

Writing for Publication

A Presentation for IUP Teacher/Scholars

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Questions, Answers, and Practical Advice about Scholarly Writing

1. **What should I write about?** Reflect on your strengths rather than following trends. Explore the intersection of your academic degrees, interests, and practical work experience; this is the most fertile area for innovative thinking. Take the long view and write about what you see on the horizon. Consider your audience and strive to be helpful and informative. Before you begin, ask yourself this question that is relevant to all writers of nonfiction: “Why bring this information and this audience together at this time?”
▶ **Suggestion:** *Plan the conference session, article, or book that you wish you had experienced before you started investigating the topic. Seek out “paper mentors” and webinars that offer advice.*
2. **How do I find the time?** What if you were awarded a contract and guaranteed that your writing would be published? Would you find the time then? If so, the underlying issue is fear of failure rather than lack of time. No one “gives” you time to write, at least at first. You have to carve it out of the same 24 hours allocated to everybody. Don’t expect your writing to be “fast, easy, and brilliant”—this is what Robert Boice (1990) identified as the unsuccessful professor/writer’s motto. He also found that “binge” writing did not work; published faculty had learned to use short periods of time—as little as 15-20 minutes—to write. Be aware that *writing* is not the most time-consuming part of the process; it is **rewriting** a manuscript and revising it significantly a dozen times or more that is the most challenging. You will not experience success with a manuscript unless you lavish attention on it.
▶ **Suggestion:** *Use otherwise wasted time (sitting in traffic, at the airport, in the waiting room at the doctor’s office) to write.*
3. **What work style is most productive?** Initiate a project and chip away at it over an extended period of time. Function as a teacher/scholar rather than regarding research and teaching as competing demands. Strive for a productivity pace of, on average, three or four significant projects per year. If you do this, you’ll have an impressive body of work within a few years’ time.
▶ **Suggestion:** *Take care of yourself professionally by balancing several “low-risk of publication failure” projects with a few “high-risk of publication failure” initiatives.*
4. **What will count as scholarship?** Do not assume that empirical research is the only legitimate form of scholarship. For example, at many major research institutions, an undergraduate textbook does not count as scholarship because it is viewed as “translating” research for novices rather than an original contribution that advances thinking in the field. However, in PASSHE, a high-quality textbook is recognized as scholarly work. You can hone your skills with less competitive outlets and gradually tackle more competitive ones.
▶ **Suggestion:** *Start small and build, realizing that something published—such as an article in the newsletter of a professional association—is better than nothing.*
5. **How can I become more efficient?** Generate multiple projects from a single literature review. Write a Senate grant with it and then pursue an external grant with the same body of work. Use a successful conference presentation and “convert” it into an article. Propose the topic of a conference presentation as a book chapter or broaden the topic to produce an edited book. Each time you change your audience and purpose, you have a different piece of scholarship.
▶ **Suggestion:** *At a boring meeting, try “playing with article titles”—how many promising variations on a theme can you generate?*
6. **How can I increase my chances for a successful outcome?** Find three in-house readers capable of providing critical feedback on your work with the following roles: (1) a content expert with a track record of successful

publication, (2) a person who keeps up-to-date in your field (but not necessarily a published author), and (3) a well-read individual outside of your field. These three readers can provide feedback on the following: (1) Is the material true, new, and important? (2) Is it a good match for the audience? and (3) Is it at least accessible to newcomers in your field, such as college students who would read the journal?

► **Suggestion:** *Volunteer to review others' conference proposals, articles, and books. You do not have to be a widely published author to do this. Seeing the flaws and strengths in others' work builds skill in self-editing.*

7. **What are appropriate expectations for journal editors and reviewers?** When professors ask, "What do editors want?" my honest answer is: "Manuscripts that they don't have to edit." Many faculty members approach the editor as they would their dissertation advisor; they think it is the editor's role to assist them in getting published, tenured, and promoted. Actually, the editor's primary responsibility is to select a few ready-to-publish manuscripts from among the many that are submitted. Most editors are field editors. This means that they are full-time faculty members with research and writing projects of their own. Thus, the probability that a field editor will invest time in a poorly conceptualized, written, and/or formatted manuscript is almost zero. Abandon the hope that the volunteer reviewers are any more inclined to be your helpers. In fact, if you submit something in rough shape, it will not get reviewed at all. A more likely outcome is that the editor will screen the manuscript, see that it is not carefully prepared, and reject it with a form letter. Sending out a manuscript prematurely is the surest way to waste everyone's time.

► **Suggestion:** *Make the journal your textbook—study it and conform to all of the submission guidelines.*

8. **Where do I begin and what should I aim for, long term?** For most faculty members at IUP, conference presentations come first because they are the closest to the teaching role. You may want to start there, but don't get too comfortable. After you know how to get on national and international conference programs, it is time to be more selective about presentations and pursue publication. You may want to choose a less competitive outlet at first, such as a state or regional journal; these publications often are seeking manuscripts rather than drowning in them (as is the case with the top-tier journals in your field).

Suggestion: *Use a "directory of publishing opportunities" to locate suitable outlets.*

9. **If I've experienced success with articles should I attempt to write a book?** It has been said that articles establish a professor's competence and books establish a professor's reputation. You will need at least some article publications to secure a book contract. Getting a book contract is not as difficult as you may think because far fewer professors are vying to write a book than to publish an article. *After* you have secured a contract, completed a few chapters, and dealt with peer review successfully you might consider applying for sabbatical leave to complete the book. Sabbaticals are not awarded with the faint hope of a scholarly product; rather, you need to build a case that the institution's investment will pay off. If you can't imagine taking on a huge book project, consider an edited book or a monograph.

► **Suggestion:** *Check out Springer's new SpringerBrief series as a possible outlet.*

10. **How do I balance writing with other responsibilities?** A colleague told me that the following was the best advice I had given as her mentor: Enter writing time on your calendar and stick to those appointments with the same seriousness as other professional obligations. Never squander that time. Always do something that will support the publishing effort even if you can't seem to get the writing going at a particular session. Tasks such as reading more about the topic and taking notes, checking references against the manuscript, or investigating suitable outlets can be completed during this time.

► **Suggestion:** *Pick up calls for papers found on conference tables, attend sessions on writing offered by editors, search through professional journals for opportunities (e.g., being a guest editor or proposing an association publication), and make learning to write well a lifelong project.*

The Take Away Message:

Publishing should not be viewed as shameless self-promotion or the antithesis of a commitment to teaching. Throughout the world, professors have the obligation to teach, conduct research, and be of service to the university and the larger community. Being an effective teacher and a responsible community member are necessary and important; however, they are not sufficient to fulfill the teacher/scholar role. When we accepted the role of professor, we agreed to enter the professional dialogue through research and scholarship. Scholarly writing can keep us current, satisfy our need to create, build new networks of respected colleagues, enrich and enlarge our teaching, open the door to professional development opportunities, and allow us to make a contribution to our chosen fields.

Recommended Resources

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Making the Transition from Graduate Student Writing to Published Writing

CHARACTERISTIC	DOCTORAL WRITING	PUBLISHED WRITING
Audience	a professor or committee obligated to read and willing to offer guidance	a wide audience free to choose reading material and under no obligation to lend support
Voice	the author's voice is somewhat obscured by homage to leaders in the field	an authoritative voice that presents a logical argument and advances thinking
Focus	papers that tackle broad topics rather superficially; vague titles	a precise focus on dimensions of the topic that can be treated adequately with a descriptive title to match
Organization	page after page of unbroken text, often loosely organized	clear organization, signaled by headings, subheadings, and visual materials that enable readers to navigate the text
Format	beginner's mistakes in format and referencing style	a manuscript that follows the specific outlet's requirements to the letter
Readability	"wastes words" and lacks transitions	revised until it is concise and flows smoothly from one section to the next
Introductions and Conclusions	absent, formulaic, or repetitive (e.g., an abstract that repeats the introduction)	carefully crafted like "bookends" that give a satisfying sense of having come full circle

Check out the "templates" for conference proposals and a practical journal article posted at the Center for Teaching Excellence/Reflective Practice website.

E-mail me if I can assist! mjalongo@iup.edu