

## Demystifying Academic Book Writing and Publishing

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I am an ethnographer and in-depth interviewer who has written two academic books. The first, *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China* (Stanford 2016), was based on my dissertation. The second, *Chasing the American Dream in China: Chinese Americans in the Ancestral Homeland* (Rutgers forthcoming 2021) emerged from a side project I pursued out of personal interest.

Without a doubt, writing and publishing my first book was one of the most difficult, isolating, and frustrating experiences of my career. It probably took two years longer than it should have due to self-sabotaging habits I developed in graduate school of overthinking and perfectionism. By contrast, my second project was smooth, mostly enjoyable, and progressed rapidly with the press as a result of the lessons I had learned.

For first-time authors, the world of academic book writing and publishing can seem opaque and difficult-to-navigate. The lack of useful information in one place means that everyone must learn through trial and error. But I believe there is no need to reinvent the wheel! This short piece is meant to help demystify the book publishing process. I also offer some tips for creating a healthy mindset and sustainable habits that can make writing more personally fulfilling.

### WRITING

A great deal has already been written about academic writing and productivity, so I won't repeat those points here. Instead, you can read *Turning Your Dissertation into a Book* by William Germano, *Academics as Writers* and *Getting It Published* by Robert Boice, and *How to Write a Lot* by Paul Silvia. Instead, I'll share some strategies that worked for me.

#### Free strategies:

- 1) *Set SMART goals.* These are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. I found it most useful to set monthly, weekly, and daily goals. Part of why my first book (and my dissertation) took so long was because I had difficulty breaking down large steps, such as "write book intro," into the necessary smaller tasks. I also consistently underestimated how long each step would take, causing anxiety due to always feeling like I was falling behind. I learned to multiply my original estimate by 2.5X to come up with a more accurate length of time. This leads into the next point.
- 2) *Track your writing time.* After each session, write down how many minutes you spent writing. Include new writing, editing of existing writing, and outlining, but separate out research and note-taking. Try to shoot for a number that feels substantial but will not cause you to burn out. I tried to write 90-120 minutes about 4-5 times per week but also recognize that some people do better with much longer slots of time. Nowadays there are numerous free or inexpensive writing apps that can help with this.

- 3) *Write during your most mentally alert time of day.* For me, writing flows most easily between the hours of 8:30-11:30am. When possible, block out your schedule, turn off your phone, and prioritize that time just for writing. Other tasks that don't require as much mental energy—which for me were reading, teaching, and committee work—can come afterward. (Note: I wrote my first and most of my second book before having a child. Plus, in the post-Covid world, writing time is that much harder to come by. But if it's important to you, still try to prioritize it as much as possible.)
- 4) *Develop writing rituals.* These are actions to prepare you for writing and to transition into a quiet mental space. For example, I always make tea using the same mug. I also meditate for a few minutes. It can help to set an intention to guide your writing session. Write mantras on post-it notes and place them on your computer such as “stay present,” “ease,” “joy,” and “curiosity.” Glance at them for inspiration while you work.
- 5) *Find external accountability through a writing group.* It was essential for me to have a writing group of other like-minded, reliable scholars who could hold me accountable to deadlines, give useful feedback, and commiserate on the challenges of book writing. I suggest monthly meetings in a group no larger than three members so that everyone can receive regular feedback. I don't think it's necessary to have major overlap in your research areas as long as everyone uses similar theories or methods. Also, exchange individual chapters with other colleagues—the more senior, the better—when you can. Sharing work with others can be a good way to widen your social networks.
- 6) *Write alongside others.* Too often, writing is an isolating, lonely process, and even more so now. For motivation and moral support, create a regular virtual writing group with friends and colleagues or find one online, such as the one hosted by different academic women's Facebook groups.

**Strategies that cost money but are worth it:** (I used a combination of institutional and personal funds for all of these services.)

- 1) *Use an online accountability system.* For four years I paid for membership in the Academic Writing Club offered through Academic Ladder (<https://academicladder.com/>.) Though expensive, it was a built-in system for me to set specific goals, track my writing patterns and habits over time, and receive social support. Many others have found the Writing Bootcamps and Faculty Success Program offered through the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity to be very useful (<https://www.facultydiversity.org/>.)
- 2) *Hire a developmental editor.* I had never even heard of this profession until my second tenure track position! Many highly productive faculty hire developmental editors. They read through your manuscript and give detailed feedback on the argument and flow and organization of writing. My developmental editor was the only person who read and commented on the entire manuscript before I turned it into the press for review. To find one, ask people in your field who they have worked with. (And for those of you in the social sciences or Asian Studies, I highly recommend my own editor, Jenny Gavacs: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jenny-gavacs-whetstone/>)
- 3) *Hire a copy editor.* My developmental editor focused on broader ideas and did not do extensive copy-editing, so I also hired a separate copy editor to polish the prose of my second book. Even if you have confidence in your writing and grammar skills, they can make everything sound better. (I worked with Letta Page: <https://pagesmithing.com/>)

- 4) *Hold a book workshop.* I held one for my second book and wish I had for my first. These workshops, which generally last a whole day, are a way to receive undivided attention, feedback, and advice on your manuscript from scholars in your field. I organized it myself and invited four scholars to read my manuscript when it was about 75% complete. Each person received \$500 for their effort. It was one of the most supportive and enjoyable academic experiences of my career. Here's a guide to putting one together: [https://cissr.uchicago.edu/sites/cissr.uchicago.edu/files/CISSR\\_Book-Workshop-Guide.pdf](https://cissr.uchicago.edu/sites/cissr.uchicago.edu/files/CISSR_Book-Workshop-Guide.pdf).
- 5) *Hire a coach.* Book writing is both a marathon and a mental game that requires endurance and a healthy mindset. It can be a great idea to work with a coach: an encouraging accountability partner who helps you achieve your goals, overcome critical self-talk, and develop more self-confidence and better habits. Besides my work as a professor, I'm also a professional certified life coach for women academics. Check out my website for details: <http://www.lesliekimwang.com/life-coaching>.

### **BOOK PUBLISHING:**

(Caveat: This process may vary by discipline and has also likely been altered by COVID, so the following advice is based solely on my past experience.)

- *Know which presses to pursue:* Unfortunately, as with everything in academia, university presses are ranked according to prestige and status. Like publishing an article in a top-ranked journal, publishing your book with a certain press can change the course of your career. That said, every press has certain specialty areas. Do some research ahead of time to find out which presses publish work similar to your own in topic, methods, and/or theory. Which presses have published your favorite books? Get a sense of the landscape before contacting editors about your project.
- *Make connections with editors.* Acquisitions editors acquire new projects and advocate for your contract at the press. They are the real gatekeepers. I typically got editors interested in my work by emailing them a few weeks before a major conference in my field that they would likely attend based on listed interests. I also asked colleagues to recommend editors and presses they enjoyed working with. My emails included a short description of my project, my book proposal, and CV, as well as a request to meet at the conference. Editors usually responded quickly to set up a meeting, or, as in one case, to convey that their press wasn't a good fit for my project (they suggested another instead). In the post-COVID world, I still recommend arranging a phone call or Zoom meeting rather than rely only on email. My acquisitions editor at Stanford told me she was in contact with 150 different authors at any one time, so it always helps to have a human connection.
- *When to contact editors:* Many first-time authors think they need to have a full manuscript completed before they can contact editors. This is not the case! Once you have a fully fleshed out book proposal and about 2-3 chapters (ideally including the introduction), you are ready to talk to presses about your book. You can even have your materials under simultaneous review with more than one press as long as you are transparent with all parties.
- *Broaden your audience.* Don't forget that book publishing is a business and editors/presses need you as much as you need them. This means two things: 1) what you have to offer is extremely important, AND 2) you need to think about your book's selling potential. Academic books tend not to be highly profitable, so presses are having a hard

time making ends meet. Many are undergoing major budget cuts and operate with few staff. Consequently, they are increasingly moving towards books that have cross-over appeal with non-scholarly readers. In light of this, I encourage you to try to write your book to appeal to a larger audience. Think about tone and language by eliminating unnecessary theory and jargon (which you can always keep for journal articles!)

- *Editors are typically not academics.* As noted above, this means that you should state your ideas simply and clearly so that non-experts can easily understand your project, argument, and the larger stakes/consequences. Shoot for an educated general audience member—like a *New Yorker* reader—that might randomly pick up your book at a bookstore. Not only is this a good writing exercise, but it also challenges the Ivory Tower effect by making your ideas accessible to the broader public.
- *Work with an acquisitions editor who is enthusiastic about your project.* You'll be able to gauge enthusiasm by their interest in your ideas, how quickly they get back to you, and the speed by which they move your project along. They are your biggest advocate at the press. Recognize that time is of the essence. Editors often move on from their positions within a couple years, and the new editor may drop some of their predecessor's projects. This is not only demoralizing, but can also endanger your employment or tenure prospects.
- *Be someone who editors want to work with.* Be realistic in your promises and meet your deadlines. I've found presses to be fairly flexible and, if needed, they will give you extra time to complete the entire manuscript. Maintain open lines of communication with your editor (as in, don't disappear!) Be honest about where you are in the process. University presses are understaffed and editors work hard for little pay. To me, the best way to express appreciation for the work they do is by fulfilling your end of the bargain.

#### **OTHER RESOURCES:**

- *How to write an academic book proposal:* Proposals are quite formulaic. Ask your colleagues to share theirs with you, especially those with topics and/or methods similar to your own. Karen Kelsky has a helpful post about this: <https://theprofessorisin.com/2015/07/02/how-to-write-a-book-proposal/>
- *Advance vs. traditional book contracts:* Advance contracts are usually based on review of a partial manuscript, with the provision that publication hinges on review of the full manuscript. Some presses will only review a full manuscript of first-time authors. Advance contracts bind authors to the press even though they can still deny them a full contract. However, in my experience, the advance contract typically does lead to publication as long as you finish the manuscript and make any requested changes. Here's another useful discussion: <https://katelynknox.com/writing-first-humanities-book/advance-contract/#:~:text=Typically%2C%20presses%20offer%20an%20advance,or%20more%20favorable%20peer%20reviews>
- *Book awards:* Once your book is out, get colleagues to nominate you. But also make sure to nominate yourself and to apply for awards two years in a row. I didn't receive any awards until the second year, and two were from self-nominations. Bear in mind that nominations can get expensive since you need to mail a hard copy of the book to each committee member and presses usually only pay for a small number.

## CREATING A HEALTHY MINDSET:

Here are some strategies for helping you manage this process that go beyond the standard good advice of getting enough sleep, eating well, and exercising regularly.

- *Pay attention to where your energy goes.* It took me years to notice how much mental and emotional energy I spent worrying about my book, even when I wasn't writing. (This was also true for teaching, though that's another story!) Several years ago, I started a meditation/mindfulness practice, which has helped me stay grounded and centered. For tips on ways to fit mindfulness into your daily routine, here's a blog post I co-wrote with my sister, a wellness coach: <https://www.carezare.com/blog/2020/11/2/pause-reflect-reset-achieving-mindfulness-with-leslie-wang-phd-amp-elaine-wang-mfa>. (I especially recommend developing a deep breathing practice and an evening gratitude practice).
- *Progress, not perfection.* I held onto my book and proposal for years longer than necessary out of the desire to perfect every line. Ultimately, the time and energy it took was not worth the sacrifice. Looking back, I can see that much of my perfectionism derived from the book being based on my dissertation. Throughout grad school, and for years afterward, I suffered from imposter syndrome and treated the book as a symbol of my scholarly potential. The whole process would have been easier and more fulfilling if I had focused less on my own insecurities and more on what inspired me, who I wanted to reach through my writing, and the satisfaction of creating new knowledge.
- *Avoid burning out.* Take it from someone who was once very burnt out, you need to invest in all areas of your life outside of academia. During this challenging time, it's even more important to create strong, clear boundaries with yourself and others. Self-care, saying NO to requests that go against your values and priorities, and making time for your relationships and for playing is essential to keep your system functioning. I discuss these issues at length on this podcast: <https://the-view-from-venus.simplecast.com/episodes/7-setting-boundaries-and-avoiding-academic-burnout-with-leslie-wang>
- *Don't compare yourself to others.* Academia is set up to feel like a non-stop competition. Remember, though, that everyone accomplishes things at different speeds depending on their individual circumstances. The best advice I've heard is to compare yourself to yourself one year ago, and to make your decisions from there.
- *Connect with your younger self.* Most of us originally got into research and writing because we were inspired to use our words to make a difference in the world. Connect to that original source of inspiration. What book would the younger, excited version of you have wanted to read?
- *Give yourself permission.* Writing happens more easily when you can treat it as a creative act rather than a professional burden or expectation. When you're feeling anxiety, dread, or doubt about your book (or about academic life in general), it's time to be kind to yourself and dial down the pressure. Give yourself permission to put your work away and to not think about it. Do something fun or relaxing, with the understanding that you will return to writing when you feel better. You'll see how much faster your ideas flow.

Overall, I hope that these strategies and resources are useful to you along your book writing and publishing journey. Of course, there's a lot more to it, but these are the things that have helped me the most. Feel free to reach out with any questions, and best of luck!