

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

The Professor Is In: Publishing Isn't Just About Volume; It's Also About Strategy



By Karen Kelsky | JULY 30, 2019

Editor's Note: This week's column from The Professor Is In tackles two questions from readers related to the vicissitudes of early career publishing.

Question: I just finished Year 1 of my first tenure-track job at a research university.

My aim is to get a contract for my first book within the next six months, and I've already received initial interest from a few scholarly presses. My question is: How late is too late to get your first book contract on the tenure track? People keep telling me not to worry, and I know a colleague at the end of Year 2 who still doesn't have a book contract. But I feel I should already have one, and I am concerned.

Kelsky: That's a good question because publishing isn't just about volume — it is also about strategy. All stages of publication — past (published work), present (work in the pipeline), or future (work in the planning stages) — make up the optics of your CV and show how hireable or tenurable you are.

In an ideal world, finding a supportive, brilliant editor to shepherd your book manuscript through the publication process would be valued more than securing a publication date within a certain timeline. But of course, academe is not an ideal world. So you need to hit the benchmarks "on time." Few benchmarks are more important than getting that first book contract if you are in a book field at a research-focused institution.

So when should you aim to have a contract in hand? That's not a completely

straightforward question. And before you can answer it, you must first resolve three other questions:

What kind of contract are you talking about? There is the "advance contract," generally based on a book proposal and a sample chapter or two. In terms of professional capital, an advance contract is more of an indicator that things are moving in the right direction than a solid artifact of achievement. It isn't truly binding; it's more of a formalization of interest than a commitment to publish. The press is saying: If this book manuscript turns out how we want it to turn out, we are likely to publish it.

An advance contract is a good thing to have. It means you're working with an editor who will help you shape the manuscript into something that fits the scope of the press. It sends a reassuring signal about your progress to your department's tenure-and-promotion committee.

Then there is the actual book contract. It's issued after you have delivered a finished manuscript that has gone through multiple rounds of peer review and has been revised to the satisfaction of the reviewers and the press editors. That kind of contract is a much more solid commitment. It tells the Powers That Be at your university that your work has been accepted for publication.

Which of these two contracts should you aim for, and at what point on the tenure track? That depends on where you are at, careerwise, when you become an assistant professor. You might be hired A.B.D., or as a freshly minted Ph.D. You might be a Ph.D. who just finished three years at a prestigious fellowship. Or maybe you finally landed a tenure-track job after several years of visiting positions and postdocs.

If the ink is not yet dry on your dissertation's cover page, no one expects a book contract from you in your first year on the tenure track. In fact, publishers want you to know that

Get Fast Advice for Your Academic Life

Sign up to get our Quick Tip newsletter: Twice a week, we'll send you fast advice to help you thrive. It's free to receive, and you'll get a mix of small suggestions designed to help you succeed in your job and your academic life.

Sign Up Now

there is a difference between a dissertation and a monograph — that a thesis needs time and reworking before it can become a book.

On the other hand, if you have been on a fellowship for three years — working solely on turning your dissertation into a book, with virtually no teaching responsibilities — it's good to have at least an advance contract in hand in Year 1 of a tenure-track job.

What, exactly, does your university require for tenure? Some institutions formally define what constitutes scholarship for tenure. Read those policies carefully. If the definition of scholarship isn't formally codified on your campus, make sure you understand the quantity and quality of what your recently tenured colleagues have published.

What "counts" for tenure will vary from place to place:

- At some universities, a book that is "in print" (meaning it has already entered the production process, and a publication date has been assigned) or even "forthcoming" (meaning it has been accepted and delivered in its final version but has not yet gone into production) is sufficient for tenure.
- At other places, it is not enough just to have a contract from a publisher; rather the book must be in the proofs stage to "count."
- At still other places, nothing short of an actual published and released book will count toward your tenure dossier.

So to make a judgment call about which type of contract you need, and by when, you have to find out your institution's expectations for tenure, and then calculate backward.

Keep in mind that part of the calculation has to consider your publisher's reputation for how quickly (or slowly) it moves in getting books edited and into print. For example, if your publisher regularly takes two to three years to produce a scholarly book, and you are at a university that requires tenure candidates to have a finished book in print for promotion, then ideally, you should have a book contract by the time your third-year review comes around. If you are working with a press that has a reputation for faster turnaround and/or your institution only requires proof that your book has been accepted for publication, you obviously have more leeway.



The Professor Is In

Karen Kelsky has advised countless graduate students and junior faculty members on how to navigate the perilous waters of the job search. Twice a month she answers questions from readers on all aspects of the hiring process. Here is a sampling of her recent columns.

- The Professor Is In: What if Your Teaching Experience Is Not 'on Brand' for the Hiring College?
- The Professor Is In: 'Should I Mention I'm From the Area?'
- The Professor Is In: It's Hard to Be Ill in Academe

Kelsky: It's not clear to me what you mean when you say you thought it was a peer-reviewed journal — a journal is either peer-reviewed or editor-reviewed, and that will be indicated accordingly on its web page.

But let me state at the outset: Just because an academic journal is peer reviewed does not mean that every submission is automatically entitled to said peer review. All manuscripts must pass the editor's desk first. It is not the practice of scholarly journals in the humanities or social sciences to accept or reject an "article proposal." Journals only make publishing decisions based on submitted manuscripts. After all, most Ph.D.s could construct a plausible proposal for 25 different articles outside their own field, off the top of their heads, with a few citations thrown in from a quick Google search. Could

Question: I'm a recently minted Ph.D. in X studies. A few months back, I had an article proposal accepted by (what I thought was) a peer-reviewed journal in my field. I submitted the article on time, close to the word limit, and in line with the parameters I'd set out in the article proposal. Today I got an email that said, and I quote: "We liked the piece very much, yet we both think it reads more like a chapter in a book. The paper has great potential but needs a fair amount of reworking to be publishable as a stand-alone article. We are so sorry to have to say no to you, and we wish you the best of luck placing it in the future."

Is that normal? Acceptable? Is it how things are usually done? Shouldn't the journal have granted me a chance to revise and resubmit the article?

they actually produce legitimate scholarly articles based on any of those proposals? No.

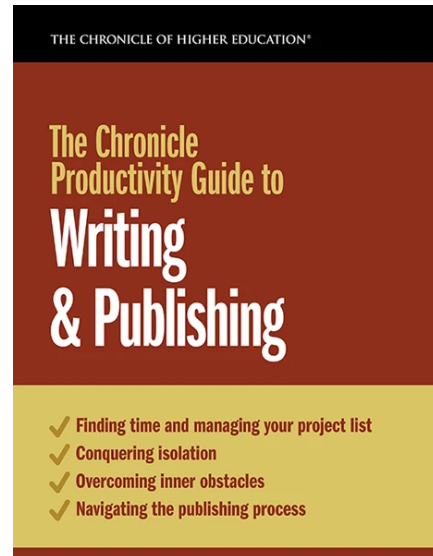
So an "article proposal" is not a formal part of any peer-review process, and the fact that you thought it was makes me concerned about the mentorship you must not have received about the publication process.

It's fine to reach out to an editor with a query prior to submitting a manuscript — especially if you are not sure whether your topic quite fits the scope of the journal. But an editor's email encouraging you to send the article is not a pledge to publish it. The official process is:

- Submit the paper.
- Receive either a "desk rejection" (an outright "no") or a notice that your manuscript is being sent out for peer review.
- Await an editorial decision (accept, reject, or revise and resubmit) based on the reviewers' feedback.

In any case, without any more information to go on, it looks like you misconstrued a positive response to your informal inquiry as some formal category of "acceptance" and then got a desk rejection (meaning the editors did not see the article as strong enough to send out for peer review). The response you received was fairly nice as these things go, with some constructive feedback.

As a rule of thumb, scholars are never entitled to an opportunity to revise and resubmit their work. I hope that including your question here will help to clear up some widespread confusion among graduate students and new Ph.D.s who have received little



The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing

\$49.00

Print

ADD TO CART

or no mentorship in the basics of journal submissions and publishing, and, as a result, often misunderstand the conventions of the process.

Karen Kelsky is founder and president of The Professor Is In, which offers advice and consulting services on the academic job search and on all aspects of the academic and postacademic career. She is a former tenured professor at two universities. Browse an archive of Kelsky's previous advice columns here.

This article is part of:
The Professor Is In

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037