



## HOW TO REVISE YOUR DISSERTATION INTO A BOOK

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Aimed primarily at HSS early career scholars, this is a brief guide on how to revise a dissertation into a book. Not all the advice given will be applicable to everyone. However, making a few of the changes suggested in this guide, or even understanding the differences between a dissertation and a book, can increase your chances of securing a book contract.

### DISSERTATION vs. BOOK

The biggest hurdle to overcome is the realisation that more work will be required to make your dissertation suitable for publication, even if your supervisor or examiner have stated your dissertation is suitable for publication. Very few dissertations are in fact suitable for publication straight away – there is *always* work to be done - and understanding the differences between a dissertation and a book can help to explain why.

The aims of your dissertation are primarily as follows: to gain a qualification and advance your teaching/research career; to show you can do original and detailed research work; to show you can write and present new arguments and perspectives in a book-length format. The readership of your dissertation is, in the first instance, your supervisor and examiners. Scholars in your specialised area are likely to know about your work, and, without publication, your dissertation will reside in a university repository where scholars can access it. As it is usually the first book-length piece of original research you have completed, it is likely to be heavily cited to show you have read everything in the field and considered all arguments. Dissertations often contain dense quotations to prove the validity of arguments, and your overall tone is likely to appeal to an expert in the field, with specialised words and limited background information as you will expect your reader to have some knowledge of the field already and therefore understand the context.

The aims of your book are in many ways the same as a dissertation: a book can help with career prospects; it shows you can do original research; it shows you can present new arguments in a book-length format. But a key difference of the book is that it is expected to be read by as wide an audience as possible, and, in particular, read by a global audience as well as scholars in other fields, or even non-scholars. Your book is expected to be cited in other publications, to be publicly reviewed, and expected to make a valid contribution to the wider debates in your field. Your writing style is therefore different: you are expected to write with greater clarity, fewer references, less dense quotations, and less specialised language. You have to be more confident in your arguments, which is reflected in the

tone of the work. Crucially, more background information may be needed to appeal to readers outside of your specialised area and to place your argument in a wider context.

### **KNOW YOUR READER**

There is a shift of focus when thinking about turning a dissertation into a book and it mainly comes down to who you perceive your reader to be. There is a primary audience: scholars in the specific area of your field (for example, *scholars of childhood diseases in Ireland during the famine*). Yet, a publisher will be looking for a wider readership than this, such as scholars connected to your field – for example, *scholars of nineteenth-century Irish history*, *scholars of nineteenth-century medical history*, and *scholars of the history of childhood*. There is also another level of readership: scholars related but not directly connected to your field – for example, *scholars of social and cultural history*, *scholars of medical history*, *scholars of modern history* etc.

All three levels of readership will require different levels of background information and will come to your book with different expertise and different questions. You cannot ensure each one of these readership groups will be satisfied by your work (and my advice is to always aim for your primary and secondary audiences in the first instance) but knowing who your reader is likely to be will help you to set the right tone in the book, present the most suitable level of contextual information and ultimately broaden your work's appeal.

### **RETHINK YOUR DISSERTATION**

The first part to turning your dissertation into a book is to have a good rethink about the work. Seek the constructive advice of peers, supervisors and senior colleagues about whether a book is the best outcome for your research. They know your work but aren't as close to it as you are so turn to the people you trust to give you an honest opinion about its suitability. Areas for you to think about are as follows:

- Is the subject suitable for a book length study? Is there a stronger book in there from 2 or 3 chapters that you could pitch as a book (with additional material) and then publish the rest as articles? Be realistic about your work's appeal and don't be precious about publishing it as it currently stands (better to have a contract for a new book and three journal articles than nothing published or contracted.)
- Can you broaden its appeal by widening your study – geographically, chronologically, comparatively, interdisciplinary? Sometimes increasing the scope of the work slightly with a bit more research can make the world of difference in widening its appeal.
- Any loose ends you thought off while writing the thesis that you didn't have time or room to finish? Any ideas you had through the course of writing the dissertation that you wanted to explore further but didn't have time or were advised to leave out? This is a good time to think about putting those ideas back in.
- Rethink your structure: is this the best way it works? Could it be improved by swapping chapters around or arranging thematically rather than chronologically? Or vice versa?
- Rethink your title – this is your work's first impression to a commissioning editor, readers, book reviewers, librarians and retail book buyers. The title must appeal to many different people so look at other similar titled books to see what works. The aim of the title is to encourage someone to read it, review it, buy it, stock it as well as describe what it is about. Keywords are important for internet / intranet searches and don't make your title obscure or long-winded.

## **RETHINK YOUR WRITING**

As mentioned before, the most important part in revising your dissertation is to be clear of your target market from the outset. How much background information are you expecting the reader to know before they start reading your work? Ways to improve your writing are as follows:

- Your tone - a book requires more confidence of the writer in terms of the ideas and scholarship communicated.
- Write as clearly as the complexity of the argument will allow, discarding dense writing, obscure vocabulary and jargon whilst not undermining the value of your own scholarly work.
- Look at your opening sentences and paragraphs (first page, first paragraph and first sentence – begin as clearly as possible).
- Look at your closing sentences and paragraphs (last page, last paragraph and last sentences – make sure you conclude adequately. Are all your questions answered?)
- Footnotes and references will need an overhaul – are you quoting to prove you have read a work or are you presenting new information that supports your argument? If it doesn't add to the argument you are making, then take it away. Edit dense quotations and long reference notes; reduce the number of footnotes.
- Clarity and cutting are essential – take out repetition, unnecessary quotation, excessive referencing and notation.
- Check spelling and grammar.
- Reduce or increase your word length (inc. notes, references etc). A typical monograph length is between 80,000 – 90,000 words, although this does depend on the publisher.
- Finally, have a good look at the academic books you liked (and those you didn't like) – why did these books work? Was it their structure? Was it their writing style? Was it the depth they went into on the subject? Make notes on what worked and what didn't work in these publications. Learn from your peers as it is highly likely the readers of these books will be the same readers of your book.

## **REREAD YOUR DISSERTATION**

If there is one piece of advice I'd like you to take away from this brief guide it is to read your dissertation as a reader, not as the author.

To do this, put the dissertation away for at least a month (longer if possible), then print it out and re-read in its entirety. With a red pen in hand, circle any sentences or words you 'trip' over as you read. DO NOT correct at the time of reading but continue reading, marking on the pages areas you need to go back to later. DO NOT do this exercise on a computer as you will start editing your work on-screen and will in that instance no longer be the reader of the work but will be the author again.

When you have finished reading the manuscript in this way, go back and work on those areas circled. Your aim is to ensure the tone is right, that no statements are left hanging and that your arguments are introduced and concluded adequately. You can keep doing this exercise until there are very few circles marked on the print edition. You could also ask a colleague of yours in the same subject to read the work as described above (using a question mark instead of a circle for anything that wasn't clear to them) or even ask a colleague in a different subject to read it for you – depending on who you consider to be your primary and secondary audiences. Finally, do encourage constructive criticism. It is far better to get critical feedback at this stage rather than in a printed review after publication later on.

Once you have done all the steps listed above concerning your dissertation, you should no longer have an academic thesis to hand but instead a revised book manuscript that is confident and clear in its tone and arguments, which contributes to debates in your field and where readers feel they are listening to an informed person tell them about a fascinating topic.

### **THIRD-PARTY MATERIAL**

Finally, before you send your revised manuscript to a publisher, identify any third-party material you have included in your dissertation. Third-party material is any material that is not your own work - images, graphs, diagrams, data sources, tables, text (long quotations as well as text you have translated), music scores etc. Whilst it may have been acceptable for you to use this material in your unpublished dissertation, if you wish to include this in your published book then you will have to secure the necessary permissions for the material. This can be costly so do have a good think about what third-party material your work must contain and what can be removed.

The rights required for third-party material will depend on your publisher, but, as a guide, it is highly likely they will request you obtain permission to reproduce the material in a print and digital format, for World territory sales and distribution and in the English language only.

### **CONCLUSION**

In summary, have a good rethink of your dissertation, its structure and your writing style, and try not to be too disheartened if you start to realise you may need to do more work. You have already been successful in completing your dissertation – think of the book stemming from this research as something different. Remember, you are no longer a student revising their thesis but an author writing, revising and completing a book.

Good luck!

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