

Writing a Psychology Textbook: Is It For You?

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Writing a psychology textbook can be a worthwhile and rewarding experience. This article will explore the reasons for writing a textbook, the personal and professional prerequisites, the nature of the commitment, suggestions for gaining textbook writing experience before you decide to write your own text, and finally, the criteria for deciding whether to write a textbook.

Reasons for Writing a Textbook: Some Good and Some Not So Good

Here are some of the reasons psychologists write textbooks.

Money

Making money is often the first reason people think of for writing a textbook. It's not a very good reason. Unless you're writing an introductory psychology text or perhaps a text for a survey course in social, child, or abnormal psychology (the courses with the highest enrollments), you're not likely to make a significant amount of money. If you consider what your time is worth and do the math, you may conclude that you could make more money by working at McDonalds (well, maybe as a manager). Certainly, don't resign your present position when you start writing your textbook.

Even if your royalties cover a lavish vacation or a sports car, you won't be getting paid for a long time: one or two years after the book is published (and don't forget it will a few years to write the book). Also, the money is not likely to motivate you when the going gets tough during the writing process. In short, there are better reasons for writing a psychology textbook than money.

Scholarship

Textbook writing is scholarship, although this fact is not always recognized. Minimally, a textbook is a summary of a field of psychology, but it generally is a lot more because it involves synthesis, analysis, critique, and a venue for a fresh perspective and novel ideas. Psychology textbooks are often the first resource professors look to find a reference or to learn about a concept or particular study. Finally, textbook writing is a form of teaching (which I'll explain later), and thus it is part of the scholarship of teaching.

Recognition and Tenure/Promotion

Writing a book of any kind is a major accomplishment that relatively few can claim. Anyone who learns that you're a published book author will be impressed. Similarly, if you use your textbook in one of your classes, your stature with your students will rise. You'll also gain name recognition among psychologists because most textbooks are referred to by the author's names rather than the title.

Whether you'll receive the esteem of your colleagues depends on their view of the value of textbooks (e.g., do they consider them as scholarship?) and, sometimes, on whether they're intimidated by or proud of you writing a textbook. The views of colleagues in your department and of your administrators will directly affect tenure and promotion decisions. It behooves you to determine their evaluation of textbooks before you decide to write one. Even when textbooks are valued, writing one will take years and, in the same period, you could publish a number of journal articles. Thus, textbook writing might best be postponed until after being granted tenure.

Sharing Your Passion for Psychology and Exploring It in Depth

Writing about your area of psychology allows you to share your passion for it with thousands of students (not just your own). You also get to explore the subject matter in depth and become a genuine expert. And, if you continue to write revisions, you'll stay abreast of the latest research and theory — a nice perk.

Textbook Writing as Teaching

If you enjoy teaching, you may enjoy authoring a textbook. Textbook writing could be considered the ultimate teaching challenge because you must present material to a diverse audience you've never met without the immediate, direct feedback you get from students in a class.

All good textbook writers are good teachers, but not all good teachers are good textbook writers. In addition to teaching skills, textbook writers must have writing skills and the ability to translate effective classroom pedagogy into a textbook format. Also, textbook writers must have the personal and professional prerequisites described later.

If you're teaching a class covering the material you're currently writing about, your textbook writing and teaching will be reciprocally enhancing. Students will benefit from your new knowledge, insights, and excitement about the subject matter, and feedback from students on your presentation of the material in class will inform your writing.

Making a Contribution to the Pedagogy of Psychology

Occasionally, there are courses for which a textbook does not exist, especially when a new area of psychology emerges, such as positive psychology. More often, extant texts have serious shortcomings. And sometimes a new approach to presenting material is warranted. In each case, writing a textbook would contribute to the pedagogy of psychology.

Social Interaction

Working with coauthors can be highly stimulating and rewarding. Feeding off one another's ideas and perspectives, brainstorming solutions to problems, and experiencing the camaraderie that comes from intense collaboration on a long-term "noble" undertaking are some examples. However, social interaction should only be one of your reasons for writing a psychology text because you will do the vast majority of your work alone.

Looking for a Challenge or Direction

Needing a challenge or direction in your professional life is a good reason to write a textbook — it will definitely provide both. If the book is successful and goes into multiple editions, much of your career could be devoted to your book.

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

Writing a psychology textbook typically begins in one of three ways. You may get an idea for a text or see a need for one. A colleague may encourage you to write a textbook because “you’ve got such great ideas about _____” or “you’re so good at teaching _____.” However, in many cases, it’s a publisher’s sales rep or editor who initiates textbook writing. Publishers are always looking for more textbooks, and you may be solicited. Each of these scenarios makes writing a textbook seem like a good idea, which it may be — if you have the “write stuff.”

The “Write Stuff”: Personal and Professional Prerequisites

The “write stuff” refers to the personal and professional prerequisites for textbook writing. It’s not necessary to be 100% on all the prerequisites or even possess them all, and strength in some prerequisites can compensate for limitations in others. Also, the burden for possessing some prerequisites can be shared by coauthors.

Personal Prerequisites

Cognitive Skills

Attention to details. Critical because there are so many details to attend to and keep track of.

Global view. Besides attention to details, a “forest-and-trees” perspective is necessary so that you are always cognizant of where the pieces fit into the big picture (e.g., in which chapter should a concept be introduced).

Linear, logical thinking. For students to comprehend new information, the text needs to proceed from simple to complex, basic to advanced. This type of thinking isn’t always easy to do because the more you know about a subject, the more difficult it may be for you to get back to basics.

Temperament and personality.

Comfort with working alone. If *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Textbook Writer* were a book, it would explore the solitary work of a textbook author over an extended period. Even with coauthors, most of an author’s work (reading, thinking, and writing) is solitary.

Type A characteristics. Some Type A characteristics, such as being internally driven, having a sensitivity to deadlines, and being able to multitask, are beneficial to textbook writing health (if not cardiac health) because they’ll help you get the book written.

Process-oriented. Although your goal is a completed textbook, you need to be process-oriented rather than goal-oriented. Rewards must come from writing the book and not the finished product. Fortunately, writing a textbook can be highly rewarding.

Open and receptive to criticism. No one relishes criticism, but critiques from manuscript reviewers will improve your book, which helps reduce the sting of your “flesh and blood” being criticized.

Flexibility

Ability to compromise. No book would get published if compromises weren’t made, including those made by authors (e.g., content you must omit due to space limitations) and those made by publishers (e.g., book design). Just don’t compromise on your bottom-line issues, such as your overall vision for your book.

Quasi-perfectionism. Perfectionism is both the boon and the bane of good textbook writing. Striving for perfection — with the understanding that perfection is a goal that you will never fully achieve — will make your book better. However, if you believe your book must be a flawless product with no errors of commission or omission, you’ll never finish it.

“Stick-to-it-iveness.”

Perseverance. Writing a textbook is a long-term commitment, and you have to be prepared to go the distance. Your work will be reinforced on a sparse variable-ratio reinforcement schedule at best and often there will be no external reinforcers (e.g., praise from your editor). Delay of gratification is required: You may have to sacrifice immediate rewards (e.g., a family vacation) for the distal reward of a published textbook.

Stamina. Being able to think clearly and pay attention to details for many hours, day after day requires mental and physical stamina, and the latter feeds the former. World-class chess players not only spend many hours a day practicing the game, but they also engage in daily physical exercise to be fit for the mental strain of competition.

Work Habits

Tolerance for deadlines. Without publisher-imposed deadlines, few textbooks would ever get written. Despite their usefulness, deadlines are stressors that you must be able to cope with to survive the textbook-writing journey.

Ability to multitask. At various stages in preparing a textbook, you’ll have to engage in a number of different tasks simultaneously. For example, in the midst of writing, you will need to keep track of references, think of ideas for illustrations, and often make notes about content of other chapters.

Time-management skills. Setting and adhering to time goals (distal and proximal, including weekly and daily) and blocking off and protecting designated “book time” are essential. Although the optimal writing period varies from author to author, here are two rules of thumb: Don’t expect to work optimally more than 4 or 5 hours a day, and 750–1,000 words a day is a benchmark of productivity (if that figure

seems low, consider that writing 5 days a week, results in a first draft of a 500-page textbook in about a year)

Organizational skills. Organizing thousands of books and journal articles that you'll read and numerous drafts, notes, reference lists, graphs, diagrams, pictures, and photos in computer files and hard copy is a monumental task, especially for those of us who are not blessed with OCD. Good organization is critical.

Social support

The acknowledgements of virtually all textbooks contain testimonials to family and friends with phrases such as “without whom the book could not have been written” and “whose love and support made all the difference.” These are not gratuitous sentiments. As psychologists, we are aware of the benefits of social support in dealing with stress and in fostering general well being. Make no mistake — writing a textbook exposes you to many stressors and will take a toll on your personal relationships, if only because of the enormous time demands, which is why the support of loved ones is crucial.

Professional Prerequisites

There is some overlap between the personal and professional prerequisites for textbook writing.

Knowledge of subject matter. Although you'll become much more knowledgeable about your subject after you've written your book, clearly you need to begin with a good working knowledge of the material.

Writing/teaching skills. Textbooks are written for naïve students, which is very different from writing for sophisticated colleagues. Besides generally writing easily and well, you must be able to adapt classroom pedagogy to a textbook. This will involve presenting material in a logical sequence (e.g., starting with basics), writing clearly and using cogent student-relevant examples, catching readers' attention from the outset and stimulating continued reading, and motivating learning — all with just words and illustrations.

Teaching target course(s). Experience teaching the course(s) for which your book is intended allows you to learn what students need and want, what they have difficulty with, and what pedagogy works best for the material.

Supportive environment. Social support from colleagues (e.g., encouragement) and instrumental support from your institution (e.g., release time) are definite assets.

Time availability. How full is your plate? Writing a textbook will fill a lot of it, so you need to assess whether there is room given your other professional commitments as well as your personal life. Consider how you might clear your plate (e.g., secure a course reduction or sabbatical, reduce your consulting, resign from committees) *and* whether you want to do so.

The Time Commitment

What is the time commitment required for writing a textbook? Before reading further, you might want to answer the following question: How long do you think it should take to write a psychology text, from start to finish? Now let's look at an estimate of the time required for each of the four phases of textbook writing.

Preliminary Phase: 9 Months to 1+ Year(s). The preliminary phase includes (a) conceptualizing the book; (b) writing a proposal; (c) writing sample chapters; (d) contacting publishers, sending them your proposal and sample chapters, and waiting for the proposal to be reviewed and the publishers' decisions; (e) selecting a publisher; and (f) negotiating a contract.

Writing Phase: 2 to 4+ Years. Writing has two meanings. Narrowly, it refers to composing the words in the text, including multiple drafts and several rounds of peer reviews and revisions based on the reviews. Broadly, writing also includes all the necessary reading of sources, compiling references, conceptualizing illustrations, and designing and writing features (e.g., boxed material), learning exercises, review sections, and further resources for students.

Production Phase: 1 to 1¼ Years. Production begins once your final manuscript has been accepted by the publisher and ends when books are printed and bound. You will review and edit copyedited manuscript, read and correct proofs, and begin your part in developing supplements (e.g., a study guide and the instructor's manual). You may also provide input on your book's design and marketing and advertising campaigns by reviewing and sometimes writing ad copy.

Post-production: 3 to 6 Months. You will probably be completing work on supplements after the book is published and before it begins to be used in classes. You may continue assisting with marketing and advertising tasks, which may include attending your publisher's sales conference to brief sales reps about your book.

Thus, it takes 4 to 6+ years to write a psychology textbook. Assuming your book is successful, you should figure 2½ to 3 years for each revision (because there will be no preliminary phase and a shorter writing phase).

Testing the Water before Diving In

Before committing to a major undertaking, such as swimming the English Channel or writing a psychology textbook, you might want to test the water first. Here are some ways of getting a sense of the textbook writing experience, from most to least advantageous.

Write a textbook chapter. Textbooks sometimes have one or more chapters written by someone other than the author, usually because the author is not very knowledgeable about the subject matter. Similarly, you could write an appendix that is, in essence, a mini-chapter, such as the primers on statistics or careers in psychology found in introductory texts.

Write custom chapters or an entire text for your classes. A possible bonus is that after several years of class testing and revisions, you might have a publishable manuscript.

Write supplements. Study guides are the best supplements to write because they are essentially an

additional textbook for the student; instructor's manuals would be a second choice.

Write features for a textbook. To save authors time (especially for books with many features, such as introductory texts), recurring features (e.g., critical thinking sections or "Psychology in the News") may be outsourced.

Review manuscripts for publishers. You'll get to see what and how other psychologists are writing, including examples of both good and poor textbook writing that you can imitate or counterimitate.

All of the experiences that involve contact with publishers serve two purposes. You get a feel (though sometimes just a tickle) for what it is like to work with publishers. And publishers get to know you and your work, including your writing, analytical and critical thinking skills, attention to detail, and ability to meet deadlines.

Should You Write a Psychology Textbook?

The answer to the central question of this article is a personal decision that should be based on your answers to four other questions.

Do you have sound reasons for writing a textbook?

Do you possess the "write stuff" — a healthy share of the personal and professional prerequisites? Remember, you don't have to score an "A" on all of them and you don't even have to possess them all. But, more is better.

Are you informed about the nature of the commitment? This includes knowing what writing a textbook involves, the time required, and what you'll have to temporarily give up professionally and personally.

Do you have the necessary motivation? Are you willing and able to make writing a textbook a central part of your life for an extended period?

Conclusions

Writing a psychology textbook is not for everyone. The purpose of this article was to provide a realistic picture of what is required for this challenging and highly rewarding endeavor. Although space limitations only allowed me to allude to the rewards, psychologists who continue to write textbooks provide empirical evidence that there are ample rewards — if they were not reinforced for their efforts, they would cease writing.