

MEETING WITH PUBLISHERS: SECRETS TO SUCCESS

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The Conference of Ford Fellows offers attendees an amazing opportunity: time to sit down face-to-face with a publisher to discuss your project. These meetings are crucial, and they are recommended for all Fellows who plan to publish a book. In order to maximize the potential of these appointments, you must take time to prepare for the meeting.

1. When is the “right” time to meet with a publisher?

While publishers at the conference have historically met with Ford Fellows at multiple stages of their careers, you will most likely find the meeting most useful if you have some sense of your project's central argument and intervention. This means that for most predoctoral Fellows, or for dissertation Fellows who are just beginning to write their dissertation, instead of meeting one-on-one with a publisher, you should attend the panel on book publication if you just want learn about the process of publishing a book. If you're well into your dissertation, or if you are already working with your book manuscript, these meetings are invaluable opportunities to establish contact with publishers who are already excited by Ford Fellows' research.

2. How do I sign up to meet with a publisher?

Appointments are only available for sign-up online.

3. What happens during these meetings?

You will have fifteen minutes to introduce yourself and to tell the publisher about your project, why you think their press should be interested in your work, and where you are in terms of process. *Ideally, these should be conversations. They are not formal, memorized presentations. They are not examinations.* Remember that you are the author of an interesting and exciting book project. As you converse with your publisher, think of them as an interlocutor, as someone who can ideally help you think about how you might improve your work even as they recognize its potential. So you should absolutely try to get a sense of whether or not you would like to work with this press.

4. How do I prepare for the meeting?

Before you meet with the publisher, practice the following:

- Talk about your project with three different audiences:
 - Someone who is familiar with your general field (literature rather than twentieth century African American literature)
 - Someone who is an academic but in an unrelated field
 - Someone who is not an academic.
 Practicing with these three audiences will help you describe your work in a way that is interesting and accessible. Ask them to give you feedback. What did they find most interesting? When did they lose interest? What needed clarification?
- Think about what originally excited you.

After you've been working on your project for some time, it is often difficult to maintain excitement about your work. Often, writers are so familiar with their own arguments and analyses that they lapse into jargon or assume that their listeners do not need critical background information. Try to tap into what drew you to your project in the first place, and perhaps use that as inspiration for describing your work. Think about why your work is new and innovative, and speak with confidence.
- Think about the ever-important “why?”

It's a huge question, and one that you've undoubtedly thought about for some time. So practice talking about why your work matters.

You might look to two resources for help with framing your work:

- The introductions of books that you see as models of innovative and important work
- Books about the transition from dissertation to book (I recommend William Germano's *From Dissertation to Book* or Eric Hayot's *The Elements of Academic Style*).

After you've signed up for appointments:

- Find time to research each press.
Examine the press's website and its lists (the catalog of books it has already published and books that are forthcoming). Pay special attention to books that have been published in your field. You should be able to situate your project in conversation with these other books. How does your work build upon this foundation? How does it expand upon or complement the press's list? Does the press have a special series that is of particular interest to you? Try to connect your work to specific authors and titles, and if you think your book fits into a series, be able to explain why. It's even better if you can connect your project to books that have garnered widespread interest or that have sold well.

- Have a sense of your timeline.

Publishers will want to know how much you've completed and where you are with your process.

5. What happens at the end of the meeting?

The meeting will often end with a discussion of next steps. What happens after the meeting will depend largely upon where you are with your manuscript. If you're writing a dissertation, don't be surprised if the publisher tells you that they will want to wait until after you've filed the dissertation, have time to reflect on the manuscript, and have completed a significant amount of revision before sending them any material.

6. Should I bring anything with me to the meeting?

Some people do share a brief abstract of their project (not a full proposal or a full-length sample of writing) and a CV, but it isn't necessary to do so (I have always been able to email a CV and project description when invited to do so by the editor).

7. What if my dream press isn't at the conference?

Meeting with publishers is still a worthwhile venture, even if your dream press isn't in attendance. You may find a press that is a better fit for you and your work. You will also certainly benefit from discussing your project with others.

8. What if my dream press is at the conference but is completely booked?

If you don't end up formally meeting with the publisher from your dream press, do make the effort to contact them and to introduce yourself.

9. What should I do after the conference has ended?

- Email the publishers and thank them for meeting with you.
- Remind them, briefly, of your manuscript's title and subject matter, and of your timeline.
- If applicable, follow up on any "next steps" suggested by the publisher.
- Lay the foundation for meeting with the publisher again. Don't forget this crucial step; it's important to keep up contact as you work with your revisions.