

# So, You Want to Write a Textbook?

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Henry L. Roediger, III has two methodology textbooks in print, *Experimental Psychology* and *Research Methods in Psychology*, both in their seventh editions, so the APS president-elect knows a little about the do's and don'ts of textbook writing.

“Most of us have taught in classrooms,” says the Washington University at St. Louis professor. “We’ve seen what works and what doesn’t work. In my own work, I ask myself: What do I really want to communicate, what are the important points? I do the same when I am lecturing: Which lectures made the students glaze over and slide under their desks, and which ones made them sit up and ask questions?”

Another trick: Tell good yarns. “When I think of what Roger Brown and Ulric Neisser did, especially, their books told good stories. There’s a natural tendency in writing textbooks to be compendious. Before a company will publish your textbook, it has to be reviewed by 10 or 15 experts. They’ll see what experiments you excluded, what research conclusions run counter to those that you do cite. So the tendency is to anticipate this by just stacking citation upon citation.

“The great ones, they just told the stories they wanted to tell. They didn’t clutter up their books with too many footnotes. Yes, you could take issue with some of the things they said, but they looked at the evidence and came to their conclusions about it, then presented those conclusions.”

This leads to his third piece of advice: “Too often textbooks offer no definite conclusions. Instead, the author’s conclusions are followed by paragraph after paragraph of contradictory conclusions, a series of on-the-other-hands, which makes them sound wishy-washy. Students really hate that. You can be too evenhanded. The great ones simply tell the story of what they believe to be true. It might turn out in 30 years that that story is wrong, but it was the best they could do at the time: They looked at the evidence, came to conclusions, then told the story.”

The reward for the effort, he said, comes “when I bump into people at meetings, people I don’t even know, and they see my name badge and say, ‘Oh, you’re Roediger. I still have your book. I’ll still use it.’”