Getting Your Textbook Published

Expert teachers often are dissatisfied with the textbooks they use for their courses. To solve the problem, they usually supplement the text with additional material, some of which they have developed themselves.

What makes textbooks less than adequate? Many factors can come into play, but a few of the more common include:

- The author’s inability to explain material at a level students can understand.
- Poor writing or organization that can’t be corrected by editors.
- Authorship restrictions, such as the inability of a publisher to provide a certain quality of illustrations.
- The philosophic orientation of the author, whose view of how the material should be presented may differ from the instructor’s.

At some point, especially after developing large amounts of supplemental material, an expert teacher may decide that writing his or her own textbook is the solution. There are a number of reasons for writing a textbook — some good, some bad. Schoenfeld and Magnus note the following three aspects of textbook production that should be addressed by any instructor who wants to write a textbook:

- Writing a text is the absolute expression of professing (being a professor). It hones teaching skills and techniques and reaches a wider audience. By writing, you will learn more about your discipline and more about teaching.
- Publishing means selling, and selling means marketing. A textbook author must become an entrepreneur. Unlike trade or academic books, the textbook author must be willing to help promote and sell the book as well as write it.
- Rewards are uncertain. Even a good text can receive meager adoptions and lukewarm reviews. At research institutions, a 2000-word
article may count for more than a 200,000-word textbook. At teaching institutions, however, a textbook author may be “positively venerated.” The financial rewards may be staggering (although this is unlikely in a market like radiologic technology) or you may receive years of “negative royalty statements.”

If you, as a professor, feel capable of producing a quality product, are willing to let your ideas be held up for public scrutiny and realize that the rewards of textbook production may end up being more intrinsic than extrinsic, then you may want to consider producing a textbook. Payne and Gallahue make the following observation about writing a textbook:

> Textbook writing should be undertaken for the love of learning, and for conveying knowledge, thoughts, and ideas on the printed page. Textbook writing is all about the process itself, and very little about the product. The rewards of textbook writing are intrinsic and grounded in the creative process of “becoming” rather than the extrinsic rewards of “being.”

**Developing the Proposal**

Let’s say you have an idea for a new textbook and are willing to undertake the challenges of publishing. Before you ever approach a publishing company, you first must develop a book proposal. A well-prepared proposal can save you considerable time should the publisher consider the target market too small for your proposed text. The proposal must convince the publisher that your book will be superior to similar books already on the market. Although you might be willing to develop a textbook as a “labor of love,” a textbook publisher will not be interested unless your book has the potential to sell. The goal of a publishing company is to make money, not to disseminate ideas. Even a small publisher must consider profit as the motive, because a publisher who makes no profit will cease to exist.

If you want to develop a book for a specialty market and the big textbook publishing companies show no interest, you may want to consult a university press that specializes in short-run books of less than
1000 copies. You also should investigate the possibility of self-publishing your book.

Book proposals have six main components. Most publishers will provide a format to follow when writing a book proposal, but proposals generally include the following information:

- A market description.
- A competition description.
- A book description.
- An author description.
- Sample chapter(s).

Securing a book contract is highly competitive. It is estimated that of 1000 expressions of interest to write a book, probably 50 make it to the proposal stage. Of those submitting a proposal, only five to 10 are accepted by a publisher and only 30% to 70% result in a finished book.

Usually, the publishing company will ask other educators in your discipline to review your proposal. If you are unable to convince these reviewers that your textbook has merit, it is doubtful that the publisher will offer you a contract. A goal of the proposal, therefore, is to convince the reviewers that they would be willing to switch from their current textbooks to yours once it is published. Let’s examine each part of the book proposal:

**Market Description**

Each publisher has a specific view of the target market or audience for every book. You must be able to convince the publisher that your book will sell enough copies to make the venture worthwhile. This is especially important in a discipline such as radiologic technology, where the market is small compared to disciplines such as English composition or psychology.

**Competition Description**

If you are unable to describe what is good or bad about the currently competing textbooks on the market, the publisher probably will decide that you are not going to be their choice of author. Another sure “kiss of death” is to claim there are no competing texts to yours at
this time. The logical assumption, from the publisher’s point of view, is that if there is no competition there is no market, and if there is no market there will be no demand for your text. When you prepare the spreadsheet or table describing your book (see Table 1), you may want to prepare a second version that shows how your textbook will stack up against the competition.

Another method that worked well for Michael Thompson, senior editor on the collaborative text *Principles of Imaging Science and Protection* (W.B. Saunders, 1994), was to conduct a national survey that asked what was good and bad about texts currently on the market. Based on his data, Thompson was able to prepare a proposal that revealed what educators didn’t like about the texts they currently were using and how he intended to develop a book that would meet educators’ needs in the areas of physics and imaging.

### Table 1
**Items to Include in the Spreadsheet**

- Total number of pages and total number of figures.
- Front matter content and length.
- Back matter content and length.
- Number of chapters.
- Features (for example, definition of terms, pronunciations, word roots, additional readings, end-of-chapter questions).

- For each chapter:
  1. Page count.
  2. Figure count (number of figures in black and white, number in color, number of line drawings, number of photographs).
  3. Table count.
  4. Number of terms to be printed in boldface or in a second color (the use of a second color adds to the cost of the book).
**TEACHING TECHNIQUES**

**Book Description**

The book description should, in one paragraph, clearly describe the book. Ancillaries and pedagogy also should be described in this section. If your book is accepted, this section often forms the foundation of the marketing plan for the book.

A content outline must be detailed enough to give the publisher an idea of how your book will compete against current texts. In addition to the table of contents, a content outline should contain a brief description of the intent of each chapter.

You should prepare a spreadsheet or table that describes your book. (See Table 1.) The spreadsheet is difficult to prepare, but it forces you to think about the details of your textbook. Be as complete as possible when describing the features of your book, because everything affects the final cost of the project. How many pages of text? Is there any front matter? Back matter? What is the trim size? How many illustrations? Will they be line art or photographs? Will the photographs be black-and-white or color?

By determining these factors in advance, you are doing the publisher’s homework and making it easier to prepare a budget for the project. It doesn’t matter if you are off a little on page count or the total number of illustrations; what matters is that the publisher has enough information to make a rough estimate to assess profitability (which affects their interest level and your leverage).

Also, doing this advance work proves that you know the ropes, are organized and can be taken seriously. This is important, because a lot of aspiring authors have great ideas but poor organizational skills. If the reviews are good and the publisher needs a book in your proposed market, you’re in business.

**Author Description**

Resumés and curriculum vitae usually are not very revealing. You may be the world’s foremost expert on radiographic technique, but that fact in and of itself does not qualify you to write a textbook. You must convince the acquisitions editor that you are capable of explaining concepts clearly and accurately, using the written word.
You already accomplished much of that in the first part of the book proposal, and some of it you will solve by providing a well-written sample chapter. However, in this section of your book proposal you should provide a brief overview of your relevant qualifications. Have you written articles or textbooks before? Have you presented papers at professional conferences? Have you won awards for teaching? Are you recognized in your profession? If so, let the publisher know. Now is not the time to be modest.

**Sample Chapter(s)**

Publishers may ask specifically for the first chapter of your book, since it will serve as a foundation for the entire text. In some cases, publishers will ask that two chapters be submitted — the first chapter plus another representative chapter. Whatever you submit, make sure that it accurately represents the remainder of the book. If you plan to include boldfaced terms throughout your book, for example, then your sample chapter should show how you will incorporate them. If you intend to use pedagogical devices, do so in the sample chapter with the same amount of detail as you will in the potential book. Don’t consider the sample chapter to be a “rough draft,” even if the publisher tells you that it’s all right to turn in something rough. Your sample chapter should be very polished.

**What If My Proposal Is Rejected?**

It can take as little as one ambivalent review to sink a proposal. In some cases, reviewers may react with hostility to the very idea of your textbook. The reason behind these reactions is best left to the psychoanalysts. If your proposal is rejected, don’t be too discouraged. Most experienced textbook authors have experienced rejection at one time or another — some of them more often than they care to admit. As consumers, you see only their successes, not their failures.

An author has two options if his or her proposal is rejected — either submit it to another publisher or give up. The best authors learn to glean relevant comments from the first set of reviewers and use them to write a better book proposal.
When the Contract Comes

An acceptance from a publisher is exciting, but don’t let your enthusiasm lead you into signing a contract prematurely. Examine the details of the contract carefully. For example, don’t commit to an overzealous schedule for producing the book. Consider your workplace and personal commitments first. Also, look carefully at the publisher’s requirements for ancillaries such as an instructor’s manual or accompanying software. Writing an instructor’s manual, in some cases, can be as time-consuming as writing the textbook itself.

Henson notes that he used to tell potential authors not to worry about the details of publishing contracts. Today, however, he realizes that it is in the publisher’s interest to write a contract that benefits the publisher. He recommends that authors follow these tips:

• **Don’t be afraid to negotiate.** Although most publishing companies are honest, they have to look out for their own best interests. Work, within reason, to protect your interests.

• **Ask for a fixed royalty fee.** Depending on the discipline, the size of the market, the financials run by the publisher, your art contributions and other factors, book royalty rates can vary from 8% to 18%. Lower is much more common than higher, and rates offered to experienced, proven authors are higher than those to newcomers. There also are levels of royalties in many contracts. In other words, the front-page contract rate may apply to U.S. college sales, while another rate — specified in a later subparagraph — applies to foreign sales, direct sales, discounted sales and so on. As separate items, these categories of sales do not count toward any escalation point.

“Sliders” are a common feature of royalty contracts, with the breakpoint often set at the projected first year sales. The contract also may include a “home-run” clause stating, for example, that if the text sells more than 30,000 copies in any one year, the royalty rate jumps to 12% retroactively. In general, royalty rates have been declining due to the large investment — now including multimedia — required in these markets. Also contributing to declining rates is the management of megapublishers by conglomerates concerned with bottom-lining every-
thing. Fifteen years ago, rates of 15% were common; today, those rates are the exception.

Henson believes that sliding scales benefit the publisher rather than the author. Such sales typically promise, for example, 10% royalties for the first 5000 copies, 12% for the next 5000 and 15% for anything above 10,000. Few books are going to sell enough to justify such sliding scales.

In textbook writing, the experts rarely agree on royalty rates. This makes it important to solicit multiple viewpoints. (See Table 2.) For example, Levine\textsuperscript{5} considers sliding scales beneficial and recommends that authors lobby for them. In the end, it simply might be a matter of the sales potential of the book. A book with large sales potential has more to gain from a sliding scale than one with a limited potential.

- **Ask for a grant or a nonrefundable advance to cover your costs of producing the book.** Ideally, a grant should be provided to the author to produce the book; also ideally, the grant is nonrefundable in the event the publisher decides to “kill” the project. Unlike advances, grants are not extracted from the author’s royalties. They cover things like computer hardware, express mailing fees, telephone bills, fax charges and other costs that are directly involved with the preparation and submission of the manuscript.

Neither grants nor advances are intended to reimburse you for your time and effort invested in preparing the text. Your time is considered your “sweat equity” that justifies your percentage of final sales. However, an advance can enable you to defer other income-producing tasks that would compete with your writing time. For example, if you normally earn $10,000 by teaching during summer session or evenings as an overload, you could negotiate an advance of that amount so that your evenings and summers could be devoted to the project. Keep in mind, however, that this money will be considered an advance on your royalties, not a grant.

When considering how large an advance to ask for, use 50% of your estimated first-year royalty revenues as a ballpark figure. Say, for
example, that the publisher expects to sell 10,000 copies of your book at $30 per copy, generating $300,000 in revenues and $30,000 in royalties. A $15,000 advance — 50% of your projected royalties — is a good place to start your negotiations.

Keep in mind that an advance is an interest-free loan — it commits the publisher to you and your project (and you to them!) more securely than a contract alone. If there is no advance, your book contract gets signed and shelved. It then becomes a “no-lose” situation for the publisher, who may assign your book a lower priority. Staged advances are fine incentives — “X” amount on signing, “Y” on completion of first draft and “Z” on submission of the final manuscript. This type of schedule helps keep you focused on meeting your next goal.

- **Look for hidden expenses deducted from royalties.** Hidden costs can add up quickly. Few authors realize the cost, for example, of producing an index. For a 250-page book, indexing may cost $2000. You may be required to prepare supplements on demand or else have the cost of someone else preparing them deducted from your royalties. Some publishers even may charge you to calculate your royalty statement. Try to make sure that the publisher pays for reprint permissions. In some cases, these items may not be negotiable. If so, you might want to look for another publisher. Most books don’t make money for the author in terms of return-on-investment. You will spend thousands of hours producing a book that may net you $2000 or $3000 a year. However, you don’t want to start at a loss.

**The Mechanics of Production**

It would take many pages to discuss the complicated process of producing a textbook. If your publishing company assigns a good editor to your project, he or she will lead you through the various production phases as they occur, explaining each step along the way. Be sure to educate yourself by reading books about textbook writing, editing, design and production. Also, don’t be afraid to continually question your editor. If you are not proactive in this aspect of textbook production, you increase the risk of winding up with an inferior product.
Table 2
Suggested Resources

Textbook Authors Association, P.O. Box 535, Orange Springs, FL 35419
This organization offers several pamphlets on textbook publishing, including one titled “Some Questions To Ask Before Signing a Publishing Contract for a Textbook.” The TAA also provides a legal hotline service, offers an ombudsman service to assist in disputes and maintains an author experience file that lists authors who are willing to share their publishing experiences with others.

Henson probably is the most recognized authority in all aspects of academic publication. This book is indispensable for all faculty involved in the production of scholarly materials. It contains a number of samples that are helpful, including sample proposal and competition statements. This text is especially useful for the publishing novice.

Written by a former university press editor and current academic, this is a good book on writing in general, including journal articles and revising dissertations as books. The last half of the book discusses textbook production. The information is both practical and usable. Included is an annotated bibliography that lists a number of sources.

This book spends a lot of time discussing issues that are only of peripheral interest to academic authors, such as literary agents, but it does contain a lot of useful information. The author is an academic journalist who writes in a journalistic style through the use of multiple interviews.

Conclusion
There is no more internally rewarding project than writing a textbook: You get to learn more about your profession, you can try out your best teaching techniques, and you gain the satisfaction of contributing to your profession. You also may make some money, but that should be a secondary consideration.

As a discipline that is constantly advancing both professionally and technically, radiologic technology needs quality textbooks. Consider becoming one of the leaders in the profession by writing one.
References


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