Why a Book?

In the humanities and most social sciences, a book published by a reputable university press remains the “gold standard” of scholarly achievement. Writing a monograph is a requirement for tenure at most research universities and at many selective liberal arts colleges. Authoring a book demonstrates that you are able to engage in an ambitious project, construct complex arguments, and integrate disparate chapters into a coherent whole.

What’s the Difference?

One longstanding myth is that a dissertation is a first draft of a book. A dissertation, even a brilliant one, is very different from a book. A dissertation requires that you demonstrate mastery of a significant scholarly problem; a book requires you to intervene in critical debates in your discipline. A dissertation is written for an extremely small audience, the handful of people on your dissertation committee; a book is written for a much broader group, professional academics and graduate students in your field. A dissertation provides an expansive and comprehensive overview of your topic and previous scholarship on it; a book offers an incisive and original argument that relies primarily on original research.

Given the considerable differences in the two kinds of projects, it’s probably more useful to characterize the transition between them as a process of radical re-conception and rewriting, rather than revision. It’s relatively easy to spot books that are really only lightly revised dissertations, and peer reviewers are frequently instructed by editors to be on the lookout for manuscripts that have any dissertation-like elements in them.

The first question to ask before embarking on a project like this is probably not “how?” but “should I?” Most everyone who writes a dissertation in the humanities has aspirations of eventually publishing their dissertation as a book, yet very few dissertations—even in a heavily revised form—ultimately are published. In many cases, a wiser strategy is to revise the various sections of your dissertation into a series of articles. These articles will make an important scholarly contribution in themselves, but don’t have to carry the burden of contributing to a unified argument. To determine whether or not you should begin the long process of reworking your dissertation into a book, you should think carefully about your topic and other books in your discipline. Can your dissertation—with significant work—make a similar kind of contribution? How original is your project in comparison with these others?
Where to start?

You first need to decide how your overall argument will need to be modified to work in a successful book. In most cases, you will probably want to broaden the scope. Rather than discussing the effect of inheritance on the negotiation of property rights in *Northanger Abbey*, or in Jane Austen's novels, you might consider including other writers, turning it into a project that encompasses Victorian novels generally. Remember, publishers wish to acquire books that will be appealing--and salable--to a broader audience than the one you wrote your dissertation for. This doesn't mean that they're willing to sacrifice scholarly merit for increased sales, but that they understand that the most marketable books are ones that make important contributions to scholarship beyond narrow or parochial interests.

What material changes do I need to make?

In addition to the considerable substantive changes to your argument and the presentation of your research, there are a number of other issues to consider. You will want to reduce—if not eliminate completely—the extended summary of previous scholarship that is a hallmark of a dissertation. Reduce the number of quotations from secondary sources, especially long passages. You need to cultivate your own voice and mode of address, a persona that your readers will trust without the need for extensive citation. A good rule of thumb is to summarize and paraphrase the words of other scholars unless you plan to deal explicitly with the language that they use. Likewise, you will want to reduce by a third or a half the number of footnotes and the number of books in your bibliography. When writing a book, you’re no longer trying to prove to your dissertation committee the depth of your research, so keep only the most essential references.

Try to keep your prose as spare, precise, and fluid as possible. Eliminate the jargon that is so prominent in most humanities disciplines. Mastering this terminology was an important part of your course of graduate study, but using jargon will generally not impress other scholars, especially when more credible, clear, and concise locutions are available. Employ a set of simple self-editing techniques to ensure that your language is as lean as it can possibly be.

Who can help?

This is not an easy question to answer. As you probably are aware, there are a number of publications available that purport to “turn your dissertation into a book.” You need to be circumspect when consulting these manuals, remembering that these guides are a way for publishers to make money while preying on anxious graduate students and junior faculty members. Instead, talk to people in your field who you know and trust who have some more specialized insight into the your field and your particular situation. People who have been through this process are the most likely to give you candid advice.

Resources


Web Resources

Many university presses offer some kind of advice on this process. These comments are often more discouraging than other information on this topic available on the internet, but it is probably most candid and reliable because these are the people who will ultimately be evaluating—and hopefully publishing—your project. Here are a few examples.

http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/authors/dissrev.html

http://www.uiowapress.org/authors/dissertations.htm

http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/288463.html

This monthly web article series, written by UTSA faculty and staff, provides our UTSA graduate students advice on how to successfully navigate graduate school. The series addresses topics on academic and professional development and career preparation. To suggest topics, contact John Shaffer, Assistant Director of Graduate Retention at john.shaffer@utsa.edu.