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Why Would a Professor Self-Publish a Book?

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Self-publishing is common outside the academy, but faculty members rarely publish their own books. In this essay, a University of California professor explains why she chose to self-publish her book about academic writing and the costs and benefits of that choice.

Keywords: self-publishing, open science, freelance publishing services

Like many academics, I tend to be a little anxious. But lately I've been finding comfort in an unlikely place: Twitter. Almost every day, my Twitter notifications turn up a handful of kind messages from people who have discovered my book. They are messages of warmth and thanks, either for the book itself or for the fact that I made it available for free when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The messages lift my spirits. I was able to make the book free because I'm also the publisher, although I didn't set out to be. This essay is about how and why I ended up there.

The book, *The Writing Workshop: Write More, Write Better, Be Happier in Academia*, grew out of a writing seminar that I've taught for PhD students in the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, for many years. The book helps early-career researchers create communities of practice around academic writing. It presents strategies for academic time management, ways of overcoming psychological barriers to writing, an introduction to the main genres of academic writing (literature review, article, funding proposal, and presentation), and several chapters on how to write clearly about complicated and abstract topics.

I originally planned to publish the book with a university press. I didn't expect it to count as a publication for the purposes of academic personnel review (the process by which the university gives out raises and promotions). As an experimental scientist, I publish my research in the form of journal articles rather than books. But because I am a professor and the book is aimed at other researchers, a university press seemed like the obvious choice.

The problem was that I wanted to be able to give the book away for free—at least the electronic version of it. As an advocate for open science (more on this below), I make sure that all of my scientific research articles are available online for free, and I saw no reason why the book should be different. As I see it, my job as a professor is to produce knowledge and disseminate it as widely as possible, and for that I receive a university salary.

Moreover, since the main audience for this book was PhD students and other early-career researchers, book sales would have amounted to a wealth transfer from junior scholars to a publisher, which was not my goal. As the author, I might have received royalties earned from the book's sales, but

approximately 90 per cent of the sales revenue would have gone to the publisher. I understood that making a book would cost money, and I didn't mind selling print copies in order to cover production costs. But my priority was to make the work available to as many people as possible.

If this sounds like a strange position to take, I should explain that I'm deeply committed to open science. For-profit academic journals once provided a needed service to the scholarly community. But in recent decades, their business model has evolved into something frankly exploitative. For example, in my own field of cognitive sciences in the United States, taxpayers fund most of the research through agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. A scientist like me conceives of the research, leads a team to carry it out, and writes an article describing it. Traditionally, the scientist then sends the manuscript to a for-profit journal, whose editor sends it out to other scientists (also paid by their universities) for quality control in the form of peer review. If the article is later accepted for publication, the publisher slaps a copyright on the work (work they did not fund, conceive of, carry out, or review) and *then sells it back to us* (the scientists and our students) for the price of a journal subscription. Biologist Michael Eisen likens this kind of journal to an obstetrician who delivers your baby, claims to own it, and then leases it back to you for a high annual fee.¹

The University of California (UC) has been at the forefront of open-access publishing efforts, and the press's Luminos program publishes open-access scholarly monographs, with a print edition for sale and an electronic edition available for free online.² I originally approached the Luminos program, but their editorial board rejected my book proposal. UC Press offered to publish it as a regular trade book, but in that case, the electronic version would not be free. This all makes perfect sense. Like other non-profit university presses, UC Press publishes research monographs as a service to the scholarly community. If I had gone with UC Press, I could have enjoyed the idea of my book sales helping to support the publication of my colleagues' monographs. But, ultimately, my priority was to make my book available to as many people as possible, so I decided to publish it myself.

I went to the freelance site Reedsy.com and started looking for an editor. I wanted one with a PhD who had experience coaching graduate students through dissertations. I queried five freelance editors and eventually chose Michael Dylan Rogers, an assistant professor at a small college who does freelance editorial work on the side. Working with him turned out to make the biggest difference between my experience as a self-publisher and my colleagues' experiences working with publishers.

Before our first meeting, Michael read my entire manuscript. When we talked for the first time via videoconference, he was familiar with the whole book and had suggestions for reorganizing some of the content, moving material between chapters, expanding some sections and paring others down. We talked for an hour or so and ended the meeting with a list of things that each of us would do before we talked again the following week.

That became our work process over the next month or so. Having never worked with a developmental editor before, I was surprised at how luxurious it felt. How wonderful it was to focus just on the writing and to leave the criticism, judgement, and editing to someone else—someone whose opinion I respected, who was really paying attention, who knew the book almost as well as I did, and whose only incentive was to make me happy and make the book as good as it could be.

I wondered whether my experience was typical, so I started asking my colleagues about their experiences with publishers. *Did you work with an editor?* I asked. *What was it like? How often did you talk with them? What kind of input did they give you?* None of them had received the kind of help I was getting. One colleague, who was publishing a book with a prestigious university press, scoffed, ‘You must be kidding. They don’t offer that kind of editorial support. I’m responsible for all the content, up to and including formatting it to their specs and proofreading the galleys. They just put their imprint on it and send it out.’ Upon reflection, I realized that it made sense. Hiring an editor is a luxury, just like hiring a personal trainer, or an accountant, or a tutor for your kid. When you’re paying the bill, you get pampered. The person you hired works for you. This positive experience was repeated over and over—with the book designer, the proofreader, and the indexer. I had no idea when I stumbled into self-publishing that it would be so enjoyable.

Of course, all this professional support is not free. If I had worked with a publisher, it wouldn’t have cost me anything, except perhaps the expense of indexing. By publishing the book myself, I assumed all the expenses. The total cost to produce the book was around \$10,000, of which about \$5000 went to the editor, \$2500 to the book designer, and the rest to covering the other costs. (I’ve since learned that I might have been able to get help with funding. After hearing me give a presentation about the project, UC Irvine’s associate university librarian for research resources, John Renaud, suggested that I consult with his office in the future about a possible collaboration to support open-access publishing.)

The book was released in October 2019, and my plan was to sell it until its production costs were recovered, at which point I would make the electronic version free. When COVID-19 hit a few months later, book sales amounted to just over \$7000. It seemed that the stay-at-home guidelines might leave people with extra time to read, so I decided to ‘free the book’ early.

Obviously, this publishing model will not work for everyone. Many academics can’t afford to pay \$10,000 to publish a book, and many scholarly monographs won’t sell enough copies to recoup the costs. Moreover, there is an academic culture of treating publishers as a proxy for book quality. Getting one’s book published by a prestigious press has traditionally mattered for promotion and tenure cases in the humanities and social sciences, just as publishing in ‘high impact’ journals has been important in the sciences. This way of evaluating research is both lazy and statistically illiterate,³ and I fervently hope that we are moving toward more valid measures of research quality.⁴ But in the meantime, I understand the difficulty that scholars—particularly pre-tenure scholars—face in the current system.

Since I made the book free online, sales have dropped by about half. So it will take a few more months to recoup the publishing costs. Meanwhile, I now get thank-you notes from people all over the world. Self-publishing is not the answer to most publishing problems in academia, but it allowed me to get my work read by as many people as possible, regardless of their location or ability to pay. To me, that feels like a success.