

Turning a Dissertation into a Book: A Few Words from an Old Scholar Still Learning to Write

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In the best of worlds hardly anyone would publish a dissertation. Much better to wait until one has had time to become a seasoned scholar, and to develop an independent world view. However this is not the best possible world, and most young scholars feel pressed to publish immediately if they are to have any hope of gaining tenure. So how to go about it?

Begin with the fact that dissertations and books are different genres. For the first you need to demonstrate a grasp of research methods; for the second you need to put before the world what you have learned and thought in the process of carrying out this demonstration in a way that will add a mite to the world's store of knowledge.

- Figure out what you have to say that hasn't been said before. Then think about your audience—who do you want to read this book? And how can one best speak to that audience?
- Make an outline in which you develop the logic of your narrative before you set out to write. Each chapter should be different from the one before, not a rehash of what you have already written.
- Devise an opening paragraph that suggests what the book will be about, and that will grab the attention of potential readers. Look at the opening sentences of some of the best monographs that began life as dissertations. For example, “The women of Petersburg would have been surprised at the suggestion that someone wanted to write their history.” Or, “Ellen, a house slave, violated a long-established code of racial etiquette by wearing her mistress's toiletries during the early years of the Civil War.” Or, “There is an old adage but nevertheless a true one that ‘justice slumbers but never sleeps.’ Oftentimes, in slumbering, merit lies unrewarded for a time.” Or, “Eleven miles from the Trinity River in the East Texas black belt lies a railroad junction called Palestine. Here, on November 2, 1883, Jessie Harriet Daniel was born.”¹
- As you write, stick to your outline and try not to repeat yourself. Remember that brevity is the soul of wit. As Muriel Humphrey said to Hubert when he tended to a longwinded speech, “For a speech to be immortal it does not have to be eternal.”

¹ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (1984); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (1997); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (1996); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (1979).

I think it is possible to generalize: the longer the book the less likely the reader will finish it.

Select only the most telling examples and leave out the others that you have so carefully accumulated. Always try to be concrete; abstract statements do not stick in the mind. Use the active voice. Make every word count. Use adjectives and adverbs VERY sparingly, but strong nouns and active verbs are to be treasured. Read carefully William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *Elements of Style*, and Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Read and re-read some of the masters of the historian's craft: C. Vann Woodward, Jacquelyn Hall, Eileen Power, Suzanne Lebsock—and try to figure out how they do it. Then try to find your own voice. Avoid what H.W. Fowler, in *Modern English Usage*, calls Hackneyed Phrases—phrases that once seemed fresh die from overuse. Particularly since the invention of the Internet, a newly minted phrase can grow old in a week.

Listen to Mark Twain: an author “must say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it; use the right word, not its second cousin, eschew surplusage, not omit necessary details; avoid slovenliness of form; use good grammar; employ a simple and straightforward style.”

- If you can find a patient listener read chapters aloud as you go. If no such person can be found, read into a tape recorder and listen to the tape. You will be shocked at some of what you hear.
- When you think you have finished, ask yourself: if someone else had written this manuscript would I want to read it? If the answer is no, revise again. If it is yes, send it to some publishers. Bon Voyage.

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