East Asian Languages and Cultures** – Assistant Professor in the field of Korean Performative and Cultural Studies
- **Economics** – Assistant or Associate Professor in the field of microeconomics and macroeconomics
- **Economics** – James Langenfeld Professorship in Industrial Organization
- **Education** – Assistant or Associate Professor in the field of policy studies, applied psychology of learning, and teacher education
- **English** – Assistant or Associate Professor in the field of contemporary American literature
- **Film and Media Studies** – Assistant Professor in the field of emerging film media
- **History** – Assistant Professor in the field of modern China
- **Mathematics and Statistics** – Assistant Professor in the field of applied mathematics; Assistant Professor in the field of pure mathematics
- **Philosophy** – All ranks in the field of philosophy
- **Physics** – Assistant Professor in the field of experimental quantum information and materials
- **Political Science** – Assistant or Associate Professor in the field of American politics
- **Sociology** – Assistant Professor in the field of immigration, social movements, and health disparities

Washington University seeks an exceptionally qualified and diverse faculty; women, minorities, protected veterans, and candidates with disabilities are strongly encouraged to apply.

Pitching Your Book to a Small Press

continued from page 6

When I wrote about making the choice to write a trade book instead of writing a scholarly monograph in the July issue of *WIHE*, I mentioned the all-important difference between the two types of books: audience. The audience of a monograph is a narrow one: other scholars in your field. The audience of a trade book is anyone interested in the topic you are writing about. You can presuppose a certain level of education, perhaps, and a certain level of knowledge about a subject, depending on your topic.

As I've written before, to write for a popular audience, "You have to learn how to write about complex subjects using plain language that the majority of your readers will be able to understand."

But remember: Writing plainly about complex subjects is not "dumbing down" your subject matter. Unfortunately, the idea that scholars writing for

popular audiences are compromising or selling out isn't an unusual one.

The key to reaching a trade audience is using jargon-free writing that is meant to be read and enjoyed. Trade books are driven by the writing, by the language itself and the ideas. All matter equally.

But if there is a plainer way to talk about an idea, you should prefer the plainer way. 

The Transformative Power of Education

continued from page 8

changes our world and builds a different, brighter future, if only we remain committed to and invested in it. Education creates our tomorrow. DPL is committed to the transformative power of education, and you can be too. 

PROFILE: Chown Provides Insight into Organizational Dynamics

continued from page 10

The difference between Canadian and U.S. health care systems has certainly impacted her research. "It's so dramatically different that I think it creates opportunity, but also challenges," she says. "The challenges involve understanding the system.... I literally had to watch YouTube videos to understand the difference between a PPO and an HMO."

The relevant research topics are different, but opportunities come because she brings a different lens to understanding how health care services are delivered.

"It's a very different competitive environment," Chown says. "The relationship between physicians and hospitals is very different. Taking that different lens and applying it to how stuff works in the U.S. can be very fruitful."

Having studied Canada's health care system, she knows its limitations; however, the disparities in access to health care in the United States have been startling to Chown.

"I have focused in the past on understanding how to improve the delivery of health care services," she says. "That applies to both countries. As I mature as a researcher and understand this country more, my hope is that I do develop a voice that can help inform that debate. It's one of the biggest social justice issues that this country is facing." 

Beauty and the Bias

continued from page 11

Participants who were primed to be sexually secure found both the attractive and less attractive women to be equally truthful. Those primed to be sexually insecure felt the attractive woman was less truthful and more deserving of being fired.

The Burden of Stereotypes

"For a lot of people, it's what we expected," says Sheppard of the results. "We all sort of know it on some level, but we don't want to talk about it."

Unfortunately, we need to talk about it. Right now, the burden of addressing the problem falls on the attractive woman.

"Many people are unwilling to believe that beautiful women are being stereotyped in this way," she says. These women have to work a bit harder to build trust, and it will take a bit longer for them.

Don't feel sorry for your glamorous gal pals, however. "Attractive individuals, regardless of gender, will fare better over a lifetime than less attractive ones," says Sheppard. 

The Inspired Lecture: A Master Class in Teaching From Brené Brown

continued from page 12

notice yours, from a place of nonjudgment, making sure that you're investing your time and energy doing work that thrills you, and sharing that work with people who can appreciate your enthusiasm.

Be Vulnerable

It wouldn't be an essay on Brown's work if I didn't end with a call to courage and vulnerability (two concepts that Brown reminds us are not opposites, but, rather, the same thing, because we can't have one without the other). Academia celebrates an idealized version of perfection. To see a highly respected academic confess to eating peanut butter on her couch while watching *Downton Abbey* after reading through the nasty comments on her TED talk is nothing short of revolutionary. Brown isn't so wildly successful in spite of stories like those, but rather because of them.

So, how can we be more vulnerable in our teaching? How can we share our very human stories with our students and our colleagues? Who among us will follow Brown's lead?

Brené Brown: *The Call to Courage* is currently available on Netflix. Her TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," is one of the top five most popular TED Talks of all time, and it's available at https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability. 

Rewriting Native History

continued from page 13

program hosts an annual conference in conjunction with the Native American Studies Department at the University of New Mexico.

In her spare time, she practices archery. When asked how she balances work and life, she responded, "Carefully."

As a Native woman in the academy, Fitzgerald notes, "There still are challenges and will always be challenges."

When asked for her advice for women looking to merge family life with an academic career, Fitzgerald had these words, "Figure out what your priorities are and make your decisions based on priorities." 

WOMEN
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Look for your perfect job at
www.wihe.com!