

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73074-7 - Writing Successful Academic Books

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Excerpt

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PART I

Becoming an Author

CHAPTER I

Foundations

If you are reading this page, the likelihood is either that you have decided to write an academic book or that you are contemplating doing so. The decision to write a book entails a number of questions. For example: Why write? What to write? For whom? And what does one want to achieve? These are the questions this chapter is designed to answer.

WHY WRITE?

Writing a book is a serious commitment, one that is likely to require several hundred hours of your time. It is worth examining, therefore, the reasons for making that commitment. There is, after all, no shortage of other things one can do with one's time.

I suspect that many academic authors don't give much thought to the question, 'Why write?' The phrase 'publish or perish' is well established in academia and it is tempting to treat it as a sufficient answer to our question. Yet it's worth going behind this phrase and considering the question of authorial motivation in more detail. Aims vary greatly between authors. The more conscious you are of your aims, the more you can use them to guide the decisions you make as an author – and the more likely you are to achieve those aims.

Let's consider some of the typical motivations. First, there is the wish to make money. This is a motivation that academic authors often play down. As an acquisitions editor, I have often enjoyed conversations with prospective authors along the following lines:

ME: Now, we need to discuss royalty rates.

AUTHOR: Yes – though of course I'm not doing this for the money, you realise.

ME: Oh, well, in that case we can deal with this very easily. Let's just write in the contract that royalties shall be payable to me instead of you.

Strangely enough, at this point authors always decide that actually they are interested in the money after all! I should add that as an editor I rather welcome this, since it encourages commitment on the part of the author. Professionalism is welcome.

The main means by which academic authors earn an income directly from their books is the royalty. This is a payment based on the number of copies sold. It is calculated as a percentage, either of list price or net receipts. For example, if the publisher announces a list (i.e. retail) price of £30 and the author is on a royalty rate of 10 per cent of list price, the author will earn £3 for each copy sold. If, on the other hand, the royalty rate is 10 per cent of net receipts, the author will earn 10 per cent of whatever the publisher receives from the sale of the book. Suppose, for instance, the retailer buys the book from the publisher at 50 per cent discount: the publisher will receive, in this example, £50 and the author will therefore earn £5. (Not surprisingly, the percentage rates that publishers offer on list price royalties tend to be lower than those that they offer on a net receipt basis.)

Sometimes publishers will offer a fee rather than a royalty. This arrangement is most common in reference publishing, where a large project such as an encyclopaedia may have hundreds, or even thousands, of contributors and royalty payments would be complicated. From the author's point of view, the payment of a fee instead of a royalty is likely to prove attractive in the short term, offering payment – possibly of quite a reasonable sum – early in the process, but less attractive long term (precisely because the fee is a one-off payment).

In addition, authors may earn money from their books through the sale of subsidiary rights. For example, a newspaper or magazine may pay for the right to publish extracts from the book. This is known as serialisation. The proceeds are usually split between the publisher and the author according to percentages stipulated in the publishing contract. Serialisation rights can be substantial: in the case of national publications, sums running to four or five figures are not unusual. For academics, these are most likely to accrue in the case of 'trade crossover' books – that is, books that originate from academic work but cross over into a more general consumer market.

A more common source of subsidiary rights earnings from academic books is the sale of translation rights. An Anglophone publisher may, for example, sell to another publisher the right to translate into another language. Payment usually comes in the form of a royalty, again split between the original publisher and the author.

The sums involved in translation rights are often small. Most of the deals that I have been involved in have yielded a few hundred dollars, split equally between publisher and author. However, such payments often provide authors with a welcome bonus. After all, they usually require no additional input from the author, beyond the original writing of the book, and often arrive out of the blue, long after the book has been written. It can be surprising which languages books get translated into. Several books that I've worked on have been translated into eastern European languages in territories with small populations. Authors of academic books often derive as much satisfaction from the knowledge that their books are being read internationally as they do from the earnings that follow.

In addition to payments from publishers, in the form of royalties, fees, and subsidiary rights, authors may earn an income from secondary rights. This source of income is not as well known as it should be. It comprises royalty payments for such activities as photocopying or broadcasting a work, sometimes occurring years or even decades after the work was originally published. Typically, such sums are collected centrally by a national body and then distributed to authors, provided they subscribe to the collecting organisation. Such arrangements now operate in dozens of countries. If you are a published author, I recommend that you consider subscribing and registering your works: you may well find you are already entitled to some money! The relevant organisation in the UK is the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS). US residents may also register with ALCS. Details of organisations in other territories may be obtained from the International Confederation of Societies for Authors and Composers (CISAC) and International Federation of Reproduction Rights Organisations (IFRRO).

In addition to direct earnings, academics often derive an income from authorships indirectly. Having one's book published may lead, for example, to invitations to speak, appear in the media, or write articles. It is not at all unusual for such income to amount to more

than the direct earnings from the book itself. If being published leads to an offer of consultancy projects or perhaps even a better job, the return (in terms of lifetime earnings) on your investment (i.e. the hours spent writing the book) may be very high indeed. Even if financial remuneration is not your main motivation, it does no harm to be alert to the opportunities.

A very different kind of motivation is altruism. When Lord Reith was Director General of the BBC, he believed that its mission was to ‘inform, educate, and entertain’. That famous phrase – especially the first two-thirds of it – encapsulates the mission of many academic authors too. In book proposals, such a mission may be expressed either in positive form – an author may wish to publish their research findings in order to stimulate more enlightened public policy, for example – or more negatively (in terms of, say, demythologising a subject or exposing fallacies or inconsistencies in conventional wisdom). Either way, the desire to enlighten is certainly a common motivation in academic authorship.

Altruism and the desire for financial gain are often spoken of as if they stood at opposite ends of a spectrum. Indeed, they’re sometimes seen as incompatible: mammon is suspected of corrupting the desire to enlighten. Yet this need not be the case. Often, in fact, the two motivations are not merely compatible, but mutually reinforcing. After all, a book for which there is no market is no use to anyone: however much wisdom it may contain, it will go to waste if the book goes unread. In contrast, a highly marketable book may enlighten many readers.

Another common motivation to write is the desire to learn. Publishing an academic book provides the author with a variety of learning opportunities. In the first place, the author learns through the process of composition. Often, it’s while actually writing that one learns what it is one wants to say. Second, one learns from having one’s book published something about the way that the publishing industry works. One may learn, for example, about processes, such as proofreading and indexing, and about the work of others, such as copy-editors and designers. This knowledge, which authors sometimes find interesting itself, may be applied in one’s subsequent work as an author and in mentoring colleagues who are new to the business of publishing. Finally, and often most importantly, one learns from

feedback from readers – formally, through reviews and critiques, and informally, through comments and personal communications. As an author, you learn, bracingly, about the errors and weaknesses in one's work; you learn too, frustratingly but usefully, about the way people misunderstand your work; and you learn about what people find interesting in your work. This may prove stimulating: what other people find interesting might be neither what interested you nor what you had thought would interest your readers.

A different kind of motivation is the desire to raise one's esteem. Being published at someone else's expense provides evidence that someone else, besides yourself, regards your work as valuable – valuable enough to invest thousands of pounds and many hours of attentive labour. It also provides visible, tangible, evidence of achievement to those around you who might not be part of the academic world – your partner, parents, children, and so on.

There are qualitative and quantitative components to the esteem that derives from authorship. The former result from the quality of your work and of your publisher. The higher the publisher's standards – especially in terms of commissioning, editing, and book production – the greater the esteem. The quantitative aspect of authorial esteem results from the number of readers that your book attracts. That too is a product of both your own labours and the publisher's.

To such esteem should be added that of another kind, namely self-esteem. Many authors derive a good, old-fashioned, sense of satisfaction from seeing their name in print on the cover of the product of a reputable press. I vividly recall the thrill on seeing a copy of my first book, published by A&C Black, for the first time. Though it may not be on a par with getting married or becoming a parent, I'd certainly rate the experience right at the top of the second division.

A further motivation for authors, one closely connected to that of raising esteem, is the desire to develop one's career. The significance of book authorship on an academic CV varies considerably between countries and between disciplines. In some systems, in some disciplines, book authorship is a more or less formal requirement for tenure, featuring as either 'desirable' or 'essential' in the list of criteria used by appointment committees. In many other contexts, the contribution of authorship to one's prospects is less formal, but nonetheless positive. A book can provide direct, readily obtainable,

evidence of your productivity and scholarship. In addition, it can help to get your name known even amongst those who have not read your book. Sometimes, indeed, it is the magnum opus in the form of a heavyweight book that secures for its author a prestigious chair.

There may, then, be many reasons why you might wish to write an academic book: you may wish, directly or indirectly, to make money; to spread enlightenment; to learn more; to raise your esteem; or to enhance your career prospects. And the fact that good reasons exist for wanting to write academic books leads to one final reason. It is certainly the case that if, as an academic author, you wish to be published, it helps considerably if you have been published before. One good reason for writing one academic book, therefore, is simply that it helps you win a publishing contract for the next one.

WHAT TO WRITE

The question of what to write is in part a question of content. That is, it may in part be answered by considering which topics you will cover, which questions you will seek to answer, which data you will include, etc. But the question of what to write requires decisions not only about content, but also about genre. As an acquisitions editor I have read countless book proposals from academic authors. Very few of them have failed to tell me enough about the proposed contents of their books. Many of them, however, have failed to make clear what genre the authors thought the books in question belonged to. When I have pursued this matter, I have found that on occasion this is a matter of oversight – the author is clear what genre the proposed book belongs to but has failed to provide an explicit statement, perhaps in the belief that the fact is self-evident. But on other occasions I've found that the reason authors have failed to clarify the question of genre in their proposals is that they are not clear about it themselves.

Let's get clear why genre matters. Genre is what might be called a 'macro-level' description of a piece of writing. It is a description of what type of work we are dealing with. We might say of a certain book that it is, for example, a 'monograph' or a 'reader'. Each genre is characterised by a set of conventions. These conventions are not hard-and-fast rules. They are, rather, guidelines, corresponding to

the expectations that users – whether readers, editors, librarians, or indeed authors – bring to the work.

Decisions about genre tend to be powerful. Suppose an author is trying to decide whether a putative book is best thought of as a monograph, aimed at scholarly readers, or a popular book, aimed at the consumer book market. Once the decision over genre has been made, the author will find that many other authorial decisions immediately become clearer. For example:

- What level should the argument be pitched at?
- Who am I writing for?
- How much knowledge on the part of the reader may I assume?
- How formal should the style be?
- How much jargon can I use?
- What tone should I use?
- How much data should I include?
- How many footnotes and references should I provide?

Clarity about genre is, then, a helpful thing for an author to have: it makes the book more writable.

Let us, briefly, survey the major academic genres. When I was working as a publishing director for a company that published several hundred titles a year, I decided to categorise the output by genre. I found that the majority of titles could be distributed into four categories, namely (a) reference works, (b) monographs, (c) adoptables, and (d) trade books. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Reference works are typically texts that are designed to be consulted every now and then, rather than read through from cover to cover. They include encyclopaedias, bibliographies, and dictionaries. The main organising principle in reference works is usually neither narrative nor argument: principles such as alphabetical order, chronology or logical hierarchy are used instead. Usually what we might call the architecture of the work is made very explicit. Though reference works vary considerably in length, they are often very long. Partly for that reason, they tend to be written by teams of contributors – often scores or even hundreds. These days it is rare for an academic reference work to be published only in print. It is likely to be published electronically as well – or, as is increasingly the case, in electronic format alone. Reference works can be expensive. Prices running to

several hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars are not uncommon. Typically, libraries constitute the main market for academic reference works.

A good, indeed wonderful, example of such a work is the 2004 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The print version runs to sixty volumes. Written by over 10,000 contributors, it includes well over 50,000 biographical articles. The print edition is organised alphabetically and has retailed at US\$6,500 (though, at the time of writing, the publisher is experimenting with a reduced price). The online edition, which continues to grow as new articles are added, is sold on subscription. It is searchable in numerous ways (for example by person's name, place name, or key word).

Not all reference works are published on such a monumental scale. In recent years there has been a burgeoning of single-volume 'soft reference' titles published in series. For example, Blackwell and Cambridge University Press each publish extensive series of 'companions', whilst Oxford University Press publishes a series of 'hand-books'. Books in these series typically consist of hundreds rather than thousands of pages, and the paperback editions at least are priced for individual purchase (usually well under £100).

A second genre in academic publishing is the monograph. The term 'monograph' is difficult to define. Originally, it referred to a treatise in natural history devoted to an account of a single species, genus, or class of natural object. During the nineteenth century the meaning of the term began to broaden. In particular, it started to cross disciplines. Now the term means something more like 'a treatise or study of a specialised kind'. In academia the term is sometimes used to mean no more than a free-standing essay. Universities occasionally produce 'monograph' series comprising photocopied works each of twenty pages or so, either stapled or ring-bound. Usually, however, 'monograph' refers to something more substantial. Most monographs published in book form come in somewhere near the middle of the 50,000- to 100,000-word range. Monographs are written by, and usually for, scholars, researchers, or professional experts. The hallmark of a monograph is specialist expertise. Without that, a monograph is no sort of book at all.

Monographs are a staple of academic book publishing. Many scholars have begun their book publishing careers with books derived

from their doctoral dissertations. Some sign off their careers with monographs condensing a lifetime of learning devoted to a single field. Books in this genre are usually published in hardback and/or as e-books. Sometimes there is a paperback too, perhaps published subsequently. For hardbacks and e-books, prices of close to, or over, £100 are common. The library sector is an important market for such books.

A third genre (or, we shall see, group of genres) consists of adoptables. You may well not have encountered this term as a noun before. The *OED* does not list it as such, and I rather hope I may lay claim to coining it. By 'adoptable', I mean a book that is suitable for adoption by lecturers. That is, a book that is recommended to students for use on an academic course.

The most obvious form of adoptable is the textbook. The *OED* defines a 'text-book' as: 'A book used as a standard work for the study of a particular subject; now usually one written specially for this purpose; a manual of instruction in any science or branch of study, esp. a work recognized as an authority'.

This definition feels slightly jaded. For current usage, 'recommended' might be happier than 'standard'. One virtue of the definition, however, is that it is wide enough to encompass many sorts of text, including both (a) standard editions (such as the texts of classic works in philosophy published by Hackett) and (b) expository works. The latter include such famous texts as *Economics* by Paul Samuelson, *Business Accounting* by Frank Wood, and *Principles Of Marketing* by Philip Kotler. The hallmark of this latter type is clear, well-organised, expository prose. This may be accompanied, to a greater or lesser extent, by pedagogical apparatus, such as statements of desired learning outcomes, case studies, questions, exercises and activities, and guidance on further study. The modern era has seen a trend towards greater provision of such features. Where the pedagogical apparatus predominates, as in many English-as-a-foreign-language texts, the term 'coursebook' is usually preferred.

The *OED*'s definition also recognises that not all textbooks are purpose-written. Some books get adopted simply because they are the most appropriate available. This happens most in fields that are relatively new or small. In tourism studies, for example, some of the books published by Channel View that might normally be regarded