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Title: How to write a textbook: our experience and advice to budding authors.

Section: Heart in Focus

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Several years ago, we were approached by a medical publisher to write a textbook of cardiology as part of a new undergraduate series. We were friends, colleagues, and both research registrars in the same laboratory. We had no experience of writing a textbook, but had co-authored several papers and we were enthusiastic about a new challenge. We approached a senior author and a good friend of ours accepted. In hindsight, we should perhaps have reflected on a lack of willing volunteers!

We met with the editors who outlined the rationale, aims, objectives and plans for the book, along with plans for the chapters, word and page counts and suggested figures. Helpfully, a book in the same series had recently been published which we used as a guide. We wrote the first chapter together, to get the correct style and show the publishers we could produce what they were looking for. This took two attempts. We then divided the rest of the work between the three of us. Naturally we tried to focus on our own areas of expertise and interest but then proof read each other's work. Each chapter had a publisher-imposed deadline.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it took considerably longer to write than we thought. We all had busy full time jobs and were writing in our spare time. For example, it took two weeks full-time work during annual leave to write the 10,000 words for the history and clinical examination chapter, one of the biggest chapters in the book. In addition, there were tables and figures to be created. After submitting it to the publisher, they travelled to meet with us, bought us coffee and then told us, the chapter needed a comprehensive re-write.

We were fortunate that we had a good working relationship with the editors, and that each of our writing styles were complimentary. This was helpful because when we edited each other's chapters, they started to develop a consistent look and feel. The goalposts did change during writing, which, all told, was nearly three years from initial meeting to the finished book. During writing, the publisher's market feedback resulted in a request to add dozens of exam-style questions, answers and explanations and illustrated case studies to each chapter, after we had already written the chapters. We each wrote approximately 33,000 words and the book was published Spring 2015¹. It has sold over 3000 copies, is on its third print run, was highly-commended at the BMA book awards in 2016 and currently has a 4.6* review on Amazon. A pocket tutor version, and some international translated copies came later, which we retained authorship on².

Writing a textbook was very rewarding, particularly because of our enthusiasm for medical education, although at times frustrating, we enjoyed working together and all learned a lot, see table 1. We have summarized our suggested 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' in table 2. We would do it all again but next time, or when it comes to the second edition, we will hopefully be wiser, more efficient and negotiate a better deal.

References:

- 1) Morris PD, Warriner DR & Morton, A (2015). Eureka: Cardiovascular Medicine. JP Publishing, London
- 2) Morris PD, Warriner DR & Morton, A (2016). Pocket Tutor: Heart Disease. JP Publishing, London.

Table 1:

Benefits
It boosts your CV and is nice to have on your bookshelf
Demonstrates a commitment to a particular specialist area and to medical education
Improving your own writing techniques such as writing with brevity and clarity
Personal learning
Useful transferable skills such as working to a deadline, negotiating extensions, fair distribution of work load etc.
Good way of passing on good teaching you have received

Table 2:

Do
Write with friends, it shares the workload, ensures a level of scrutiny, and makes a prolonged and often challenging process much more enjoyable.
Negotiate a good deal, you won't become rich writing a textbook but you should get something back for the many hours of hard work.
Work closely with the publisher's illustrators, it is very rewarding to create new figures rather than recycling age-old ones.
Work hard to understand the publisher's aims and objectives early on – you do not want to have to rewrite text just because it does not fit with the style that the publishers require.
Expect to learn. Teaching is one of the best ways to learn!
Don't
Get annoyed with the publishers. Although they may not understand your field of medicine, they are experts in their own field and understand the market, style, length and pattern of their book better than anyone. Work together and each play to your strengths.
Leave chapter delivery until the deadline. Writing, permissions, and corrections always take longer than expected.
Expect to get rich - our royalties per year pay for a family day out at a theme park
Necessarily expect to be print published; many 'books' are now being published online or as apps for electronic devices.