

## Roundtable: **Writing a Textbook.**

Moderator: Christopher Stream, UNLV

Have you been thinking about writing a textbook? Or, do you have an idea for one percolating on the back burner? Perhaps you're simply curious to learn more about how the process works and what's involved? This roundtable discussion will cover some of the most frequently asked questions and misperceptions about textbook publishing, along with some advice for how to get a project off the ground and into the right publisher's hands.

### **1. Why should I consider writing a textbook?**

Editors are always on the lookout for signs of author potential and evidence of a proven track record. At conventions and on campus, in phone conversations and via e-mail, they are in search of that rare combination of spark, expertise, and commitment to teaching.

How many of the following indicators apply to you?

- "I'm not fully satisfied with existing textbooks for the course; in fact, I have specific ideas about what I'd like to see improved and what I'd like to see done differently in a new book."
- "I teach an introductory or upper-level undergraduate course that gets my students interested in and excited about my field."
- "I've devised innovative ways to make the course content come alive for my students."
- "In addition to the core text I've adopted, I've created my own course pack or custom publication."
- "I'm in the process of creating (or have recently created) a new course for my department."
- "I've been recognized by my department or university for outstanding teaching. My student teaching evaluations are consistently strong."
- "I am active in my field with a vita that shows a strong record of current research, journal articles, presentations, and membership in my field's major organizations."
- "I'm already tenured or will be up for tenure within the next year."
- "I've written or coauthored a textbook before for a different course."
- "I've previously authored an instructor manual, test bank, or other ancillary materials to accompany a leading textbook."
- "I'm on the editorial board of a journal or publication associated with my field."
- "I have a sense of the current trends and future directions of my field that should be reflected in a new textbook."
- "I've taught this course enough times now and have tried different texts and methods so that I know what works for students."

## **2. What's the first step in linking up with a publisher?**

This “first step” actually consists of several preplanning tasks. Before drafting a proposal and approaching a publisher, you should closely evaluate the competition, gaining a concrete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the leading books on the market. Peruse your office bookshelves and determine what you like about your favorite textbooks. Do you find effective chapter-opening or end-of-chapter features? Eye-catching art? Inviting design? Accessible writing style? Concrete, relevant examples? Student-centered activities? A helpful ancillary package?

Today, the Internet makes it very easy to access instant information about competing books on publishers' Web sites.

Test out your ideas in class with your own students, and talk with colleagues at your campus and other schools about common course goals and teaching challenges.

The next time that publisher's representative stops by to say hello, don't politely brush the rep off. Take a few minutes and talk with him/her. Experienced publisher's reps are experts about their own company's books as well as the competition. The rep will be able to tell you why a book sells or doesn't sell, discuss regional and national course trends, and explain the impact of new technology. A good rep can also function as your ally, helping to get your proposal brought to the attention of a busy editor.

When you attend your next convention, stroll through the exhibit hall and take advantage of the opportunity to meet editors, publishing executives, and marketing managers. Depending on how serious you are about a book project, you might consider setting up an appointment ahead of time to meet one on- one with the editor. Talk with the staff in the booth and ask questions about the books and media on display.

After assessing competing books and conducting some informal market research of your own, you're ready to craft your draft prospectus and determine which publisher will be the best fit for you and your book. Most editors and companies have proposal writing guidelines that you can download off the publisher's Web site or request in person from your local publishing representative.

In addition to your narrative prospectus or proposal (about 5 to 10 pages), you'll need to sketch out a detailed table of contents or book outline that clearly shows all chapter titles, subtopics, appendices, and other back matter you plan to include in the book.

## **3. Pitfalls to avoid in your book proposal.**

Sending unsolicited manuscript or huge e-mail attachments. Most editors prefer a brief project description, or outline and prospectus, along with a copy of your vita.

Ignoring the competition. Inexperienced authors often state that they never look at the competing books because of a naïve perception that their own project's originality would be compromised.

Pitching your book for everyone. "There's no other book like this on the market anywhere. In fact, I've never seen a book like the one I'm proposing. My book will fit a range of courses, such as Intro X, upper level courses in Y, as well as courses over in the Medical School, and anthropology and education departments. The book will also have broad appeal to professional markets and the lay audience."

Some version of this comment appears in many first draft proposals, and this line probably makes an editor wince. If you can't find a similar book available anywhere, you might want to consider what this lack of supply suggests about market demand or market size. If the course for which you are writing a book is a newly emerging or growing course, you'll want to have hard evidence (sample syllabi from other campuses, studies or reports, related articles describing new course trends) to back up your claims of the need for such a book.

#### **4. How does the review process work?**

Depending on the quality and completeness of your draft proposal, an editor may require changes before agreeing to send it out for review. When both editor and author are satisfied that the proposal and outline are in good shape, the editor will commission 4 to 10 "pre-signing" reviews (depending on the market size and competitive landscape) to gather feedback on the project's potential for critical and commercial success. The review process typically takes 4 to 6 weeks, including time to line up reviewers, prepare and mail out review packets, and track reviews as they come in. It's a good idea to get a sense of the timetable for the reviews up front.

When all the reviews are in, the editor will send you a set of reviews and set a date to discuss them with you. It's a good idea to prepare for this conversation by taking careful notes as you read the reviews, noting which comments or criticisms you find helpful and which you disagree with.

Assuming that the reviews are encouraging—that is, reviewers indicate that they would be likely to adopt the proposed text or would seriously consider it for adoption—the editor will then nail down a writing schedule, terms, and proceed to negotiate a contract.

#### **5. What are the hallmarks of a good textbook? What makes a book marketable?**

It's important to recognize that there's a distinction between a good textbook and a marketable textbook. Not all good books are commercially successful. I'd bet that there

are numerous first edition books lining your shelves that you consider perfectly respectable in terms of accuracy of content, organization, and style.

A good book may appeal to a narrow segment of a market but fail to meet the needs of a wider audience. It's your job to craft a strategy for your book's critical and commercial success, ensuring that it is a quality book that gets widely adopted and sells enough copies to satisfy the publisher's investment goals. To reach a second edition, your textbook will have to meet or come close to meeting the sales targets established by your editor.

Commercially successful books tend to be ones written for a specific course that the author successfully teaches. The author's grasp of common course goals, teaching challenges and areas of student difficulty is informed by his or her firsthand experience as an instructor who teaches the course.

The book must match the course as it is commonly taught, while offering obvious improvements and innovations that make it a better and more exciting alternative to the leading books already dominating the market.

It's also essential that the author complete the book according to schedule, as a book that suffers from chronic delays risks losing its timeliness, currency, and competitive edge.

Given the high competitiveness and tight margins of publishing, the book alone is no longer enough. The author and publisher need to partner in creating a complete course solution delivered via a combination of text, media, and supplements.

## **6. With all the books on the market for course "X," why would a publisher want to develop yet another new book for the same course?**

Why would I want to sign with a publisher who already has other books for the same course? Why would I want to sign with a publisher who has never published a book for this course before? New authors confronting this issue need to decide what is most important to them in an editor and publishing house, and what they expect for their book. It's important to understand that there are potential benefits and challenges that come with either of the two scenarios mentioned above.

Signing with a publisher who already has a track record of success publishing in a given course can benefit your book in several ways. The house has a demonstrated commitment to the course, and its sales reps and marketing department know the customers and what it takes to be successful in that market. Your new book will have the advantage of cross-promotion with established titles.

Sometimes, it's tempting for an author to favor a publisher who will make his new book that publisher's first entry in a given course or market. As in the scenario above, be sure to get specific assurances up front about your and the publisher's expectations for

development and marketing. What are the publisher's goals for entering a new market? You'll want to see evidence that the publisher has the resources, creativity, and commitment it will take to establish a successful new book in a competitive and often crowded marketplace. If your book marks a publisher's debut in a new market, does the publisher have other strengths it can leverage in helping to establish your book?

## **7. Is it ethical to send your proposal to different publishers at the same time?**

As a prospective author, you are free to talk with and get advice from as many publishers as you wish. It is not uncommon for an author to submit his proposal to several publishers at the same time. Doing so can help you gauge your potential working relationship with different houses.

To avoid miscommunication, communicate honestly with all parties about your most important needs and concerns, identify which publishers you are talking with, ask tough questions, and establish clear decision-making timetables. When will reviews be commissioned, analyzed, and discussed? Is an on-site meeting with the publisher necessary, and if so, when? By when can you expect a decision from the publisher of intent to offer a contract or decline interest in the project? Do you have a date by which you want or need to make a decision?

When the honeymoon phase of signing has ebbed, and you're hard at work on the book, you'll want to be confident that the publishing relationship you've entered into is the one that will support and sustain your efforts over the long term.

## **8. Concluding Thoughts/Tips?**

Christopher Stream is an associate professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Dr. Stream conducts research on issues of intergovernmental relations and public policy. Stream's substantive research focuses on state health care reform, local delivery of health care services, gaming policy, institutional capacity and city management. He is the author of several articles and has served as a policy consultant for a variety of government and private organizations.

His research has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *International Journal of Economic Development* and *State and Local Government Review*. His latest textbook, "State and Local Government" (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning) is now available.