

# Book Proposals: What do publishers want?

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My guest is Carolyn Hayes Uber, who is president of Stephens Press, LLC in Las Vegas, Nevada. Stephens Press is a small regional publisher and has been in existence since 2002. They have published about 100 titles since the company's inception.

**SC: As an acquisitions editor what do you absolutely hate to see and what do you love to see, in terms of the query/proposal?**

**CHU:** *We're a small publisher so I think we're easier to submit to, but as hard as anywhere to get a "yes" unless the author has a good platform, something amazingly unique, a good FIT for us, connections or money attached (a sponsor).*

*Hate:*

- ❖ *Submissions reeking of smoke or cats.*
- ❖ *Misspellings, typos—is this the BEST you can do?*
- ❖ *Something totally unsuited to us - clearly sent to dozens if not hundreds of publishers with no consideration for what we publish.*
- ❖ *No cover letter or one with no personality.*
- ❖ *Arrogance.*
- ❖ *Ignorance of the pub world, such as saying "EVERYONE will love this book, the entire world is my target audience" or my marketing plan is for the publisher to post billboards across the country and book me on Oprah.*

*Love:*

- ❖ *Neat, readable, clean package (you'd be surprised what messy packages arrive)*
- ❖ *Cover letter with some personality that suggests they know something about Stephens Press.*
- ❖ *An incredible platform—creds, contacts, media, speaker etc.*
- ❖ *Writing that sucks me in without my noticing (I'm always resisting, I have too much to do, so if I find I'm actually **READING**, not skimming, I must be hooked.)*
- ❖ *A really unique hook, angle or subject.*

**SC: Please explain further what you mean by "platform" does this mean a following? Or does it mean something else?**

**CHU:** *A "platform" is everything the author brings to the table to help the publisher market and sell books. The stronger and more "spot on" the platform, the more a publisher's confidence will increase that the book will sell-through with enough units to make money.*

- ❖ *Platform can include credentials and credibility (what qualifies the author to write about the subject?) and what is the author's reach as an "expert"? This applies, in some cases, to fiction as well as non-fiction. For example, a police detective that investigates identity theft cases—and writes a novel centered around identity theft—will be of interest to publishers because he/she is an expert who can do interviews and speaking engagements on the subject, which will help sell the book.*

- ❖ *A previously published author may have a fan base and that is huge! Likewise, they may have a blog and/or website with documented high levels of visitors.*
- ❖ *Other platform items can include being “known” in one’s community, maybe through offices held, charitable endeavors, etc. and/or being “known” in one’s career field. The higher the profile the better. Having experience or being in-demand as a speaker is highly desired. Ditto for regular media interviews.*
- ❖ *Other published writings, from op-ed pieces to being in anthologies are good. Contributor of articles to magazines, websites etc. Freelancer (or staffer) on newspaper or newsletters.*
- ❖ *Author will also get props if the publisher feels they have the personality and poise to handle themselves well with media, speaking ops etc.*
- ❖ *Is the author bringing any known “names” with the project—blurbers or foreword writers of note?*
- ❖ *Does the author have the kind of contacts that assure publicity - excerpts, features, interviews?*
- ❖ *The other, non-quantifiable quality that the publisher will assess is the fire and drive and determination of the author. Do they have a passion to see this through and find success?*
- ❖ *Unfortunately, many writers would rather just write! Or feel, with some rightful indignation, that it ought to be about the WRITING. That the writing needs to be good is a given. With 400,000 new titles a year, most of which never make money, to expect any publisher to invest in a manuscript without an author who understands the writing is only half the picture, is shortsighted.*

**SC: Have you ever turned someone down but given direction as to what changes might make you say yes? If so, did they resubmit?**

**CHU:** *Yes, I have made considerable recommendations, particularly related to positioning. I am most interested in how to appeal to a specific audience. Sometimes the author thinks their target is A, but it might have a better chance with B.*

**SC: How many people actually query first before sending you their manuscript?**

**CHU:** *I would say I probably get 75% manuscripts and 25% queries. I don’t really care. I probably am more likely to read the MS and less likely to ask for the MS from a query. I don’t like giving people false hope.*

**SC: That’s both encouraging and discouraging. It costs more to send out the full MSS than a smaller query/proposal. So do you think that writers are more confused than ever since the submissions procedures vary so much with publishers and agents all over the country? (Hint, I am!)**

**CHU:** *Yeah, I hear you. We DO accept email submissions, so the cost factor doesn’t apply, but not all publishers do. Yes, I think it is confusing, too. There’s no Submission Commission to establish “rules”—just industry practices, which seem to vary widely.*

**SC: I notice on SP’s submissions guidelines there are no stated genres or preferences for either fiction or non-fiction. Why?**

**CHU:** *We state in our description of Stephens Press that we primarily publish non-fiction. Our submission guidelines were written when we first started and are sadly out of date—like many other things, I merely need the time to get to it, for a revision.*

**SC:** **For a novice writer—perhaps a first time author—how important is it to submit clips or other samples in-addition to a proposal/query?**

**CHU:** *Well, we have to see some ability to write! If the proposal/query doesn't include a sample chap, then we've not much to go on.*

**SC:** **If you've turned down a project in the past from a writer, and they submit something else, are you more or less likely to give it a thorough review process?**

**CHU:** *We look at every submission and unless the author reminds us, or has an unusually memorable name, we might not even remember they've submitted something else previously.*

**SC:** **Or I guess I am asking if you encourage writers to keep submitting to you once you've passed on them?**

**CHU:** *We look at each submission individually. Subsequent submissions aren't going to get points added or subtracted because the author has previously submitted.*

**SC:** **I've heard both sides about resubmitting the same work with changes... Can you comment on resubmitting same or different material?**

**CHU:** *If it is just a resubmission, I'd be annoyed to have to process the same work twice. If it has changes, I'd expect the cover letter to explain what was changed and why—especially if we'd made suggestions that prompted the changes. There's a submission we got a couple of years ago, that we turned down. The author has turned up frequently at events where I'm speaking, and introduced herself. She's resubmitted, using information from my talks to improve the work. She's very cheerful about her lack of knowledge, but determined to learn how to do it right. Meanwhile, her submission is getting better, and while we're not to a "yes" yet, I appreciate her efforts. Maybe, someday . . .*

**SC:** **Why do you think it is so hard to profitably market literary works? Or do you agree that the book world has been significantly "dumbed down"?**

**CHU:** *Don't get me started! I think it has to do with the fundamental way that retailing in general works in our country today. Where do most people buy their books? The average American that buys books (which is certainly not the entire population) purchases them at Wal-Mart, Target, Costco, and Sam's Club. How many literary works do you see on those shelves? Publishers are loathe to take big risks, which is why they'd rather publish and promote a "star" author with a formula book than two dozen fresh new voices. Outside of the pre-selected "bestsellers" from the NY houses, most books published in the United States never earn out their advance (if there was one), sell on average fewer than 500 copies, and never make a dime of profit. So, for the big houses, it is the mega-sellers that carry the freight of their operations. For smaller independent presses, they have to choose what they publish VERY carefully, and many*

factors come into play. Great writing alone will not do it. To hear my opinions on this subject in depth, check out my interview, *Publishing 101*, on [The Writing Show](#).

**SC: Does the very defined and “enforced” genre pigeonholing of new authors make it easier or harder to publish books profitably when they don’t exactly fit in a specific mould?**

**CHU:** *That can be frustrating, be it fiction or non-fiction. The first question by every bookstore buyer or distributor’s rep is what shelf does it go on and how crowded is that shelf already? Does this book bring enough to the table to kick another book off the shelf to make room? I’ve seen buyers dismiss a book on the spot (never so much as crack open the cover) because the shelf category isn’t instantly clear. We have a new book by a well-known basketball coach on leadership. Is it a business book? A sports book? A perfect solution is to put a few on the shelves in both sections of the store, but we can’t make that happen.*

**SC: Should a new writer try to stick to a genre if they’ve never yet published a book?**

**CHU:** *If the writer is still learning and honing the craft (which should actually be a lifelong passion) then how will they know what genre resonates with them unless they try on different ones? Once an author is published, especially fiction with a big house (NY), their publisher will want more of the same. In that respect, the author needs to build their career within a single genre. Stephen King had to write horror. He couldn’t jump all over the place. However, once you reach the level of a Stephen King, you can write whatever you wish (he has a great book out on writing, called, *On Writing*). Big money authors generally stick to their genre (and often as a series, same characters) but many very happy writers work on many different subjects. We’ve just published a book, [DAMN THE REJECTIONS, FULL SPEED AHEAD: The Bumpy Road to Getting Published](#) by Maralys Wills. Wills is a genre-hopper! She’s been published a dozen times, by big houses and indie presses, fiction and non-fiction. She’s also a 20+ years college teacher of novel writing and her students have been published hundreds of times.*

**SC: Without revealing too much about particulars, what are some of the funniest (either ha ha, or peculiar) submissions you received?**

**CHU:** *Well, yesterday brought a non-fiction submission about a man who claims the government has installed an invisible-in-sunlight pyramid on his property that he discovered after acquiring night-vision goggles! There is something about delusional, paranoid and conspiracy theory types that encourages them to write—a lot! We regularly get massive manuscripts from these folks. We get our share of “I was framed” submissions from prisoners. Just received a manuscript on how to have an affair and never get caught. We get many memoirs, which are a tough category. I personally enjoy memoirs, but unless there is a celebrity factor, they don’t sell beyond one’s circle of family and friends. A respected writing coach asked me to meet with a cookbook author—who showed up at our meeting with a plate of lobster filled endive leaves. His book, [WILL COOK FOR SEX: A Guy’s Guide to Cooking](#), is one of our bestsellers.*

**SC: Have you had to pass on projects that you really, really wish you could publish? If so, why did you have to pass, and what advice could you offer for them to get a yes either with you or somewhere else?**

*CHU: Oh, absolutely. The thing I wish authors would understand is that often a rejection isn't a rejection of the author or their work, but it just doesn't work for the publisher. I don't know why authors seem to think we have unlimited resources and if we like their book, we should just publish it! First and foremost, we have to be confident we can SELL it in sufficient numbers to not lose money. If we primarily publish books on widgets and market to widget-buyers, then a good widget book (that is unique and different from other widget books) will be of interest to us. If the widget author has creds, a following, a speaking schedule (platform) all the better in getting to a yes. When a gadget book comes along, we might like it, even love it, but how do we sell it? We're not plugged in to the gadget buyers industry. When appropriate, I've referred books that don't fit us to publishers who I know might be interested, or I've suggested a category of publishers to the author.*

**SC: (CHU:) Please fill in the following: Acquisitions are the frustrating part of my job. I cannot keep up or offer meaningful responses because the volume is overwhelming and our first priority goes to books in production and books in print and I must reject most submissions. Acquisitions are the serendipitous part of my job. I never know what might be in the next envelope because the most interesting project or a bestseller may be in tomorrow's post.**

**SC: Have the quality of the submissions gone up or down with the quantity as SP has become more well-known?**

*CHU: Actually, I was surprised at the quality of submissions from the get-go, but our association with journalism gave us some initial credibility. The quality of our books is repeatedly a factor in significant submissions and even important commissioned titles.*

**SC: Do you think that regional presses are maybe the best place for new writers to start in attempting to publish a book?**

*CHU: Regional presses often specialize, so if the writer works within that specialty, then yes. If a smaller press publishes general titles, I'd look at how many active titles they list, what are their distribution channels and the overall quality of the books? Breaking into the "big" time (ie, a contract with advance at a Random House or HarperCollins) is akin to lottery odds. Writers shouldn't overlook regional and indie presses. It is well known that smaller presses will give you and your title more attention than a big press and give your book longer to find its audience and prove itself in sales. The "New York" model generally gives your title 6-12 weeks to garner sufficient sales—if not, it is remaindered, they are on to the next big thing, and no further efforts will be made to promote you and your book.*

**SC: I've heard many times that self-publishing can be the kiss of death for ever landing a contract with a "real" publisher later on, but that seems to becoming less true. Your opinion?**

**CHU:** *There was a time when self-publishing even one title meant a big publisher would never consider you, but that thinking is going away. Certainly, a self-published author who has demonstrated significant sales would interest many publishers. There most definitely is a place for self-publishing and I occasionally suggest that route to authors. One thing that comes as a surprise is that publishers are most unlikely to take on a self-published book and republish it. To have the same title and author with two different ISBNs and publishing houses invites instant marketplace confusion. Because Amazon's "used" books channel will keep a book "findable" via search engines forever, you can't simply say this book is out of print any longer. A publisher "might" take on the self-published book and change the title, but that is a long-shot. Authors who work with POD self-publisher service providers may find their fine print relinquished the rights to their title and they can't sell their book to another publisher without an expensive buyout of the rights. Read the tiny type!*

**SC:** **Is there anything about book proposals or newbie authors that I haven't asked, or you'd like to add?**

**CHU:** *Find the best match between the publisher, you, and your book. Make sure the reasons for that match are spelled out in your submission. Put some personality in your cover letter so you seem like a "real" person to the editor. Make your own luck.*

**SC:** **Thank you Carolyn, this was great. I learned some things that I didn't know! So the moral of the story is: if you smoke, get a fresh copy of your proposal at Kinko's and mail it before you go home, and don't let your cats sleep on your manuscript.**

*Carolyn writes frequently about publishing, including tips and resources, on her blogsite at [www.carolynhayesuber.com](http://www.carolynhayesuber.com).*