



Writing and Publishing Scientific Papers

A Primer for the
Non-English Speaker

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29. How to Write a Book Chapter

Books have become very important tools of information and learning. In the view of many, a scientific book is an authoritative source of information, written mostly for those who know little about the subject. Writing a book is a very large and complex task. Traditionally, writing scientific books has been the realm of the “real expert”, usually near the peak of an illustrious and productive career.

Today, however, fewer and fewer people write single-authored scientific books. The reasons for this are manifold, but the two most important ones are the huge increase in the amount of information, and the increasingly limited time available to researchers to focus on such a task — or so most people claim.

In the absence of knowledgeable, willing and able single authors, there are more and more books that are written by a group of experts. In some cases, every chapter is written by a different set of authors. Such a book is then coordinated by one or more scientific editor(s). Receiving an invitation to contribute to a book is flattering, because it means that you are considered by your colleagues to have a certain comprehensive knowledge as an expert in your chosen field of research, and they trust you to impart this knowledge to others in an accessible way. However, do not let yourself be led by your vanity into such a venture. Once your pride subsides a little, consider a few things very carefully and critically before accepting the invitation.

The success of a book depends on content, form, and marketing.

Let us assume that you are confident that you can write an excellent chapter alone, or in a team, about the topic you were asked to write about. Of course, if you do not feel this way, do not accept the invitation.

However, if you do feel this way, this is far from sufficient to give a positive reply. Writing a chapter is still a considerable piece of work and, if the entire book is unsuccessful, your contribution will not get the attention it should. So: what are the necessary conditions for a successful, multi-authored book?

The first is organisation. The editors will have a large and complicated task: to make sure that many authors complete their given contribution on time, and to a reasonable standard. This is a huge organisational challenge. Additionally, there must be some stylistic editing done, as it is guaranteed that authors will have very different approaches to their topic, and different styles. An editor must be an efficient organiser, a diplomat, and a conscientious controller of a complicated venture. This role is very important, as it keeps the project progressing on time, and this requires a lot of time, effort, and scientific — as well as diplomatic — skills. Only join an author team if you know the editor, preferably personally, and are favourably impressed by her abilities as scientist, writer, and organiser.

If there are multiple authors, it also becomes a question of “company”. One good chapter will not make the reputation of the book, nor assure its success, so you must be sure about the quality of your co-authors. Find out about the other authors who were asked to contribute, and only join the team if you trust them to deliver high-quality manuscripts.

Finally, a set of high-quality manuscripts delivered on time are not enough: books have to sell, and for this, they must be printed and distributed. Only a good, experienced publisher with a record of producing high-quality books would provide a reasonable chance of success. Only join the team if the suggested publisher is well known in the field, and has a reliable record of producing such books, as well as a global distribution chain.

If all three conditions are met, then consider the available time, your own engagements and, if you have the time, go ahead: good books are rare, and are in high demand. The task is to write for the novice. Book chapters are also non-primary publications, so never include previously unpublished information.

During the actual writing, use the experience gained when writing reviews, or refer to the points mentioned in the previous chapter. Assume even less of the reader’s background knowledge than for a review.

Frequently, people reading books know next to nothing about the subject and the function of the book is to provide them with this knowledge. Write in plain language, use lots of examples, figures, pictures, and tables. You will almost certainly use the work of others — so dealing with copyright is almost inevitable. The publisher can help you with this, but do not leave it to the end.

