

BOOK ENDS

A GUIDE TO THE OBERMANN/OVPR BOOK ENDS WORKSHOPS

with thanks to Priya Nelson of the Center for International Social Science Research at the University of Chicago for sharing with us "A Guide for Faculty Book Workshops" & inspiring our own version

ADVICE FOR FACULTY READERS OF THE MANUSCRIPT

BEFORE THE WORKSHOP

Things to consider as you read & write your commentary on the manuscript:

- How would you describe this book to a colleague? What is the central argument & why is it compelling? What does the manuscript ultimately achieve—for you as a reader? For the field? What does the manuscript do especially well?
- With whom is the author in conversation in the manuscript? What other scholars could be part of the conversation, & how could the author include them?
- Could you imagine the book being used as required reading in a course? If so, what course? What other readings would you pair it with in a course? How might that grouping suggest the kinds of larger claims the author could be making?

Things to bring to the workshop:

- A copy of the manuscript with your notes for your own use. (Please let us know if you would like a hard copy when we send the manuscript a month in advance.)
- A 5-page commentary that you can leave with the author (external reviewers only).

AT THE WORKSHOP — OUR RECOMMENDED FORMAT

Before the workshop, we will ask the UI faculty member to act as facilitator. That will free the author to listen carefully & take notes. The Zoom session will be recorded for the sole use of the author.

Open by comparing perceptions of the “big picture” of the manuscript. Usually, the author will start the conversation by offering a brief description of the argument of the manuscript and noting questions of particular interest. The group can then move toward some consensus about the topics they especially want to address in the session. We suggest opening with three topics:

1. **Significance:** What big picture issues does the manuscript address; what are its most significant contributions to your field(s)?

ADVICE FOR MANUSCRIPT AUTHORS

AS SOON AS POSSIBLE (EVEN BEFORE YOUR BOOK ENDS WORKSHOP)

- Practice a 3-minute pitch & talk with editors about your project when you attend conferences. Look to see which presses published the books you most admire adjacent to your topic.
- Send your initial proposal to presses once you have a nearly completed manuscript.
- Be prepared to send your introduction & a couple of chapters to an editor who expresses interest.
- Be prepared to send the entire manuscript to a press after a round of efficient revision following the workshop.

BEFORE THE WORKSHOP

- In your application, you are asked to identify 4–6 senior scholars who would be excellent readers & mentors for this project, briefly noting what each would contribute to your project. Please include a link to each scholar's homepage. You are also asked to identify 2–3 University of Iowa faculty members who would be excellent readers & mentors for this project, briefly noting what each could contribute.

Once you receive the award, **schedule a meeting with the Director of the Obermann Center to think through the rationale & order of invitations.**

Ideally, your readers will cover the areas of expertise you address in the book. You want readers who are smart, generous, rigorous, & responsible; that matters more than celebrity. You also want a local reader who will be an informed supporter when you go up for promotion.

- Be prepared to send your manuscript to your readers a month before your Book Ends workshop. We suggest sending a PDF, especially one that allows readers to comment. If your readers want a hard copy, please give the Obermann Center staff a heads-up well in advance.

AT THE WORKSHOP

We will ask the Iowa participant to act as facilitator. We will also record the Zoom session and share the recording with you after the workshop. It's enormously helpful to listen to the conversation afterward.

Focus on listening rather than speaking. Your goal is to learn from your readers, not to defend yourself or your manuscript against their claims or questions. If the conversation gets tense, try the following:

- Simply take notes until you feel calm.
- Say, "I want to understand your point better. Could we look at a specific passage where I could tackle the problem you see?"
- Turn the conversation back to the full group by asking, "Do others see this same problem? Do you have thoughts about how I might address it?"

Don't be afraid to redirect the conversation if it gets bogged down in a particular issue or passage. Once you grasp the concern, thank the reviewers & then diplomatically suggest that you move to the next chapter or topic.

As soon as the workshop ends, **jot down key ideas & suggestions you don't want to forget.**

2. **Overall structure:** How do you see the narrative arc of the book as a whole & what through lines connect the chapters? Would you recommend reorganizing the chapters? If so, why & how?

3. **Strongest sections:** Which sections are particularly strong, compelling, engaging, surprising, and/or well-written? How so?

Zoom in on the individual chapters. You might wish to move chronologically, but it can also be useful to begin with a chapter everyone agrees is especially captivating. What makes this chapter stand out? Is its greatest strength a unique example? An unexpected claim? Elegant writing? All of the above? Building on that strength, consider the other chapters. Note their strengths, but also how they might be reordered or revised to meet the high bar set by the chapter with which you began.

The following points might give the discussion helpful specificity:

- How could the chapter title be made more compelling?
- Which concepts are essential to the argument, and which seem gratuitous? Is the conceptual scaffolding sound?
- Does the chapter appear in the most logical place within the manuscript? If not, where should it go?

- Is the secondary literature treated fairly, & is it gracefully intertwined with the author's own argument? Which references can be cut or given less prominent treatment?

- How could the overall structure be improved?

- When does the author project the strongest voice? When do they lose it?

- Where does the author assume too much knowledge of the expected reader? Is there background information that might be necessary to reach a broader audience?

- Which parts of the chapter are most reminiscent of a dissertation? How so?

- Are there ways to make the chapter opening more compelling?

- Are there examples of deft transitions between empirical & theoretical registers? Which transitions seem strained or awkward?

Recommendations from Priya Nelson, "A Guide for Faculty Book Workshops," p.5

Look closely at the introduction & the conclusion. It should be easier at the end of the workshop to return to these framing chapters. In addition to the above questions, you might pay special attention to the following:

Introduction:

- The author has about two minutes to hook a reader. Are you hooked at the outset, or is there another, more compelling entry point to the book?

- Does the introduction address itself to a readership of more than a handful of specialists? How could that readership be enlarged?

ADVICE FOR FACULTY READERS OF THE MANUSCRIPT

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

- Thank the participants for their hard work. Review your notes (and/or the audio) & boil them down to the recommendations you find valuable. Remember that you don't have to take all the suggestions, but you do want to have a rationale for rejecting a suggestion, if only to yourself.
- If you haven't already submitted a book proposal to a press, this might be a good time to do so. Writing a proposal could be an excellent step toward revision, since you'll need to crystallize your thinking & describe the project as a whole. The proposal can be circulating while you tackle revisions.
- Create a combination outline & timeline for revision. **Be reasonable** about what you can accomplish in the time you have in order to send the manuscript to a press well in advance of any deadlines you face, especially for tenure.

Force yourself not to give in to the temptation to rewrite sentences. Instead, start with the hard work of reordering sections or chapters. Once the large-scale revision is done, then go to the next level, tackling suggestions about how to introduce & close chapters more effectively or where you could cut or add evidence. It probably makes sense to revise the introduction & conclusion LAST when you fully grasp the larger project. Only then should you give into the pleasures of tweaking sentences & paragraphs.

- Send the manuscript to a publisher 3 to 6 months after your conference—at most.
- Pat yourself on the back & keep us posted!
- Once your book is published, please send us a copy for the Obermann Center's library.

ADVICE FOR MANUSCRIPT AUTHORS

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ADVICE FOR FACULTY READERS OF THE MANUSCRIPT

- Are the stakes of the project clear? The introduction does not have to outline the whole argument, but the importance of the topic should be plain.
- How can the last few pages of the introduction be revised to make the reader more eager to continue to chapter 1?

Conclusion:

- The conclusion should look back on how much terrain has been covered while broadening the vista considerably.
- Does the author do justice in reviewing what the book accomplishes?
- Could that conclusion be more ambitious, speculative, or suggestive?
- Does the book end on a powerful & satisfying note? How could it be improved?

Try to end the workshop without overwhelming the author. One of the challenges is to offer great advice without overwhelming an author. It's helpful to conclude by talking through next steps, emphasizing which changes the group collectively agrees are crucial & which are "worth considering."

Also, help the author estimate the amount of revision & the time it should take. Sometimes adding a paragraph can solve what first seems like a huge problem. Or reordering existing material & adding brief transitions can resolve what seems to be a major ellipsis at some point.

Conclude by encouraging the scholar to remember why the work is valuable & how to address suggestions efficiently. Think with the author about what a reasonable timeline for revisions might be. We hope you'll conclude the workshop with encouragement. You might also invite the author to ask questions about possible publishers & the publication process.

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