

From Dissertation to Book: A Few Suggestions

One of the first major hurdles in a new Ph.D.'s career is publishing the dissertation. At many universities this is a requirement for eventual tenure and promotion, so it is a distinct advantage to begin this process as early as possible. In this brief article I will be passing along a few tips that I have gained from personal experience and from the wise counsel of senior colleagues. These are starting points, and as I note at the end, we can continue the conversation on my blog.

The best way to publish your dissertation quickly is to write it as a book in the first place. When I was selecting my doctoral program, a significant draw to the program that I selected was my advisor's track-record of producing graduates with books ready or very nearly ready for publication. As soon as I had finished my qualifying examinations, my advisor laid out the argument for this approach. In his words, "Why would you want to finish, but then not be done?" As he pointed out, a recent graduate with a new job typically has to relocate, find a place to live, establish social contacts, develop new courses, write lectures in areas outside her/his specialty, figure out the politics and expectations of the new institution, and of course find out where all the bathrooms are. If there is a family involved, then there are added pressures of finding employment for the spouse or partner and perhaps settling children in a new school system. All these things take time and energy, and many new faculty members find the first year or two simply overwhelming. The dissertation may sit on the shelf for 2, 3, or even 4 years. By that point the tenure clock is ticking louder and the work may need updating based on recent research. To put my advisor's question another way: Why write a book and then have to re-write it?

Before I go any further, I need to add a disclaimer. If you are in graduate school, you need to graduate (obviously), and that means maintaining a positive relationship with your advisor. Some advisors have a "just get it done and fix it later" approach and may not welcome your pushing to publish. Others believe that graduates have not earned the right to publish a book until they have been out for a few years, or they may have other misgivings. Above all, you need to be wise about negotiating your own context, so be sure to test the waters before jumping in with both feet and expecting your advisor to follow.

That said, here are a few practical suggestions for working toward a publishable work with your dissertation:

1. From the outset, you have to believe that you are writing a book. Throughout the entire dissertation process, my advisor never used the “D” word. He only asked, “How’s your book coming?” In my mind, there was never any doubt that I was writing a book the first time.
2. Use conference papers as part of your writing process. Conference papers are very much like books in terms of the audience. In both cases the audience will include people who are interested in your topic but may not be specialists, so you cannot litter your prose with technical language and jargon. Book editors often say that a book needs to be accessible to an audience beyond the specialists in a particular field (the catch-phrase is “a wider audience”), and at conferences you have the chance to try out your material on exactly that kind of audience. Conference papers have the added advantage of giving you external deadlines that can push along a writing process that may otherwise get bogged down for long periods of time. We all experience periods of listlessness, and nothing motivates like knowing that we have to present in front of our colleagues. Incidentally, presenting your work is also a great way to meet important contacts. The future editor of your book may be sitting in the second row at your paper, and a few of the people who have become my most important career advocates are contacts I made in sessions in which I presented.
3. Pay careful attention to how you frame your project. This is directly related to the issue of audience. Your introductions and conclusions should clearly frame your work and your argument for an interested, non-specialist audience. When you write journal articles, you can assume that readers are ready to dive into the middle of an ongoing discussion. You should not assume this about readers of your book. Also, think about how you read scholarly books – usually in random chunks of time and almost never in one sitting. Clear framing within the individual chapters will allow your reader to put down your book, pick it up again later, and quickly be able to reorient herself to where she is in your argument. Here’s another image to illustrate the point. I loved living in New England, but in that corner of the world they seldom put up street signs that let you know the name of the street you’re on. They must assume that I always know the name of the street I’m on, but I don’t always, and in some cities the names of streets change without warning. The framing in your book serves as the sign posts that let your reader know that she is still on the right road.
4. Write only chapters that publishers will eventually publish. A full chapter reciting the history of scholarship is a common feature of many dissertations, but very few books. To quote my advisor again, “Why doesn’t your book just start?” The literature survey should properly be part of the dissertation prospectus. You will, of course, need to discuss this with your advisor(s), because some argue for the necessity of the survey chapter in the diss. If your advisor says to include it, then you need to include it. However, on numerous occasions I have heard publishers and editors single out the scholarship survey chapter as the first thing that has to go, and I’ve never heard of a publisher asking, “Hey, where’s the literature survey chapter?” Your book introduction will likely end up including references to a few critical works on your topic, but a guided tour of the past hundred years of scholarship—even when very well done—usually ends up on the cutting room floor. The job of a book is to plow new ground, so get plowing as quickly as possible!
5. Writing a dissertation is hard, and striving for the next level of a publishable work is even harder. (If you feel alone in your dissertation struggles, check out [this article in the latest edition of the Chronicle](#).) So, be generous with yourself in the midst of the process, and celebrate each little victory along the way.

There is much more to be said about this process, and everyone's path to publishing success is different. However, these are a few tricks that I have been able to pick up along the way, and I hope you will find something useful here for your own writing process. If you want to read more on this topic, you can go to [my new professional development blog](#). There you'll find entries on maintaining your authorial voice, the plusses and minuses of publishing parts of your book in journals first, why the choice of publisher matters (or doesn't), and how writing your dissertation/book is like paying off a car loan. I will also be providing suggestions of additional resources and discussing other timely topics. Feel free to stop by and submit your questions to be addressed in future entries.

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