

# Why it is so hard for academics to write textbooks

Robert J. Sternberg

---

*Although academics are accustomed to writing articles and books, they much less frequently write textbooks. When they do, they likely find it much harder to do well than they ever would have imagined. This difficulty is likely to surprise them, because they have considerable experience in writing research articles and in teaching. I argue in this article that the reason that textbook writing is so hard for academics is that there is substantial negative transfer from professional academic writing to textbook writing. That is, experience in academic writing often interferes with textbook writing. Moreover, there are a number of factors that make textbook writing simply hard to do. I enumerate the reasons why this is the case.*

**A**CADEMIC PROFESSIONALS may have many and diverse motivations for writing textbooks. They may believe that they have a different and better way of presenting material to students, or they may find none of the textbooks available to them to be satisfactory, or they may need some (or perhaps a lot of) extra money.

There are many books on how to write scientific papers and even books in psychology (see American Psychological Association, 2009; Beins & Beins, 2012; Landrum, 2012; Miller, 2013; Mitchell, Jolly, & O'Shea, 2012; Rosnow & Rosnow, 2011; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2010, 2016). But these books are of little or even no help in writing textbooks, as explained below. Indeed, academic writing skills can be an impediment to the writing of good textbooks. I was unable to find any book on Amazon.com that specifically gives guidance in writing textbooks, although there have been some articles (e.g. Bauman, 2003).

When academics try to write textbooks, they often find it very difficult to do, or at least to do well. The difficulty, I argue in this article, results from negative transfer between the kind of professional academic writing to which they are accustomed, on the one hand, and textbook writing, on the other.

There are obvious similarities between professional academic writing and textbook

writing. In both, the author tries to write well, writes for an audience, wants to be scientifically accurate and up-to-date, wants to interest and engage readers, wants readers to remember most or at least some of what has been read, and wants to make a difference through his or her writing. With all these similarities, one might expect textbook writing to be a breeze. But it is not and there are far fewer successful textbook writers than there are academics or even star academics. Indeed, many successful textbook writers are at good but not top-rated institutions. There are reasons for this: Teaching is more valued at their institutions than at institutions known primarily for their research output; textbook writing also is more valued; and they better get to know the modal reader who actually will use their text.

What are the differences that so challenge academic writers?

## **How professional academic writing and textbook writing are different**

Professional academic writing and textbook writing are almost entirely different species. Table 1, the heart of this article, summarises the many differences between the two kinds of writing. These differences can produce enormous negative transfer from academic to textbook writing.

Table 1.

Outcomes	Academic writing	Textbook writing
<i>Main goal in writing</i>	Your main goal is to advance science.	Your main goal is to advance student learning.
<i>Prior knowledge</i>	Assume your reader has basic knowledge of the subject.	Assume your reader has no knowledge of the subject.
<i>Focus of writing</i>	Focus on the professionals who will read your work.	Focus on the students who will read your work but also on the professionals who decide on textbook adoptions.
<i>Academic orientation of reader</i>	Assume your reader is academically oriented.	Assume your reader is not academically oriented.
<i>Professional status</i>	Assume your reader is a professional or pre-professional.	Assume your reader is not a professional and likely never will become one, at least in your field.
<i>Differentiating yourself from competitors</i>	Try to show how you are creatively different from your competitors.	Try to show how you are pedagogically different from your competitors.
<i>Coverage of material</i>	Don't cover the same stuff that everyone else covers.	Cover much the same stuff that everyone else covers.
<i>Tables and figures</i>	Don't include too many tables and figures, which are space-consuming and can be costly to reproduce.	Include a lot of tables and figures that illustrate the points you make.
<i>Personal material and anecdotes</i>	Don't get too personal and thereby sound anecdotal rather than scientific.	Get personal and show that you are a person who understands your readers and their needs.
<i>Who looks smart?</i>	Make yourself look competent.	Make your reader feel competent.
<i>Definitions of terms</i>	Assume readers know definitions of basic psychological terms.	Define every term, super-clearly, and in the same sentence that the term is first introduced (and bolded).
<i>Use of italics and bolding</i>	Avoid heavy use of italics and bolding.	Use italics and bolding liberally to emphasize important terms.
<i>Titles</i>	Come up with catchy titles for articles, books, and book chapters.	Use largely standard titles for books and book chapters so students and professors know what they are getting.
<i>Whose contribution to emphasise</i>	Emphasise the scientific contribution of your work.	Emphasize the scientific (and practical) contributions of the work of the psychologists you are writing about.
<i>Classical and modern contributions</i>	Balance classical and recent references to show your scholarship.	Balance classical and recent references but show your book is totally up to date while still recognising early contributions.

Outcomes	Academic writing	Textbook writing
<i>Concrete real-world examples</i>	Do not include too many concrete, real-world examples, which can distract from your main points and even appear to be pandering.	Include many concrete, real-world examples to facilitate student understanding.
<i>Pedagogy</i>	Do not include pedagogy, which would be inappropriate.	Include lots of student-centered pedagogy, which is totally appropriate.
<i>Story telling</i>	Avoid telling lots of, or even any stories.	Tell lots of stories.
<i>Details in reporting data</i>	Include all detail that is necessary to show your scholarship and to allow reproducibility of results.	Be selective in detail, as it can detract from the big story. It is as important to know what not to include as what to include.
<i>Personal involvement in narrative</i>	Keep yourself way in the background.	Let readers get to know who you are and why you are so excited about the material.
<i>What you are trying to advance</i>	You will get ahead if your work advances research.	You will get ahead if your work advances teaching.
<i>Redundancy</i>	Avoid redundancy.	Include as much redundancy as you need to ensure students learn vital concepts.
<i>Foregrounding versus backgrounding</i>	Foreground the people who have made the discoveries (who are likely to be reviewers and readers of the work).	Foreground the discoveries themselves, often relegating the discoverers (except for truly major work) to parenthetical citations.
<i>Boxes and similar features</i>	Avoid boxes and other such distractions.	Use boxes and similar techniques to break up the text and write about things that would not quite fit in the main text.
<i>Lengths of words and sentences</i>	Long words and long sentences are ok if they clearly convey your meaning.	Avoid long words and long sentences, which decrease the readability of the text. Use the simplest words and sentences possible.
<i>Product longevity</i>	Success is an article or book that lasts forever.	Success is a book that lasts for three or so years and sells well enough to generate a next edition.
<i>Evaluation of strengths and weaknesses</i>	Make sure readers understand in some detail the strengths and weaknesses of the work you cite.	Be truthful but selective about explaining strengths and weaknesses, as many of them will be technical and beyond the comprehension of your readers.
<i>Signs of success</i>	Success is a BPS award or a 10% additional salary increase as a result of your writing.	Success is sending your children to college off the royalties, or buying that second house you have always dreamed of in France.
<i>The meaning of success</i>	Success is knowing that a few hundred or, if you are lucky, a few thousand colleagues will have learned something.	Success is knowing that tens of thousands of students will understand the field as a result of your efforts, and some of them may even change career plans as a result of your efforts.

I will not attempt to discuss every item in Table 1; rather, I will summarise some of the highlights of the table.

The large majority of academic writing, at least for most of us, is for professionals (like ourselves). One gets into certain habits of writing that are intended to appeal to readers like oneself. In contrast, textbooks need to appeal to students, whose backgrounds and interests are totally different from faculty members'. But in textbook writing, one also has to appeal to the faculty members who are potential adopters of the text. That appeal is different from the appeal of academic writing. It is an appeal to the professor in the hope that the professor will believe: (a) her students will understand and learn from the text; (b) her students will not be overly overwhelmed by the material in the text; often (c) adopting the textbook would not require too much work on the part of the faculty member in adapting her course from her former textbook to the new one.

In textbook writing, the focus always has to be on student learning. The textbook author therefore has to emphasise readability, pedagogy, occasional redundancy to underscore one's points, and even making student readers feel a sense of competence for however much they are understanding, rather than ignorant for what they are not understanding. The textbook author needs to assume minimal background information. Every point has to be clearly made and all terms clearly defined the first time they are used. One cannot assume one's readers are motivated to read one's text, so one constantly has to be asking how to be motivating the reader to read onward. Textbook writing requires a personal touch and, at least in psychology, lots of clear, real-world examples of how the material in the text can be applied to everyday life. One cannot provide too many details, nor can one deeply evaluate theories and research with arcane points that are likely to lose students' interest. As in academic writing, one needs to balance older and newer references; but with a textbook, newer references

are a must because adopters are typically looking for textbooks that are up-to-date.

In writing a textbook, one needs to be creative, but the creativity cannot extend too far. Instructors have pretty set ideas about what should go into their course, and moreover, they likely will have taught the course before and thus not be eager to change all of their notes and other pedagogical material if they adopt a new book. Often, then, much of the creativity in writing a textbook is with regard to how the author presents material and the pedagogy one uses to enhance it, rather than with regard to the material one presents. Of course, the author always can include some new and fresh material, but if one departs too far from what instructors are used to, one may find the same instructors reluctant to adopt the book.

Ultimately, success means a very different thing for a textbook versus an academic paper or book. A textbook succeeds if students who start off knowing next to nothing learn a great deal from it and, after reading it, become excited about the field, whether they originally were or not. Textbooks typically are not the royal road to promotions, scientific awards, and salary increments in research-oriented institutions, although they may be in more teaching-oriented institutions. However, the greatest satisfaction is in knowing that thousands and sometimes tens or even hundreds of thousands of students may have learned about a subject because of your efforts. And of course, that academic book is unlikely to put your kids through college – the textbook just might. Of course, not everything is different between textbooks and scholarly books: In both cases, one at least hopes to sell large numbers of copies!

There are other oddities associated with textbooks that are not associated with academic texts. For one thing, publishers typically expect authors to play a much more active role in promoting the book. Especially for lower level books, authors even may be asked to travel to campuses that represent large potential adoptions in order to represent the book. The authors typically do not have to 'sell' the books – just make their

presence known. A second difference is that publishers' representatives are much more straightforward about the financial aspects of the book – that is, their main goal is their bottom line on the book, or what they earn from the book after expenses (including royalties). A third difference is that, whereas the longer an academic book lasts, the more successful it is, with textbooks, it is often just the opposite. You want to have a book that is so successful that it will be ready for revision in 3–5 years. The stated reason for the revision is to update the text, but the not-so-well-hidden reason is that by the third year, the used-book market has all but destroyed sales of the original book, at least for print books. Publishers more and more are moving to e-books and book rental licenses, partly to bring down prices for students, but also partly to enhance their own revenue.

Although differences in writing style between scholarly works and textbook writing constitute a major reason why academics may hesitate to write textbooks, there are other reasons as well.

First, it is particularly difficult to get a contract to write a textbook. A reason is that publishers need to invest much more money in advance in a textbook than in a scholarly book. The textbook typically requires a somewhat substantial advance against royalties and maybe a grant to the author to help with his or her writing. If these investments are not recouped, the publisher can lose substantial sums. With a scholarly, advances tend to be minimal or nonexistent, and grants are very rare.

Second, writing a textbook proposal is generally more of a challenge than writing a proposal for a scholarly book. The potential author needs to show why, at least in theory, her or his book will outsell the competition, which is likely to be somewhat similar to one's own book. A sample chapter is also usually a good idea. Scholarly book proposals, in contrast, generally do not require one to show how one's book will outsell the competition, nor is a sample chapter as typical. An idea for a textbook may be technically strong, but not viable in the marketplace, in

which case the potential textbook never goes further than the proposal stage.

Third, the number of publishers of college texts has shrunk over the years. Many of the college textbook publishers of yesteryear – in the United States, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Holt, and Houghton Mifflin, to name a few – are gone, consolidated into larger conglomerates. There just are not as many places to send a proposal with the hope of getting an acceptance.

Fourth, the the textbook market is in flux. Textbook sales have been on the downswing. Partly this is due to the used-book market, whereby purveyors of used books capture many of the sales after the first or second year of a new edition. And partly it is because students are reading less. As textbook sales decline, publishers raise prices to compensate for lost revenue, which in turn makes students more reluctant to purchase the books. It becomes a vicious circle. Moreover, one can find pirate sites on the Internet that make the books available for free, in violation of copyright laws.

Finally, writing a textbook just takes a lot of time. You might finish a scholarly book in a year or two. A textbook easily can take three to five years to write, with a need for a disciplined writing schedule that assures progress on at least a weekly basis. Textbook writing is a huge time commitment.

Writing a textbook is engaging and even can be fun. I have written or coauthored a few myself and enjoyed the process (e.g. Sternberg & Sternberg, 2017). But writing a textbook is hard. It takes far more time than writing a scholarly article or even than writing most scholarly books, and because of the revision cycle, the commitment can be a very long-term one. So textbook writing definitely is not for everyone. It is for those who are challenged by uniquely meeting students' needs, and who are ready to put forth continuing effort to make the book successful in edition after edition.

**Robert J. Sternberg**, Cornell University.  
Email: robert.sternberg@cornell.edu

## References

- American Psychological Association (2009). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th edn). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bauman, M.G. (2003). Textbook writing 101. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/article/Textbook-Writing-101/28253>.
- Beins, B.C. & Beins, A.M. (2012). *Effective writing in psychology: Papers, posters, and presentations* (2nd edn). New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Landrum, R.E. (2012). *Undergraduate writing in psychology: Learning to tell the scientific story* (rev.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Miller, S.A. (2013). *Writing in psychology*. New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, M.L., Jolly, J.M. & O'Shea, R.P. (2012). *Writing for psychology* (4th edn). Lanham, MD: Cengage.
- Rosnow, R.L. & Rosnow, M. (2011). *Writing papers in psychology* (9th edn). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Sternberg R.J. & Sternberg, K. (2010). *The psychologist's companion* (5th edn). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R.J. & Sternberg, K. (2016). *The psychologist's companion* (6th edn). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R.J. & Sternberg, K. (2017). *Cognitive psychology* (7th edn). Lanham, MD: Cengage.