

So You Want Your Dissertation to Be a Book

M. Kathryn Armistead, PhD, Publisher, GBHEM Publishing

Ten Things Editors Want Authors to Know

1. Anyone can benefit from having a good editor.
2. The book is not for you. It's for the reader.
3. Let Narcissus be a warning. Don't fall in love with your own words.
4. Lean and clear writing is better than fluffy and obscure.
5. Your editor wants you to have the best book possible.
6. Sometimes there is no market for even a good idea.
7. Use jargon and trendy phrases sparingly. If in doubt, don't.
8. Logical flow helps the reader follow your storyline.
9. Readers will remember your stories but not your points.
10. Writing is a skill. With practice you can do it. Reread #1.

Making Your Dissertation a Book

We applaud anyone who finishes a dissertation. Chances are that you spent years of your life trying to please, and perhaps appease, your dissertation committee. And after you pass your oral exam—a modern hazing ritual— you are admitted into the club and welcomed as a peer. These are no small accomplishments, we hope you take time to celebrate.

It is also true that having achieved this goal, you may not be able to open any book in your subject area or any book for a long time. And it is not uncommon for depression to set in, the let-down can be massive. But after a season, or two, very likely, you will look at your dissertation and think, "I bet that could be a good book." There is reason for this belief, after all, that is what a dissertation is supposed to be—publishable. And it may be, but not yet.

Yes, you have worked years and spent untold resources to complete your dissertation. Yes, you now have a PhD added to your name. And yes, your faculty may encourage you and even tell you that you should publish your dissertation. And yes, you probably have examples of those people who have published their dissertations. But you may not know that, most likely, your dissertation is not publishable in its current form.

Still you persist in thinking that there is merit to your constructive work—something that should be broadcast to the wider community— important, vital things everyone ought to know. All that may be true; however, if you want to turn your dissertation into a book—and it is doable; I (Kathy) did it—there is a process.

Like you, when I finished my dissertation, I believed it would be helpful for others. I wouldn't have written it the way I did if I had thought otherwise. From the beginning I crafted my dissertation to be marketable, or so I believed. Fortunately, a wise editor came to my rescue and helped me understand what to do and how to do it. The process begins with getting some distance.

1. Getting Distance

After you've finished your dissertation, you may feel exhilarated or you may be sick of the subject. In either case, the first thing you need to do is take a step back. This may mean putting your dissertation on the shelf for six months or a year. In any event, getting distance will take longer than you think. With distance will come objectivity, something you are going need in order to make substantive changes to your dissertation—oh, yes, you will have to make changes.

Remember that your dissertation was written to please your dissertation committee—usually only three or four people. In addition, the primary purpose of the dissertation was to fulfill a requirement for graduation. A book is for more than gatekeepers; you are writing to many, many more people, most of whom have never read much of what you have, even in your own field. And now that you have your degree, know that you have earned the right to have an opinion. Claim your authority. There is no need to footnote every thought or assertion. There is no need for lengthy quotes from experts. You are the expert.

It is obvious, but if you want your dissertation to become a book, you need a publisher.

2. Choosing a Publisher Depends on Your Audience

How do you decide which publisher is right for your project? This question presupposes a prior question: Who is the audience of your book? It is hard to overstate the importance of deciding on your audience. Keep in mind that people buy books from people they know. So who do you know, or better, who knows you and wants to hear what you are pitching? Please be aware that the answer is never “everyone.” Please be as specific as you can about your audience. And be honest. Given that your dissertation is the fertile ground out of which something new will emerge, most likely your book will be for an academic audience.

If you are having trouble picturing your audience, go to Amazon, search for a book similar to what you want to write, and see the other books bought with the one you've selected. Then see who published it. This expedition will yield two important findings, audience and publisher.

Once you decide on a publisher or at least the first one you want to approach, how do you do that? At many professional or scholarly conferences, there are book vendors; and if the conference is large enough, there may be editors there as well; or at the very least, you may be able to get an editor's contact information from the sales person. If there are editors at a conference, ask if you can make an appointment. Better still, look online to find the editors at various presses with which you want to do business. Send an introductory email. If you can find a phone number, make a call. Tell the appropriate editor who you are and what you want to do. Be specific about your audience. Ask questions; ask for advice about what to do next. It's the editor's job to acquire book projects; they have had many conversations with prospective authors. Just as you want to make a good impression, so do they.

But be aware that many editors will stop cold if you say that you want to publish your dissertation. In fact, it may not be wise to even mention a rewrite of your dissertation. This is because dissertations are usually formulaic. And most editors can spot them from a distance. Best to pitch only the constructive parts. You may think your dissertation style is unique, but we assure you, it isn't.

A question we are often asked is: Should I send my proposal to many publishers all at once or one at a time? This is more complicated than you might think. Publishers prefer one at a time, because of the time investment they put in. Authors, on the other hand, might prefer sending a proposal to many at the

same time, because they want to get moving and get published. Publishers operate with a different timeframe in mind, so it can take up to six months to get a response—either an acceptance or decline. This is, in part, because of the hoops they have to go through for their internal approval process. If you tell them that you are sending your proposal to multiple presses, editors may think that the author is trying to play one press off against another press, and that does happen. Consequently a press may put your proposal at the bottom of the unsolicited manuscript pile. Be aware that the publishing world is small, and many editors and publishers know each other and may have worked with each other, so it's best to assume that everyone knows everyone. Clearly, we did not answer the question. But if you have a prior relationship with an editor, you'll be in a better position to answer it for yourself.

Please understand that publishers have a “publishing program.” They think in terms of groups or lists of books and may have slots for a certain number of books in specific categories that they need to fill. For example, recently for my Fall list of books I (Kathy) lacked a preaching book. It just so happened that a prospective author called me to tell me about his project. And I had an immediate place for it, so I was eager to hear more. If I had already had several preaching books, I may have simply declined his book. All this to say that how a publisher responds to you may have nothing to do with the quality or content of your work. It may be that your project does not fit the audience they reach, or there may not be a place for your project in their publishing plan.

Choosing the right publisher is a lot like finding a new pair of shoes. You have to try them on to get a good fit. Likewise, try to get to know several editors at different presses and learn from them. Quite often, they are scholars, so engage them in conversation and keep them abreast of current happenings and trends in your field. That will help them value you all the more. After all, you do want friends in publishing.

3. When Book Conversations Begin in Earnest

Once upon a time, there were four things needed to publish a successful book: 1) great content, 2) a well-known author, 3) a reputable publisher, and 4) a workable and targeted marketing plan. Things have changed. Today we begin with: 1) an author who has a household name, 2) great content, maybe, 3) publicity and marketing dollars that support the author's efforts if the author has a big enough name, and 4) any publisher; and even then, the book may not be a financial success. Consequently, once upon a time, editors could once begin conversations with content and questions such as, "What's your unique take on the subject?" and "How will your content address a felt need of the audience?" While these are still important, they aren't the first things that publishers consider. Today, an acquisitions professional begins a book conversation with "How large is your platform?" and "What will you do to help market the book?" We might like to think that superior content rules, but we all know better. If superior content was that important, our conversations would begin there.

4. Crafting the Book Proposal

After you've gotten some distance from your dissertation, scouted out likely publishers, spoken with a few editors, and downloaded the proposal form from the publisher's webpage, it's time to craft your proposal; although you've, no doubt, been thinking about this all along. If you have cultivated a relationship with an editor who is interested in your project, you already have a head's start.

A book proposal is submitted to a press in order to get a contract, which means that the press commits to publishing your project. **Proposal guidelines** are pretty much the same for all publishers and can usually be found on the publisher's website. Your proposal is meant to convince the publisher to take a chance and financial risk to publish your book. Most likely you are unknown and new to the field. If you

have a teaching job, so much the better; and don't be surprised if no one will speak to you unless you have a job. This is because a job gives you a platform from which to reach an audience and publishers need authors with large platforms. Because for publishers, it's about numbers and sales. Yes, there is more than that, but in order for publishers to stay in business, even a nonprofit business, they have to sell books.

Crafting a proposal may, at first glance, seem overwhelming. But if done carefully, the process can help you think through your project, present your ideas in a compelling manner, and save you an inordinate amount of time and future headaches. It's like the adage: measure twice; cut one. Plan ahead. Do your due diligence. It's for your benefit.

Here are the basic ingredients of any book proposal:

1. your latest resume with full contact information;
2. an annotated chapter outline;
3. manuscript delivery date;
4. manuscript word count (as close as possible);
5. 1–2 paragraphs of description describing the felt need of the book and the unique selling proposition (Why this book now?);
6. working title;
7. how you will help market the book; and
8. a good, clean, thoughtful, representative writing sample.

Some presses will want more and those will be listed in their proposal guidelines.

As you write the proposal, remember this: **your book is for the reader**. Yes, you may land a job because of your book contract; and yes, your reputation may be enhanced; but successful authors know that readers' needs are paramount. Writing the first draft might help you get yourself out of the way, but the final draft has to be strictly for the reader. Here are some ways to help.

First, think what your reader will get from your book. That is, why would someone want to buy this book now? What felt need does your book address? Some people call this the "unique sales proposition." What does your book promise to deliver to readers in terms of what they want—not what you think they ought to want or ought to need. If you need direction, talk to some of your colleagues, peers, and friends about why they would buy your book.

Second, graduate school teaches you the insider's language of your field, which means that you become fluent in jargon. Your proposal, and consequently your book, has to be in plain English—simple, not simplistic, readily understandable. If you want to make sure you are jargon-free, ask your spouse or mother to read your proposal. If they understand what you are trying to say, you're off to a good start. Jargon provides conceptual and linguistic shortcuts, but it also excludes people, and that is the last thing you want the reader to feel.

Third, this may be your first book, but it probably won't be your last. So think of your book as the first of a series of publications. Consider your own publishing program. This will help you keep your project focused and prevent you from thinking that you have to dump everything you have to say in one book. But beware, if you want to publish multiple books, the first one needs to be successful. This means it needs to meet the publisher's sales expectations and be favorably reviewed.

Fourth, after you've settled on the one thing you really want to offer the reader, break it down into manageable chunks of roughly equal length. Then craft these parts so that they logically flow. These are your chapters. Be aware that many readers do not read a book from beginning to end. They go straight to the parts they want and may never read the entire book. So make your chapter titles as descriptive and compelling as you can.

If you have questions, contact your editor. Don't be a pest but also don't be shy. Authors have important things to say, but successful authors maintain a sense of healthy humility. We enjoy hearing from authors. Some editors are more reticent, but they still want to publish marketable books. And while some editors are more responsive and approachable than others, they all want to produce the best books possible. But do not expect a lot of back-and-forth with your editor. Editors expect to see final products. They may coach you, but they are not just coaches. They are professionals who juggle many projects at one time. Your book is important, but so are the other books in their portfolio. Your project would not have been accepted if the editor thought he or she would have to write your book, and if you really want to impress your editor, stick to your deadlines.

3. Securing a Contract

If your proposal is accepted, the press will send you a contract to sign. Conversation and promises aside, you don't have a book deal until you have a signed contract. The contract will show the working title, manuscript due date, length, publication date, and other terms. While we encourage you to read it closely, your contract is boilerplate—one that is sent, with slight modifications, to everyone. If you have questions or concerns, contact your editor. But in most cases, your editor should have already explained the terms to you.

Remember that compared to other book genres, academic books have very modest sales expectations. You are not going to get rich from this book. With my (Kathy) first book, I'm sure that the cover designer made more money than I did.

"Will I get an advance?" There are still some publishers that offer a book advance, but please know that the advance is an advance against future royalties. Presses are not "giving" you anything; and be aware that if your book doesn't pay out, you might owe the publisher that money back. However, more presses are going to fee-based publishing. That means that authors receive a flat fee upon acceptance of a manuscript and perhaps a subsequent fee after a certain number of copies are sold.

4. Writing and Submitting Your Manuscript

Most presses have manuscript formatting and style guidelines. If your editor does not send them to you, ask. This includes things such as style (SBL, Chicago, etc.) and formatting for headings, subheadings, appendices, charts and graphs, table of contents, notes (endnotes, footnotes, in text notes) and indexes. If you plan well upfront, your project will move more smoothly and quickly toward publication.

Set a time and space aside to write regularly, away from reminders of your other responsibilities. Even if you don't feel you have the energy, ideas, or clarity to write when that time comes, go ahead and sit in your writing location with pen or computer and be open, even up to 30 minutes. A so-called "non-productive" day can be what leads to a breakthrough and writing that flows more easily the following day, or week.

If you write very little or nothing at all on a particular day, don't sweat it. Just return to your writing location the next scheduled time. Avoid trying to have a page-count goal in mind on the days you write; content will flow more quickly and naturally some days and other days you may work at a slower pace.

Break up the total page count into smaller "works" mentally, and focus on one part at a time, for example one chapter at a time. It helped me to remember that each chapter of my book would be about the length of a term paper that I had written for my classes. So for me (Kathy), writing five chapters was the equivalent of a semester's worth of work—very doable. And I had already done the research—a bonus. That was in my dissertation.

The more difficult thing is to reconceptualize and redirect your thesis with a different audience in mind. This means that you will have a different starting point, and you can cut the literature review. Your book needs to draw in the reader, so beginning with an illustration or a surprising fact is a good strategy. Start with something that will grab the reader's attention and keep them turning the pages. Also consider the overall arc of the argument, are you unpacking your argument, building it, or do you want to bring the reader full-circle, so that when the book ends you refer the reader back to the beginning, starting with the felt need and then bringing the reader home showing how the need has been met.

Set your dissertation aside as you write; it's already a part of you anyway. Refer to it as you would any other reference.

Write your introduction last. Or write it first as a place holder and revise it last.

As you write, strive to ensure that the book will take care of readers. As a writer, you create a world through which readers must want to navigate. Readers get tired, so break up the text with headings. Make the text visually appealing by using bullets points or callout boxes. If your book will be emotional taxing on the reader, you might modulate the text with examples, facts, or asides to lighten the subject matter.

Try to avoid the temptation to talk about your writing with others, especially while you're working on the first draft. Talking about your subject could potentially drain your urge to develop and express and cause you to "lose" potential material. Share what you've written and ask for feedback in later stages, after the first draft.

Try to stay out of your own way. Don't back-track too much to correct mechanical errors, such as capitalization, punctuation, etc. Go easy on yourself. Once you get in a rhythm your voice and style will naturally emerge, but too much self-editing on the front end can interfere with what's unfolding. Don't critique yourself too much while in the first draft but be prepared for as many drafts as it takes.

Securing permissions is important. If you need help knowing what and how much you can quote, ask your editor. Remember that the reader wants your words. If they wanted someone else's, they would have bought another book instead.

The time between signing the contract and submitting your manuscript may be one or two years. And your editor may contact you from time to time to see if you still plan to deliver on time. Your project lives on the press's publication plan. If you run into a problem or unforeseen calamity, contact your editor as soon as possible. While tardiness is not preferred, it does happen. Editors are used to pushing back projects, so please keep your editor informed.

Your Final Draft

It is time to pause and celebrate. In finishing your manuscript, you have done something to which many aspire but few accomplish. Each press has slightly different procedures from this point. Some will send your manuscript out for review. Other presses will have a development editor, who may or may not be the same person as the acquisitions editor, read your manuscript for logic, flow, and focus. Ask your editor what you should expect from here on out.

If this is your first book, you will learn all kinds of things that only publishing professionals notice. They are there to help you have the best book you can possibly have. Your name may be on the cover, but the press's name is on the copyright page. It's a team effort; it works because everyone is invested. And it is a kind gesture to credit your editor and others at the press who contributed to the final product, but that is up to you.

Production

We are not going to dwell on the production process here, but this is what separates the self-published from the professionally published. The press will have a competent production team to guide you through the process. While you usually deal with one person at a time from the press, there are many people who work on your project that you will never see. Each person is there for the support and expertise they offer. Some of these include: editor; editorial, design, and production manager; copyeditor; reviewer; designer; compositor; marketing professional; ebook creator; printer; distributor; finance professional; support staff; and contract and royalty professional.

Your Book Is Out!

Authors like to think their job is over once the book becomes available. Sorry, but now the real work begins. It is part of your job as an author to help the publisher get the word out about the book. You are, after all, your book's best advocate. One author said that she didn't know that marketing her own book was a full-time job. All successful authors, including academics, learn how to market their books.

Don't be shy. You have done a lot of work. And the publisher would never have taken on your project if she didn't think it was worth the time, talent, and treasure. You want this book to make a difference, but first people have to know it exists and where to get it. Ask your editor for any marketing materials. Communicate through email, social media, giving papers, and teaching classes using your book. Amazon has author helps as well. Ask your school librarian to order your book and colleagues to write reviews. These are just a few ways, and the surest way to know that your book is successful is if your editor comes back asking for another.

Next Steps

Your dissertation has yielded a book and perhaps scholarly articles and presentations. But like a well, there is probably a reservoir of material from which to draw for the future. Take what you've learned and advance your field even further.