**From Dissertation to Book - Elizabeth Knoll**

JUDY SINGER: I'm Judy Singer. I'm the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity. And I want to welcome you all to this event on book publishing. We have a great panel here, both from the publishing end and from the faculty end, to help provide insights in how you go from having written a dissertation, which I presume everybody in this room has done, and writing a book.

Some of the people who are here are people who have historically been book people. In other words, when you wrote your dissertation, you actually thought about framing it in terms of a book. Others are making a transition from having written more on the paper side, and are thinking about how you could convert those ideas into a book length manuscript. I've written three books. I fall in the second camp. I'm a statistician, so I'm primarily a paper person.

But the task of writing a book is a daunting one. There's something about being a faculty member where everybody assumes that somehow, when you turned in your dissertation and you got the sign off from your advisor and other people on your committee, you magically knew everything that you needed to know about academic publishing. And I think one of the things you're going to hear today is, that's not the case.

And so, for those of you who are in the midst of writing, I think you're probably confronting that spot on. And we hope that this gives you an opportunity to learn from a distinguished panel about how to take those next steps. To introduce the panelists, I'm going to introduce my colleague, Amy Brand, who is the Assistant Provost for Faculty Appointments. Thank you.

AMY BRAND: Good afternoon and welcome. First and foremost, I just want to say that I'm really delighted to have this panel and, also, to have-- I think for the first time in our events within the office of faculty development and diversity-- some colleagues from MIT as well, which is my alma mater. We have very limited time, and we really want to encourage discussion. So you'll notice that we have the panel being filmed, but when it comes to the time of asking questions during the Q&A, we're going to turn that off. So feel free to ask any questions you like of the panel.

In the handouts, you'll see that we've put in bios of all of our speakers. So, rather than give lengthy introductions, which they all do deserve, I will start with Elizabeth Knoll who's Senior Editor for the behavioral sciences, education, and law at Harvard University Press.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: I'm going to start-- and I hope you can hear me-- by talking about how to turn your dissertation into a book. Generations of dissertation writers have been paralyzed, at least for a while, by the philosopher Moore's comment at Wittgenstein's dissertation defense, "It is my opinion that Mr. Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus is a work of genius that will completely change all future work and philosophy. But be that as it may, it is well up to the standards of a Cambridge PhD degree."

Probably no one said this about your dissertation. But there is an immense liberation in realizing that you are probably not a genius, at least not yet, and that your dissertation doesn't have to show that you are-- or change the world. A dissertation, as a rule, is a demonstration of professional competence. It shows that you have mastered the literature in your field, that you can do research according to the standards of your discipline, and that you can make a persuasive and well-supported argument, at least to that very essential audience, your committee.

A handful of senior faculty advisors, here and there, and some academic programs now encourage people to write their dissertations as books from the get go. But for the most part, a dissertation is quite a different creature from a book. So how do you turn the one into the other? The answer is threefold. At the most obvious and basic level, there are the mechanics. More deeply, there's the authorial voice. And finally, perhaps least obviously-- but I think most fundamentally-- there's manners.

And I don't just mean by manners addressing people by the correct name or not insulting them, though that's certainly important. I mean the kind of manners that makes a conversation a real conversation and not just alternating monologues. Good manners means recognizing another person's position, constraints, and feelings and caring enough about them and respecting them so that you don't ignore them. In the case of book writing, the obvious first people you need to consider are your editor and the reviewers. But the really important other people to be thought about are your eventual readers.

So let me start with the easiest part, which is the mechanics. Most editors will tell you just about everything I'm going to say, and I owe a lot of this talk to some notes given by Kathleen McDermott, the Senior Editor of Harvard Press in history. First of all-- get out your pencils-- aim for a final manuscript of about 100,000 words and absolutely not more than 120,000 words all inclusive, meaning including the notes. Now, assuming 335 words per page in a 12 point font with 1 inch margins, 100,000 words is about 300 manuscript pages.

Second, keep the manuscript as sleek as possible. Limit the apparatus-- the tables, the chart, the figures, all illustrations. The more illustrations you have and the more complicated they are, the less appealing the manuscript may be to a publisher. Now many people wonder why this is true, if art-- that is, black and white art-- is not more expensive to print than text. The answer is that art is a complication, and complication is always expensive in terms of people's time, your own and the publisher's.

Art has to be a publishable quality. It has to be the right size. All the permissions for the art that you don't own yourself have to be sought, granted, and paid for by you. All legends have to be supplied and unambiguously linked to the correct piece of art. And everything has to come in together and on time. I think you can probably see why this can create complications.

Then there are the elements in the text that you should reduce or remove completely. The first, the literature review. Discussions of other author's work need to be integrated with your argument or in the notes. Second, the use of other author's characterizations of problems or events or ideas. Speak in your own voice. Third, limit quotations. Often quotations are used to allow you to invoke an authority. Use only quotations that say something in a memorably pungent or eloquent or funny way. And keep them short. Use quotations to vary the voice in the text.

Limit the number of notes, especially the discursive notes. I have an author right now whose manuscript is 103,000 words of text, which is basically fine, and 89,000 words of notes, which is a lot less fine. This is not a model that you should follow. And I'm not allowing him to either, but it's very painful for him to have to cut his 90,000 words of notes down to approximately 10,000 or 15,000.

Avoid chapter opening abstracts and chapter summaries that essentially repeat the chapter opening abstracts. And you know who you are. In this chapter, I will discuss the nautical and legal maneuvering that led to the Norman conquest between the years of 1025 and 1035. I will show A, B, and C. And then at the end of the chapter, you say the same thing. Please don't do this.

Try to avoid using a lot of subheads and a lot of subdivisions within chapters. Let the chapters flow as a continuous statement and a continuous argument. Avoid using subtitles in the chapter titles or quotations in chapter titles. They often just get too long and hard to read.

And try to make sure that all the chapters are more or less the same length. Avoid the extremes of many short chapters or a few very long chapters. 15 typed pages is probably too short. 70 typed pages is probably too long. I have a manuscript right now of about-- it's a reasonable length. But it has only four chapters, and each chapter is 75 pages long. It's un-digestible. One can at least see what it's about, but it's very hard for readers to sort of make their way through chapters that long.

Now these are some of the most essential, basic mechanical changes. As you revise and rewrite though, you'll need to mull over matters that are more ambiguous and more arguable and that are more of a judgement call, which gets us to the questions of voice and style. Now editors like me will always, always, always say, avoid jargon and insider lingo.

The line between jargon and a technical term with precise and useful meaning for people in the field is, admittedly, a hard one to draw. What is jargon? It can follow Justice Potter Stewart's famous line on pornography, "I know it when I see it." More often though with jargon, it's more likely to be the case that your friends know it when they hear it. If they can't understand a chapter or a passage or worse, if they start to laugh when you read some of it aloud to them, you might want to think about rewriting.

A highly theatrical editor whom I used to work with sometimes tells his postdocs, "Take your work home and read it to your husband. Read it to your dog. That will help you turn this manuscript, which is 28,000 times too long, into something neat and crisp and what people would want to read." If you absolutely need the insider language, and you don't want to unpack it or explain it, then keep it, and be prepared to make the case for it. But bear in mind that that will come with a cost. Insider language may mean-- almost certainly will mean-- a smaller market for your book. And that may limit the eventual publisher's enthusiasm, or at least the degree of enthusiasm for the book.

Take some thought with your table of contents. Remember that it will be the very first thing that any reader sees after the title page. Susan Boehmer, who's the Editor in Chief at Harvard Press, says that a table of contents should be a poem. Now poetry may be asking a lot, but your table of contents can be clear, immediately digestible, and it will outline the book's argument and scope. It should fit on one page, and a reader, in scanning it should be able to see what this book is about.

Write a real introduction and a real conclusion. In the introduction, say what is the book's central argument. What is it contributing to the field? What important puzzle is it solving? What previously unknown story is it telling? What piece of conventional wisdom are you overturning? And in the conclusion, tell us what the consequence is. What difference does it make if you're right? How might your argument, or your discovery, or your approach help make more sense to some other current significant work or problems in your field?

These questions about the introduction and the conclusion take us to the big picture of the difference between a dissertation in a book and why I make a point of emphasizing manners. A dissertation is an exercise. Part of the reason writing a dissertation can sometimes be so painful is that, on one hand, it matters so much to your academic progress and your career, and on the other hand, it matters not at all to the wider world. You probably already know this from Thanksgiving, when your aunt Debbie asked you to explain, again, exactly what it is you do. In fact-- and this is an important point-- the larger world is so wary of dissertations that you should scrub the very word dissertation from the final manuscript that you turn into the publisher, because some library wholesalers will not buy any books that can be recognized as revised dissertations.

But a book is different from a dissertation, and it's much, much more satisfying to read and to write. With a dissertation, you have something to prove. With a book, you have something to say. The purpose of a dissertation might be, in part-- realistically-- to show how much you know. The purpose of a book is to make an argument and join or create a conversation.

As a potential book author, you already have some academic authority. You have that PhD. You're at Harvard, which is a name to conjure with. You have given conference talks, and you published articles. Your purpose now is not to prove yourself so much as it is to prove your case to the people who care about it. That will probably not be a huge group of people. Just as your dissertation is probably not the Tractatus, your first book is probably not going to win a Pulitzer Prize, unlike, say, Paul Starr's Social Transformation of American Medicine. That's probably just as well, because what would you do for an encore in your second book? You need to have something to strive for after you're 30.

But you do want your book to be read and to be readable by all the people who care about what you care about. That's why editors will plead with you to keep it short, make it clear, omit the unnecessary words. What editors are really doing is asking you to put yourself in your reader's place. Think about them as real people. They probably are real people.

In fact, you probably already know some of them. They will be, in the grand scheme of things, people who are a lot like you. Busy, intermittently impatient, with their own interests and their own turf to defend, but essentially curious, intelligent, imaginative, and as impassioned as you are about the subject. Otherwise, they wouldn't read a review of your book, let alone the book itself.

But life is short, and attention spans are getting shorter. The secret truth, which I hereby reveal free of charge, is that even the senior people in your field would rather not read more pages of jargon laden academic writing than they have to. They've already read quite a lot of it. What they and other people in your world want to know is what you have to say, how you're backing it up, and why it matters. And they want you to say it as strongly but also as straightforwardly as you can.

Here's a story that I think is helpful. The great physicist Murray Gell-Mann is famous for knowing not just everything about physics, but everything else, too. He always pronounces the names of people in places as native speakers of the languages would or should. In fact, he has been said to correct native Ukrainians on their pronunciation of Ukrainian.

There is a story that he once told Richard Feynman, also a great physicist-- a colleague of his at Caltech-- that he had just returned from "Moe-rhay-ah." When Feynman finally established that Gell-Mann meant the city known to most English speakers as Montreal, he said, "Hey, Murray. Do you believe that the purpose of language is communication?"

It's a kind of parlor game to argue about who is the greater physicist, Feynman or Gell-Mann, and it's almost certainly a silly question. But every editor and most readers would put an extra couple of flowers on Feynman's grave. The purpose of language is communication. The purpose of your book is to talk to other people.

And now, Phil will tell you about talking to the first round of other people, which is the publishers.

PHIL: Thank you.