

## Turning Your Dissertation into a Book

A dissertation is not the same thing as a book. There are, in fact, many differences between them. This document will help you determine what those differences are and how to navigate them as you turn your dissertation into a book.

There are four main areas through which this transformation takes place: *Audience*, *Content*, *Structure* and *Style*.

Before you begin this process, however, it is necessary for you to take some time to consider the larger purpose of this effort, and your stamina in achieving it. Is there enough new material in your dissertation to warrant a book, or would an article or two suffice? Will the subject matter still be timely and relevant by the time the book is published? Do you have the necessary interest and stamina, after your many years of work on this project, to commit even more to new research, revisions and rereading? Answer these questions honestly for yourself, and if the answer is 'yes', then keep reading!

### **Audience**

Know your audience and revise accordingly.

Fernwood publishes books for three main audiences: professionals, students and educated laypeople, and as such we have three categories of books: scholarly, academic and trade. Understanding who your audience is and the purpose that your book will serve for that audience is the first step in the revisioning process. If it is your intention to write a scholarly book, then the audience will be similar to the dissertation's audience, though your purpose will differ. If you are, however, writing an academic or trade book, then your audience and purpose are significantly different. Take the time needed to consider who will read this book and why. Once you know your audience and purpose, revisions of content, structure and style will emerge more organically.

The audience for a book is very different than the audience for a dissertation. The dissertation is written for a small audience of experts on the topic at hand, and the writing style is academic, defensive and meant to showcase the depth and breadth of the author's knowledge and ability to carry out a fairly extensive research project. Books, on the other hand, are meant to be read by a wide audience, many of whom may be non-experts, and so must be written in a manner that is more broadly accessible.

Dissertations are highly specialized, whereas books need to be more generalized. A dissertation might examine the minutia of a particular social practice from the theoretical and methodological context of a specific discipline, but a book must weave that minutia within a larger, more general context so that the research becomes both more widely relatable and more widely applicable.

Although dissertations are (usually) written within specific disciplinary boundaries, you might want your book to cross those boundaries. This doesn't mean that a social work book needs to be written for engineering students! But it does mean that students in related disciplines (say sociology, anthropology, human geography, family studies) who are also studying the specific subject matter might also read your book, and should be able to do so without getting lost in the conventions of the discipline of social work.

### **Content**

First and foremost, dissertations likely have no maximum page length and so may be quite long. Books, on the other hand, must be held to a certain page length, sometimes necessitating deep cuts. (At Fernwood, we prefer our manuscripts to be about 180-250 double-spaced pages, or 55,000-75,000 words; though scholarly books may be lengthier.) The reality is that sometimes you will have to make some difficult decisions about what must be sacrificed.

Dissertations often include a number of materials that are essential to the dissertation but have no place in a book. This scholarly apparatus may include: appendices, sidebars, repetition, summaries, and chapter-level introductions and conclusions. These materials should be removed.

Other academic materials may be needed to support arguments but should be minimized as much as possible. These include: tables, charts, graphs, notes, bibliography and quotations. Some of these materials can be beneficial to a text. Visuals, such as tables and charts, can be helpful, and, obviously, direct quotes from the scholars who have influenced your work are an essential part of any book, however, careful consideration should be given to such additional materials to determine if they add value. In terms of notes, we at Fernwood like to live by the old adage: if it's worth saying, it's worth saying in the text.

There are some academic conventions, such as literature reviews, methodology, theory, history and limitations, which are often an essential aspect of the dissertation, but cannot be presented in the same manner within the pages of a book. They should be cut as much as possible, with the remainder reincorporated into the text in a new, narrative fashion (more about this in Structure).

Don't be afraid to lose whole chapters. If there are chapters that do not advance the core ideas of the book and the new contribution you are making, then let them go. The most obvious example of this may be a chapter on methodology or lit review, though certainly this could even extend to chapters that contain new and original material. For example, when you are revising your manuscript for audience, you may lose a chapter that speaks to very specific disciplinary boundaries. Perhaps certain chapters were relevant to the dissertation but not to a book, or may be better published as articles.

Sometimes revisions also require the addition of new materials. Newly released or updated information, new or expanded case studies or examples, even new questions may be raised. These latter suggestions may result, for example, from the expansion of the audience – either to clarify issues for non-expert readers or to give the book broader focus and appeal.

### **Structure**

Dissertations are structured in a very particular way, reflecting academic conventions. Books must be structured differently. Books require a narrative form – they are not primarily vehicles for demonstrating the extent of your knowledge, but are stories presented in order to engage and enlighten a reader. You must tell this story from beginning to end - it must be clear and concise, and must progress logically. Chapters should flow coherently from one to the next, and each should be self-contained. Chapters or information that interfere with this narrative flow should be removed.

Consider the length of chapters. Dissertations may contain chapters of a variety of lengths – some may be very long – but when writing a book, you want to create some semblance of uniformity in chapter lengths. It is good to keep in mind that one of the main audiences for your book is likely to be the undergraduate student, often tasked with reading one or two chapters a week.

Avoid the thesis conventions of providing an overview of the book in the introduction, and an overview and summary within individual chapters. This is not to say that you shouldn't offer a discussion of the larger purpose of your book or chapter, but rather that this should be done as part of the narrative and flow, not as a delineated list of what is to be or has been discussed. The latter, which is often just the table of contents in prose, interrupts the flow of the narrative, is boring and can insult the intelligence of your reader – not to mention takes up precious space.

As noted above, lit review, methods, history, theory etc. should be integrated into the story. They should not stand alone, but rather should be incorporated into the larger narrative arc. A dissertation often has distinct lit review and theory and methodology chapters – while the information contained in those chapters (or what's left after you deal with Content, above) is obviously important to your work, the structure must change. Each of those elements should be incorporated into the narrative throughout the book in ways that allow the story to unfold in a coherent, progressive manner.

Include only the materials that genuinely move your narrative forward. With any story there are numerous twists and turns and digressions that could be explored – explore only those that are directly relevant to the argument you are making. Examine history, for example, exclusively through the lens of your subject matter. When writing a dissertation, students are required to demonstrate the full breadth and depth of their knowledge through a comprehensive history and lit review, but the readers of books assume that the author is an expert on the subject matter – you

don't need to demonstrate that you've done all the reading your committee demanded, you just need to impress them with the new and innovative approach you bring to the subject.

Because of all of the changes that may be made to the actual content of the manuscript it is important that you give a careful review of the introduction and conclusion to ensure that they reflect the book and not the dissertation. Don't forget to update the Table of Contents, lists of figures, etc.

### **Style**

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about style is that you need to write for your audience. Books must have a clear narrative flow and be accessible and engaging. If you are not naturally comfortable with the art of writing, then you need to rely on stylist elements (and a good editor!) to help you through.

Strive always for clarity - accessibility is essential. Avoid academic jargon, use accessible language, define terms and avoid repetition.

Strive for an economical writing style. Avoid wordiness. Watch for run-on sentences and a reliance on the thesaurus-style lists (i.e. "I'm going to explore, ruminate on and elucidate the meaning of..."). As well, keep in mind that excessively flowery language or the poetic-academic writing that sacrifices the clear and concise delivery of ideas on the altar of the (imagined) poetic delivery of academic theory can undermine accessibility. None of this is to suggest that one cannot take some poetic license with writing, but it shouldn't be done at the expense of clarity.

You want to create a narrative that is engaging – remember that you are telling a story, not just offering up factual information. Don't just provide a list of facts but breathe life into those facts, make the subject matter real. Use stories from your own experience or from your research and use the voices of other people to bring your theory to life.

When using facts ensure that they are contextualized and given meaning. Any fact that remains after the process of revising is obviously an important one – but its not enough for the reader to know that a fact is important, they must also understand *why* its important. Make sure that your reader has a clear understanding of how facts interact and interrelate.

Tone is perhaps one of the most important differences between a dissertation and a book. Dissertations are written defensively – intended to be a thorough reckoning of all of your knowledge on a subject matter. They are often written in the passive voice and are highly annotated. Your book audience, on the other hand, reads the book with the assumption that you are an authority. They do not need to be impressed with the breadth and depth of your knowledge, nor do they need to be impressed with your knowledge of theory or methodology, nor do they want to be impressed with your grasp of academic jargon. When you are writing a book, accept

that you *do* have specialized knowledge and write accordingly. Don't apologize for your shortcomings. Don't apologize for all of the theories you're not going to discuss. Don't apologize for offering a new interpretation of the subject.

As William Zinsser (author of *On Writing Well*) says, "The difference between an active-verb style and a passive-verb style—in clarity and vigor—is the difference between life and death for a writer." Write in the active voice. Be assertive, and be confident. The contribution that your book is making is yours and yours alone, so own it.