Five Secrets to Publishing Success
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For many young academics (whether graduate students or assistant professors preparing their tenure files), the subject of publishing is a source of anxiety and consternation. In addition, whether or not one has a sound understanding of publishing more often than not is true thanks to being teamed up with a helpful supervisor. Thus, what most young academics know about publishing is only limited to what little they may have heard from helpful -- and often not so helpful -- mentors.

In this essay, I will uncover what I believe are five secrets to publishing success. These tips arise from my experiences in the fields of philosophy, political science, and law as an author, an editor, and founding editor of the *Journal of Moral Philosophy.* These experiences may be of particular use to readers working in the areas of humanities and social science, but I hope will also be relevant to readers in different disciplines. The advice below is general and there are always some exceptions, although what I note below is most often the case.

Secret #1: Finding your voice

The biggest key to publishing success is what I call 'finding your voice.' What does this mean? Well, think about essays you wrote for classroom assessment. These essays often focus on particular topics and literatures that are covered in specific lectures. When you write, you have a particular audience -- for example, your supervisor -- in mind.

Success in publishing requires a new mindset. The key to success is to find your voice and connecting with the public. When you write for a journal, your audience is unknown: They will be people with an interest in the general area, but they may lack the specific expertise you bring to a topic. You cannot assume they will have the same perspectives on the relevant literature and they will be unknown to you. Writing for such an audience is a different practice (and experience) from writing for classmates and for assessment.

Perhaps the best training ground is the realm of book reviews. Book reviews are easy to have accepted, first of all. Book reviews are typically handled by someone other than the editor, normally a 'reviews editor' or 'book reviews editor.' I strongly recommend graduate students and others e-mail review editors, stating their areas of specialization and level of study while asking to review a book for the journal. Review editors will almost always agree and when they do -- *voila*! -- you have a publication 'forthcoming' for your c.v. A star is born.

Book reviews are a great training ground because they force you to write in a new way. Reviews are typically between 500-1,000 words. A good review will discuss the main findings and key arguments, while also offering one or two criticisms; there is not room for much more. A good review is never entirely positive. These 500 words or so are practice in small bursts at writing for an academic audience -- *your* audience -- for the first time. They offer opportunities to develop your skills at communicating to others in your field whom you have not met. The practice lies in writing with a new mindset. You will not know who all the readers of your review will be. One trick is to ask fellow students or colleagues to read your review and provide some feedback. A second trick is to work with a journal's book reviews editor. These persons are part of your general audience—and they are often very happy to help you develop your review so that it communicates best with the journal's audience. This advice can truly be invaluable. Indeed, the better you can communicate to this audience, the better are the chances that your work will be published.

Thus, if you desire to begin publishing, then your first step is to get into the proper mindset. Your success will be built off your ability to communicate with a general audience in your area. If practice would help, then book reviews are an excellent place to start.

Secret #2: The importance of focus

In addition to finding your voice and writing from an appropriate point of view, there is a second important secret behind publishing success. This is focus. No matter how clearly you can write (itself a major bonus), you will never find publishing success without constraining your writing within a particular focus. A publishable article is about a clear problem and limits its entire discussion to addressing this problem. Arguments or discussions that address the main problem less than 100 percent should not be exiled to footnotes, but omitted altogether: If your article is about *x*, then don't discuss *y* also. For example, if your article is about a misreading of a particular argument, then do not write about anything else -- such as other misreadings -- that is not *directly* relevant.

The importance of focus is a particular blessing. First, a clearly focused article is easy to read. The reader knows what is at issue, the steps taken to address it, and the results of your analysis. An article lacking focus also lacks clarity: Readers may be confused as to the main general problem motivating the article, why certain arguments or viewpoints are discussed, and the prospective benefits from your conclusions.

Secondly, a clearly focused article is easier to write. There is no need to give in-depth analyses of everything ever written. Instead, the goal is to say only as much as is needed about only as much as must be discussed to give proper attention to your problem. A sharp focus not only makes your work clearer and easy to follow, but also provides clear parameters to work within (and limitations on the size of the literature you must address).

The importance of focus is simple. A publishable article is an article that referees believe merits publication. It is easier for referees to take this view of your work if they can clearly identify the structure and arguments of your work than if your work is muddled. Referees may not always accept your work even if clear, but they are more likely to reject your work if unclear.

Secret #3: Rejection is the norm

Publishing might not be as highly prized as it is if it was easy for everybody. I believe following the secrets to publishing success outlined here may help make publishing more likely, but rejection is the norm. It is an old publisher's tale that for every article accepted, about seven are rejected. This sounds about right. Most reputable journals have acceptance rates of 20 percent or less. The end result is that it would be foolish to become upset or too surprised from a rejection as the vast majority will be turned down.

Think positively about rejections as opportunities, rather than an opportunity lost. Often rejection letters will be combined with comments from the editor and referees about potential worries they had about your paper's quality. These comments can be invaluable as they highlight what your readers have stumbled across. Even when referees offer comments that seem mistaken, view these in a new light: If mistaken, they are a call for greater clarification on relevant points to ensure future readers at another journal do not make the same mistake. Indeed, often nothing can be more helpful than solid criticism from referees. The more advice your paper gets from experts in the field on how it can be improved, the better.

Do not worry too much about rejections: Every author is rejected at one time or another. The trick is not to become demoralized.

Secret #4; Getting a book contract

Few things can boost a career more than a well regarded book. Books receive great attention: how often are there ever "author meets critics" sessions centered on an article? Given this importance, you might think that acquiring a book contract always far more difficult than getting an article accepted. This is not the case.

An excellent book contract is not just about ideas, but also its marketability. Let me first say a few words about this market. Academic publishers regularly remark to me that the difference between academic publishing and trade (or commercial) publishing is that academic publishers have far lower expectations of sales. This is because academic books are not often the stuff of *New York Times* bestseller lists and blockbuster movies. Sales for most academic books are 500 copies or less: only 5 percent or fewer books sell more than 1,000 copies. (On average, textbooks almost always sell best.)

Given the relatively small sales involved, a solid marketing plan is crucial to the success of a book proposal. Proposals should always spell out clearly how the proposed book offers something new and unique that does not yet appear in the market. Your idea may

be "correct," but if a publisher is unpersuaded that a book will at least break even or fare better, a proposal will often be dead in the water no matter its intellectual merit.

Many publishers have a space on their Web site with information on submitting proposals. As a rule, most U.S.-based publishers expect a full draft of the book to be in hand. Some U.K.-based publishers may accept a book proposal without a full draft prepared in hand, but they will always require sample chapters with the proposal. These proposals and sample chapters are then sent to readers to help advise the publisher on whether to accept your proposal. (You may often be asked for suggested names for these readers, especially where a publisher is very favorable.) If accepted, there will be an agreed date for completion and your draft will be reviewed, but normally only to suggest some helpful final revisions prior to publication.

There are at least three more items worth noting. First, authors rarely keep deadlines and this is rarely a genuine problem. Academic publishers tend to aim for a February release. This is seen as ideal as new catalogs are often produced at this time to help market new books for inclusion in the next academic year's course syllabi. Taking an extra two or three years beyond the contracted deadline is fairly common, although taking five or more years may render void your contract.

Secondly, keep proposals brief, at between 6 to 10 pages. Always note full contact details, a brief biography, a few pages on chapter outlines with descriptions of chapter contents, and two further important items. First is the previously mentioned section on marketability, to clearly demonstrate that your project is unique, new, and timely. While your proposal should be specific enough to satisfy fellow specialists, these specialists do not vote on approving your proposal at publishers' editorial meetings: ensure that a non-specialist can understand what issues are at stake and what contribution to knowledge you have in mind. Avoid writing about any books individually, but group them together where possible. For example, do not comment on each book separately when discussing the market, but talk about books that share a similar approach and discuss them together.

The final item worth noting is that journals normally stipulate that articles submitted to them may not be under consideration elsewhere. This is almost never true with publishers. Many publishers allow multiple submissions and this is often noted on their Web sites.

A well-spelled-out idea with a clear presentation of how it fits in the market will combine to create a powerful book proposal.

Secret #5: Publishing takes time

The fifth secret is that publishing takes time ... and probably more than you might think. More than once I have had an eager young scholar ask -- when submitting an article -- if the paper would appear in print six months from today. The answer is very clearly "no;" the peer review process itself may take this long in extremes.

Let us assume a paper is accepted today. Can we be fairly certain that it will appear in six months? Again, the answer is no. For journals, papers for an issue will be sent to a project manager who will then collaborate with a typesetter (who converts papers into the fonts of the journal) and copy editor (who notes possible grammar problems, incomplete references, unclear language, and the like). This will easily take one month. Papers are then sent to authors, often with a copyright assignment form. Authors must then respond to any queries from the copy editor and make final corrections. (They must also sign the copyright assignment form or the piece will go unpublished.) These corrections are then returned to the copy editor who conforms final corrections with the typesetter and the journal editor before the issue is sent to the printers. The process from the moment the editor submits the next issue to the publisher's project manager to print and distribution is no less than four months and often five or six months long. Books may take even longer, given that there is more to copy edit and a need for an index to be composed after final proofs are created.

If this process takes about five or six months, then why did I say that we cannot be fairly certain a paper accepted today would be in print in about six months? The reason is that all reputable journals have a backlog. Once accepted, your article joins a queue. Authors should normally expect their papers will not be in print sooner than 12-15 months.

The importance of knowing this fact is that, if having a paper in print is important for you, you should expect this process to take more than a year. Do not expect journals to publish more quickly than this.

What to do today

I believe that these five secrets will bring about greater publishing success. There is wide variability between journals and publishers, but these secrets offer a good standard operating procedure to follow. If you have not published before, contact a reviews editor today: ask the editor if you can review for his/her journal and start on your path to improving your ability to communicate with a general audience.

Publishing is never easy, but it also is not mysterious. Knowledge of its "secrets" may help unlock doors and reveal new routes to success. Best of luck!