

## University Presses, an option for authors.

(Cool fact: They do not at all expect you to have an agent.)

I edited a small university press for a few years, but I also attended several annual meetings of the Association of University Presses, and I have the tote bags to prove it. (I even attended four times since the days when I was a member, and only got thrown out once.) Maybe one of these would be the right place for you to send some of your own work. Here are some observations to help you decide.

First, one of the moist memorable lines from the many panel discussions I attended over the years:

“There is for-profit publishing, and there is not-for-profit publishing, but there is no such thing as for-loss publishing.”

University publishers are not charities. They’ll consider your manuscript only if they can feel pretty confident they will recoup the cost of its production, plus some of the cost of keeping the doors open. And that cost is usually modest. Staff salaries are much lower than in the for-profit world, the university typically provides working space and utilities, and press runs and expectations tend to be small.

Here’s how to help an editor decide if your work might be something he or she wants.

**Send your work to the right place.** Harvard and Toronto and the like publish everything, but they get thousands of submissions so they are not likely to look at yours. Nearly all the other presses operate in a few narrow niches. Send your stuff only to places that publish material very much like yours.

At WVU Press we did Appalachia, naturally, and especially regional labor studies and history because a couple of our distinguished professors were active in that world. I have a presence in regional folk music, so we published some archival fiddle and singing recordings. I knew who wanted these and how to spread the word, so investing in these projects was safe for us.

Our first two novels, under our “Vandalia” imprint, were certain winners, too. Lee Maynard’s *Crum*, a coming-of-age story set in a very real town in southern Wayne County, West Virginia, (my home) was a true cult classic ripe for republication. Used copies of the 1985 original were scarce and costly, and 15 years later any mention of the book was likely to stir up strong emotions. In the introduction to the new edition, Meredith Sue Willis praised Maynard’s work in terms like “scatological” and “misogynistic.” Our second novel was Meredith Sue’s *Oradell at Sea*, another safe investment because of the author’s reputation in the state, her ongoing prominence, and the book’s strong regional ties.

WVU Press has reached into other areas of fiction and poetry, primarily continuing in the Appalachian regional vein, or in an area in which the author’s reputation ensures some visibility. An “over-the-transom” proposal from an unknown author would receive some serious consideration if it fits snugly into the same space as one of WVU’s current offerings.

The work would be even more likely to merit a second and third look if it is presented properly. Here's how to do that.

On the publisher's web site, see if they prefer electronic (probably) or paper (still possibly) communication. Learn the actual name of the editor, and address yourself to him or her. Here's a template. Just fill in the blanks.

\_\_\_\_, editor, \_\_\_\_ Press

Dear \_\_\_\_

Please take a moment to look at the attached/enclosed sample of my novel/essay collection/whatever, "The Title." I am submitting it to your press because your recent publication of (name some books very, very much like yours from this publisher) suggest that "The Title" might be a natural addition to an area in which you have had such success. Specifically (detailed details of how you work appeals to the readers of the books you mentioned.)

Anything else about why they won't lose money on you. Previous publications. Standing in some group, like me among folk music people, or a college writing teacher or president of a writing group, or a local personality of some sort.

I have enclosed/attached Chapter One and Chapter (Another Chapter, poem, essay, whatever). I will gladly send more. The entire work is (complete/nearly complete/will be completed by date 1/1/1111), and will total approximately XXX,000 words. I have included other technical details along with the samples.

\_\_\_\_ Press is the only place I have submitted "The Title," and I have no current plans to submit it anywhere else.

**OR** I am submitting "The Title" to multiple publishers.

Thank you so much for your time.

sign

Notice that you did not assess the quality of the work, or what kind of editorial help it might or might not need. No "I've run spell check" or "I've had an editor help with it." (Though you should.)

On the details sheet:

- Number of words and chapters.
- Any illustrations, graphs, maps, etc.? Details.
- Any non-Roman characters? (Math symbols, foreign words to be italicized, etc. Little drawings of assholes like Vonnegut used?) Details.
- Any quoted writing, song, movie lines, etc., and whether you have obtained permission. (Probably not, but publishers are happy if you've done this.)
- Any actual people, places, products, or events mentioned. (Not likely a problem, but good to know.)