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Writing a Book Chapter

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You have been invited to write a chapter in a nursing text. Should you be flattered or distressed? Probably a little of both: flattered because your expertise is recognized in a specific area, and you are being asked to share this knowledge. Distressed because writing a chapter can be a major undertaking, and the rewards may be minimal. In general, chapter authors are paid a modest honorarium ($100 to $350 is typical), if any, and given a complimentary copy of the book. Tenure committees often do not consider book chapters as meeting the same standard as an article published in a peer reviewed journal. Even so, it is a thrill to see your name on the list of contributors in the front pages of a text and knowing you have made a contribution to the literature is always satisfying. So, realizing in advance that you will not get rich and an authored book chapter constitutes a "modest" entry on your résumé, you may still choose to accept the invitation. If you do, read on to learn some suggestions to make the process as successful and painless as possible.

Get the Scoop

Your first step should be to learn as much about the project as you can. I would suggest scheduling a phone conference with the lead author/editor to discuss the book in general and your chapter in particular. Even though some of this information may have been covered in the original invitation (likely issued in writing, either as a letter or an email), it is still useful to talk things through and make sure you are clear on the details. Consider the following questions as a starting point for the conversation:

1. Ask for an overview of the book: topic, scope, intended audience, publisher, planned publication date, number of pages, number of chapters, and number of contributors.
2. Is this a brand new book or a revision? If the latter, will you be revising a chapter previously written by someone else, or writing a new chapter covering new content?
3. What will you be expected to contribute as an author? Certainly you will be writing the text, but many contributors are asked to provide art (photographs, drawings or other illustrations) and pedagogical materials such as care plans, learning objectives, and test questions. Make sure you know if this will be part of your chapter assignment.
4. What can the author and publisher do to support you? For example, do they have a database of art that you can access? If there is a previous edition of the book, can they send you a copy? Can they provide you access to the literature to obtain references? This is particularly important if you do not have access to a library through your work setting.
5. What are expectations beyond writing the chapter? Will it be your responsibility to obtain permission to use copyrighted material? Will you be asked to review page proofs when the book is in production?

Last but not least, make sure you are clear on deadlines and what your expected deliverable will be —format for the chapter, length, number of references, format for artwork and so on. Contributors

who have only a vague understanding of what they are supposed to do may unintentionally create more work for copy editors, proofreaders, indexers, and many others during the production process. If you have a question, ask. It is easier to do something right from the outset than it is to expect others to fix your mistakes later.

Understand the Book's Design

Pick up a text—any text—and page through it. You will notice a consistent format from chapter to chapter. There also will be special features, such as callouts, tables, charts, bulleted lists, and so on. Generally, the lead author has worked with the publisher in advance to determine what these various design elements are and how they will be used to structure each chapter. For example, a recent project that I worked on included things such as "Dollars and Sense," "Safety First," and "Red Flags." Each element had a definition, format, and specification of how many were to be included in the chapter. Authors were provided with a checklist identifying what they needed to include—in addition to the written text. It was my job to double-check and make sure all elements were included. If they weren't, the chapter went back to the author for revision. Chapters that arrived with everything in place and well organized were a pleasure to edit. Those that were missing information or a hodge-podge of materials were not as much fun. The point is, make sure you have a clear understanding of what exactly the chapter is going to look like and what you need to contribute to the chapter to achieve that look.

Design elements are important. They make a textbook colorful and engaging, and keep the reader interested. A textbook is not a novel, and readers have different expectations for each. Modern publishing processes have made it easy and affordable to include elements, such as color photographs, that were cost-prohibitive not too long ago. Therefore, it may be part of your job as a contributor to come up with some or all of these additional materials for your chapter. As I said before, make your job easier by having a good, clear understanding of the book's design so you can create content that enhances your written text and increases the reader's knowledge.

Use Your Tools Correctly

In general, a manuscript is not going to be highly formatted with lots of fancy fonts, columns, and so on. Still, know the basics of how to use your word processor to set margins, select a font, space lines, and justify the text. Find out if it is acceptable to use the features of the word processor to create tables and bulleted and numbered lists. If any of the things I have just mentioned are unfamiliar, consider a word processing tutorial before you begin or ask someone for help. It is frustrating to receive a manuscript for editing in which the author has used the space bar to center text and hit return at the end of every sentence. Do what you can not to be that person!

With respect to art, find out if the manuscript specifications call for art to be embedded in the chapter (at the place where it is referenced), placed at the end of the chapter, or saved in a separate file. If the latter, make sure it is saved in the proper format, such as a jpeg, bmp, or gif. Similarly, ask if tables, charts, or boxes (if part of the book's design) are included in the chapter or saved as separate files. For all of these things, make sure you have identified copyrighted materials for which permission needs to be obtained. Keep track of where you acquired photos, drawings, and so on. Creating an art log for your chapter, either as a spreadsheet or table, is a handy way to stay organized. Make sure to include the source of the art and complete contact information for its producer. Even if you have obtained permission and documented it, this will be verified in the

production process. Transparency around copyrighted materials makes everyone's job easier.

References

Textbooks should be properly referenced, and references should be current. However, the expectation may be to include fewer references than you cite in a journal article. Clarify this with the lead author. You also want to be clear on the format for citations in the text and for references. In nursing, the most popular reference formats right now are the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual (APA 2009) and American Medical Association (AMA) manual of style (AMA 2007). Still, the publisher may have a different style planned or some sort of hybrid model. Whatever the case, get the information you need and then format the references properly.

If you use a bibliography database manager (BDM), such as EndNote or Reference Manager, find out if the lead author has an output style specific to the book that you should use. Also ask if you should remove the field codes before submitting the manuscript. Programs such as EndNote can be helpful and real timesavers in the writing process, but they do have a learning curve. If these programs are unfamiliar to you but you are considering using one, you need to balance your time and learning process against the time you have available to produce the chapter. You also should consider the total number of references that will be in the chapter. A reference list with 10 citations is pretty easy to do by hand; 100 is more tedious, and it is likely that errors will creep in. A BDM might be worthwhile in that case. If all of this is new to you, I'd suggest enlisting a knowledgeable colleague or professional editor for help with this part of the project.

However you opt to produce the reference list, make sure the references are accurate. Double-check the spelling of author names, year of publication, title of article and journal, page numbers, and so on. Incomplete references or those with errors will slow down the production process, and it is likely that errors may be missed. Reference lists with errors frustrate readers and reflect poorly on you as an author. As the author, you have the ultimate responsibility for the accuracy for the references you cite—do not take this obligation lightly.

Keep Communication Channels Open

The lead author is responsible for overseeing the entire project and delivering a completed manuscript to the publisher by an established date. Generally, all the steps in the process have been identified, and a timeline has been carefully worked out. Contributors who miss deadlines or who do not provide manuscripts according to specified guidelines make the lead author's job more difficult, which in turn can threaten the entire project. Even if you think, "Oh, I'm just one chapter out of 50," your chapter is an integral part of the book.

That said, we all understand that "life happens." If you feel yourself slipping behind, call and explain the situation and ask for an extension. If something turned out to be more work than you expected—for example, finding pictures to illustrate the chapter—ask for help. The lead author wants this project to be a success and may have resources to help you, but you'll never know if you don't ask. Nothing is more frustrating than a contributor who goes "radio silent" and stops answering emails and phone calls and in the worst-case scenario, does not produce a contracted chapter. The latter is a difficult, uncomfortable, and unprofessional situation—don't let it happen to you.

Conclusion

As with any project, writing a chapter is going to be easier if you spend time in advance learning all you can about what is expected, being clear on details, and asking for information. Once the writing is underway, if you run into trouble, seek help from the lead author and, if appropriate, knowledgeable colleagues. Make every effort to meet deadlines and produce a manuscript according the lead author and publisher's specifications. And, when you hold the finished book in your hands and see your name on the list of contributors, be sure to celebrate!

References

American Medical Association (AMA) (2007) AMA manual of style: A guide for authors and editors (10th ed). Oxford University Press, New York.

American Psychological Association (APA) (2009) Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.) APA, Washington, DC.

Author

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