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INTRODUCTION

How to Develop a Scholarly Manuscript

“IT FEELS like a handful of people, somewhere, must understand how academic publishing works,” said a participant in a workshop I recently held for academic writers. “The rest of us are just trying to figure it out as we go and hoping we get it right.” As a professional developmental editor for scholarly authors, I’ve heard similar sentiments expressed countless times. The scholar in this instance is a tenured professor at a research university who has published multiple well-received books and half a dozen peer-reviewed articles. From the outside, she looks like a successful academic writer, yet she still lacks certainty about the steps that lead to such success.

The problem with uncertainty is that it breeds anxiety, which prevents many scholars from moving forward with their writing projects as quickly as they want to. If you’re unsure what publishers are looking for, you’ll dither over whether your manuscript is ready to submit. If you don’t know what to expect from the revision process, you may be stymied by perfectionism before you even finish a full draft. Some scholars eventually learn how to write and publish through trial and error, but doing so

takes time, social capital, and emotional fortitude, all of which are in short supply these days.

Even after you've resolved to send your manuscript to a publisher, the uncertainty continues. What if peer reviewers don't understand the point of your project? What if you receive conflicting feedback? Will you have to spend years revising in order to get published? As you get pulled through the process, you can feel as if you're no longer the one in charge of your own ideas, but instead you're just trying to get other people to deem your work good enough to be shared with the world. It's no wonder the writing and publishing process can feel so stressful and disempowering for scholarly authors.

This book is here to help academic writers reclaim a bit of agency. You won't be able to control everything, because you can't know in advance whether a specific publisher will want to invest in your manuscript or whether peer reviewers will support what you're trying to do. You can't force readers to cite your ideas or compel committees to give you recognition and awards. But you can learn how to present your research in ways that meet the needs of scholarly publishers and readers, increasing your chances of having your text resonate with those you most want to reach. And you can come to understand how manuscripts travel through the publishing process and use that knowledge to make your own decisions about what your text will be.

I aim to empower you by offering a systematic method you can use to develop your manuscripts in progress, taking them from first drafts to well-formed, publishable texts. This method is derived from my decade of experience working as a developmental editor for academic authors. After helping hundreds of writers refine their book projects and land contracts with their dream publishers, I want to help more scholars reap the benefits

of developmental editing for themselves. If that sounds intriguing to you, you're in the right place.

What Is Manuscript Development?

Perhaps you only recently became aware that developmental editors exist, maybe even as recently as when you read the previous paragraph. The question is: What do they do? Developmental editors work on texts at a crucial stage: after the text has been conceptualized and drafted, but before it gets polished at the level of sentences, words, and punctuation. Developmental editing deals with the most fundamental aspects of a text. Different editors will describe these aspects with different terms, but for me, these aspects can be typologized as argument, evidence, structure, and style, which I call the **four pillars of scholarly writing** (Figure 1.1).

How do developmental editors approach these four pillars? First, we clarify the **argument** that's driving the text, the author's core claim that will cause a change to the reader's understanding of the subject matter. In scholarly writing, a writer's argument is often their text's novel contribution to a field and is the text's main reason to exist, so it must be clear. Next, we developmental editors ensure that the writer has backed up their argument appropriately with well-analyzed **evidence** and that they are using the **structure** of their text to guide the reader's understanding of the argument. Finally, we consider the text's **style**, looking at how the writer's overall attitude to both subject and reader shows up on the page. Developmental editors don't check for correct grammar or even elegant prose, as a line editor would. The aim is rather to help the writer project a consistent voice that earns credibility with their intended audience.

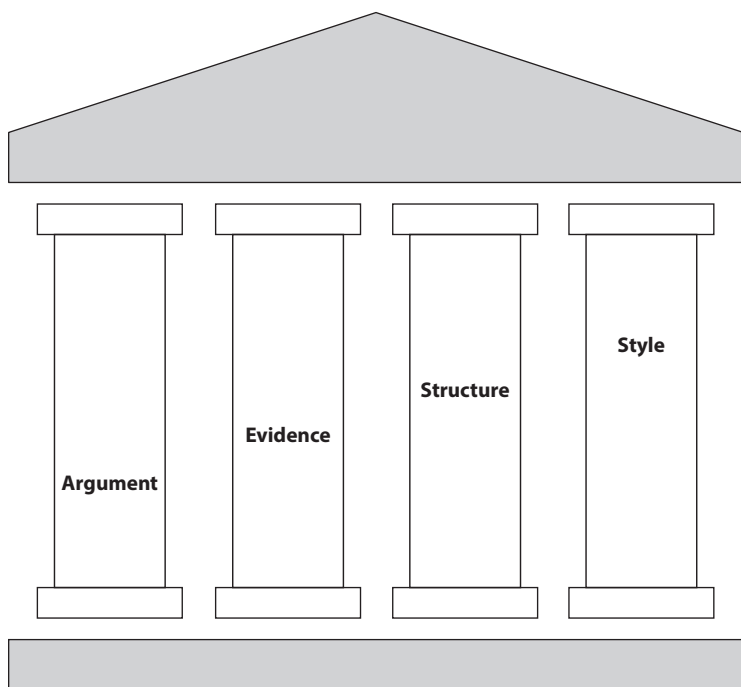


FIGURE I.1. The four pillars of scholarly writing

Scholarly manuscripts must have a solid foundation in all four areas to be successful in the publishing process. Each of these fundamental aspects of the text has the potential to make or break the text's chances of being received well by peer reviewers, getting approved for publication, and ultimately reaching readers in the author's scholarly field and beyond. Although elegant prose and correct grammar are worthy aspirations, publication decisions and reader reception of academic texts tend to hinge less on technical perfection than on the big-picture aspects of argument, evidence, structure, and overall style. Developing your manuscript's fundamentals is therefore imperative, both before you submit it for consideration by

publishers, and before your text goes out into the world upon publication.

You've likely paid attention to argument, evidence, structure, and style in your writing, though you may not have used the same exact terms or described your big-picture revisions as developmental editing. Yet if you're like most writers I've met, you've lacked an organized system for evaluating these fundamentals in your own manuscripts in progress. I've noticed that most academic writing advice focuses either on establishing a regular writing practice to get drafts done or on tightening up prose at the level of paragraphs and sentences. Writers are rarely taught a methodical approach to the crucial stage between drafting and polishing. Few scholars know that developmental editing is a thing, fewer know what it involves, and even fewer know how to do it for their own manuscripts in a systematic way.

As a remedy for this situation, this book offers a novel framework that academic writers can apply to their own manuscripts in progress: the **manuscript development cycle**. The manuscript development cycle consists of three phases that mirror the work I do with scholarly authors as a professional developmental editor (Figure 1.2).

Phase I involves **clarifying your mission** in developing the manuscript. You'll establish the basic parameters of the text you want to publish in terms of topic, scope, and research approach. You'll also identify your intended readers and the publisher you hope to partner with. Clarity on your mission further entails taking stock of where your manuscript currently stands with potential publishers. Are you preparing the manuscript for initial submission, hoping to make it to the peer review stage? Do you already have feedback from acquiring editors and peer reviewers that you'll be using to develop the text further? In Phase I, you'll also define the work you want your manuscript to do in the world

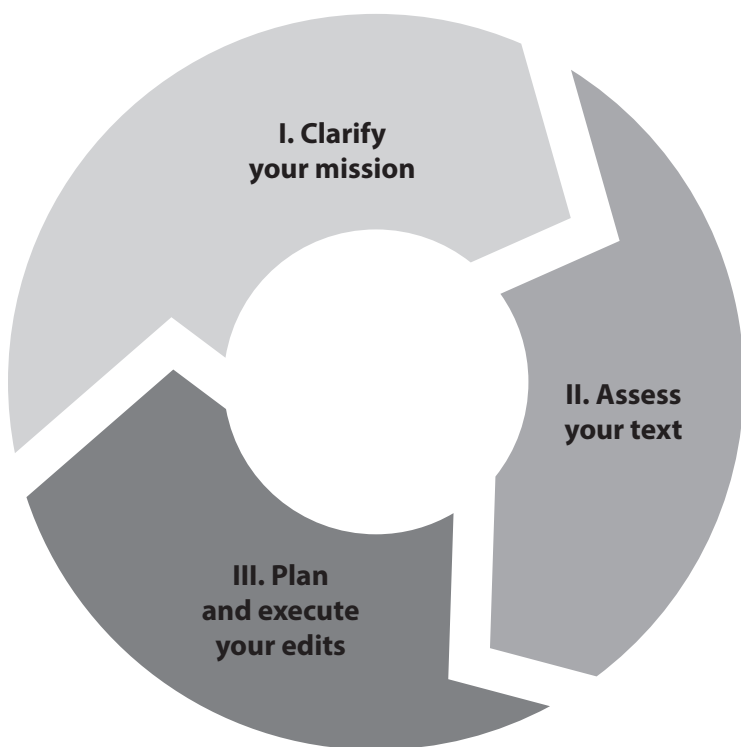


FIGURE I.2. The manuscript development cycle

after publication. Is the text supposed to anchor your tenure file, garner public recognition for your research, or support a community that can benefit from your knowledge? Finally, getting a full picture of your mission in developing your manuscript involves an inventory of the resources available to you. How much time and capacity do you have to develop the text further? Clarifying your mission in undertaking manuscript development isn't difficult, but many authors take their mission for granted or don't realize they should pause to make key decisions about their text before they invest more time in working on it.

Phase II of the manuscript development cycle involves **assessing your text** in its current form to identify opportunities to strengthen its four pillars. Assessment means reading the text critically, evaluating how its argument, evidence, structure, and style are presented across the entire draft. In this phase of the cycle you will diagnose your text's weaknesses and recognize its strengths.

Phase III involves **planning and executing edits** to your text. In this phase, you'll filter your initial reactions from the assessment phase and organize your thoughts into an editorial summary. Crafting an editorial summary requires you to decide which aspects of the text need to be developed further to achieve the aims articulated in Phase I. It also means itemizing and prioritizing specific edits you'll make in light of the time and resources you have available. Once you have a concrete plan in place that allows you to take control over what changes you will make and when, you'll execute your edits, arriving at a draft that's ready to move along to the next stage of the publishing process.

Most authors skip directly to executing edits when setting out to revise a draft, missing the vital work of clarifying, assessing, and planning. By systematically rotating through the whole manuscript development cycle, you'll avoid the directionless tinkering that keeps so many writers stuck. You'll not only know what to do, but you'll also have a much better sense of why to do it and when. Completing the manuscript development cycle takes time—time to learn it by reading this book and time to apply it to your manuscript in progress. But this investment of time will pay off exponentially as you become a more powerful editor of your work and move through the publishing process with greater confidence and efficiency.

The manuscript development cycle is a tool that will enable you to edit your own work before you ever send it out for

feedback. It will also empower you to make your own decisions about your text once you have external feedback in hand, even when that feedback is incomplete or contradictory. Furthermore, the cycle will give you insights into your writing that will help you with future manuscripts. Having this tool at your disposal will make new writing projects feel less daunting because you'll know that you have a reliable method for making them publishable once you have a rough draft down.

I call it the manuscript development **cycle** because a writer may rotate through the phases several times between first draft and final version. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, an author is called upon to make substantive improvements to their manuscript at a few **key moments in the typical publishing timeline**:

- **Moment 1:** preparing for initial submission to publishers
- **Moment 2:** revising after receiving feedback from preliminary readers but before receiving publication approval, for example, responding to peer reviews in hope of acceptance
- **Moment 3:** preparing the final manuscript to go into production

You'll benefit from passing through all three phases of manuscript development at each of these moments. The cycle is also scalable to specific parts of a text; for instance, after completing the cycle for an entire book manuscript, you may want to repeat the cycle for a particular chapter that needs extra attention before moving your manuscript to the next publishing stage.

I've chosen the term *development* for particular reasons too. Some might point out that what I've already described could be called revision, rewriting, or simply writing. However, revision is often used to refer to finer levels of prose polishing in which a writer makes minute decisions about sentence structure, word

choice, and other aesthetic features of a text. Although some definitions of revision include the kind of fundamental development I'm talking about here, I think having a more specific term for this particular stage of the writing and revision process can help authors gain more clarity about what they need to do for their manuscript at any given time. Polishing your prose will have its hour, but separating that work from your developmental work can save effort and put your attention where it's needed, when it's needed. By calling this work *developmental*, I'm also building on the existing terminology that the publishing industry already uses to distinguish between the levels of editing that occur at various points in the publishing process, with developmental editing always preceding line editing, copyediting, and proofreading.¹

The term *development* further appeals to me because it entails an implicit acknowledgment that every text will necessarily grow and change between its moment of conception and its final publication. No publishable text initially lands on the page in its complete form, and all ideas must be nurtured and cultivated with intention before they're ready to go out into the world and do the work we want them to do. Having a manuscript in need of development doesn't mean you're a bad writer. It simply means you're a writer.

Who Can Use the Method? On What Kinds of Texts? When?

The framework of manuscript development can be used by scholarly writers at every career stage, in every field, and for every type of manuscript. However, in the interest of concreteness, I'm going to show you how to apply the method to scholarly book manuscripts specifically. I'll be speaking directly from my experience helping academic writers publish research-based

books in the humanities and qualitative social sciences with university presses and other publishers that serve the English-speaking academic market, mainly in the United States. Some of the advice and examples I offer will be specific to that context. The general contours of the manuscript development method, however, will be portable to other forms of academic writing, such as journal articles, theses, dissertations, seminar papers, conference presentations, fellowship applications, and grant proposals. I recommend using this book in conjunction with other guides to help you decode the specific expectations in your field and for the type of manuscript you're working on.²

All scholarly writers can find value in this book, but I had a few specific kinds of people in mind when I decided to write it. This book is particularly for writers who have high standards for their work but feel they lack the necessary tools to meet those standards. It's for scholars who have received less than comprehensive feedback on their writing from mentors who were too busy to help them learn the ropes of academic publishing. It's for aspiring authors who have had their work rejected by publishers while getting little guidance on what could be done to improve it. It's for first-generation academics, scholars from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups and regions, speakers of English as an additional language, and those in positions of precarious employment or unemployment. It's also for any writer who simply appreciates a step-by-step method for getting things done.

The method of self-editing in this book will be especially beneficial for people who, for valid reasons, have a hard time seeking outside help. You may worry that asking for assistance or sharing drafts at an early stage of development could confirm a misperception that you're incompetent or undeserving of your position, especially if you belong to a marginalized group. You

may also fear plagiarism or others taking credit for your original ideas. You may have had negative experiences with feedback in the past that have left you hesitant to invite criticism of your work.³ Professional developmental editing services can be a boon for such writers, but the cost of a professional's labor and expertise may be prohibitively expensive for many. Although no book can make up for those structural obstacles, I aim to give you tools to develop your work and take it as far as you can on your own. (If you do decide to seek outside support for developing your manuscripts in progress, Appendix C offers practical guidance on how to get that support.)

Last, this book is for people who support scholarly writers, though I'll mostly address such readers indirectly. The skills I share can be used by any editor, mentor, or colleague who provides feedback on another writer's text, such as

- Professors who mentor graduate students, advanced undergraduate writers, and early career faculty;
- Scholars who organize special journal issues or edited volumes;
- Book series editors and journal editors;
- Acquiring editors at scholarly publishers;
- Peer reviewers; and
- Freelance editors and literary agents who work with scholarly authors.

The aforementioned types of readers will be able to determine which advice is relevant to your role and can adapt everything else as needed. (For more specific guidance, Appendix D is addressed directly to readers who would like to use this book's method when giving feedback on other people's writing.)

The method I present is designed to be worked through step by step, but I welcome all readers to skim the entire book fully

so you can get an overview of the work ahead of you before applying the method to your manuscript in progress. I also recommend waiting to implement the method until you have a full draft of your manuscript in hand, though it's okay if the draft has a few holes that you know will need filling. Can you clearly articulate your text's topic, scope, methodological and theoretical approaches, as well as your reason for writing the manuscript in the first place? If so, you're likely ready for manuscript development. If you're turning your dissertation into a book, you can count your dissertation as a draft and apply the method to it, with the awareness that quite a lot of development may be needed. As you become more practiced in the method of manuscript development, the principles will likely help you as you conceive and write new projects from scratch, but that application is beyond the scope of this book.⁴

How I Think About Manuscripts and Publishing

If you're still reading, I'm assuming you're intrigued by what this book offers. However, before ending this introduction, I want to briefly explain where I'm coming from and how I think about scholarly writing and publishing. Having read many other academic writing guides, I know how essential it is for readers to feel a sense of compatibility with an advice giver's outlook and voice.

I take a pragmatic approach to writing, editing, and publishing. I don't write or publish books for the inherent love of it, nor do I romanticize the creative output of the authors I work with. Many writers find deep meaning, personal fulfillment, and even pleasure in the writing process. Some take pride in producing well-crafted prose for its own sake. I admire those writers, but I'm not one of them. I don't expect all readers of this book to be those kinds of writers either.⁵

Scholarly manuscripts are the products of labor that can be leveraged for concrete goals. When I look at any given scholarly manuscript, I think about the work the author wants it to do in the world. This work can include communicating vital ideas to an audience of readers whose own lives and scholarship can benefit from the writer's intellectual contributions. A published book can also function as a token in the academic economy, where the fact that the book was published at all—or the fact that it was published by a particular press—can be as significant as its contents. A book is also a commodity, a product packaged and marketed to generate revenue for both publisher and author. A book can be a reputational calling card that leads to other opportunities such as media appearances, speaking gigs, and expert consulting work. You can probably think of other things you want your text to do. I don't judge any of these forms of work or consider any of them better or worse reasons to publish a scholarly manuscript. My approach is to meet you—the author—where you are, help you name your aspirations, and recognize that different amounts and types of labor will be needed from you to enable your manuscript to accomplish the work you want it to do.

In revealing the conventions and expectations of publishing gatekeepers and showing you how to meet them, my approach could be seen as fundamentally conservative. I don't attempt to radically question or transform institutions of scholarly publishing here. However, you have your own power and agency in the writing and publishing process. I hope to help you write the text you want to write, how you want to write it. You may need to develop your work in particular ways if you want certain publishers and readers to come along with you, but that will be up to you. If you're on a mission to reimagine what scholarly writing and publishing can be, I hope this book will help you do that too.

I'll speak to you openly as an experienced and supportive colleague. I've personally guided hundreds of aspiring authors through the process of writing scholarly books and book proposals, and thousands more scholars have benefited from my online programs, public seminars, and institutional workshops. My clients have published with every large university press in the United States, as well as with smaller publishers, commercial publishers, and international publishers.⁶ I've also authored several journal articles and three academic books of my own, including a monograph based on my doctoral dissertation. Before setting up my editorial business in 2015, I earned a PhD in communication, held a five-year post as an associate editor at a scholarly journal in my field, and served as a peer reviewer for several journals and book publishers. Many of the lessons I share in this book were hard-won, learned from years of practice and missteps along the way.

I strive to provide a comprehensive picture of scholarly developmental editing practices and how they can be used by writers and those who support them, but I make no claims as to the universality of my methods among other developmental editors. My perspective is unavoidably shaped by my own subject positions, which include being American, a monolingual speaker of English, and a trainee in particular traditions of academic writing and knowledge production.

I make this offering not as the definitive expert on academic writing and publishing, but as someone with experience-informed knowledge I want others to benefit from. When I'm aware of other expert advice that I think may help you deal with a particular issue, I'll reference it in the endnotes. The notes thus collectively serve as a recommended reading list. I'll refrain from using notes for any other purpose, aside from citing the source of a quoted phrase from time to time. If you see a

note indicated in the text, know that it doesn't point to a discursive digression. Consult the endnotes only if you're looking for additional resources and bibliographic information for the topic under discussion.

The method presented in this book isn't a rigid program. Even where I seem to offer prescriptive advice, I'm only doing so to give you a starting point and reduce your decision fatigue. The ways you apply—or choose not to apply—the guidance I offer will be unique, both because you bring your own set of perspectives to the table and because every manuscript presents its own opportunities for development. Use this book as a resource but be prepared for flexibility as you find what works for you and the other writers you support. I wish you the best of luck.

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