

BECOMING AN AUTHOR

ADVICE FOR ACADEMICS
AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS



DAVID CANTER
GAVIN FAIRBAIRN

BECOMING AN AUTHOR

**Advice for academics and
other professionals**



***David Canter and
Gavin Fairbairn***

OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Open University Press
McGraw-Hill Education
McGraw-Hill House
Shoppenhangers Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
England
SL6 2QL

email: enquiries@openup.co.uk
world wide web: www.openup.co.uk

and Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121-2289, USA

First published 2006

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-10: 0335 20275 6 (pb) 0335 20276 4 (hb)
ISBN-13: 978 0335 20275 1 (pb) 978 0335 20276 8 (hb)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
CIP data applied for

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Poland by OZ Graf. S.A.
www.polskabook.pl

Preface

As friends for many years, who met each other at various family and social gatherings, we have often compared notes on the parallels between our rather different academic experiences. Gavin is a jobbing philosopher, whose published output spans applied ethics, higher education, special education, nursing and social care. After a career in special education and social work he taught in teacher education for many years, and has also made significant contributions to education and professional development in both nursing and social care. These activities contrast with the data collection and statistical analysis around which much of David's teaching and research have evolved, and the more popular writing he has done for newspapers and general audiences, including his award-winning book *Criminal Shadows*. Furthermore, his professional career has focused on supervising post-graduate students in psychology, architecture and, more recently, criminology, working in an environment in which publication is expected to be commonplace.

Between us we have worked with the full gamut of people starting out on academic and professional lives in which publishing might, and often would, play a part. Some of them, it has to be admitted, have been on the cusp of illiteracy when they first sought to become authors. Others have been more fluent than was necessarily good for them – pouring out their thoughts in uncontrolled torrents, with never a sideward glance at those who might consider reading what they wrote, or perhaps more importantly, at those who might consider publishing it. Some have had a clear mission from the start and knew what they wanted to contribute, though not necessarily how; even more common have been people with a desire to break into print but little confidence that they could do it.

In conversation about our students and junior colleagues and the increasing pressures for them to become authors, we found that even across the very different contexts in which we operated there were remarkable similarities in our experiences of the struggles many people have to go through in order to publish. For example, we both know of the personal pain suffered by many people who aspire to become academic authors, which often arises not only from the lack of timetabled opportunities for writing, but also from the lack of detailed training or even any real guidance to help them acquire the appropriate skills and attitudes. These factors often combine with self-doubt of a kind that makes a surprising number of young academics think they have neither the authority nor the knowledge to write anything worth publishing (even when it is clear that they have). But most of all, in our conversations over many years, we found that we could both think of lots of excellent work we had come across, including coursework, dissertations, seminar presentations and even conference papers, that just never got published.

For a small number of people in academic and professional life, writing for publication comes very naturally, apparently without effort, just like a tight-rope-walker who looks as if she was born on the high wire. The vast majority, however, need help to get started and are surprised when they are shown that, with perseverance and a steady will, they can succeed. They may never become virtuosos, but we have found over and over again that even those who are most scared about whether they have what it takes, can achieve admirable, competent results that make a real contribution to knowledge, if only they are shown how, and given some encouragement and support.

During our discussions about working with inexperienced authors – both students and colleagues – we began to share approaches we had each developed to help others to improve their writing skills and to develop their knowledge of and attitudes towards academic publishing. It emerged that we both firmly believed that the necessary skills could be taught and, what was more, we found that the teaching packages we had created, and the associated notes we had prepared, overlapped to a remarkable degree. We became aware that there seemed to be common principles that were relevant to all academics who want to become authors. Not only that, but we found ourselves agreeing that there were approaches and procedures that could get most people beyond the blank page and into print. Even where we had differences of opinion we could see the value in articulating them so that others could make their own decisions informed by a variety of views. Out of our excitement at discovering that we agreed on common principles and had independently discovered complementary procedures for getting aspiring authors to put those principles into practice, the present book was born.

Gavin had already published a successful study guide with Open University Press and was planning another, so they were the natural choice for this book. The pressures of continuing to publish in various academic genres ourselves (and, for David, of making a television documentary series) somewhat slowed down the production of this book, so that it has been rather more years in the

making than either we or, we suspect, our publisher would care to admit. However, we hope it has benefited from the long, slow cooking by which it has been prepared; certainly it could not have been more timely as the pressure and possibilities for publishing have never been greater for academics and other professionals than they are today.

As with all writing, this book has been a journey of discovery, but possibly more so for a philosopher and an empirical scientist who found so many areas of agreement that we began to think that if these tenets were not established truths, then they at least had the feel of well-established facts. Central to these discoveries is our shared recognition that all writing is fundamentally a form of storytelling. This idea has tended to be ignored in academic writing but it is very helpful in thinking about even the most arcane disquisition. There is always a narrative, whether it is shaped by the search to make sense of complex issues or by the need to find evidence for or against particular hypotheses. Academic stories are always enacted or retold in relation to particular settings, which may, for example, be the context in which a discourse unfolds, or the apparatus used for an experiment. Episodes exist in the story too: the laying out of the quest – the questions that instigate the work to be discussed – the search for enlightenment or resolution, and the *dénouement* when all the strands come together to make sense. And, of course, there are central characters, often ideas or concepts that change and develop through their interactions with each other, and the setting. This perspective on academic writing is a central thesis, or sub-plot, to the book we have written, which we develop as our own narrative unfolds.

Another central focus in the ways we think about academic writing and publishing relates to our awareness that any piece of writing has a life cycle. It does not come fully mature into the world, but usually emerges in a stumbling, often confused, and invariably undeveloped, state. Through contact with its author as she drafts and redrafts, and its first steps out into the world, as it is shared with others whose comments the author invites, the embryonic text develops, through a number of stages, towards maturity. Some texts will change radically when, having reached adolescence, they first try to exist independently from their author, and are subjected to the critical comments of editors and reviewers. This can be a difficult time for authors, who may feel duty bound to protect their literary offspring from the ravages of the editorial and review process (sometimes, it has to be said, they are right to do so). However, it is through this developmental process that new text, whether for a book or for an article, eventually comes to have its own independent existence, in a published form. The author's task is to help it on its way, not to assume that it will have all the properties it needs to survive from the moment of conception.

A third important focus in our views of academic writing is our belief in the power of structure. We believe quite firmly that the way to develop good writing skills is to work from the general to the particular, being aware of where the written material fits into the general picture. Many novice authors make the

mistake of focusing on getting the words and the sentences correct (or even the typeface and font size) rather than developing a clear picture of what the overall shape of the work is, whether it is a book, a chapter, a journal article or a section of any larger work. Much of the breakthrough from the blank page can be achieved by giving overall shape to the material. This may need to be a form of collage from bits and pieces already written, or it may be a deliberate mapping out, but the work takes life from its overall structure and how the components of that fit together. Of course, as an author works on a piece of writing, it will often metamorphose so that its final shape may be very different from the one with which it began, or the one that the author carried in her mind as she imagined her text into being.

From all this comes the central belief on which this book is founded. Writing is a process, based in skill that develops with experience and feedback. This developmental process can be enhanced by understanding the principles and processes described in the following pages. But in the end, writing can no more be mastered by reading a book about becoming an author than riding a horse can be mastered from reading a book on equitation. We therefore hope that, above all, this book will encourage you to get on with the process of putting pen to paper (in whatever medium you choose) and we look forward to seeing you in print.

David Canter
Gavin Fairbairn

About the authors

David Canter is Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool and was formerly Professor of Psychology at the University of Surrey. He has published extensively in many areas of applied and social psychology, including work on the psychology of the built environment, human behaviour in fires and emergencies, alternative medicine, and criminal behaviour. He acts on the editorial board and as a reviewer for many journals across a number of social and behavioural science disciplines. Twenty years ago he established the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, and more recently the *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, of which he is managing editor. He has published over twenty single-authored and edited books and contributed to many books of readings in the UK and the USA. As an adviser to publishers he has reviewed many book proposals for many different publishers and has edited three series of volumes, one in the environmental social sciences, one in forensic behavioural science and one in general psychology. His work in helping the police with their enquiries and in particular in the development of psychological profiling has led both to his coming to the attention of the general public in many television programmes and to his book *Criminal Shadows*, which has won the Golden Dagger award and the USA's Anthony award for Best True Crime. His most recent book, *Mapping Murder*, developed from the six-part television documentary series that he wrote and presented.

Gavin Fairbairn is Professor of Ethics and Language at Leeds Metropolitan University and was formerly Professor of Education at Liverpool Hope University College, to which he moved from a Chair of Professional Development in Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Glamorgan. Prior to that he worked for many years in teacher education in Wales, following a career in social work and special education. He has published extensively in education,

and in applied philosophy and ethics, where he has a special interest in the ethical issues that arise in the caring professions. He has acted as a reviewer for a number of journals for many years and, as an adviser to publishers, he has reviewed numerous book proposals on both educational and ethical topics. His books include (with Chris Winch) *Reading, Writing and Reasoning: A guide for students*, and (with Susan Fairbairn) *Reading at University: A guide for students*. He has also written extensively on applied ethics and philosophy, including *Contemplating Suicide: The language and ethics of self harm*. His most recent book with Susan Fairbairn, *Writing your Abstract: A guide for would-be conference presenters*, was published in 2005.

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1 Publishing without perishing

Learning to write for publication • Wanting or needing to publish? • Becoming an author: the need for resilience • Knowing the rules of the game • The way ahead: finding your way in *Becoming an Author*

Learning to write for publication

Many successful research students in the sciences and social sciences, capable of research of the first order – creative and scientifically sound – have something to say but never make the transition from writing a thesis to being the author of published academic work. Others will publish a few joint papers with their supervisor, but never publish independently. Indeed, a surprisingly small number of those who undertake postgraduate research ever get round to publishing anything that draws on that research. Many never publish anything at all. Something similar is true of research students in arts subjects, whose background ought to have prepared them to communicate in writing, but often does not.

Writing and communicating about their ideas and findings takes up a significant portion of the time of most postgraduate researchers. Indeed, uppermost in their minds throughout much of their period of study is the fact that, in the end, the work they are doing must underpin a significant piece of writing, in relation to which the contribution of their work will be assessed. Of course, there are differences in the way the reports of their work are produced. For those undertaking conceptual or literary research in arts subjects, the written account, in the form of a thesis, is central, and its creation will occupy them throughout their studies. In the sciences and social sciences, on the other hand, the bulk of the writing will often be undertaken after the empirical study on which it is based has been completed, and the writing itself is thus usually given a less central role in the course of study.

Many capable postgraduates, other researchers and professionals fail to move into professional academic writing because their university experience has not helped them to develop the literary skills that they need in order to do so. Few students on either undergraduate or postgraduate courses are given any help in developing as writers, other than through the sometimes cynical comments that appear on marked assignments, often from lecturers whose own writing leaves much to be desired. Typically this absence of guidance about writing will carry on into the research supervision that they receive as postgraduates, or as researchers on various projects, where most are even less likely to receive help about the nitty-gritty of actually communicating in writing. 'After all,' the reasoning may go, 'they've got this far, so they should be able to put a sentence or two together.' It is almost as if there is an expectation that skill in academic writing will somehow 'rub off' on anyone who enters a university library or accesses academic material via the internet.

Another reason that many people fail to develop careers as professional academic authors, even if they have received help in developing their writing skills, is that they will probably have travelled through the higher education system without being told anything about the practicalities of getting into print. For example, it is unlikely that anyone will ever have told them how to submit an article to a journal, or about the ways in which the peer review process works. Nor will they have been taught what they need to do if they want to publish a book. For instance, many people do not realize that agreements to publish academic books are, by and large, reached after consideration of a proposal that includes an outline of the content, rather than after consideration of a finished manuscript. What tends to happen is that those who, for whatever reason, are highly motivated towards publication will work out what to do for themselves; and those who are not will simply be filtered out of becoming authors.

In *Becoming an Author* we therefore aim to help researchers and other professionals, postgraduates and even some outstanding undergraduates to develop the knowledge and skills that are necessary if they are to become successful academic authors.

This book will therefore be useful for:

- Individuals who have recently completed higher degrees and want to rewrite their work or draw on it in order to publish, but are unsure how to do so.
- Lecturers for whom academic writing has not hitherto been a priority, but whose career development and feelings of self-worth now depend upon 'getting published'.
- Professionals, such as nurses, psychologists, schoolteachers and medical practitioners, for whom publication, whether about research or about knowledge gained through professional practice, can be satisfying as well as bringing career advantages, including promotion.
- Researchers involved in funded or sponsored projects who want to move beyond internal reports to a wider realm of publication.
- The many other people whose job or interests imply that they will publish but who have not developed the knowledge or skills to become an author.

Becoming an Author is thus aimed at anyone whose personal or career development will benefit from getting published.

Wanting or needing to publish?

In the UK, as in many other countries, it is nowadays very difficult to obtain an academic post unless you are not only well qualified, but also have a record of research and publication. This is not to say that all academics in full-time 'permanent' posts have such a record. Many lecturers in the UK do not, especially in the newer universities and the non-university higher education sector, where they have commonly had, and still have, higher teaching loads than their counterparts in the older universities. But even such institutions tend nowadays to expect new staff to demonstrate some commitment to publication. Thus, one reason for your interest in a book about becoming an academic author might be that you have not yet secured a university post that you can hope to occupy for the foreseeable future. Another is that if you achieved a permanent teaching post in the days when this was still possible without having published, it is increasingly unlikely that you will gain promotion, or be able to move between academic posts, unless you begin to do so.

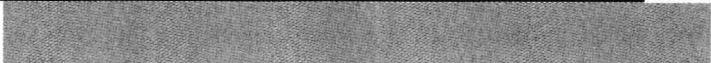
Even highly experienced university and college lecturers may be relatively inexperienced in writing for publication, because for one reason or another, their careers so far have been entirely focused on teaching and administration, rather than on research and writing for publication. Such individuals often experience the same anxieties about writing for publication as recent postgraduates. It is increasingly common for British institutions of higher

education – especially the newer universities and colleges in which research has not in the past been a high priority – to provide support for staff who are at the early stage of their research careers, in developing as researchers and authors. Indeed, much of Gavin's time for some years has been given over to helping lecturing staff gain confidence in professional writing.

Whatever your reason for opening a book about getting published, we suggest that you take some time to reflect on your reasons for wanting to get into print, because they will make a difference both to what you write and to the genres in which you attempt to publish. Do you want to increase your chances of landing a post in a well-respected university? Do you perhaps feel the need to publish in order to justify your salary or to gain promotion? Do you want to find ways of sharing your ideas with others? If you are a professional outside academia, say in medicine, or in some area of business and management, are you hoping to improve your chances of promotion, or to attract new clients for your business and management consultancy? Or do you just have a burning desire to get your ideas and the results of your studies out to a wider audience?

The academic community within which you will publish will influence not only what you write about but also the academic genre in which you do so. Different disciplines, and even different subgroups within disciplines, have contrasting views about the most significant form of publication. For example, whereas in the sciences and social sciences it is unusual for books to be the preferred route for presenting original material, in subjects such as philosophy and theology this is much more common. Whatever you decide you want to publish – and like both of us you may develop a mixed portfolio of published work – your choice of place and of medium will have an influence over the style in which you write.

Becoming an author: the need for resilience



Writing for publication is demanding, particularly when you have to fit it among the many other burdens that go hand in hand with academic life. And so, if you are going to put the effort into pondering, preparing and polishing text that will be necessary if you aspire to becoming a successful academic author, you will need to be very clear about why you want to do so. Holding this motivation strongly in your thoughts will, hopefully, help to sustain you whenever it looks as if you might stumble at the many hurdles ahead. Though the adventure that is academic publishing will bring you the excitement that comes from seeing your name and what you have written in print, it will also involve exposing yourself to the upset and hurt that can come from offering your work for publication and having it rejected or criticized, even if it is not rejected outright. Doubtless your work will often be both criticized and

rejected, because this happens to virtually all academic authors – both the best of them, and the worst.

If you are to be successful as an academic author you will have to develop positive ways of dealing with criticism and rejection. You need not become thick skinned, but you will certainly have to become resilient so that you can bounce back ready to do whatever is necessary to be able to resubmit work to an editor after amending, or to pursue publication in some other arena. Otherwise you are likely either to give up, or to end up with a huge pile of unpublished material clogging your desk, the hard disk of your computer, or worse still, your head, because you find it difficult to motivate yourself to revise material that seemed perfectly satisfactory to you, but which some journal referee has advised should not be accepted for publication without substantial (or even slight) changes. Even worse, will be the occasions when an article that draws on work that was the basis of your postgraduate thesis and readily accepted by examiners, and has gone down well at several conferences, is rejected outright by the journal of your choice. It can be particularly galling to have an article rejected on the basis of a review in which the referee suggests that you have nothing new or interesting to say, especially if they try to justify their decision by offering a detailed critique of your views, almost as if they really believe that you do have something to say but merely disagree with it. The frustration is even worse if, as a result of their own lack of knowledge or expertise, you know that they have simply misunderstood what you are saying.

None of us are immune to the fear of failure, and rejection can be difficult to overcome. Elsewhere in this book we discuss in some detail the need to take care in deciding the journals to which you should submit articles, and which publishers would be most appropriate to approach with a proposal for a book, if you want to maximize your chances of success. At this point we want merely to draw attention to the fact that everyone shares in anxiety about rejection – both fledgling and experienced academics. The fear of failure is probably the biggest hurdle to publishing, no matter who you are or what stage of your career as an author you have reached. We all hate being told, however politely, that our book proposal, though interesting, is not interesting enough for our publisher of choice to want to pursue it further. And we all hate receiving rejection letters from editors of journals, whether they are polite and encouraging:

Though we did not feel that this article was suited for our journal we wish you luck in placing it elsewhere, and hope that in the future you will consider offering other articles to us for consideration.

or brutal and disheartening:

We do not consider that this article is sufficiently academically rigorous or provides anything new or interesting to warrant serious consideration.

In later chapters we will help you to understand the process that generates such letters so that you can reduce the chances of getting them. We also discuss the many ways of taking advantage of thoughtful criticism to improve your chances of success.

Knowing the rules of the game

Whatever medium for publication you choose, if you want to maximize your chances of getting into print, it is important that you adopt a style that will be acceptable for that medium. For example, there is no point in writing in a very abstruse and scholarly way for a professional magazine or journal aimed at practitioners for whom practical advice is more important than hearing how that advice arose from a research project. Equally, there is no point in writing a first-person narrative account of an experience from professional practice for a journal whose readers are more interested in reading discussions of theory or reports of empirical research. You may get text written in one style accepted for publication in one forum but not in another, and it is as well to be aware that what suits one outlet may not suit others. That is why it is important to develop both an eye for the predominant styles adopted by authors in your field, and the ability to write in a number of different voices about the things that matter to you, thus allowing you to speak about the same things to different audiences in ways that they will understand.

We have colleagues who have struggled for years to get their work published but have steadfastly refused to shape their writing to the outlets in which they want it to appear: a foolish move for anyone who wants to get their work into print. Some of them have submitted engaging personal accounts to academic journals that only publish rigorously objective descriptions of empirical studies; they have been disappointed. Others have tried to get difficult and abstract ideas published for a mass readership. If you aspire to do the same, try to learn something from their lack of success; then try to temper your enthusiasm with the thought that just because you believe that what you have to say is important for everyone on the planet, this does not mean that everyone on the planet (or even a few thousands of them) will want to read it. Finally, other people we have known have submitted to publishers of scholarly texts, work that draws on a deep well of personal insight and owes more to poetry than to science. Oddly, from our point of view, they have been surprised by the puzzled rejection they have received. Of course, these three examples are extreme cases. We use them only to emphasize the general rule that you should make sure that both the content of what you are writing about and the style in which you are writing are likely to appeal to those who you hope will publish it; otherwise there is little point in offering it to them.

It is worth bearing in mind that in many disciplines a small number of publications in prestigious refereed journals is likely to be viewed as more important than a larger number of publications in lower ranked refereed journals or professional periodicals. Thus, if your sole aim is to forge a glittering academic career, you may decide to stick to publishing in the most important journals in your specialist area. Often these will have an international readership and an editorial committee drawn from different countries. However, even though publishing articles in weighty academic journals will help you to make your mark academically, it is never a good idea to dismiss the possibility of writing for less prestigious outlets, which can offer an easier route to developing a portfolio of published work. For one thing, it may be easier to get material accepted by them. The old adage about success breeding success is worth remembering. Indeed, in some disciplines, it might even be the case that developing a reputation as an author of serious articles in lower ranked journals is a positive benefit, provided that you do publish at least some work in the more highly ranked outlets. This might be the case in, for example, nursing, where reputations at national, if not international level, can be built at least partly on the basis of work in professional, rather than refereed academic journals.

An advantage of publishing in less prestigious outlets is that they tend to move much more quickly in getting material into print, especially if they do not have refereeing processes, because in general they appear more frequently – perhaps monthly or even weekly, rather than perhaps three, four or six times a year, which is common among more academic journals. This makes them an ideal outlet for ideas you might have that are very topical, because publishing in them offers the opportunity to ‘strike while the iron is hot’. It is important to bear in mind that just because an outlet for published work is less prestigious, this does not necessarily mean that the standards of writing it publishes are any lower. A recent widely quoted comment from Lord May, president of the Royal Society is worth repeating. He declared that publication in prestige journals such as *Nature* and *Science* was becoming too important in the rating of scientists and departments. ‘We need a fundamental review,’ he said. ‘There is a very damaging change in the culture. Our focus should be on the ideas, and their merit, not on where they were published’ (Curtis 2004).

Another advantage of publishing in periodicals and professional magazines is that they tend to be read by many more people than refereed academic journals. And so, if you are motivated to influence the development of professional practice in an area in which you have an interest, you might decide that your time is better spent writing for such outlets. Doing so will gain you fewer academic brownie points, but more readers; often the difference will be between some tens or even just a handful of readers for a prestigious academic journal, and tens of thousands for a professional periodical or magazine. This might, for example, be the case if you work in a professional area such as education, social work or nursing, where reports of experience can at times be as influential in changing what people do as reports of empirical research. We