

ATTRACTIVITY AND RIGHTS OF ILLUSTRATION PROJECTS
FOR INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

How to build an international project?

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NICOLAS GRIVEL

Born and raised in North Eastern France, Nicolas Grivel is a literary agent (Nicolas Grivel Agency). He began his publishing career in 2003 as a senior editor for Pika (publisher of manga - Hachette France). He now owns an agency specialized in the sale of rights (paper, digital and media) of bande dessinée, comics, graphic novels in creation and in translation around the world. The goal of Nicolas Grivel Agency is to represent and to push demanding works which make the readers think. Nicolas is casting a wide net for all kinds of graphic stories. He's also scouting comics and artists for various animations studios (as the American studio Laika during three years) and he's teaching classes in five French Universities and doing lectures in various universities (New School Parsons, Viborg, CESAN, CCS, Beijing Film Academy, and events as Hangzhou Festival, Ligatura (Poznan), Warsaw BookFair, etc. He has a Croatian cat and loves to travel.
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SAM ARTHUR

Sam Arthur is founding partner and CEO of Nobrow and Flying Eye Books. He studied Graphics at Central Saint Martins, graduating in 1998. He worked as a commercials and music video director before setting up Nobrow with business partner Alex Spiro in 2008. The company now employs 18 staff with two offices, in London and Los Angeles. Their children's books include winners of the UK's prestigious Children's Book prizes the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal and the Waterstones Picture Book Prize. Amongst their most successful projects is Hilda by Luke Pearson, now a BAFTA and Emmy winning animated series on Netflix.
nobrow.net

The lecture focus on all the steps to bring a project to the publishers. From the concept of a story to the layout of a book proposal, the workshop also gives an overview about all the key points of a contract and try to avoid toxic projects, commissions and contracts for the authors. The workshop ends with how to manage a career in comics art industry. My main goal is to show that thanks to the “globalization”, authors can work everywhere and/or bring their own story around the world. Thanks to my experience as a literary agent and scout for the animation studio Laika, I aim to bring key information for the audience.

1. Which project do I want to develop?

Which story, you would like to develop. On a career, how many projects an author can write and draw? It's hard to say but maybe between five to twenty books (Art Spiegelman has written only a few books).

How many ideas of books come out? I think much more (in general).

That's why the first part of the webinar is to see which project do you want to do, and why now? It's always good to take some time before jumping on a new project.

LITTLE TIP

It could be good to have a timeline with different projects like a hierarchy of what seems possible or not (a wish list of projects).

When the project is chosen, a book proposal has to be prepared for convincing the publishers (but not only). On this second step, I have made a mix between my experiences on the publishing industry and from animation. When I was scouting proprieties for Laika (Coraline, Kubo, Missing Link, etc.), I had to pitch a new book or an original project every week to the head of development and acquisitions of the studio. Below is how I think it's possible to persuade publishers.

First, don't forget that the editors have no idea about your project.

So, you need to introduce all the parts of the project step by step and not everything upfront. The publishing houses are surrounded by projects and your presentation has to make it simple (in a good way) for them.

The goal of a book proposal is to find someone who will invest money on your project.

2. *How to make your submission more attractive to publishers?*

The book proposal can be sent by snail mail or/and by email. If so, the presentation has to be in a one pdf. The layout of your presentation can be on the format you want for your future book. Now, we will start with all the pages of the pdf (from the first page to the last page).

A FIRST PAGE OF THE BOOK PROPOSAL

A draft of the cover

In my mind, the publishers have to imagine how your project will look like on a table of a bookstore. The cover is a summary of the interior pages. Even if it's not a final cover, it will give a first impression to the publishers.

A working title

Like for the cover, the proposal of your title can change during the creative process. Again, it needs to catch the attention of the publishers (for the book proposal).

B SECOND PAGE OF THE BOOK PROPOSAL (LEFT PAGE)

Five Sentences

The story or-and the concept have to be sum up into five sentences (no more no less). It's a good exercise to see if you control the borders of your project. Don't forget that you have to bring information of your project step by step to the publishers.

Technical information

Below the concept, it's always good to give some 'technical' information:

- **The number of pages** (it has to be a good balance between enough space to tell a story and a realistic number regarding the time and the advance you can get). It's also possible to bring a serie with volumes. Keep in mind, that the publishers are very careful and won't invest in more than two or three first volumes. If you have a first idea of ten volumes, you will have to go step by step. It will influence your way to tell a story (like an independent story in two volumes with an open ending).

- **The size and the format of your book have to be mentioned.**

If your project is in the vein of *Building Stories* by Chris Ware, it could be smart to send a book proposal via snail mail.

- **The genre of your project:** science fiction, non-fiction, documentary, etc. Be careful, if you are doing a graphic biography (of a public figure but not only), an autobiography (like *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel), a documentary (*Climate Change* by Philippe Squarzoni), etc. More and more, the publishers will ask if you have the agreements of the persons who will be in the book (on the early stage). It's a very sensitive topic and publishers are totally scared to be sued (since the French graphic novels: *Les Algues Vertes* published by Delcourt).

- **The estimate time to achieve the project is important for you and the publishers.** Again, this information has to be realistic. You have to decide the deadline. You need to keep windows of time for you. It could be for a break - vacation and also to develop other projects as commissions (which will refresh you). Be careful, it's like a marathon to develop a graphic novel. In general, a comics project is around ten to twenty-four months. The deadline can change during the creative process. It's necessary to keep the senior editor posted about a delay, an issue, etc. The lack of communication is a real problem and it's the job of an editor as well. For your information, the publishers nowadays are looking mostly for projects for their program of... 2023.

C THIRD PAGE OF THE BOOK (RIGHT PAGE)

Synopsis

It will be the synopsis in one, two or three pages. It's really the skeleton of your story. Take time to write the synopsis and it has to show the plot and the architecture of your project. After the reading of the synopsis, the editor has to understand exactly the direction of your project. No matter about the genre of your project, you have to write a detailed synopsis.

Sample pages finished comics pages

For a project of a graphic novel, I think it's good to show eight to twelve final pages. For the sample, you are not obliged to draw from page 1 to page 10. You can choose an excerpt from another part of your future book. What is important, it's to draw an appealing sample. It will show the diversity of your skills but also the constancy of the pages (don't forget for now, the publishers don't know 'your style' and the kind of art you want to use for this project). If you would, draw a sample from page 22 to page 32. It's good to explain in 5 - 10 sentences what happens before. Comics is a medium of sequences and thanks to this sample, the publishers will feel the quality of your projects, for the art and

the dialogues (if you have dialogues). It's also important to choose an art style for the sample which is doable during the whole project. If it takes you too much energy, etc, think about compromises for the sequences, the backgrounds, etc. It's the way to do of Bastien Vivès for example.

For the lettering, it's better to be close to the final results you want (it could be with a font or written by handwriting).

New sample in a storyboard form

Another sample could help the publishers to make the right decision. But time is money as well. That's why it's better to suggest another sample to follow again the characters with sequences, dialogues on a storyboard form. It's the same as for the sample page (finished), you have to choose the right sample and explain with five to ten sentences what happens before. Plus, the publishers appreciate to see how your storyboard looks like.

D ON THE NEXT PAGES AFTER THE SAMPLES

Researches for the visual identity of your project

The bible of your characters, researches of environments, characters, you can add texts to the characters of the places you want to draw. It's really like a pitch for an animation project.

Note of intention

Why you want to develop this project now. It's like the story telling between the author and their project. For a documentary, a graphic memoir, an autobiography, it's also to check (for you) if you are ready to jump on the project. Some projects can be very emotional, and you have to be careful about it. This would help the promotion department of the publishing house before the release of your book.

Your bio

In five to ten sentences, you have to talk about your background, the schools, the previous books, awards, etc. If you want, you can add (or not) a photo (with a copyright) or a drawing self-portrait.

Back cover

The pdf of your book proposal starts with a proposal of the cover and a working title. It could be good to finish it with a back cover with your contact: email, Instagram, website, etc.

Your book proposal is around 20-25 pages and it gives a strong overview of your book. You are ready to send your book proposal to the publishers. Before it, below are some tips.

SOME MISTAKES TO AVOID:

- If you prefer to wait to finish the project and to send it directly to the publishers. This could be very cruel. Again, a publishing house has to finance the creative process.
- If you would start to send the full script or-and scenario with no explanations. Even if the scenario is amazing, nobody will start to read a document of forty pages without any explanations or something that will make the publishers feel it's a powerful story. It's tricky but you have to make it simple for the publishers.
- It's better to send in a one pdf and not a confetti of files. Plus, be careful about the name of your pdf doc.

3. *Ready to bring the project, but to whom?*

You have now finished the full presentation of your project. Next step, you need to build a short list of publishers around the world. You have to decide to which publishers you want to send it. Again, there's no borders. It's better to write your book proposal into English but the language of the writing has to be the language in which you feel more comfortable (example during the webinar of Empacho by Chabela Lazo from Costa Rica signed by Nobrow).

? **TO WHICH PUBLISHERS?**

It depends on your contacts. Of course, about your taste, if you have no ideas about which publishers would be good. You have to think about where are published your favorite authors. Check this family tree of authors and see by whom they have been published. It's your basement for the contacts. It could be Fantagraphics, Avant-Verlag, Cornélius, D+Q, Dargaud, Casterman, Oblomov, Coconino, Argo, Bao Publishing, etc. Nowadays, there's no borders for projects. So, it could be brought to various territories at the same time. Meanwhile, the markets where the projects can be financed on the early stage are still the same territories: UK, North America and the French market (France, Belgium, Quebec and Swiss).

? **WHEN IS THE BEST TIME FOR SENDING A PROJECT?**

I would avoid Summertime and Christmas time. Otherwise, a project can be sent during all the year. Before Covid, we had like two seasons with Angoulême Festival, Bologna Book Fair (first semester), Comic Con of San Diego, Frankfurt Book Fair (second semester). Not anymore... Be careful, if you send your project on Monday. A senior editor is surrounded by proposals and 90% of the time, they are working on projects on the process (editing, proofing, etc.). They are spending around 10% of their time to find new projects. Better to wait the end of the week... It's also better to send your book proposal to your selection of publishers at the same time. That's why you need to be patient before to send your book proposal.

? **HOW LONG DO YOU HAVE TO WAIT FOR A FEEDBACK?**

If your project is strong, if your book proposal has been well-done and easy to get into the project. After few days, you can get first feedbacks and interests from publishers. The fear of publishers is to miss good projects. If you receive an email about your project with an interest. Be open for a discussion via zoom or a meeting at their office. But be careful, it's not a commission, if you think

their remarks are too far from the idea of your story. You have to decline it. During all the creative process, you are the one who has the final cut.

? DO I HAVE TO DRAW NEW MATERIALS IF I GOT AN INTEREST?

Normally, no. Because with the book proposal, the publishers have enough materials to make a decision. Then, they will have to finance the project. Again, be careful about sentences like: 'it's good but do more pages and we will see...' It could be very risky and a publisher has to take a risk at some points through a loyal contract.

? FIRST OFFER, WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO?

You have to take your time. In a good way, you control your project, and the final cut is always in your hands. The first offer has to show some key info like below. It's all the key points for the future contract between you and the publishing house.

Advance

Advance on royalties (how much money?). Keep in mind, how much you need to achieve the project. It cannot be a flat fee. To make it understandable, I will make an example. If you receive an offer for an advance of 10 000 Euros. If the retail price is 20 Euros and 10% for the royalties (linked on the retail price). It means you will have 2 euros on each book sold. The 10 000 Euros represent the first 5 000 copies sold. When 5001 copies will be sold, you will have recovered the advance and you will start to have royalties.

Royalties

Royalties have to be linked on retail price and not on the net receipts. It's quite often linked on the net receipts in UK and North America. Because the Lang Law doesn't exist there and it's possible to have a discount of more than 5% of your book. Do not forget to ask escalators on the royalties. For example, to have 1 or 2 points more after 10 000 copies sold, etc. The royalties are different regarding the various versions of your book: softcover, hardcover, book clubs, etc.

Duration

How many years the contract will stay alive. It could be the terms of the copyright - intellectual property (it also depends on the country of the publishing house) or ten years (which is the case for the publishers of the French union SEA: Union of independent publishers: Cornélius, 2024, L'Association, Ici Même, Presque Lune, cà & là, Atrabile, Misma, Requins Marteaux, etc.). It could be very surprising but, in my mind, the most important point about the duration is the 'exit' and how you can have your rights back. A contract is based on the availability

for the sale of your book. The publishers have to make it possible and the book can be bought by anybody, anytime. It's the key point of a contract as well. If the book is not available anymore, not matter about the duration of your contract, you can have the rights back. It could be after two, ten or fifty years. This point has to be very clear on the contract.

World rights or not

You have to know to which languages and territories, it will be.

Digital rights

In general, these rights are for 3-5 years. Because we don't know exactly how the digital publications will turn. Unfortunately, if you don't leave the digital rights in North America, it could be a deal breaker.

Audio-visual rights

It's always another contract and it really depends on the structure of the publishers. Better to wait before accepting it.

Installments for the payments of the advance

It will be also a part of negotiation. It could be in three times, divided per months, etc. it's really you who have to explain regarding your needs and the taxes you anticipate paying.

Again, with all these informations, you will have a good sense either it's a good or a bad offer. All these points are the architecture of the future first version of the contract.

? BUT DO YOU HAVE TO AGREE ON THE OFFER NOW?

No, it's better to make a competition between the publishers who were interested in your project. In this case, you have to leave two weeks to all the publishers to bring their best offer and to ask them, their marketing plan, the promotion, etc.

? AFTER TWO WEEKS?

You will have various offers and the proposal in general will be increased. Now, you can take a few days to decide which publisher would be the best for you. It's like a bid and you have to be transparent with the other publishers about it. It will help to have the best offer for the advance, royalties, duration, etc. and also to make the publishers think about the best way to promote your future book.

THE V1 OF THE CONTRACT

After your decision for the best offer, you will receive the first version of the contract. Please do not forget that your future publisher needs to make some pedagogy about all the points of your contract. If some points are unclear, it's better to ask. It's totally normal. When everything has been agreed, you are ready to sign. If you have some doubts, you can ask questions to Charte des auteurs et des illustrateurs jeunesse, SNAC, AOI, Central Vapeur and to authors as well. Do not hesitate to ask the feelings about some authors published by the same publishing house. If you have collected all the key information seen before (with the complete offer), it will be very easy to read and agree on the future contract.

- GRANT OF RIGHTS
- COPYRIGHT
- FIRST PRINT RUN - COVER PRICE - PUBLICATION
- WARRANTIES
- ROYALTIES
- ADVANCES
- PRODUCTION
- REPORTS AND PAYMENTS
- FREE COPIES
- REMAINDERS
- TERMINATION
- ASSIGNMENT
- ENTIRE AGREEMENT; AMENDMENT
- NO WAIVER
- GOVERNING LAW - JURISDICTION

4. *Working with a publishing house during the creative process.*

? **WHAT IS THE JOB OF AN EDITOR?**

The creative process will be divided in few steps during months or years (sometimes). The person who will always be here for you is your editor. From the beginning to the ok to print.

What is important is the communication. You can be late, it's fine. You can have issues on the stories, on the project, on your life, etc. you can share all the problems to the editor. They are really here to help, follow, ask you as a first reader. It's always to find a good balance between constructive and not intrusive remarks on your story.

I recommend a zoom meeting every month to talk about the ongoing pages. It's very hard to follow when there's a lack of communication. Everybody will lose energy and if there are some difficulties, it will be harder to move forward.

During the creative process, you will be introduced to the various departments (it will depend about the size of the publishing house). It will be the marketing department, the department in charge of the sale forces, the promotion department, the production department and also the art director in charge of the whole cover with you. **It's also for this that it's good to have a complete book proposal on the early stage.** Thanks to it, all the departments can be aware about the project. Which is more than important.

It's impossible to feel on an offer, on a contract how it will be during the creative process with your editor and the entire team of the publishing house. That's why it's good to **ask some feedbacks from authors about how it was for them to be published by the company you will sign for.**

5. *Strategy for your career - Important perspectives for the future*

The first contract and first book have to be seen in a long-term vision and if you can, it's good to anticipate thinking about what you will do next.

If your first project is doing well. You are happy with the work with your editor and you got a decent advance. Of course, it's maybe better to see if your first publisher would be interested in your next project (do not sign a contract with first option on your next books).

Again, you control your books and your career.

That's why you can **put in competition** your first publisher with other publishing houses for your second project. It will help you to increase your advance, royalties, etc. for your next project.

Again, for this second project, you will have to be a filter about which story do you want to develop, to make a book proposal (again, and even though you already had a publishing house for your first book). Thanks to the historical sales, the reviews, the foreign publications of your first book, it will be also a way to negotiate. Plus, a book will be also like an alive portfolio of your work for magazines, producers, festivals, advertising, etc.

The next important step is not the questions to have enough work.

It's to be able to agree or refuse about what you want to do. That's why it will be important to make a schedule of your year with various projects (book, illustrations, workshops, commissions, etc.) with this, you will have also a better idea of your income of the year. The turning point is when the royalties earned every year are starting to be strong.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the webinar is really to help you to feel more confident on your projects. Again, you control all the points of your book. I hope the presentation will give you some 'strategies' about how to build projects in various countries. Do not forget that it's only my point of view. You can pick up what could be helpful for you and adapt, adjust in your own way as well.

Believe on your project. Be your own filter. Be patient before to agree on an offer and a contract. Take the good part of the work of an editor and to be surrounded by a team of a publishing house.

Plus, do not forget that I have focus on the 'traditional' way to be published but nowadays, you can think about self-publishing your work through social media, press, crowd funding as well. There are good and bad points on it but it's another story...