

The Guide to Writing Introductory College Textbooks

Preface

Acknowledgements

GETTING STARTED

1 Should You Write a Textbook?

- A. You have a vision of the course 1
- B. You're a good writer 3
- C. You have time to write 4
- D. You want to make money 5

2 Finding a Publisher

- A. Which publisher? 6
- B. How much will your book cost? 8
- B. Getting an offer from a publisher 10
- C. Negotiating a contract 12

3 Starting Work

- A. Setting up a schedule 18
- B. How much time will your editor have for you? 21
- C. Listen to your editor 23
- D. To the editor 23

The TEXTBOOK

4 Writing Style and Content

- A. A teacher-proof text 29
- B. Your audience 30
- C. Your writing style
 - 1. Whatever I teach you, you can't learn for yourself 31
 - 2. Write for the student, not the professor 32
 - 3. Avoid jargon 32
 - 4. Don't pack the material too densely 33
 - 5. Don't talk down to the student 34
 - 6. Don't be dry as dust 36
 - 7. Pronouns 37
 - 8. Writing well requires imagination 38
 - 9. Examples of good writing 38
- D. Clarity and signposts along the way 40
- E. Jokes and "I" 41
- F. Tell no lies 42

5	The Shape of the Book	
	A. Telling a story	45
	B. Chapter length	46
	C. Large sections of the book	46
	D. Appendices	47
	E. Index	47
	F. Glossary	48
	G. Bibliography	48
	H. Acknowledgements	49
	I. Table of contents	49
	J. Prefaces	49
	K. Dedication	50
	L. Listen to your editor	50
	M. To the editor	51
6	Definitions and Examples	
	A. Clear definitions	52
	B. Steps in making a good definition	53
	C. Examples	
	1. Examples in the presentation of definitions	54
	2. Examples to illustrate a method	57
	3. Examples to illustrate a point or make a point memorable	57
	4. Examples need to be focused	58
	D. Quotations	
	1. How to use them	59
	2. Formatting	62
	3. Getting permission to use quotations	62
	E. Finding good examples and quotations	64
7	Exercises	
	A. Why you need to write good exercises	65
	B. Where do the exercise sets go and what do they contain?	
	1. Within a chapter	68
	2. At the end of a chapter	72
	3. At the end of a large part of the book	74
	4. Remedial exercises	76
	5. Matching and true/false exercises	77
	6. Multiple-choice exercises	77
	7. Questions	79
	C. Answers to the exercises	80
	D. Essay exercises	81

8	Illustrations	
	A. Why illustrations?	85
	B. Cartoons from newspapers or magazines	85
	C. Graphs and tables	86
	D. Creating the illustrations	90

SUPPLEMENTS

9	What Are Supplements and Why Have Them?	95
10	The Workbook	96
11	A Study Guide?	99
12	The Instructor’s Manual	
	A. You should write an instructor’s manual	101
	B. Contents	
	1. Introduction	103
	2. A syllabus	103
	3. Lesson plans for the first week of classes	103
	4. Chapter-by-chapter	104
	5. Additional exercises and examples	106
	6. Printing the IM?	106
	7. The CD for the IM	107
	C. Examinations	
	1. Exams in the IM?	107
	2. Writing exams	108
	3. Quizzes	110
13	Software	112
14	How Much Is Enough?	113

PUBLICATION

15	The Design of the Book	117
16	The Cover and the Copyright Page	
	A. The cover	121
	B. The copyright page	122
17	Marketing	
	A. The marketing questionnaire	123
	B. After your book’s been published	123

18	The Royalty Check	125
19	Preparing the Next Edition	128
	Conclusion	129

APPENDIX: BOOKS in the DIGITAL AGE

	Print Runs and Print-on-Demand	131
	E-Books	134
	Index	137

Preface

When I began writing research books and textbooks, the only guide I had was the books I'd used and the ideas I'd developed for how to teach. Trial and error were my school. Then and now I've written the kind of books I wish I'd had when I was learning the subject.

One book I wish I'd had was a guide for how to write a book. Now, with forty years experience, I've tried to write such a text.

A guide to writing all levels of textbooks would be too diffuse. What I offer here is a guide to writing introductory college textbooks, principally for the market in the United States and Canada, though I hope the suggestions in it will be useful for other levels and countries.

Above all, an introductory textbook is a teaching tool. It can supplement the work of a good teacher, or it can do the work that a bad teacher leaves undone. The author of a textbook must be a teacher with a vision of his material and how he thinks it should be taught. It is his responsibility to shape the project so that all the parts contribute to that overall view. For someone who wants to be such an author, I've written this book.

Unfortunately, there are many professors who reckon their lectures alone are worth the price of a book. They think that writing exercises or aids to instructors is a drain on their time that could be better spent doing research or earning large sums lecturing and consulting. This guide is not written for them, except perhaps in the hope that they will see the moral costs of abdicating their responsibilities as teachers.

The editors for such authors are left with the job of shaping their project. To do that, an editor must know the contents of the textbook very well and have a good idea of the author's vision, know what students need in order for that vision to be successful, and know what instructors want and need in order to be able to teach the course well. In addition, he or she must be able to evaluate writing in order to make decisions about who will write supplements.

Most editors do not have those skills. That knowledge is normally acquired by teaching for a long time and by writing textbooks. Most editors these days are skilled principally in marketing, sales, and production. So this book is written to help them, too.

In writing this guide, I have imagined it as a conversation between me and an author—unfortunately rather one-sided—with his editor sitting in. Editors should be able to listen well, so I only rarely direct comments to them.

In order to clarify my suggestions and to give some reason to believe them, I've included lots of examples, both from texts and from my experience. They hardly qualify as serious evidence. But then writing is an art, not a science.

For reasons that I discuss in Chapter 4.C.7, I've chosen to use the convention I was taught when I was young: “he” means “he or she,” “his” means “his or hers,” “him” means “him or her.” I plan to prepare an alternate version of this book using instead “she,” “hers,” and “her” as the standard pronouns, which I can make available on request.

* * * * *

Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to think that I have something to say that would be of value to authors and editors. But every good book, every major step forward, comes from such presumption. It is my desire to write a book that I would have liked which tempers that presumption just this side of hubris.

My background, though, may be of interest for showing where my ideas came from and why in some areas they may be too limited. I wrote my first book, a research monograph presented as a textbook, for my Ph.D. thesis in mathematics in 1973; it was published in 1975. I subsequently wrote a graduate-level text and another research monograph in mathematical logic that were published in 1979 and 1981. By then I was becoming interested in the foundations of my subject and began studying philosophy. In 1989 I published with Walter Carnielli an undergraduate textbook on the history, mathematics, and philosophy of computability; in a later edition I added an historical timeline to that text. Since the early 1980s I've been working on a series of upper-division/graduate level texts on the foundations of formal logic, *The Semantic Foundations of Logic* that incorporates much new research; the first two came out in 1990 and 1994, and the third in 2007.

In the mid-1990s I was asked to teach a freshman critical thinking course in a philosophy department, which I did for three years, four sections each semester. At the end of that time I'd finished a textbook

for the course, which, with several workbooks and a shortened “pocket” version, has become successful commercially. Then I produced a graduate level/research text in philosophy on the foundations of reasoning using the ideas I’d learned while writing that undergraduate book. Later, I was asked with Carolyn Kernberger to do editorial work on a freshman economics text. As a result, we collaborated on writing a guide to reasoning in economics. More recently, I’ve published a guide to reasoning in the sciences and have written a series of books called *Essays on Logic as the Art of Reasoning Well*. All these books, whether meant for freshmen or as advanced research texts have been written as textbooks.

I’ve also written some plays, and I write a column for my local newspaper. The illustrator Alex Raffi and I have completed a draft of a picture dictionary of American gestures that includes an analysis of gestures in relation to language. I’ve taught mathematics, philosophy, English as a second language, and a little drama here, there, and everywhere.

In 2008 I published a new edition of the computability book through my research group, the Advanced Reasoning Forum (ARF). Then in 2012 I got the rights to most of my other books and made ARF into a more serious publisher, producing and publishing new editions of my books on critical thinking and the essays on logic and reprints of classic works in logic. Selling textbooks through ARF is now how I make a living.

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I am grateful to Carolyn Kernberger who discussed with me most of the ideas here and pushed me to clarify and expand, editing the entire first draft. My sometime editor Peter Adams read and made many useful suggestions on drafts of this work; he has taught me so much that this book would not have been possible without him. LynnDiane Beene commented on the penultimate draft of this and her suggestions led me to finally write this final draft for publication. I'm indebted, too, to Birta and Buddy and Chocolate for standing by me while writing this book—actually more often sitting or cavorting across the desert. A big lick to all of them.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to all the editors, copyeditors, development editors, assistant editors, assistants to the editors, marketing directors, production staff, artists, sales reps, website designers, accounting staff, too numerous to list, with whom I've worked and who have made the publication and sale of my books possible. And to my students, without whom no text is possible. Many thanks to all of you, especially for your patience in teaching me and listening to me.

But above all, this work is for all those authors to come who will struggle mightily to produce a great vision.

GETTING STARTED

