Index and Bibliography Series: Qualities of a Good Proposal, Qualities of a Good Author

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Profile of the series

The MLA Index and Bibliography Series publishes... well, indexes and bibliographies—guides to music and music literature. The series has a long history, dating back to 1964. So, last year was actually its 50th anniversary. Oddly enough, that landmark anniversary, passed unnoticed—even by me.

The first volume was an alphabetical index to the collected works of Monteverdi, and looking at that volume we can see what has changed about the series and the profession during the past fifty years. From the 1960s on into the 1990s, the Index and Bibliography Series played the important role of making useful, but usually small and esoteric, reference tools available to librarians and scholars. Today, there are other ways to make an alphabetical index of the collected works of Monteverdi available. It would be on a website somewhere instead of being published as a slim volume for twenty or twenty-five dollars. The web is the perfect platform for making small indexes and bibliographies available quickly and inexpensively.

So, where has this left the MLA Index and Bibliography Series? We still publish indexes and bibliographies, but they tend to be substantial works whose content is fairly static. The two-volume index of the long-dead but important *Etude Magazine* is a good example of a 21st-century Index and Bibliography Series volume.

Qualities of a good proposal

I've been asked to talk about the qualities of a good proposal.

A successful proposal is the essential first step in getting your book published. The editor, the publisher, and two or three expert readers will review your proposal, and they'll expect to find the answers to several questions.

- What is the topic of the book?
- Who will be the audience for the book?
- Why is the book important? What gap does it fill?
- Why should this material be presented as a published book rather than as an article or a website?
• What is the scope of the book? Every book has limits to its scope. You want your book to cover enough to be a substantial work, but you don’t want the scope to be so great that the work becomes overwhelming.
• How are you going to go about preparing the book? What’s your methodology?
• What’s your timeline?

Much of this is the kind of information you would expect to find in the preface to a published bibliography, so this section of your proposal can later be used as the foundation for the preface to your book.

Your proposal should include several sample entries to give the readers a clear idea of the content of your work.

Reasons proposals are turned down

The editor, publisher, and readers give your proposal careful consideration, and within four to six weeks, the editor gets back to you with a decision.

There are a number of reasons why a proposal might be rejected that have nothing to do with the content of the proposal itself. Most frequently, a proposal is rejected because the proposed volume is out of scope for the series. For example, if it’s a set of essays or a monograph instead of an index or bibliography.

Another is the perceived market for the book. MLA can take some pride in having published obscure little volumes that few other publishers would touch—for example the 1975 volume An Annotated Bibliography of Writing about Music in Puerto Rico by Annie Thompson—but in this day and age we look a bit more carefully at the bottom line. Today, would we publish a bibliography of music composed for voices in combination with electronic and tape music, as we did in 197?? Probably not. Some of you may argue that publishing volumes that no other publisher will take on is part of MLA’s mission. Yes, to some degree, but at what cost? We don’t want our publication program to have to be subsidized by the association. It should be self-sufficient financially.

Qualities of a good author

So you have submitted your proposal, it has been reviewed by the editor, publisher, and readers, and you have come to an agreement on the content and the delivery date. You are offered a contract, which of course you sign.

The next step is to go off to your cave, work hard on your book, and deliver the manuscript to the editor.

Establish a template and stick to it

First of all, work hard on developing your model entry—the bibliographic style, the typical content of an annotation—and have the editor sign off on it before diving
earnestly into the project. Neither you nor your editor want to spend a lot of time redoing work. Once you’ve settled on that model entry, stick to the format.

**Don’t reinvent wheels**

As you’re making decisions about the content and style of your model entry, don’t reinvent the wheel. Look at books comparable to yours, and when you seem something you like, use it. If you’re working on a bibliography, look at acclaimed bibliographies and use them as models. If your project is a thematic catalog, pull six or seven off the shelf and take notes on what works well and how you might adapt their style and organization to your own project. No one is working in a vacuum. We’re always building on what others have done before us, and the key is to build on the best.

**Accuracy**

Although you might be under pressure to meet your deadline, don’t submit your final manuscript until you are satisfied that it represents your best work. Don’t submit a piece of work that you know contains careless errors. When an editor comes across lazy typographical errors and errors of fact, the editor’s confidence collapses, and everything about the manuscript becomes suspect. This isn’t a good feeling for an editor to have about the work of an author, and it isn’t good for an author to have an editor who is full of doubt.

**Consistency**

If you’re going to make errors, though, be sure you make them consistently. Emerson said that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, but when it comes to preparing a manuscript, there are no foolish consistencies. Any consistency is preferred over inconsistency. You can search and replace something that is consistently done wrong.

**Communication**

And of course, you will deliver your manuscript on time, because all authors meet their deadlines. If you can’t, though, you should let the editor know as soon as possible. Don’t wait for the editor’s email asking where the manuscript is. Once it’s clear you can’t meet a deadline, do the right thing and write or call the editor. It’s possible the editor has blocked out time to work with the manuscript, and plans will need to be made for the delay.

**The ultimate reward**

After your manuscript is submitted, it’s copyedited to make sure the content and format meet house style. This process can sometimes be painful for both the editor and author, but after that, when the copyedited manuscript goes to the typesetter
and you get the first proofs a few weeks later, you start seeing the rewards of all your work. In the proofs, you see the book taking its final shape. Within another few weeks, you receive a package in the mail. There's nothing like the experience of opening that package, holding the book in your hands, and flipping slowly through the pages. It's the ultimate reward for all of your hard work.