



HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

A GUIDE FOR ACADEMICS

THE TIMES
HIGHER
EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT

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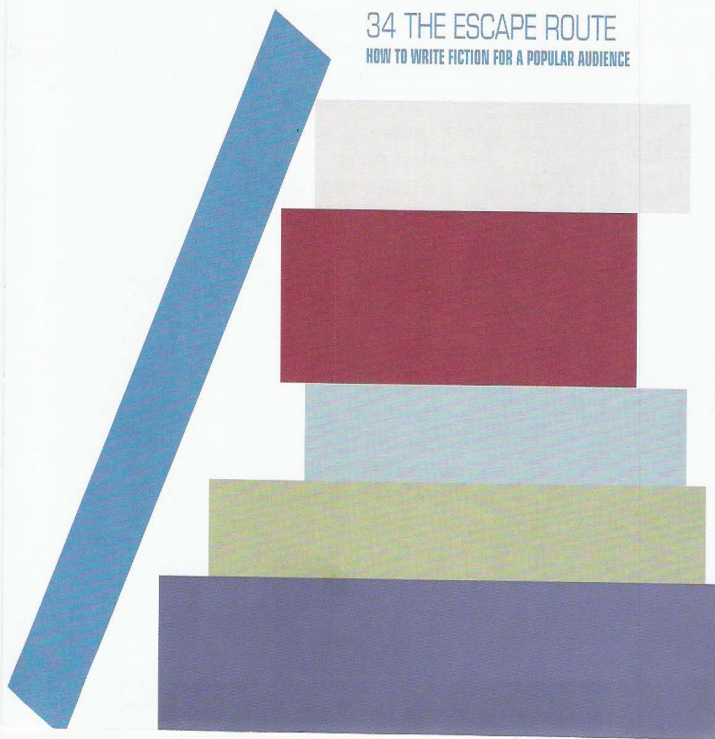
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THE GATEKEEPER

HOW A REVIEW EDITOR MAKES HIS CHOICES

Andrew Robinson is literary editor of *The THES*.

This booklet about how to get a book published is full of hard-won advice for academics from highly experienced academic authors and publishers. It covers just about every major type of book, from monographs based on PhD theses and edited conference collections through reference books and textbooks to potential bestsellers and even novels.

As a literary editor, I spend much of my time unhappily sifting through piles and piles of such books, which ought to be reviewed but which I know will not be for lack of space in our newspaper. As an author myself of more than a dozen books, several of them academic, I probably understand better than most how much time, effort and passion goes into the making of a serious and significant book. It feels wrong to discard review copies so heartlessly. But there is no alternative: *The THES* can review perhaps a thousand books in a year. I have no choice but to make a choice.

If we put aside textbooks — important though they are (which *The THES* reviews in a separate Textbook Guide) — my first criterion for selection has to be originality. Is the research that has gone into a book clearly new, or does the thesis explored in the book break genuinely new ground, or, best of all, are both things true? Regardless of who the author or publisher is, these are the books to which I try to give priority. There is nothing more satisfying for a literary editor than spotting original work and publishing a well-informed review of it (preferably by a well-known

writer) ahead of the pack.

However, there are many other factors to consider in choosing to commission an academic book review. Here are some important ones:

a) How well does the author write? Prefaces, introductions and conclusions are invaluable to a non-specialist literary editor; if they cannot catch my attention, or if they repel me with jargon, something is wrong with the

writing. Even acknowledgements can be revealing (avoid being fulsome, mawkish or facetious).

b) What else has the author published? Inevitably, a track record is an asset — generally in one field, though it is always interesting to see a well-established specialist take on a new field. The main difficulty comes with books by academic celebrities. Should precious review space be given to a book that is appealing, but may not be original, simply because the author is famous?

c) What do fellow specialists think of the author's work? Here, quotes on the front and back jacket are certainly influential — against a book, as well as in its favour — especially if they come from major figures who do not regularly comment on books.

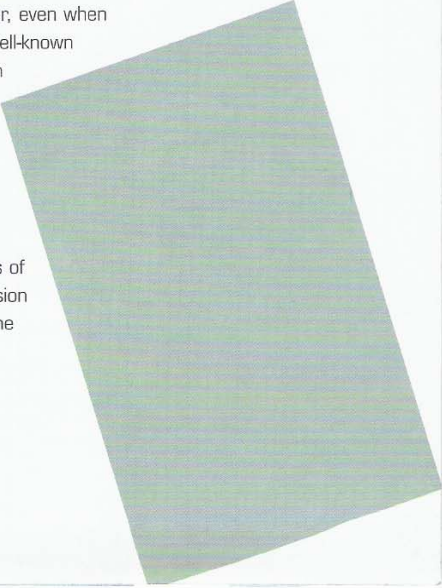
d) What institutional affiliation does the author have? It is no secret that there is a pecking order among universities and among departments within universities, though a literary editor has to be aware of exceptional authors working at less prestigious institutions and, of course, of independent scholars and professional writers and journalists.

e) Who is the publisher? There is

a pecking order here, too, if perhaps less clear than in the case of universities, with certain publishers known for the strength of their lists in particular subjects.

f) What does the book look like? In other words, how much effort have the author and publisher put into its production and design? Shoddy copy-editing and proof-reading are bad signs; a poorly conceived jacket or cover, with a vestigial or hyperbolic blurb, is not encouraging; and the lack of an index where one is expected, especially with an edited collection, is usually the kiss of death.

Despite all of the above, there remains an element of luck, of the literary lottery, in which books get reviewed and which do not. Sadly, the fact is that original, well-written work published by a respected publisher, even when it is written by a well-known author, is too often neglected. But any author who acts on the expert advice in this booklet will definitely increase his or her chances of making an impression and, perhaps, some money.



THE PITCH

HOW TO GET YOUR RESEARCH PUBLISHED BY AN ACADEMIC PUBLISHER

Richard Fisher is executive director, humanities and social sciences, at Cambridge University Press.

"Publish or perish" has become such a widespread academic axiom that it is tempting to think that everybody in the scholarly world must know, at some basic level, how to get published. And

yet I also know from numerous conversations with graduate students and with more senior faculty that there are few subjects more prone to misunderstanding, confusion and general anxiety than that of book publication — particularly first book publication. This means, in the great majority of cases, the book of the thesis. Such anxiety and confusion is especially marked within the humanities and social sciences, particularly within those disciplines perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be "book-driven" (rather than "article-driven") in career terms.

For many young scholars, the words of John Locke, writing to Anthony Collins in June 1704, still ring true: "Books seem to me to be pestilent things, and infect all that trade in them with something very perverse and brutal. Printers, binders, sellers, and others that

make a trade and
gain out of them
have universally
so odd a
turn and
corruption
of mind,
that they
have a
way of
dealing

peculiar to themselves, and not conformed to the good of society, and that general fairness that cements mankind."

Three centuries on, such overt hostility may have mutated into something softer. Most graduate students I meet at academic conferences — bounding up to the Cambridge book exhibit with the magic introductory phrase "I have just finished my dissertation" — are eager politeness personified. Nonetheless, confusion and misunderstanding are still rife, and are fed by a paradox that has become central to the academic world, and particularly to the British humanities and social sciences community. On the one hand, almost nobody in the

scholarly world claims that they do not have enough to read and that there is an insufficient flow of new publications. "I can't keep up with the literature anymore" is one of the most common complaints of all scholars, especially those sucked into the growing administrative and/or bureaucratic networks of the university system.

This is not new. In November 1648 during the period of uncertainty that followed the first civil war, the Puritan minister Richard Baxter wrote that "every ignorant, empty braine (which usually hath the highest esteem of it selfe) hath the liberty of the Presse, whereby the number of bookes is grown so great that they begin with many to grow contemptible". And five years later, in what must seem a remarkably perceptive assessment of the deleterious impact of parts of what we would now call a research assessment exercise, Baxter went on to fear the "Luxuriant Fertility, or Licentiousness of the Press of late" as "a design of the Enemy to bury and overwhelm in a crowd

'Few subjects are more prone to misunderstanding, confusion and anxiety than that of book publication, especially first books'



'Every potential monograph author must be able to state explicitly why their subject matters and why it deserves to be made public over 288 pages or so'

Judicious, Pious, Excellent Writings".

And yet the more senior members of the scholarly community will complain that "it is so difficult to get serious work published anymore" and articulate a general perception of "monographic crisis". I confess that I sometimes translate this lament as "I can't place my students' doctoral theses with major publishers anymore".

It is true that the range of outlets for specialised and detailed work based fundamentally on primary sources or original fieldwork has shrunk considerably from the halcyon days of the 1960s and 1970s. In a context where the majority of British universities' library budgets, and hence institutional monographic demand, have been assailed by the three imperatives of massively increased expenditures on scientific journals, ever-increasing substitution of e-expenditures (whether on hardware or software) for traditional print purchases, and teaching-related rather than research-oriented acquisition models, the goalposts of monographic publication have moved, sometimes further and faster than the supervisors of dissertations are aware.

I hold to a fairly austere view of what scholarly publishers, especially university presses, are for, and regard the dissemination of specialised academic research as a central *raison d'être*. Dissemination is the key word, of course, and it is worth emphasising that for scholarly publishers the medium is emphatically *not* the message. For generations, the hardback monograph book has been the most convenient, accessible and predominant way to disseminate specialist research in the humanities and social sciences. It is not, however, the only one. The first question any commissioning editor working for a scholarly publisher must ask is: "Assuming that the primary research is original and important, what is the best means to disseminate that research to the wider world?" Given that the circulation of major British academic journals such as *New Testament Studies* or the *Journal of Linguistics* is in the region of just over 2,000, and the sales of monographic work of equivalent specialism are often nowadays fewer than 400 copies worldwide, publication of primary research in article form has become an increasingly sensible option for those interested in the

widest possible dissemination of their ideas and arguments. In general, thesis dissemination in book form is still the exception, not the norm.

This is not a new problem, nor is it one confined to Britain, as conversations with friends and colleagues in North America and elsewhere in Europe have confirmed. Indeed, the academic monograph sometimes seems to share the qualities of the Habsburg monarchy, and to have been always in decline. I hope and suspect that it will manifest the same plasticity and thus the same longevity (although even the Habsburg monarchy came to an end, eventually), but it is important that the scholarly world recognises that the criteria for acceptance applied by the major scholarly publishers to monographic work in some subjects will, inevitably, tighten further. "Honest competence" is no longer good enough in a context where fundamental quality, centrality, significance and ambition must be emphasised more resoundingly than ever before.

Any academic publisher will from time to time receive referees' reports on typescripts that wearily conclude "I see no reason to oppose publication" as

a supporting endorsement. That will no longer do. Every potential monograph author must be able to demonstrate explicitly why their subject matters, to whom it matters and why it deserves to be made public over 288 pages or so.

The paradox in all this is that academic merit, appointment and promotion within much of the humanities and social sciences are still largely recognised by the output of the research monograph that the same constituency has found (at both institutional and individual levels) increasingly indigestible. In brief, monographs get jobs, and monographs from the major scholarly presses get better jobs. Over the past generation, the expectation has grown that a first book will ensure a certain kind of tenured appointment, and a second

book will earn promotion to senior lecturer or higher. The "revised PhD as first book" has become a staple of academic publishing in the English-speaking world, but it must be emphasised that this is a phenomenon of the past generation only, as scrutiny of the postwar catalogues of, say, Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard university presses and similar publishers will confirm. The problem that is thus emerging is one that confronts young scholars just coming onto the academic ladder, who face a publication climate notably more hostile than that which confronted more senior colleagues sitting in judgement upon them.

The double whammy for younger faculty is that as PhD completion rates have become ever tougher, and boards of graduate studies less inclined to approve broad-ranging and ambitious projects that may not reach completion within the sanctioned maxima, such highly focused theses will, by definition, be less "publishable" than their more ambitious

predecessors of a more expansive age. It is encouraging to see that some major professional associations, notably the Modern Language Association in the US, are taking this dilemma seriously. Nonetheless, every year several hundred British doctoral theses are completed, and in every case their authors will wish to convey their thoughts to a wider scholarly public than their examiners and supervisors alone. Many will contemplate book publication.

To ease the pain and to make a potentially traumatic process as stress-free as reasonably possible for young authors and their publishers, I have drafted a quintet of laws that, if obeyed, will greatly increase (though not guarantee) the likelihood of a happy publication outcome for all concerned:

Fisher's Five Laws

1) Never send your original thesis to a publisher unsolicited (especially not in its bound form). Find the name of the editor who handles your subject area at an appropriate publisher and write directly to him or her with a cogent proposal for a book proper. Some publishers

may ask you to complete a formal proposal template, others will ask for a detailed covering letter. Few will send your thesis out for review (by external referees) in its original state.

2) No publisher publishes in every area. If you study politics and there seems to be no contact person for politics at your publisher of first choice, try your second choice. Ensure that what you are proposing fits the list of your chosen publisher (publishers' websites and online catalogues will give you this information).

3) When making your initial pitch to a publisher, never assume the *a priori* importance of what you have done. You must persuade a sympathetic but professionally sceptical editor that what you have to say is sufficiently broad-ranging, significant and original to merit articulation in more than 90,000 words, and that you have a viable scholarly audience in mind. Who are you writing for? "Scholars of 16th-century Warwickshire" is not an acceptable answer. Nor, conversely, is that mythic entity "the general reader". Just to complicate matters, what has always seemed to you to be a virtue — the glorious and imaginative interdisciplinarity of

your own research — can be a distinct vice when contemplating publication. Publishers, like librarians, like to categorise, to segment and to channel — sometimes rather brutally.

4) A thesis is, by definition, a defensive document. A book is not. A thesis has a specific professional purpose; a book has different aims. Your initial pitch to a publisher must make this understanding clear. You don't need a battery of a hundred references proving that you have read everything ever published in your field to substantiate a single point. Don't tell your publisher that you have "written your thesis as a book". If you have, then your thesis should probably have been referred.

5) Finally — and most important — say what you want to say firmly, clearly and concisely. The scholarly reading public wants to know what you think, ultimately, not what you think other people have thought. And if you have something interesting, powerful, imaginative and cogent to say, you will be heard and your arguments will find a good home. I promise. Because, in the end (contrary to what you might have heard), scholarly authors, publishers and librarians are all on the same side.

'Don't tell your publisher that you have "written your thesis as a book". If you have, then your thesis should probably have been referred'

THE WORKHORSE

HOW TO WRITE A TEXTBOOK THAT STAYS IN PRINT

Brian Fagan is emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of seven widely used textbooks, as well as many popular works on archaeology.

Sooner or later, many of us toy with the idea of writing a textbook. There is something seductive about becoming an authoritative voice for thousands of eager students — and there is always the siren's false lure of fat royalty cheques. Truth be told, few authors make their fortunes from textbooks. In today's competitive, crowded market, they are lucky if their book survives a first edition. No one in their right mind writes a textbook to make money; they write them because they perceive a need or relish the challenge.

It takes elemental courage to write a textbook in today's academic environment because such a book ranks low on the social totem pole. The authorship of a text, however brilliant and timely, does not "count" in the narrow world of academic publication. One hears that writing texts is "easy", the mark of a lightweight intellectual and an "inappropriate activity" for an academic researcher.

What arrogant, self-serving nonsense! After a writing career of more than four decades, I would rank textbook writing among the hardest of all challenges. To write a successful textbook requires an ability to think and write clearly, together with a grasp of the broad issues of the subject matter, not just an aptitude for elegant classroom lecturing. As textbook editors soon learn, academics with the gift for such writing are rare, especially if they have academic visibility, a reputation as a basic researcher and the other credentials that make them a force among their colleagues.

It's not easy. Any editor can tell you horror stories of confident academics who quickly produce a textbook proposal, believing they can dash off the book in their spare time. I recently read a portion of such a manuscript, aimed at a large undergraduate audience in the social sciences. The author's arrogance leapt from every page. The writing was careless and talked down to readers, and the academic coverage reflected the author's specialised interests. If ever there was an author who had visions of quick money, this was it. Almost invariably, such people refuse to

listen to criticism, to editorial suggestions or to the comments of academic reviewers. Inevitably, too, the publisher cancels the project — and the author has to return the already-spent advance.

If you are determined to go ahead, you must realise from the start that any textbook project, even a short paperback, will involve a great deal of hard work, the ability to accept criticism and, above all, a commitment to deliver the manuscript on time. Textbook publishing is quite unlike selling to bookstores or on the web. The big season for textbook adoptions falls about four to six months before the autumn term begins, so new books have to be in the publisher's warehouse and in the sales force's hands at the start of

a short, intense selling season.

Timely delivery is of the essence.

Writing a textbook goes through four major stages: drafting the proposal and submitting it to a publisher; writing the draft manuscript; revising

it after reviews obtained by the publisher; and, finally, production, which consumes much more of your time than you might imagine. A successful textbook proposal often begins with a suggestion from an editor that you consider writing a book, preferably on a subject of broad appeal. If you show interest, the publisher will ask for a proposal to submit to its editorial board. Alternatively, you may choose to submit a formal proposal to several houses.

A successful textbook proposal often begins with three key components: a narrative that lays out the purpose of the book, a chapter-by-chapter outline and at least one specimen chapter. The narrative is far more than a statement of what your book will be about, its major themes and its theoretical slant. Your concise proposal has to answer tough questions and be written in the clear style you will use in the book itself. What is the need for your text? Which competitors are in the market and how would your text be better than theirs? Is there an unexploited niche in, say, the introductory market in meteorological sciences?

You then have to sell yourself. Why are you uniquely qualified to write this book? Do you have the

'Any textbook project will involve a great deal of hard work, the ability to accept criticism and a commitment to deliver the manuscript on time'

academic and pedagogical credentials, as well as the intellectual breadth, to do so?

No one expects a hagiography, but the board needs a profile of the author in whom it is investing. Above all, your proposal should communicate an excitement and passion for the subject. Nothing resonates better than enthusiasm.

The narrative leads into the chapter-by-chapter outline, which shows the book's organisation, the cumulative pedagogy through the chapters and the ancillary features such as boxes, glossaries and other items that will accompany your narrative. The specimen chapters should be final drafts, complete with boxes, questions for students, guides to further reading, call-outs and a list of illustrations (with copies of the images). This is a lot of work, but you want to show the publisher that you know what you are talking about and that you are professional in your approach.

This is the stage at which you

must convince yourself, your publisher and any potential reviewer that you have the academic breadth and expertise to carry off the book. For instance, some people write archaeological textbooks that are slanted toward their expertise in Maya civilisation or North America, when the subject at the introductory level is global. Clearly, such authors are somewhat uncomfortable in the broader academic arena of human prehistory.

Your editor will send out your proposal for academic review before it goes to

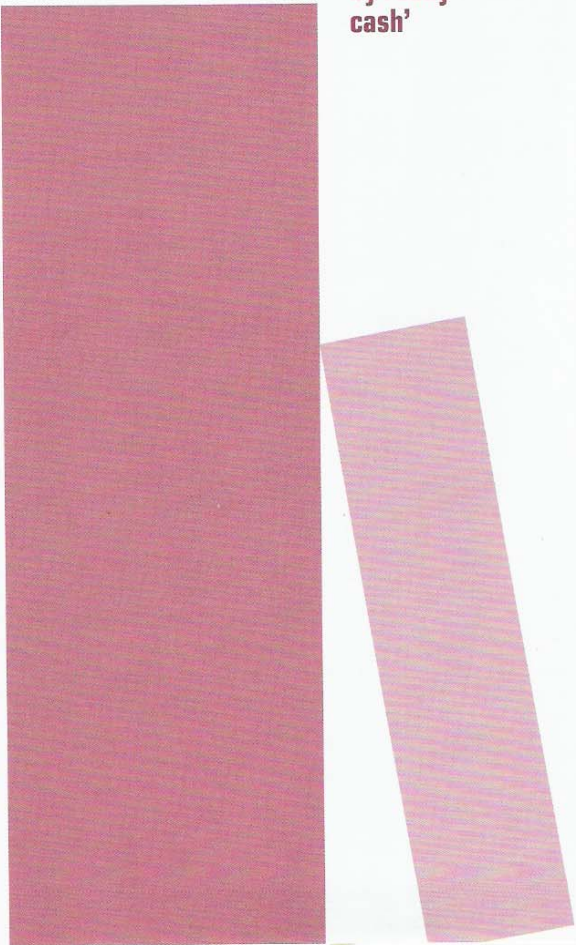
the editorial board. You will probably have to respond with revisions, especially if the reviewers are unanimous about which areas need improvement. Your editor will not take your proposal forward unless it has a high chance of success. If the board accepts it, your editor will offer you a formal contract, complete with royalty percentages, a budget for illustrations and an advance, typically payable in segments: on signing, on acceptance and on publication. These days, most textbook contracts are boilerplate agreements that have been dissected endlessly by corporate lawyers, so there is little room for negotiation away from industry norms. You may hear stories of huge advances for major textbook projects, especially when publishers are competing for what they perceive as a "hot" book. But if you ever find yourself in such a competitive situation, do not be seduced by ready cash.


There are three criteria for selecting a textbook publisher that should never leave your mind. First, does the publisher have a strong list in this area that your book will amplify? Second, what are the house's production values? If its books look cheap and

hastily produced, go elsewhere. Last, and most important, is its marketing team aggressive, active in the field and on top of the market? Always choose a publisher with its marketing sights in line. In the end, you will get more satisfaction from reaching a broad readership than from merely getting the money upfront.

The worst part of writing a

'You may hear stories of huge advances for major textbook projects, but do not be seduced by ready cash'





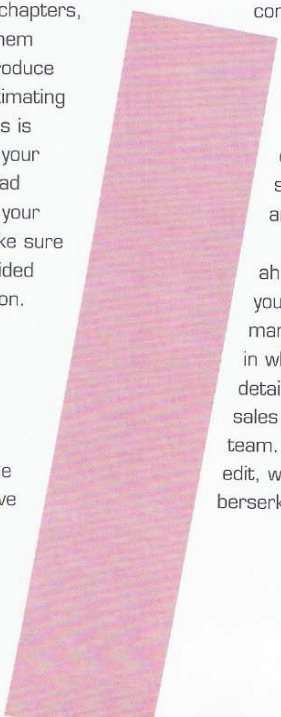
textbook is the first draft. The old formula for authorship applies: set a fixed daily word count and keep to it. This way you can generate 6,000 to 7,000 words a week, the best part of an average textbook chapter. The prose may be awful, but psychologically you will be ahead of the game. Don't go back and revise, plough ahead and get the entire rough draft on paper. This approach will give you a book of a sort far ahead of schedule, so the worry of actually producing manuscript is behind you. You can then devote your time to revising the draft.

The second draft is probably the most important, as you will disembowel your chapters, rewrite most of them completely and produce something approximating the final book. This is when you expand your reading, seek broad examples outside your expertise and make sure that you have avoided undue specialisation. This is also when you write boxes, draft questions and prepare references, so at the end of the revision you have

a truly complete manuscript.

After a third revision, you have probably carried the book about as far as you can without editorial input and external reviews. Such reviews can range from the useless, even offensive, to the priceless line-by-line constructive criticism. Armed with the reviews and the editor's suggestions, you then prepare the final manuscript and the inventory of drawings, tables and photos — the last a hateful task, especially if you are responsible for all the permissions, which can take weeks to obtain. Be sure to agree a shared budget for illustration expenses in your

contract so you do not receive an unpleasant surprise when the first royalty cheque arrives. Once all this is done, you can formally submit your manuscript and forget it for a while.



But more work lies ahead. You have to turn your attention to the marketing questionnaire, in which you spell out the details of your book for the sales force and marketing team. Then comes the copy-edit, which can drive you berserk if you are sensitive to

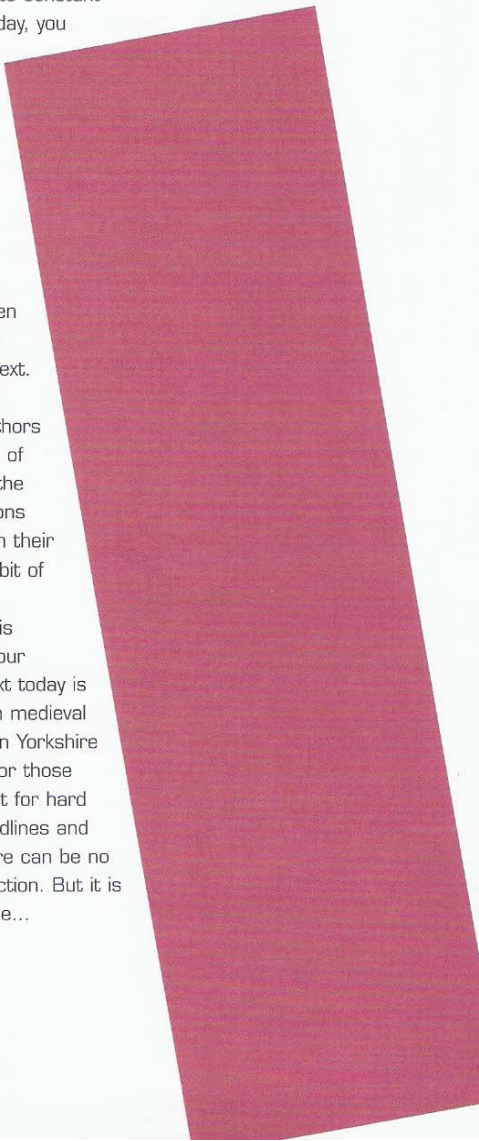
criticism of your writing style. Long experience has taught me that copy-editors, who have a unique mindset and an unsurpassed penchant for detail, usually know what they are talking about. Take them seriously. Finally, the proofs arrive, you complete the index, and you are finished. You will earn bouquets from the production folk if you meet their deadlines. They operate under savage time constraints not of their making and often handle six or more books at once.

Months later, the advance copy of your book arrives and it all seems worth it. Then there is silence, except for the inevitable nitpicking emails from people who delight in pointing out the grievous error on page 86. My favourite was from an anonymous correspondent who sent me a photocopied page with a single paragraph highlighted and the cryptic comment "wrong".

Mercifully, there is mostly silence as the market absorbs your book. Your only feedback will probably come from your editor and from your biannual royalty statement. If the book does well, you'll find yourself on a three or four-year revision cycle, and the treadmill starts all over again. With luck, and conscientious

revision, your text might become a permanent feature of the market — every author's and publisher's dream, even if it condemns you to constant revisions. One day, you may receive the ultimate reward, when a young colleague sidles up at a conference and confesses that they first met their chosen speciality in the pages of your text. Nirvana!

Textbook authors have the future of academia and the public perceptions of a discipline in their hands. With a bit of luck, the naive freshman who is entranced by your introductory text today is the specialist in medieval rabbit-keeping in Yorkshire of tomorrow. For those with a penchant for hard work, tight deadlines and teamwork, there can be no greater satisfaction. But it is not for everyone...



THE BIBLE

HOW TO ASSEMBLE AN AUTHORITATIVE REFERENCE WORK

David Crystal is author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* and editor of the Cambridge and Penguin families of general encyclopedias.

Early in the planning of the first edition of what later became *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, I visited

the office of W. & R. Chambers in Edinburgh to learn about the production process. Never having edited a one-volume general encyclopedia before, I wanted to know what sort of size and shape they had in mind for the final product. The production controller had a full-size dummy stuffed with blank pages. He heaved it down from the shelf and opened it at the first page. "I've done my job," he said. "Yours is to start at the beginning — and write small!"

Start at the beginning?

Reference books are rarely written or compiled from left to right. This leads to the first principle for anyone who decides to write or edit a reference book, whatever its subject matter: success lies in the planning. You need to devote much more time to planning the structural organisation of the work than you do with other types

of publication.

The cardinal criterion is to give your subject a balanced treatment. All subjects are equally

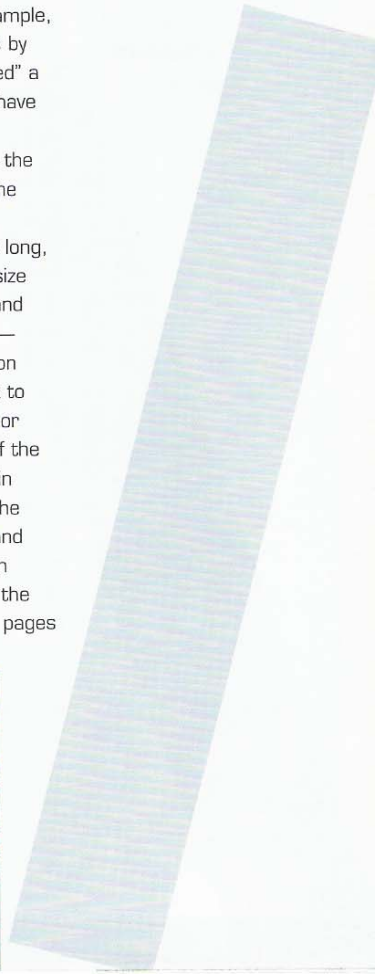
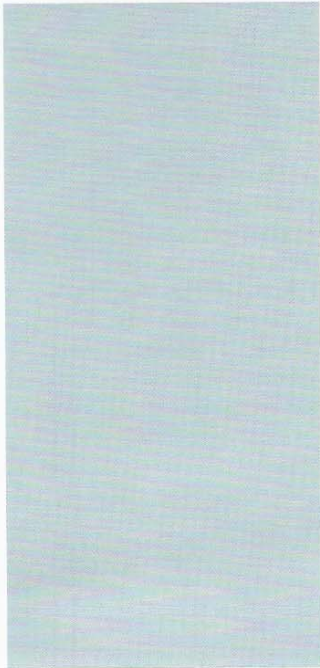
contentious in this regard. It is not just a matter of balancing Democrats and Republicans, or Christianity and Islam, in terms of numbers of entries or numbers of words. Proponents of minor schools of thought in linguistics or sedimentology can write pretty severe letters if they think they have been short-changed.

You have to be fair-minded. At the same time, you have to be thick-skinned. No matter how fair you try to be, you will get hate-mail. People always think that their favourite subject has been under-represented. But if you've quantified your policy in advance, you at least have a defence ready.

For general reference works, you need to have a genuinely

catholic range of interests. You cannot edit a subject well if it bores you. At the very least, you must have a high regard for the range of intellectual traditions you are dealing with, learn to develop a tolerance and respect for other people's enthusiasm and industry, and display great sensitivity, especially in areas such as religion, politics and history. It is so easy to slip up — for example, to betray a Eurocentric bias by saying the British "discovered" a country that native Indians have lived in for generations.

You must be clear about the general characteristics of the work. Length is critical, as reference works tend to be long, but there are limits to the size that can be happily bound and handled in a single volume — not to mention the effects on purchase price. Is the work to be organised alphabetically or thematically, or a mixture of the two? Is it to be illustrated, in which case, what is to be the balance between pictures and text? Is it to be organised in chapters or sections, or is the text to be continuous? Will pages



'You need a bit of ruthlessness; and if you cannot rewrite or cut sensitively but firmly, you are no reference editor'

run on or be presented in double-page spreads? Will there be sidebars or other extraneous material? None of these matters will be decided by the author or editor alone, so expect daily email exchanges with your commissioning editor.

If you are going to use contributors, you must consider carefully how much time to allocate to the task of finding

them — then double it. This

is one of the most frustrating sides of the business.

Make your initial hit-list as inclusive as you can, regardless of duplication — you will rarely get your ideal set of people. It took me 18 months to get all my contributors for the first edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*. Fortunately, things speed up as you get to know people and they get to know you. The difficulty of lining up contributors is compounded by the fact that it is not just a matter of finding specialists — there are plenty of those. You want specialists who can write. People who deal with the public, such as museum and gallery staff, are often better at exposition than

academics. You also need to bear in mind internationalising contributor coverage (if the book is to sell in a particular part of the world), maintaining a balance of female and male writers, and perhaps reflecting an ethnic or religious balance, depending on the subject matter.

The writing is not as easy as is sometimes thought because reference writing is actually highly creative. There is no simple "subjective vs objective" opposition here. I have written imaginative literature, and when I write or edit reference material I see many similarities. People select topics and slants and turns of phrase that are, inevitably, personal. They give an account that — unless the work is highly specialised — is a series of selected and simplified observations and approximations. Constraints of space and readability combine to make most general reference works sophisticated half-truths. There are no facts, but editing makes them so.


When working with contributors, you have to be a mixture of wooer, tactician and disciplinarian. You must persuade contributors that your allocation of space is correct. It may appear to be a genteel scholarly debate, but

it is one you must win. If you have decided that different religions will each have 10,000 words — say, 200 entries at 50 words, in an alphabetical approach — then the individual contributors must obey. They are not responsible for maintaining your thematic superstructure; that buck stops with the editor. Contributors will agree to what you say, of course, and then proceed to ignore you. You will receive 220 entries, several of them at 75 words, with an apologetic note. If you have asked for entries to be written in a particular house style, they will ignore that, too. You need to employ a bit of ruthlessness; and if you cannot rewrite or cut sensitively but firmly, you are no reference editor.

You need to be brave — especially if editing text by your seniors or a subject about which you know little. I remember receiving several hundred entries from my professorial chemistry contributor to what is now *The New Penguin Encyclopedia*. The chemistry was excellent, but the entries were mostly unintelligible. Although my knowledge of chemistry is minuscule, I rewrote them so that they made sense to the non-specialist reader; then sent them back to my chemist for

checking. He replied that they now made excellent sense but were terrible chemistry. He revised; I reread. That cycle recurred several times, until we were both satisfied. It took about three months (in the days before email).

Clarity is everything, and it applies to format as well as to content. You are responsible for making the reader's task as easy as possible. It is no good having information if it is unclear; but equally, it is no good having information that cannot be found. You need well-designed preliminary matter; a substantial preface or introduction explaining your approach, sensible running heads, prominent section breaks, judicious cross-references and, above all in a thematic reference work, an excellent index (a thematic *Factfinder* without an index is



a contradiction in terms).

If you are going to have illustrations, there is one cardinal principle: decide on the pictures as early as possible, and before you start writing the text. Writers usually think the other way round, to their cost. I learned this the hard way, with the first edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. I wrote the section text, thought of possible pictures and allocated postage-stamp-sized spaces for them. The picture researcher found fantastic illustrations that were much bigger than the space I had left. As a result, I had to cut several lines of text (which I thought I had honed to perfection) to make the picture fit. Admittedly, that was easier than the opposite: when a picture is smaller than the space allocated for it, and you then have to pad out text by finding relevant material to add in seamlessly.

Reference books, by their nature, mean that you are always standing on the shoulders of others — so it is important to check whether any of those shoulders need permission

before they can be stood on. You should start obtaining clearances as early as possible, and this is especially important if a piece of text is dependent on obtaining a particular picture, diagram or quotation. Some poetry estates are notorious for refusing permission if there is any adaptation to be made. Some publishers are notorious for their delays in processing applications. Some sources are notorious for the costs they charge, which may exceed your budget. All kinds of problems may make it impossible for you to use a desired source — and if your text is already written, you will have wasted your time.

What personality traits are a prerequisite for successful reference publishing? I have already mentioned fair-mindedness and ruthlessness.

You must also be well organised, especially when dealing with dozens of contributors, whose material is coming in at different times, and where your interaction is operating at different stages of editorial involvement. Because of the time it takes to get contributors, you might find yourself on the same day

having a preliminary discussion about content with author A, reading a first draft from author B, tweaking a final version of author C and copy-editing a version of author D (or checking the work of your copy-editor).

You have to be able to switch from subject to subject. My notes remind me that one morning, while editing an encyclopedia, I had phone calls from (a) the pharmacologist, wanting to discuss modifications to his entry on Aids drugs; (b) the ornithologist, with ideas about illustrations; (c) one of the religious studies team, replying to a query about the options for biblical references; and (d) the in-house editor at the publisher, with queries about (e) the use of hyphens and dashes in chemical formulae, and (f) the dating conventions for historical battles. During this, I was (g) attempting to edit the literature entries.

You must be able to focus — which means that having worked out a general schedule, you must

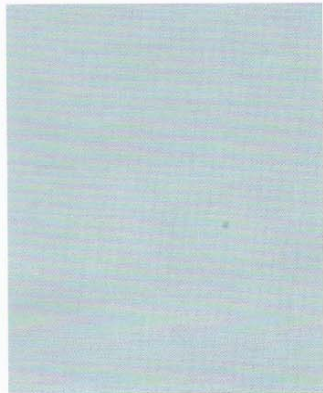
then forget it and live only for the entry. You must imagine that the entry on which you are working is the only one in the world — because that is how the reader will see it. Few reference books are read continuously. Readers work non-linearly when they look something up as only that specific part of the work interests them. An additional benefit of this item-by-item focus is that it keeps you sane. The day you allow the fact that you still have 17,569 entries to write or edit to permeate your consciousness, you are lost.

For current affairs, check everything in two sources; above all, never trust the internet, where editing standards are often conspicuous by their absence.

You have to be loyal to the book. A reference work always needs updating. It is not like a novel or a monograph that you can send to the publisher and in effect wash your hands of it. New or corrected editions always loom. You can never leave it behind: a reference work is like an albatross, always hanging on your neck.

Last of all, you have to be firm with yourself. Valéry's dictum applies as much to reference works as to poems: they are never finished, only abandoned.

'You must imagine that the entry on which you are working is the only one in the world — because that is how the reader will see it'



THE COMPILATION

HOW TO PRODUCE A COHERENT COLLECTION AND NOT A RAGBAG

Gordon Johnson is president of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and chairman of Cambridge University Press.

At some point in their career, most academics will consider publishing work in collaboration with their colleagues. They may be asked to write a textbook or to compile a volume of readings for teaching purposes; they may contribute a chapter to a book or write about their specialist subject for a general reader in a companion or some such encyclopedic volume; they may be seduced into giving papers at conferences with the promise that a book will result from the proceedings. They may, faced with demands for an update of their CV, think of getting a quick publication by editing a collection of papers written largely by others. They may even think that their own scattered essays might happily be brought together and, with little more than a catchy title, be paraded as a new book.

Almost invariably, however, those caught up in these ventures as editors or contributors will rue the day they started out and will face the stark reality that such works form a specialised and unforgiving form of publication —

certainly not to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly.

So how do you edit a collection that will make a successful free-standing publication? Let's begin by teasing out the principles that underlie other types of collaborative publication. The clearest example is the big textbook. Here, it is quite normal for a book to be written by a team, working under the direction of an academic editor or editors, who are in turn responsive to strong input from the publisher. The publisher, committing huge resources to the project, must ensure that the book reaches the intended readership, not just once on initial publication but year after year to recover the investment. Sometimes, a good book of this type can come from a group in a single university department, which works together on designing and teaching courses; but more usually, to be balanced and comprehensive, the collaboration will involve many colleagues in several different institutions, and the work will need planned revision.

In the humanities, this approach is mirrored in the volumes of the Cambridge Histories or Cambridge Companions. The distinguishing

feature is that all are commissioned in advance with a clear idea of what is wanted and with the close and continuing involvement of the publisher from the outset. A team of authors is assembled. They are likely to discuss (among themselves) the vital academic issues that must inform the volume's content, scope and approach; then they will be given a precise assignment within the overall plan that they have to fulfil. The editors must be ruthless in sending back work for revision — or in dropping it altogether and commissioning anew if authors fail to deliver what was asked for.

Academic publishers also produce excellent anthologies for use in teaching. Typically, such

books will be a selection of edited extracts from key articles and monographs, occasionally with primary source material forming part of the work. Compilations of this type play into an identified and large market, and

one that the publisher can expect to sell to recurrently as new generations of readers emerge. It is crucial to find good topics for this treatment that have a broad appeal. Such books are not easy to compile and often face practical difficulties beyond the intellectual challenge of selection and editorial commentary. William T. de Bary's *Sources of Asian Tradition*, from Columbia University Press, is a remarkable intellectual achievement of this kind that has stood the test of time.

To be successful, all books of these kinds must have an academic vision, a clear purpose and a researched and well-defined market. They must be of a consistently high standard throughout, however many scholars participate in their creation. They must be comprehensive and complete, seamless from chapter to chapter and section to section. They must be simply written at an appropriate level for the intended readership. In the case of anthologies of readings or source materials, the whole needs to be held together by a firm hand and to have crisp editorial guidance interpolated throughout the volume. All of this requires skills that are not self-evidently the

same as those that go into writing a monograph or single article, and necessitates a vital partnership with the publisher to bring a volume safely through: they are truly cooperative ventures, and individuals must submit to the discipline of the project as a whole.

The principles of clarity of purpose, coherence and completeness, all enforced by editorial and publishing control,

apply just as much to other forms of collected publication. The enthusiastic editor or convenor of a workshop should reflect that it is librarians who buy books.

They have tight budgets and many demands on them. They will ask: Who will read this work? How many staff and students will study its contents or borrow it for the weekend? How important will its contribution be to the reach or teaching of our institution? Is the topic of significant interest, and is the new book an original contribution to knowledge? Are the editors and authors a known quantity or up-and-coming young scholars rumoured to

be shaking the foundations of their subject? How comprehensive a treatment does the book provide? How complete and rounded is the collection? Will it stand the test of time, or is this an interim statement to be superseded by more thought-through research? Only if there are positive answers to most of these questions will the librarian file an order; whatever the pressure from individual academics to make the purchase.

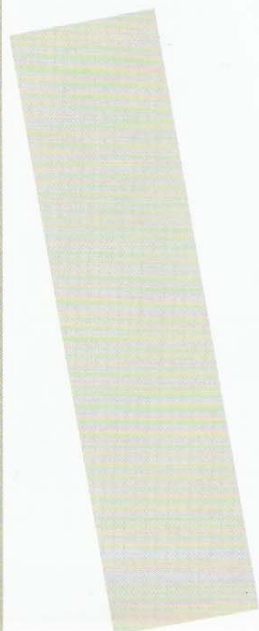
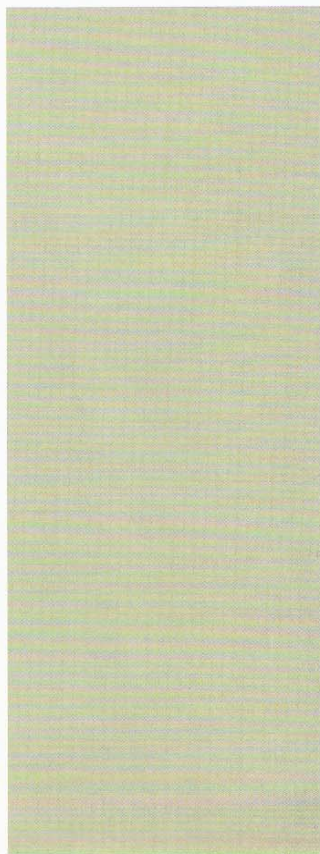
In this context, any collected work starts out at a disadvantage. If it has been written by many people, it is inevitable that there will be scepticism about the quality of all the contributions. It is simply bad value to buy an expensive book that may contain 20 essays of which only a few will ever be highly regarded: better by far to arrange for a copy of the star articles to be logged in the library as a single items.

Then what about the coherence of the volume? Are the contents all about one subject or lodged within one discipline? Making knowledge available to readers in an efficient way is becoming increasingly difficult: how will the book be classified — within an existing recognised category, or has it such a scattergun approach that it is not clear how to

catalogue it or where to place it on the shelves? How original is it, and have the articles been written specially for it? Do the contributions present genuinely new research or interpretation? And, crucially, does the whole add up to more than the sum of its parts?

Another way of putting these questions is to ask simply: is this the best way to publish this particular material? After all, there are a growing number of

'If a collected work has been written by many people, there will be inevitable scepticism about the quality of all the contributions'



alternative ways of disseminating knowledge efficiently, which should be considered by anyone who is contemplating bringing together a collection of papers.

Publishing an interesting group of papers in an established journal is the most obvious. Not only is this likely to reach a far wider readership than any book, but qualms about the standard of individual pieces can be put to rest in the knowledge that the articles will also go through the journal's normal peer-review process. Further, in this case, it is not so essential for all the essays to be so sharply focused on the main theme, nor is there the same need for balance within a cluster of papers. As a journal caters to a field of interest, it can more easily accommodate wilder variations on a theme and need strive neither for completeness nor comprehensiveness in any particular issue.

Finally, what about collections of an author's own work? It is tempting for an academic, especially when established, to assume that there is automatic

merit in bringing together the work of a lifetime, but here again basic rules apply. Unless the author is an essayist of literary renown (a Macaulay or a Trevor-Roper; say) care should be taken before succumbing to flattering words about the value of reprinting papers written — often for different purposes and with different research agendas in mind — over many years. Your articles are already known and, given technological advances, are becoming ever more accessible, however obscure they may originally have been — and most librarians will not buy a book of essays if they see it as indulgent duplication of existing stock.

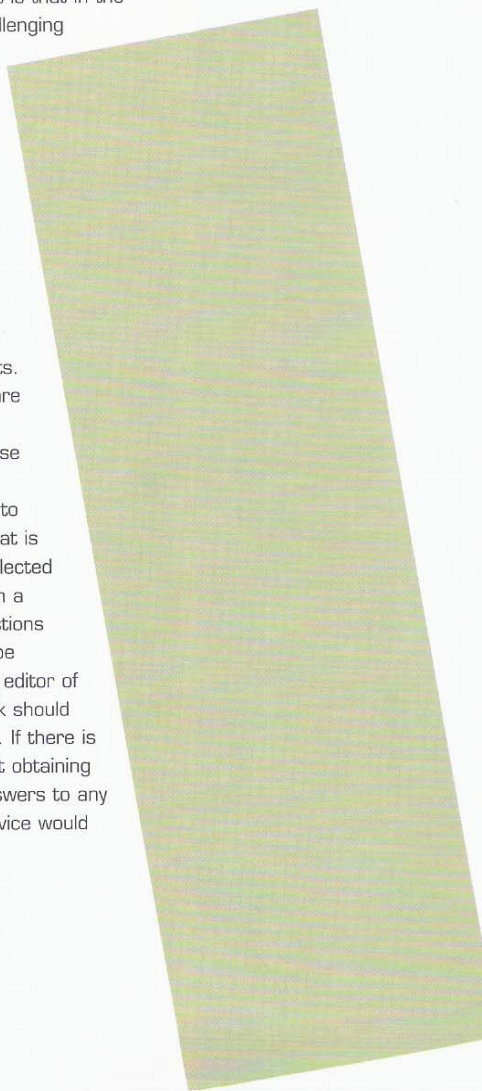
However, an excellent new book can be made out of previously published research. Scholars will have worried away at intellectual problems or come at them in various ways using different research methodologies. They may now be ready to reach a summing-up of where they have got to; in some subjects — for example, philosophy, literary theory, social and political theory, economics and

mathematics — this is how good work often proceeds. The essential thing is that the collected book must be different, new and an advance on earlier publications, however distinguished they were at their first outing. This will mean the addition of new material, or of some extended commentary on the old, taking into account criticisms of it and research that others have since contributed to the field. The Cambridge list has some good examples of this type of publishing, particularly in philosophy and political theory.

But the principle of new development can be carried further, entailing a more radical reformulation of the author's position: Gareth Stedman Jones' *Languages by Class*, for example, is a major reworking of a number of papers on cognate themes to make an integrated book with its own internal logic and structure that goes far beyond a simple act of collection. Norbert Peabody prefaced his recent monograph on Hindu kingship with a prominent statement that the "material presented in this book draws, in part, on three of my previously published essays". Note both the phrase "in part" and that the author goes on, quite correctly, to

say: "In some instances, the substance of these articles has been subtly reworked; in other instances, it has been massively transformed; and in yet other instances, it has not been altered at all." The point is that in the course of a challenging intellectual journey over a long period of time, such authors have an opportunity to reach a new peak in a book that is much greater than the sum of the component parts.

These then are the criteria the consumer will use when deciding whether or not to buy any book that is a species of collected work, along with a number of questions that the would-be entrepreneurial editor of a collected work should ask themselves. If there is any doubt about obtaining satisfactory answers to any of them, my advice would be: "Don't."



THE GOLDMINE

HOW TO TURN YOUR RESEARCH INTO A BESTSELLER

Jon Turney was formerly senior lecturer in science communication at University College London. He is now an editorial director at Penguin Press.

So you did some research: sweated over the data, gave a few seminars, pieced together a couple of papers and (having

pacified the referees) saw them into print. They have been read by, oh, dozens of people. A trickle of reprint requests is coming in, along with one or two invitations to talk.

Yet it's not enough. You put heart and soul into the project; the world must hear of it. Time, perhaps, to write a book for that mythical "intelligent general reader"? Everybody's doing it. And compared with the rigours of research, how hard can it be?

Perhaps harder than you think. In most fields, those papers would have sent a finely tuned signal to a micro-community of academic peers. The readers who pored over your results already shared your interest in your subject. They had to read them; nobody else does.

To beguile the general reader — and the publisher's editor,

who gambles on knowing what he or she wants — you have to send a different kind of signal. The reader over your shoulder now, in

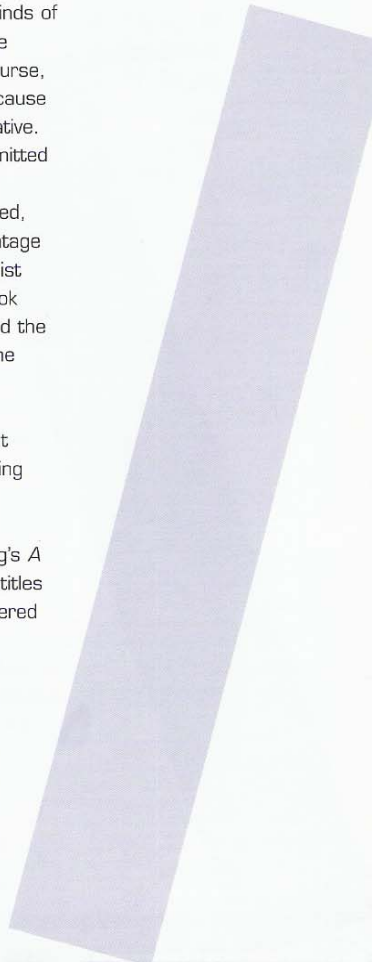
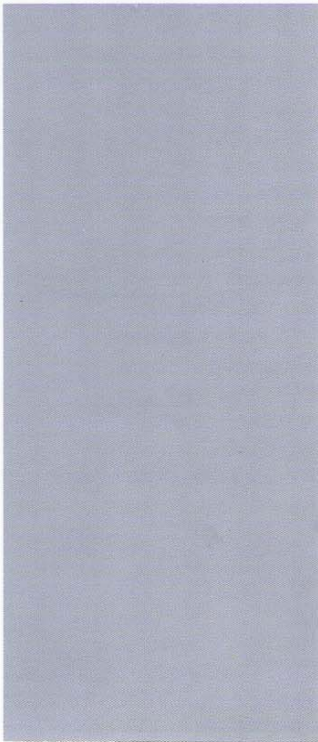
Auden's phrase, is not picking your abstract out of a list delivered by some electronic retrieval system, but weighing the competing claims of the Booker prize shortlist, say, or just the leftover bits of the Sunday papers.

So you propose a work of non-fiction that people will pay good money for in a bookstore in the hope that it will engage them for hours or, possibly, some days. They will expect to be amused, entertained or informed, perhaps even offered insights into the human condition. What have you got to pull off this desirable trick? Some facts, presumably, and a

cute concept or two. (If your thing is explaining why facts are not really facts at all, you should stick to your guns, but you may have a harder time.)

Ideally, you will incorporate those facts and concepts in a story, although probably not the story of how you did the research — unless you have just won a Nobel prize. Think product, not process. Beyond that, the kinds of stories are as various as the disciplines. Historians, of course, begin with an advantage because their work is rooted in narrative. Cosmologists are also committed to a narrative for which the adjective "grand" was invented, though it is less of an advantage for them as every cosmologist seems to put together a book proposal sooner or later, and the market is overloaded with the results.

Still, it is a story with an undeniable pull, and one that easily incorporates the coming to awareness of the human observer. One of the neater features of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (note: titles matter, too) was a three-layered



'There are two main ways to get the public's attention: tell them something useful or appeal to their sense of wonder'

narrative. We learn about the story of the universe and about Hawking's own life story. In between, there is a narrative of discovery in cosmology built around a sequence of towering thinkers — Copernicus, Newton, Einstein and, by implication, the author.

Hawking's life is so dramatic that he can get away with taking centre stage in his own narrative.

This temptation should usually be resisted.

But you will want a narrative of some kind. Tell yourself that however specialised the actual research, it connects somewhere with a larger story. If it doesn't, one might ask why you are doing it at all — you might end up asking yourself. If it is hard to find, try to recall what first drew you to the field, to capture in a few words what a research group is doing or what the outstanding problems are in the sub-discipline or even the whole discipline that you normally take for granted. Then think again about how it relates to people outside the academy.

There are two main ways to

get the public's attention: tell them something useful or appeal to their sense of wonder. Which of these features most prominently in your text will also feed into the tone and style of what you write. It is useful to know how to treat a disease, raise a child, pursue a foreign policy, manage an economy, prevent crime or child abuse or design a computer processor, but it will sound odd if you go into raptures about matter and method. On the other hand, there are still gratifyingly large areas of inquiry — even in British universities — that simply come up with stuff it is good to know. The age of the universe. The structure of a star. How the brain processes *The Goldberg Variations*. The sources of the imagery in *The Ancient Mariner*. The life cycle of the creatures that dwell around deep-sea vents. The proof of Fermat's last theorem. The proper tone here, surely, is celebration; of the wonders we have come to know and that we can know them.

But before getting too enthused, you must bear in mind the limits of what can be shared with the non-specialist. Those limits, I reckon, are of two kinds. The first is easy. All this fine stuff has to be established in great

detail so it can withstand critical scrutiny, but often the details grow dull amazingly quickly. They are for scholars; the rest of us just want the good bits. Which those are is a matter of judgement and can be argued over endlessly. But if you want to write a bestseller (I'll discuss what that means in a bit), it is probably best to assume that the customer is right. Round up some trial readers who will tell you what they really think. If they all insist that one of your favourite items is not really that interesting, then it probably isn't (at least not the way you have written it) — so take it out.

The other limit is harder to deal with. Fermat's last theorem is a convenient illustration. It is simply stated; the proof is not. In fact, it is never going to be remotely comprehensible to the vast majority of people — not just non-mathematicians but even many with quite well-developed mathematical skills. All a writer can do in such a case is give an impression of what was achieved. Simon Singh's book about Andrew Wiles' achievement in proving Fermat correct was, deservedly, a bestseller, but more for its skilful depiction of his solitary struggle than for conveying much of the actual mathematics. A more

recent title worth close study from this point of view is Marcus de Sautoy's *The Music of the Primes*. The story is built around the as-yet-unproven Riemann hypothesis, and therefore depends on some appreciation of what the zeta function is. But there is also a large collection of nicely turned anecdotes, vignettes and mathematical curiosities to reward the reader who does not quite get the details of the core concepts.

Still, explanation is at the heart of a book such as this, and it is hard to do well. Even in strictly non-mathematical fields (and their number is shrinking), there will be plenty of ideas and entities that are not familiar in the everyday world. Their properties or capacities have to be built up with great care before you start to show in more detail what they can do. This, too, can be treated as

'A well-crafted piece of non-fiction might be the most fun you have as an academic. But if you insist on bestseller-dom or nothing, be prepared to be disappointed'

a kind of storytelling, but its effects need to be finely calculated. Clarity is the cardinal virtue.

We began with research, and your book may well do, too, but teaching helps immeasurably here. If you teach, you have already begun to develop your stock of explanatory stories. Yes, you have a captive audience, but that can help if you pay close attention to what seems to work and develop your performance year by year. If you happen to work anywhere that can still afford one-to-one tutorials, even better. Richard Dawkins, one of the world's great explainers, ascribes his success in making the strategies of genes so clear to his years spent in Oxford tutorial rooms dealing with every imaginable misunderstanding of every point and struggling to clarify them. Like him, you need to try all the time to imagine potential difficulties and deal with them. If there is a question that might arise in the reader's mind, the courteous author will answer it as unobtrusively as possible.

If you can pull together all these elements, most probably with help from an agent or editor, you may be on the way to a successful book. A good story, preferably

with a moral, some things that are useful to know, some lustrous wonders and explanations so clear they make the reader feel they can understand anything will mean you have something worth publishing. Will it succeed? The most optimistic answer is still only "maybe".

It depends, of course, on your goal. Saving the world or earning enough to retire on are unlikely outcomes. Simply adding to the cultural conversation is a more realistic ambition. But not all books get the attention they deserve. Forget Hawking with his sales in the millions. A bestselling piece of serious non-fiction, defined as one that makes at least one appearance in the week's top ten list, can still end up shifting thousands, rather than

tens of thousands, of hardbacks in the UK. A medium-seller will likely stay below 10,000 until it makes it into paperback. Books are tantalising: each has the potential to reach a mass audience, but only a small number ever do so.

There are, of course, other reasons to sweat over your work for a year or two. A well-crafted piece of non-fiction, informed by the latest academic thinking, can be a worthwhile thing in itself, and a satisfying (because lasting) testament to your more specialised work. It might also — and this is the best reason — be the most fun you can

have as an academic. But if you insist that it is bestsellerdom or nothing, be prepared to be disappointed.

Bestseller or not, who will your readers be in the end? Like most other aspects of publishing, answering that relies mostly on guesswork. They will be curious, like you. Various, undoubtedly. Some will be academic colleagues, a daunting thought that is best ignored while writing. Some will be people who just wandered into the bookstore. My own suspicion is that quite a few will be students. And a good thing, too. We have created a mass higher education system — one thing a publisher can hope is that the ever-growing tally of newly minted degrees will increase the population of serious readers. Academics who can write non-academic books can only help that to happen.

THE ESCAPE ROUTE

HOW TO WRITE FICTION FOR A POPULAR AUDIENCE

Olga Wojtas is Scottish editor of *The THES*.

Not completely fulfilled by that submission to the research assessment exercise? A sense of something lacking in your latest article? Then why not replace fact with fiction and try your hand at creative writing? There are plenty of reasons not to, from pressure of time to the improbability of ever earning serious money, not to mention the reaction of your fellow academics.

Rob Maslen, a Glasgow University Renaissance studies specialist who writes science fiction and tutors in Glasgow's creative writing centre, says: "I get the sense that creative work is regarded with amusement and even contempt by many academics. Like the Elizabethans, they see it as a youthful phase that needs to be outgrown — an alternative form of masturbation, like trainspotting." But, Maslen says, creative writing programmes are burgeoning and blossoming all over the land, and he believes that the people who need to grow up are those who mock their colleagues' creative aspirations.

For those who are determined to write, an academic course may be useful for some but not for

others, says Robert Crawford, a leading Scottish poet and head of St Andrews University's School of English. "Writing doesn't belong to universities," he says. But most institutions offer workshops or have a writer-in-residence who can offer advice. He also suggests looking into the short courses run by the Arvon Foundation.

Just don't expect a course to be the gateway to fame and fortune. Patricia Duncker, a novelist and professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, says writing is a craft that has to be studied and learned like any other. "My view is that there is no quick, simple and easy way in which you can unleash your creativity. There are no short cuts — and those who think there are are sadly deluded. It's about getting your head down and working hard. If you want to write fiction, you have to start by reading fiction and thinking critically about fiction," she says.

Crawford agrees, warning that taught courses risk becoming something of a navel-gazing exercise. The best courses encourage students to read widely rather than simply concentrating on their own writing.

Adam Roberts, one of the UK's most acclaimed young science-

fiction writers and reader in English at Royal Holloway, University of London, concurs. He says omnivorous reading is vital because you never know where ideas will come from. "I read popular science but also all sorts of contemporary fiction and biography and poetry," he says.

"You need to be able to pick out material from stuff you're reading that's going to be useful to you, and academic training helps you do that. If someone wants to write a novel set during the Napoleonic wars and reads only things written about the Napoleonic wars, they're going to end up producing something very dry and narrow. But if you read right across the board, you're going to be able to bring in strategies and details that enrich your writing."

One thing you should pick up is an appreciation of grammar and syntax, says Margaret Elphinstone, professor of writing at Strathclyde University. "You want to use language absolutely

correctly. Sloppy writing doesn't do the job. Language is a precision tool. If you employed a joiner who said his tools were all rusty and he didn't know what any of them were for, you wouldn't have confidence that he would do a good job. You need to know your parts of speech and how to spell, then you can start experimenting. Reading books that are well written, you do learn how it's done."

Relevant research can be essential for historical or specialist fiction, she adds. Her own research has included a canoeing expedition down Canada's Ottawa River and seeking out primary sources in American state archives. She says academics can be at a huge advantage in having a research methodology because readers take pleasure in being able to trust a novel. "The setting is crucial, and I would say make it something either that you know about or you can find out about. I wouldn't set a novel in the Antarctic unless I could go there because too many people have been. But I could set it on the moon because there are only half a dozen people on the planet who could tell me I'd got it wrong."

The experts insist that creative writing is not the preserve of

'There is no quick, simple and easy way in which you can unleash your creativity. There are no short cuts — those who think there are are deluded'

'We all have learned to be objective, abstract, authoritative, but the voice of fiction is not an academic voice'

English literature departments but can be done by academics from any discipline. "You can't tell where lightning's going to strike," Crawford says.

Richard Francis, a novelist and a professor of creative writing at Bath Spa University College, believes English literature can be positively daunting, with "the horrible pressure of the great dead leaning over your shoulder". Other backgrounds such as science and engineering have proved valuable for writers such as Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon.

Elphinstone says when the poet Kathleen Raine was asked whether she had an English degree, she said no, that studying botany had stood her in much better stead. But for some academics, there is a danger that their work has stifled their creative "voice" and they may have to work to recover it, she believes.

"We have all

learned to be objective, abstract, authoritative, but the voice of fiction is not an academic voice," she says. One of her students, a lawyer, had great difficulty because her written professional language was so different from the voice she had had when growing up. "I'd say, 'Talk to me as if we were sitting at the kitchen table,' and gradually the intonation and register

came back; and I'd say, 'Now write it down without changing anything,' and she began to reclaim her voice."

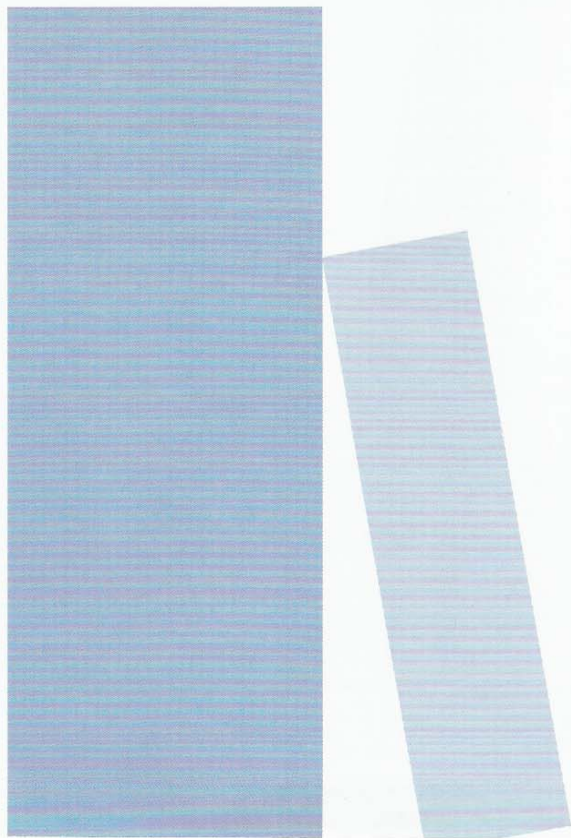
But the desire to communicate and tell a story is fundamental: if writing is purely therapeutic, it is probably too self-directed to find a publisher, Crawford says.


Writers vary in their preparation of plot and structure, Elphinstone says. She has written six novels as well as short stories and poems, and she says she often sets out without knowing exactly what will happen. "I've got the setting and characters and situation. I can see a number of things that could happen and it's going to be one of them — they're not going to have to be rescued by a spaceship." But she writes meticulous background notes on her characters, saying that although this does not mean she knows them "through and through", she is not sidetracked at a crucial stage by having to wonder whether they went to school or not.

Many novels play with the time sequence, and for this, it is essential to have set out a straight chronology in advance, she says. "*Wuthering Heights* starts in the last year of the action. Emily Brontë must have

had notes of all the births and deaths and chronology — you couldn't do what she's done if you hadn't worked it out very carefully."

Research and planning may sound dispiriting to academics who already feel overburdened by work in their own discipline. But all the experts warn that serious writing takes serious effort. "[Creative writing] may be much more fun, but it's hard work and it's exhausting," Roberts says.





Alexander McCall Smith, professor of medical law at Edinburgh University, whose novels about Botswana's first female detective are international bestsellers, has uncompromising advice on time management: never watch television. "That isn't said in a snobbish, anti-TV way, but if you don't watch it, it opens things up," he says. "I would write on Saturdays or at night, I would write during the Christmas and New Year vacation and always took three weeks' holiday in August, which I found very useful."

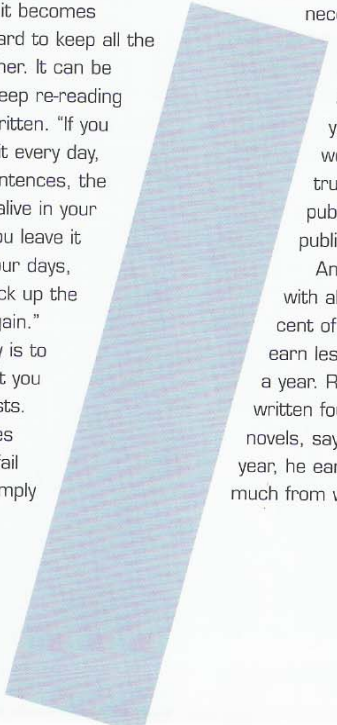
Francis recommends writing regularly; daily, if possible. As a novel progresses and grows in complexity, it becomes increasingly hard to keep all the strands together. It can be stultifying to keep re-reading what you've written. "If you write a little bit every day, even a few sentences, the project stays alive in your mind. But if you leave it for three or four days, you have to pick up the whole thing again."

And the key is to complete what you start, he insists. Postgraduates tend not to fail PhDs but simply

fail to complete them, and it is the same with novels: "Novels are long, but if you write a page a day, you've got a 250-page novel in just over half a year."

Roberts says it is no good writing the first sentence, then agonising over it for three weeks. "Always finish what you do and then revise it. Get it written, then get it right," he advises.

But don't assume that if you get it right, you'll match J. K. Rowling's earnings and be able to quit higher education. There is no one absolute criterion for what will attract a publisher, Crawford says. Elphinstone quotes Doris Lessing as saying that three things are



necessary to be a successful writer: talent, persistence and luck. "Unless you have all three, it won't happen. It's not true that if it's worth publishing, it will get published."

And even for those with all three, 75 per cent of published authors earn less than £10,000 a year. Roberts, who has written four successful novels, says that in the past year, he earned almost as much from writing as from his

academic post — but there are no guarantees he would earn a similar amount in future.

McCall Smith admits that his Precious Ramotswe books are now “very successful financially”, but he points out that they had been around for more than five years before becoming an overnight success. “It’s very difficult to be published as a novelist. It’s terribly, terribly competitive, many, many times more competitive than academia. I wouldn’t discourage people, but one has to be realistic.”

He now earns enough from his

novels to allow him to leave his university post. He has shifted to working part time for three years, but he would not want to give up entirely because he not only enjoys his academic work but finds it a stimulus for his writing. “The nice thing about an academic career is that you meet all sorts of different people and it’s quite a good way to observe humanity.”

Francis believes it would be positively unhealthy to give up the day job. The American poet William Carlos Williams was a GP and he wrote poems on prescription pads, he says, but a full-time writer risks losing mainstream contact with people and the “raw experience” of life.

“It’s a strange and rather isolating experience being a writer; just you and your computer,” Roberts says. “There’s nothing gregarious about it. It can be good to spend the weekend writing and then go into the office.”

‘It’s very difficult to be published as a novelist. It’s many, many times more competitive than academia’


BIOGRAPHIES

Andrew Robinson, literary editor of *The THES*, has written three books on ancient and modern scripts. His other books include *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* and (with Krishna Dutta) *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man and Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (as editor).

Richard Fisher read history at Oxford University and completed three days of a Dphil on proto-industrial processes in the West Country. He joined Cambridge University Press as a trainee in 1983, and worked for many years as a commissioning editor in history and politics. He is now executive director responsible for the humanities and social sciences at CUP.

Brian Fagan is emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of many books on archaeology for popular audiences. He is

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David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer, broadcaster and honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His authored works include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. He has edited the range of Cambridge and Penguin general encyclopedias, and is developing an electronic reference database with various software applications.


Gordon Johnson is president of Wolfson College, Cambridge, a deputy vice-chancellor at Cambridge and a long-time syndicator of Cambridge University Press. He is finishing his own volume of the *New Cambridge History of India* and working on a book on Cambridge University in the 20th century.



Jon Turney, a former features editor of *The THES*, spent the past ten years at University College London teaching and researching in science communication. His books include *Frankenstein's Footsteps* and *Lovelock and Gaia*. He is now editorial director at Penguin Press, where he commissions popular science.



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