



Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction and Get It Published

Susan Rabiner , Alfred Fortunato

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Over 50,000 books are published in America each year, the vast majority nonfiction. Even so, many writers are stymied in getting their books published, never mind gaining significant attention for their ideas—and substantial sales. This is the book editors have been recommending to would-be authors. Filled with trade secrets, *Thinking Like Your Editor* explains:

- why every proposal should ask and answer five key questions;
- how to tailor academic writing to a general reader, without losing ideas or dumbing down your work;
- how to write a proposal that editors cannot ignore;
- why the most important chapter is your introduction;
- why "simple structure, complex ideas" is the mantra for creating serious nonfiction;
- why smart nonfiction editors regularly reject great writing but find new arguments irresistible.

Whatever the topic, from history to business, science to philosophy, law, or gender studies, this book is vital to every serious nonfiction writer.

Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction and Get It Published Details

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Charlene Smith says

If you are going through the nightmare of writing a book proposal for a literary agent read this book first, write half the proposal - read it again; and now, just as you think you've finished the proposal, go through this again ... hopefully you have dog-eared some pages, or underlined relevant sections.

And good luck!

Molly Westerman says

This book takes readers/writers through the publishing process for trade (as opposed to academic) "serious" nonfiction: writing a proposal, putting together a submission package, contacting agents and/or editors, writing the book, and getting yourself "published well."

The chapters on the publishing-industry, how does this unfamiliar process work? stuff are clear, helpful, and nonthreatening.

The part on the writing process felt really weak to me, perhaps in part because I've taught writing for a decade. 'Be aware of your audience' and 'write with clarity' are not exactly news flashes. The book lost me as a reader at: "while argument is a term frequently heard in book publishing, it is not, as far as I can tell, commonly used in academia. You have your research and your interpretation of what you have found, adding up to your thesis" (141). Not hanging out much with folks in the humanities, huh? Or with first-year writing instructors ... or comp/rhet PhDs ... So, that chunk might be helpful for some readers but was alienating for me.

The whole book is repetitive and only competently written (clear but not compelling). I also wish it had defined "serious nonfiction," rather an odd term and not one that the reading public bandies around much. On the other hand, it gave me the basic overview I needed to move forward into more detailed treatments, and into the process itself--and it avoided making an overwhelming and unfamiliar process sound even more overwhelming.

Cameron says

A good, carefully thought-out approach to designing a book project, writing a proposal, writing a nonfiction book that will sell, and selecting an agent and/or a publisher. The author's many years of experience as an editor and an agent are very evident, and the book is written with style, humor and grace making it a fun read. A sample proposal at the end gives you a good idea of what a winning proposal looks like. Unfortunately the book is slanted towards academic publications, biographies and how-to books, but much here applies to other genres.

Connon3 says

Thinking Like Your Editor is the best book on writing serious nonfiction that I have ever read. It is very useful when writing a book proposal. In addition, the chapter "Using Narrative Tension" is thought provoking and confidence inspiring. I highly recommend this book.

Ebony says

Thinking Like Your Editor is one of the few books I bought in graduate school that is just as useful then as it is today as an associate professor and a published author. Rabiner says it took her 8 years to deliver under her contract, which is awesome because a) it makes me feel great about my delivery time and b) it made for an awesome book. It's so concise and honest about a form and style of writing that no one ever teaches you. The two most important lessons—it's about the audience and the story—nothing else matters as much. Know exactly whom you want to write for and tell a psychological story that carries your argument. I admit to not always thinking in terms of a story but always wanting to be engaged by one. Whether you're writing serious commercial nonfiction or university press projects, this book is for you. Learn how to structure your arguments within a standard book format. My only critique is that the book is way overdue for a new edition. How books are written may still be the same but how books are published is certainly not.

T.R. Locke says

So far this book is very surprising. It actually is much like my book for Hollywood, only it deals with the publishing industry. Although I've already experienced many of these issues first hand, it is fascinating to see that, with a little research, I might have been better prepared on my first foray into the world of books. So far so good.

Katherine says

This is an extremely useful book. The author's intelligence and good sense ooze out of every page. Highly recommended for anyone who wants to write serious nonfiction, or gain some insight into how agents and editors think, or learn how to make their own writing more interesting and readable, regardless of whether publishing a book is the ultimate goal.

David Sasaki says

There are multiple ways to disseminate an idea. Like so many others, I've found the blog post to be my greatest vehicle. Over the past ten years I have published over 1,000 such posts, of which at least half set out to express an opinion, make some argument, or test out a hypothesis.

It's not the only medium — and it's certainly not the most compelling — but the blog post is the most frictionless channel to transmit complex arguments that build on the works of others. No, my writing doesn't show up in magazines or academic journals that boost the perception of the writer's authority, nor does it serendipitously find itself in the hands of bookstore customers exploring the jackets of the latest nonfiction; but it's remarkable that every post I publish is somehow read by thousands of individuals without any intermediaries beyond search engines and social media. I have found it extremely satisfying to contribute ideas and arguments to the public discourse with little intervention from gatekeepers, profit motives, and power brokers.

At times, however, I'm tempted to explore other forms of narrative argument. I've long dreamed of producing a documentary film that tells the human stories behind the institutionalized corruption that underlies all aspects of the importation of Chinese products into Mexico. I want the film to be an empathetic look at our basic desire for cheaper goods, and the social, environmental and cultural consequences that desire brings about.

I would also like to write a book. Several, in fact. There are topics that refuse to be neatly encompassed in a single blog post, or even a series of many posts. A well-delivered argument that adds substantially to our understanding of how the world works can take at least 300 pages to articulate. As an avid consumer of ideas, I find myself spending more time reading books than blog posts. (Though admittedly, many of those books would have been better off as blog posts while others are, in fact, polished collections of an author's blog.)

One of the books I'd like to write, *Smart Cities, Dumb Democracies* builds on Edward Glaeser's argument that cities should strive to alleviate poverty while promoting social inclusion and personal freedoms. It argues that the current fixation on "smart cities" leads policy makers to focus on the creation of "consumer cities" that appeal to the tech-savvy "creative class" without taking into consideration social inclusion, education and civic participation.

I have an outline of chapters, each of which makes a specific argument backed up by data and anecdotes. In aggregate they will hopefully convince the reader to re-think how we approach the development of urban life in the 21st century. Sounds ambitious, I know, but a nonfiction book should be ambitious, or else I don't see why one would take the time to write one.

Having spoken with various friends who have published nonfiction books with major publishing houses, I came to realize that I had a lot to learn about the publishing industry. I didn't understand the pros and cons of an agent, the difference between publishing with an academic press or a trade press, nor that publishing houses actually pay bookstores to place books on particular shelves.

In hindsight, I was clueless. *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction--and Get It Published* is an eye-opening look at the nonfiction publishing industry and what it takes to get a work of serious nonfiction published. Several of the book's suggestions are counter-intuitive until they are explained in greater detail. Publishers don't want groundbreaking ideas, we are told. Rather, they look for the authoritative version of an argument that has already provoked public interest. In other words, publish plenty of book reviews and Op-Eds to seed your arguments in public before you publish your book.

The first half of the book explains step-by-step how to prepare your submission package for an editor at a publishing house. The second half deals with the actual writing process. Most first-time writers, especially academics, the authors write, struggle to effectively encompass narrative into their non-fiction. Clearly some academics simply don't have the natural ability or the learned experience to make arguments with compelling

stories. But the authors mention another reason for the hesitation to use stories that illustrate arguments: the increasingly fuzzy line between fiction and nonfiction. The authors point us to the scandal around Edmund Morris' almost-factual biography of Ronald Reagan, which was sold as non-fiction despite its use of fictional characters. A more contemporary example is Jonah Lehrer's bizarre fabrication of Bob Dylan quotes, despite the fact that they hardly contributed to his book's larger argument.

The authors mention George Chauncey's *Gay New York* and Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* as prime examples of effectively mixing narrative with argument. They are also prime examples of why I began to feel uneasy as I read through the second half of this book, passing from one suggestion to the next about how to craft serious nonfiction. In aggregate, those suggestions don't quite make up a formula, but they get pretty damned close. In parallel to reading this book I was also listening to the audiobook of Walter Isaacson's Steve Jobs biography, and I became annoyed when I detected those same rules of thumb in the book's structure.

The nonfiction book no longer felt like an exciting new medium to explore. Rather, the best practices of the nonfiction publishing industry began to feel like a formulaic corset that restricts the author's creativity and voice. The publishing industry knows how their customers consume nonfiction, and they ensure that the authors don't stray too far outside of the lines.

I am still left with three options: self-publishing, approaching an academic press, or working with an agent to pitch a trade press. Thanks to *Thinking Like Your Editor*, I'm much more informed about the pros and cons of each option.

Josh Liller says

As an aspiring nonfiction author, I read this as a recommendation from Kevin Levin, a Civil War blogger and published author. It provides what seems like a pretty good overview of the writing and publishing process, specifically for those producing mainstream "trade" nonfiction. It's also a generally enjoyable read.

It is now 14 years old so some of the information may be a bit out of date due to changes in the publishing industry during that time. Also, if you read this book and realize your book is probably not going to appeal to a trade publisher and want to pursue a university press route instead you will need to look elsewhere for more details on that process.

Danell Jones says

Absolute must-read for anyone writing--or thinking of writing--nonfiction.

John says

The kind of book I should probably find at a used bookstore sometime and buy to keep, as it will come in handy once I finally get to the point of trying to write and publish history books. But this is also good just to read through ahead of time, as it will get the wheels turning in your head about how nonfiction books are put together and why some are successful and others, not so much. There are a lot of factors covered here that I

hadn't thought of before, like the fact that a book isn't just a long magazine article, and the problems with simply publishing one's thesis. It's making me look at all the other nonfiction I've been reading, most of which was published for the popular market and sold in normal bookstores, to see the ways that these books follow the guidelines the authors set out here. I can see a lot better now why some of the nonfiction I've read has been successful (with me), and others left me feeling unfulfilled. Take that "river of doubt" Roosevelt book. I couldn't quite point to why I didn't love it, and now I think I know. It didn't have any real argument to make or mystery to solve. It told an interesting story, but it didn't really teach me anything new. Whereas a book like 'Vermeer's Fan' did help me to see things in a new light, by using the specific paintings as clues. I had general knowledge of the 17th century, but I hadn't ever looked at it in that particular way before, and the author showed me how to do it. The first book filed something away in my brain, but the second book fired up my imagination. I have a feeling that this book has done a lot to improve my critical eye for nonfiction.

Amy says

There is a lot of great advice in here for writers of non-fiction, no matter what stage of the process in which you currently find yourself. I am very glad I read it and took several pages of notes. This book is geared more to the perspective of trade non-fiction, which is a useful counter-point to the previous book I read by William Germano which focused more on academic books. If you're not sure which way to go, reading several books will help you get a better sense about what's different about each avenue of publishing.

Jay Wigley says

Super practical. Which is fine if that what you're after. I wanted more.

Douglas Wilson says

A lot of good, sturdy advice here.

Text Addict says

Excellent and reassuring. Some of the most basic advice is no different from what I've read online, but the expansions and explanations make it all clear - and so much less intimidating.

At least for people who, like me, are more intimidated by ignorance than by information.
