

Research panel:

So You Want to Write a Book?: A Survival Guide to Writing a Proposal, Finding a Publisher, Negotiating a Contract, Finishing the Book, and Living Happily Ever After

Description

This panel discussion will address the joys and headaches of writing a book and finding a publisher while preserving your sanity, happiness, and marriage. The idea of writing a book has broad appeal among journalism and communication scholars. Far more people think about writing books than actually write them because writing a book can be a daunting task. You must know where to start – and when to finish. You must be willing to spend long hours working in solitary confinement while your family and friends are watching *Game of Thrones*, sipping wine on the Seine, sobbing about the Trump presidency, or posting pictures of their iguana on Facebook. This panel will address your questions about book writing and move you toward writing a book and perhaps even total consciousness or at least inner peace.

PANELISTS:

Andrew C. Billings (**AB**), Reagan Chair of Broadcasting, University of Alabama, is the author or editor of 18 books, including *Olympic Media: Inside the Biggest Show on Television* (Routledge, 2008). He has two co-authored books, *Mascot Nation: The Controversy Over Native American Representations in Sports* (with Jason Edward Black; University of Illinois Press) and *Media and the Coming Out of Gay Male Athletes in American Team Sports* (with Leigh M. Moscovitz; Peter Lang Publishing) that will both be published in 2018. He also oversees a book series entitled “Studies in Communication and Sport” (with Lawrence Wenner and Marie Hardin) for Peter Lang Publishing.

W. Joseph Campbell (**WJC**), a professor of communication at American University in Washington, D.C., is the author of six books, including the media-mythbusting work, *Getting It Wrong* (University of California Press, 2010; second ed., 2017). He also has written *1995: The Year the Future Began* (University of California Press, 2015); *1897: The Year That Defined American Journalism* (Routledge, 2006); and *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Praeger, 2001). Before joining the American University faculty in 1997, Campbell was a professional journalist for 20 years. His first paying job in journalism was as a summer sports-writing intern at the Elyria (Ohio) *Chronicle-Telegram*.

Kathy Roberts Forde (**KRF**), associate professor in the Journalism Department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, received the Frank Luther Mott-KTA book award and the AEJMC History Division book award for *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). She has received the Covert Award twice for best journal article on the history of mass media. Her second book (under contract with University of Massachusetts Press) explores how the ideas of James Baldwin’s social protest essays collected in *The Fire Next Time* shaped public understanding of and public policy about civil rights and racial justice, reaching into the highest levels of the federal government.

Chris Lamb (**CL**), professor of journalism, Indiana University-Indianapolis, is the author or editor of nine books, including *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to End Segregated Baseball* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012), which won the AEJMC History

Division book award. His tenth book, co-authored with Patrick Washburn, is a history of sports journalism (Northwestern University Press, 2019). He is currently writing the story of the 1955 Cannon Street YMCA all-stars, a black Little League team in Charleston, South Carolina. When the Cannon Street team registered for a segregated tournament, it found itself in the middle of the national struggle for civil rights, provoking the greatest crisis in Little League Baseball.

Rob Taylor (**RT**) is senior editor at the University of Nebraska Press, where he acquires and develops sports history books for both general and scholarly audiences. He also acquires spaceflight history and some regional works. He has 20 years of experience as an acquisitions editor with the University of Nebraska Press, Contemporary Books/McGraw-Hill, and Independent Publishers Group in Chicago. The *New York Times* profiled Taylor in an article on the University of Nebraska Press's success publishing books about baseball.

Each of the participants on the panel was asked questions on different parts of book writing.

Here are their responses:

1) What are the professional benefits and personal rewards to writing a book?

AB: A book allows for the “deep dive.” For me, it allows an opportunity for multiple theoretical lenses and methodological approaches. If writing six articles is a half-dozen cookies, writing a book with six parts is like six slices ultimately forming a pie. There's a synergy to the process that allows your arguments to breathe.

WJC: Too often we overlook or ignore the rewards and dwell instead on the demands and challenges of book-writing. The rewards and benefits are many and include, in an academic setting, solidifying a case for tenure and promotion. Beyond that is the satisfaction of making an intellectual contribution — a lasting intellectual contribution — to important subjects.

CL: I like writing – as much as it's possible to like something as arduous and demoralizing as writing often is. Writing a book provides an opportunity to tell a story in a way you can't do in a newspaper, a magazine, or an academic journal. There are also professional benefits such as achieving tenure and promotion or creating a reputation that increases your marketability. Because of this, books have a value that far exceeds what relatively little you might make in an advance or in royalties.

RT: On the professional side, a book (or subsequent books) can help with tenure, promotion, and job possibilities. Personal rewards can include contributing to your field of expertise with original research/intellectual contribution, etc., that gets attention and sells successfully.

2) What should every promising author know before they begin working on their book?

AB: Clarity of vision is obviously key, but more than that, an author should ask: what parts of your vision are negotiable? What parts are dealbreakers? More importantly, is this a vision that can be encapsulated in 80-100K words? Map it out. Sometimes people think they have a book when what they have is a dataset they'd love to explore three different ways. They then proceed

to discover that each of those three ways can be written in 8K words and that they're about at a third of what a book would need to be. Do you have enough to say? Figure that out now.

WJC: Would-be authors should be fully aware of the unglamorous side of book-writing, that it is hard work, as almost everyone says — that self-discipline has to be applied in a sustained way; that time can be so easily squandered, and that in the end there are no guarantees the book will be widely reviewed or even well-received.

KRF: There's no point writing a book unless you have something new and urgent to say. A book is meant to contribute something new and valuable to the conversation of scholarship and even public life. So when you begin your book, have a clear idea of the story and information you want to share. Be able to place your work in conversation with what is already known or poorly misunderstood. And be able to explain persuasively why your book matters.

CL: Writing a book is both easier and harder than it may appear. If you commit enough time to writing a book, you'll eventually write a book. Therein lies the rub. You have to commit enough time and if you do this over a period of days, weeks, or months, there will be times when your family and friends will consider committing you. Don't sacrifice the things that are important in your life to write a book; sacrifice the things that aren't important.

RT: Whether a scholarly book or a trade book, be able to say early on what your controlling idea is. It sounds simple, but if you can't describe your book's main idea in a couple of concise sentences, it might need further development. The question "what is this book about" never goes away, and the ability to summarize it and do it well helps you not only write the book but helps convey to a publisher what it's about succinctly and clearly. That and before writing, map out the book's structure with an outline that shows where you want the book to go from start to finish.

3) What's the hardest part about writing a book?

AB: For me, it's likely keeping the argument timely. Sports are inherently liquid for 98 percent of what is consumed; what is epic today is forgotten two weeks later, if not sooner. A book process is a minimum of 18 months, but often two to three years. If you're trying to write on a "hot" topic, how do you ensure that the thoughts are still topical when the book is actually released?

WJC: At least three elements qualify as "hardest": Developing a book-worthy idea (this can be more challenging on some book projects than others); securing a publisher's interest and commitment, and developing a complete working draft, which in my experience is key to preparing a polished final manuscript.

KRF: Finding the time, creating the schedule, and forging the work habits that are necessary to writing a book. If you have something of the introvert in you, the solitary nature of a sole-authored book is just fine. But if you're more of an extrovert, I imagine it might feel lonely; at least, I've heard friends talk about the loneliness of book writing. If it's lonely for you, create a writing group to make the experience more social and supportive.

CL: To write a book, you need time, and more specifically, uninterrupted time. Thinking or talking about writing is not the same as writing any more than thinking or talking about exercising is the same as exercising. You must ruthlessly protect the time you commit to writing. Close your door, turn off your phone, and your Wi-Fi, if necessary, and write. Do this two to three hours for two days a week over a period of months and you'll be surprised at how much you can accomplish. Don't teach summer school, if you can help it. Write.

RT: For scholars, probably revising/reconsidering much of a manuscript that you thought was ready for publication prior to peer review. The peer review process may result in recommendations to revise, and could result in a revising period that takes anywhere from 3-12 months and sometimes longer, but most of the time is an invaluable part of making a manuscript as good as it can be for publication.

4) How do I come up with an idea that is broad enough for a book, specific enough so I can sell it to an editor, and compelling enough so there's a market for it?

AB: If a topic hasn't been written about before, it's often because the topic isn't very compelling (bad) or because it's so new no one has gotten to it yet (good). Obviously work toward the latter. Then seek topics that have a good lineage of publication (journal articles and the like) and ask: what could a book do on this subject that other singular articles could not?

WJC: The book idea fundamentally should be on a topic that deeply interests the would-be author. Taking on a project that does not fascinate the author is an invitation to a slog.

RT: In terms of selling an idea to an editor and making it "specific enough" probably depends to a large degree on the field you're writing for and what the market for the published work looks like. If you're writing on something that is part of your discipline's core, then maybe going narrower in scope might be a good thing. If you're working more in the margins, so to speak, then something broader might work just fine.

5) How do I find the right publisher for a book?

AB: This depends on where you are in your academic career. If you're in the early stages, the "right" publisher is likely whatever will move the needle most at your given institution for tenure and promotion. Those parameters often vary widely. Beyond that, one has to balance things: autonomy, reach, royalties, and relationships (with people at a press). I find supposed hierarchies of presses to be bad reasons to select one over the other. Don't choose a press because it'll "look good," choose one because it had the most upside for the characteristics you value.

KRF: Look at books in the field that are most similar to yours in terms of topic and approach. Choose the ones you most admire that also have high production value. Note the publisher and book series, if any, and the acquisitions editor. Shop your book proposal to these presses. If you want your book to have a market beyond academic libraries, be aware that some publishers only print expensive hardcovers that no one will buy except libraries. Also know the various kinds of

publishers that exist—university presses, commercial presses, trade presses—and learn about the markets associated with each and the reputational tiers within each.

RT: To find the right publisher, you have to look at their lists and make sure your project fits the disciplines they publish in. And make sure they are currently doing work in those area(s) because sometimes they've published in the past but are not doing it currently. If you're familiar with other books a publisher has released in your discipline, then you can look more closely at where it has been reviewed, how it has been received, etc., to try to get a picture of how capably a publisher might be with your own book. Your own research may also turn up publisher possibilities. Look at the books that have helped inform your work and are cited by the journals in your field.

6) What should be included (and not included) in the cover letter and proposal?

AB: Most presses have published parameters of what should be included, so look those up and show a first impression that you can ably follow directions. Common parts include a synopsis of the project, table of contents, estimation of audience, survey of competing related texts and (ideally) a sample chapter. I would encourage people NOT to make the sample chapter the intro. Sometimes it's better to write the introduction at the end.

WJC: Often the would-be publisher has posted proposal guidelines on its website, which help focus proposal-writing. The cover letter and proposal have to be compelling, and written in a way that non-experts are going to understand and are going to find intriguing. The proposal has to address the question of fit — that the prospective book would mesh with the publisher's interests and lineup. And the proposal has to make clear that the would-be author has the expertise and experience to complete a book-length treatment on the subject.

KRF: The best advice out there is in the wonderful book *Thinking Like Your Editor* by Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato. It's written for writers of serious nonfiction, but with a bit of tweaking, it works very well for academic writers, too. It's informative and inspiring to read before you write and as you're writing. It has terrific advice on all aspects of book writing, including the proposal.

CL: You must disabuse yourself of the notion that just because you think your subject is undeniably important a book editor will automatically do so, too. You must convince the editor. This requires knowing what the publisher publishes and knowing what makes your book so important. Come up with a brief (50-to-75-word) summary that captures the essence of your book, describes its contribution, and justifies its publication.

RT: In the cover letter, make sure you include these things: 1) a succinct cover letter that tells about your basic idea, your audience, and how close to completion you are, 2) who you are and what your credentials for writing the book are, and 3) that you are interested in having that house publish your work and why. In a proposal, you can then go more into detail on the book's structure. Always include chapter-by-chapter summaries (paragraph or two describing each chapter in detail) so that the editor can see where the proposed book would go from start to

finish, a section on the market/audience including competing books and how yours will stand out, and your qualifications including how you can help promote your work.

7) Can I submit to multiple publishers simultaneously?

AB: Absolutely. That said, I think there's a duplication of effort that is often not necessary. If you have a press that you know is a top choice, pitch them the proposal. Mention that if there's at least initial interest, you're willing to give them an exclusive six-week negotiating window. They'll appreciate it (as they will know you're serious about them), you'll appreciate it (because they're likely to make sure to get reviews back on time) and it's not that much of an amount of time to let pass if you do need to submit the proposal more widely.

WJC: It may be tempting, but I wouldn't.

KRF: Yes. It's expected. But you should still note in your cover letter that you are submitting to multiple publishers. And know that once a publisher decides to send your proposal out for external review (university presses always do this), the acquisitions editor will expect you to withdraw your proposal from consideration at other presses during the review process.

CL: Yes. Publishers created the dictate that you cannot submit manuscripts to different publishers simultaneously because it serves their interests. That said, you should state in your cover letter that you are sending your proposal elsewhere.

RT: Yes, although it's always best to tell the publisher on initial submission that you have it out with other publishers already or are planning simultaneous submissions.

8) How do I decide whether to approach to a university press or a commercial press?

AB: Again, I'd say the first step is to know what your institutional values are and follow those. However, if I were to generalize I'd say, for instance, that the university presses value theory a bit more while commercial presses might value international markets. University presses often let you go more narrow with a topic; commercial presses love broader landscapes. Those kinds of differences.

KRF: Different types of publishers serve different purposes in the marketplace of academic books and in the careers of scholars. At an R1/research extensive university, it may be expected that a first book published while standing for tenure and promotion appear with a university press, where manuscripts are peer-reviewed and vetted by an editorial board. Certain book series, whether at a university press or commercial publisher, may be the best choice for certain topical areas of scholarship. It's important to understand the various forces shaping your career trajectory and the potential readership and market for your book when you search for a publisher.

RT: If you're writing primarily for scholars, then university presses or for-profit scholarly presses are best first options, usually. The answer here would be somewhat related to answer in #5 above. Look at their lists and try to pick up what you can about how their books contribute to the discipline. If you're writing for a general nonfiction audience with a trade book, then many

university presses are going to be an option. To approach a commercial press as in a trade publisher usually requires literary agent representation.

9) How does a publisher decide whether they want to publish the book or not? What does the review process include? And how long does it take?

AB: I'll leave this to publishers to discuss, but my experience is that your book is often slated as part of a book series and the relationship between publisher and series editors vary widely as some give those series editors great weight in the decision and others less so.

KRF: In my experience with university presses as an author and reviewer, from first contact until acceptance of a book proposal, the timeline is four to six months. The relevant acquisitions editor, sometimes in consultation with a series editor, decides whether the book's topic and approach make sense for the publisher given its mission and areas of emphasis and whether the quality is in keeping with the publisher's standards. If these are affirmative decisions, the proposal may be sent to several scholars with relevant expertise for peer review. This review process generally takes a few months. Once the reviews are in, the acquisitions editor (and perhaps series editor) will decide, based on the reviews, whether the book is strong enough for publication. If yes, this editor will ask the author to write a response to the peer reviews, which will contain suggestions for revisions. This response and the reviews will be shared with the editorial board. If the editorial board approves, the publisher will offer a contract.

RT: A publisher is going to be looking in a most basic sense if the book fits their list(s), and what the scholarly contribution is. Then they're also looking at the author's publication track record or expected future might be. The review process can proceed a couple different ways. If you're working from a proposal and one or two chapters, the publisher may want to have it reviewed, especially if it's something that seemingly departs from a discipline's core. It might take two weeks to a month to get a proposal reviewed. Another route is you're working from a completed manuscript, which may take 2-6 months to be reviewed. From there, the reviews might be supportive or supportive with some recommended revisions. But the editor then might be able to take a project to the faculty advisory board for approval. On the short end, it can take a couple of months to go through the review process and as long as a year or more if a publisher likes your work but the review process results in recommended revisions that both the publisher and author have agreed to undertake before moving to final approval stage.

10) What part of the contract, if any of it, is negotiable?

AB: Sometimes contracts ask if you have institutional funds to help with production costs. If at all possible, get those eliminated. Royalty percentages are often negotiable; I've had luck getting higher percentages for royalty ladders where the royalty goes up if you sell a certain number of copies. Publishers tend to know that once those benchmarks are hit you're dividing up profits, not minimizing losses. Due dates are negotiable, as are proposed titles (as sometimes your title and the publisher's proposed title don't match).

WJC: Almost all of it is subject to negotiation. An author can offer suggestions for contract revisions — but the publisher doesn't have to embrace them. In negotiating a contract, the author

should always ask for an advance and seek a healthier slice of the net than what the publisher may propose.

RT: Most negotiable parts of a contract are the manuscript due date and the delivery specs (word count, other elements like photos, illustrations, etc.). Less negotiable are the royalty rates, especially on truly scholarly works. There's some room for negotiation, depending on the publisher, if you're writing a trade book. You might be able to negotiate to keep some of the subsidiary rights, like film, but in most cases a publisher is going to be much better equipped than you are to sell any of the non-print book rights to your work.

11) What expense is the writer responsible for?

AB: The big thing is the index (unless you wish to do that yourself). Most indexers cost \$3-4 per indexable page. This likely puts you in the \$600-1,000 range. Sometimes you can get the publisher to hire out an indexer and take the fee from your royalties, but sometimes not. Some publishers are now charging for typesetting fees or page layouts, etc. I always recommend not allowing for those, so try to negotiate out.

WJC: The writer should expect to cover all research-related expenses. That's why it's worth the effort to seek research grants. Even modest grants can be important in covering costs of traveling to archives or conferences. Authors often are asked to cover the expense of indexing the book. Investing in an index, done by a professional, is a wise investment. A meager index done by the author makes the whole book look shabby.

CL: I'd rather walk naked, covered in butter and mushrooms, through a village of starving cannibals than do an index myself. Ask about funds in your department or school to pay a professional to do your index. Create a GoFundMe page. A publisher may agree to do the index but they'll probably delete the expenses from your royalties. You don't want to do that, if you don't have to. Try to avoid, if humanly possible, the time and aggravation that goes into doing an index. Don't do the index yourself – or did I say that already?

RT: With a university press, an author is almost always responsible for any fees involved with securing photo rights and permission to republish work that isn't their own and would exceed fair use. Most university presses will require an author pay for their own index to be created by a qualified freelancer if they cannot provide it themselves.

12) What can you expect your publisher to do in the marketing of your book?

AB: You'll have a marketing questionnaire they'll ask you to complete. You'll list everything from listservs to conferences you'll be attending to awards for which you could potentially have your book nominated. Some do better than others at utilizing the marketing questionnaire, but almost all will have a one-sided flyer, and you can typically ensure that they'll have your book at the conferences you favor—although sometimes you have to remind them which those are.

WJC: It's essential that the author figure on shouldering the bulk of the book's long-term promotion. And these days, an author should plan to be an unabashed self-promoter, and call

attention to the book by establishing a presence on social media (Twitter affords frequent opportunities to do so), by accepting almost all requests for media interviews, and by launching a blog and posting frequently. Unabashed self-promotion is obviously a conceit. But an author does well to reject reservations about self-promotion and simply realize that no one else is going to promote the book, at least not in any sustained way.

CL: If you expect your publisher to do all the marketing for your book, you'll spend a lot of time baying at the moon. This may be the only book you've written, but it's not the only book your publisher is publishing. I devise my own marketing plan, which, includes, among other things, contacting media with a brief but pithy summary of the book, writing columns and articles for newspapers, magazines, and websites, and using social media.

RT: Effective marketing depends on the particular kind of book. For scholarly books, this could mean direct mail/email to scholars and for course adoption consideration. Reviews for scholarly books can take a while, often six months to a year after publication with some outlets. Scholarly conferences are a great outlet for direct marketing to potential buyers. For trade books, marketing often means review copies to book trade publication and print/online media who cover the subject(s) you're writing about. For both trade and scholarly work, social media has an ever-increasing marketing importance.

13) How important is submitting your book for awards, etc.?

AB: I haven't done it as much as I should. Some authors value these a lot; others think the ultimate sign of success is sales volume. However, I will say that if you opt to publish in limited formats (for instance, "print on demand" hardbacks with paperback editions coming only if "print on demand" warrants it), you'll likely need those awards as a quality metric, as institutional evaluators may believe the publisher only invested a bit in you and didn't necessarily vouch for the quality because of a limited run.

WJC: It's very important, if done strategically: "Strategically" in the sense the book is not going to be an award candidate in all competitions. It won't be a fit for all competitions. Select these competitions with discretion. Entering book-award competitions is part of the self-promotion imperative mentioned above. Avoid making a big deal if the book is a finalist or a runner-up in a competition. That just means it didn't win, which is something you need not emphasize.

KRF: VERY! Book awards can help raise the profile of both the book and its author. They can be important elements of a T&P or job application, proposals for second books and grants, etc. Submitting your book to award contests also expands the reading audience and awareness of your work in your discipline.

RT: Depending on your discipline, awards can be important for recognition and professional advancement. Most university presses will be able to submit for awards that your book is eligible for and a good fit for, but be realistic about the awards, the likely number of submissions. An award within the discipline, even if from a smaller and not widely known organization, can help with sales and increase exposure for a book a year or more after publication.

14) What’s the most important lesson you learned from writing your first book?

AB: Of all the elements I’ve listed to consider, I find autonomy to be the aspect I value most. Can I write the book in the manner I intend? Will the acquisitions editor let me truly advance my vision? Will the publisher let one middling review take sway over your vision? Feedback is crucial to advancing a good project, but if you advance a project and a reviewer basically says “this is not the way I would have written about this topic,” you want an acquisitions editor that will take your side, not the anonymous (and often less knowledgeable on your book subject) reviewer.

CL: You now know you can write a book and once you write a book you will want to write another – and this is just one of the chances you take whenever you write your first book.

Books on writing books:

Todd Armstrong, senior specialist acquisitions editor, communication and media studies for Cognella Academic Publishing, recommends the following books for aspiring writers.

William Germano, *Getting It Published: A Guide to Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Book* (3rd edition), University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato, *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction and Get It Published*, W.W. Norton, 2003.

Mary Ellen Lepionka, Sean W. Wakely, and Stephen E. Gillen, *Writing and Developing Your College Textbook: A Comprehensive Guide* (3rd edition), Textbook and Academic Authors Association, 2016.

William Germano, *From Dissertation to Book* (2nd edition), University of Chicago Press, 2013.