

TWEED

editing tailored to the academic

Dissertation-to-Book Guide

No. 3

Again, for the First Time

REVISING your MANUSCRIPT

In this guide, TWEED takes you through the main stages of dissertation revision. Though much of this guide assumes that you are developing your project into a scholarly monograph, most if not all of the material will be useful to those working toward journal publication as well.

Please refer to Guide No. 1 for definitions of key terms.

Reframing Your Concept

A book based on a dissertation will have to be reconceptualized from the ground up. You aren't just writing a better dissertation; you're changing the game entirely. In a student thesis, you have the burden of proof to show that you are an expert. You do this by citing scholarship relating to your topic. With a published piece of writing, however, you *are* an expert. Your ideas are the focus, and they need to be gripping enough to sustain your readers.

Instead of focusing on your *theory* or the theories of others, think of the project in terms of its subject and its interpretive turn—your unique take on the subject. These elements combined are your **concept**. Thinking of the project in this way may also help you overcome any boredom you may harbor for the research.

Those in the social sciences and related disciplines will recognize the need to have a question driving your research. When you present your work in book form, you can think of this as having a **research problem**. Consider your dissertation and pull out what you think is the compelling central issue.

Free your mind: this issue may not have been the one you focused on for your degree completion. Even if you feel married to the way that you presented the material in your submitted dissertation, the project is actually malleable. At this initial moment of reframing, you want all options on the table, even if that means focusing on some parts of the dissertation and ignoring others completely.

You will not have a literature review chapter in your book: that's almost guaranteed. The new framing must center on your own research. Eventually, you will completely shed the academic apparatus that was required of your dissertation, but for now just think about (a) what made you interested in your topic to begin with and (b) what in your research you found most interesting and surprising.

You might zero in on the research problem by answering the following questions:

- If your project were a movie, what would the trailer look like?
- If your project were a news story, what would be the headline?

You're looking for a way *into* the material as a whole—something that drives you and encourages the reader. Play with your options before settling on a concept. Ultimately, you want a concept that inspires you, capitalizes on the research you have already done (even if it requires some additional work), and can generate some kind of narrative arc.

In fact, **storytelling** is a helpful way to think about the revising task before you. This guide intentionally uses *story*, *plot*, *argument*, and *narrative* almost interchangeably. The best nonfiction, whether scholarly or not, presents a concept in an artful, compelling way that really *moves*.

Your research may involve people or it may center on ideas or statistics, but, in any case, you will want to identify its central **characters**. Whatever functions as a main character in your project will have a path, will develop over the course of the book (or article, though to a perhaps lesser extent). That development is facilitated by your **plot** or **narrative arc**, which should be clear from the beginning of the revised manuscript. You could achieve this by foreshadowing change or, if your central "character" is an event or innovation, by descriptively illustrating a situation before your

topic. Alternatively, you might start by setting up assumptions that you proceed to knock down, one by one, throughout the book.

As you revise, you will be constantly referring to your reframed concept. Really give this a healthy amount of thought before moving on to the next stage or contacting publishers. (The next TWEED Dissertation-to-Book Guide will discuss timelines for revision and communication with publishers.)

🌀 *Back to the Library* 🌀

Zeroing in on the concept for your book may have made you realize that you need to do a bit more research. Here are some aspects of any project that could do with some expansion:

- **Background, history, grounding:** What will your intended audience need to know (a) to understand your concept and (b) to be interested in reading further?
- **Examples:** Carefully chosen illustrations can enliven your argument and persuade your readers.
- **Status of scholarship:** Have new studies that bear on your concept been recently published? Your project enters a conversation; it's best to know where it stands.
- **Connection to current events:** Outside of scholarship and other nonfiction, are there world happenings and cultural phenomena that impact your concept—or your readers' framework for *understanding* your concept?
- **Significance:** What areas of scholarship, society, or everyday life might your work impact?

To diagnose the areas of your project that could use additional research and writing, always start with your concept. Anything you add must contribute to your central vision.

Take your concept to colleagues and mentors. Chat with them about what in your project interests them—or confuses them. Read new books that are interesting to you or have generated discussion in the academy. Enlist the help of an editor who understands scholarly publications and has a sense of the market for books like yours.

The key, however, is not spending too much time on extra research. Decide on a timeframe

that makes sense for you and your project, and stick to it!

🌀 *The Chopping Block* 🌀

Cutting material from your dissertation is necessary and good: it keeps your eye on the prize (your concept!) and should bring clarity for both you and the reader. Odds are, revising your dissertation for publication will involve plenty of cutting. You will probably be adding material in your revision process, so you *must* also take out some material.

Given your book concept, some material will just not be revisable. Start by identifying the material that is *essential* to your book concept. If it's crucial, then it's revisable. If you haven't considered a certain passage essential, then that material is a candidate for removal.

It's not uncommon for a scholarly book to be so long that it deters readers. A potential reader might assume that she would have to be an expert to get through a great tome on an otherwise interesting subject. A great topic deserves a wide audience, and one way that you increase that pool of possible readers is by limiting your book's size.

Be critical of your writing. As you reread your material in light of the concept or research problem that you've selected, take note of problematic passages. Then decide whether to resituate, rewrite, or discard the material.

You jumped through some hoops in writing your thesis to prove that you know your stuff. You already know that your **literature** review is ripe for omission. When you use other scholarship in your book, it will be woven into the fabric of your own research story. Consider the sources you do cover in the dissertation's lit review—are any of them interlocutors that you would like to carry with you for a chapter or even throughout your whole book? Which of the sources will be interesting to a *cross-disciplinary* audience? That material may be worth saving, even though it will be thoroughly naturalized into your book's story (argument).

The next stop in the cutting tour is your **theory** chapter (or chapters). Generally speaking, published academic books don't start with theory. They start with narrative and perhaps draw upon theory at important moments. This will of course depend upon your field (philosophers might indeed start with, wade into, and end on theory). Nevertheless, those in all disciplines can benefit from taking a good,

long, critical look at their theoretical frameworks. As a student, you needed to prove all of your grounding, but as a published writer, you foreground the subject and *your* interpretive turn—your *concept*, remember?

The point in cutting or resituating the material in your theory chapter is to minimize reader boredom. This isn't being anti-intellectual or tearing down your discipline. If you can reframe theory so that it's always used *in service of your argument*, then keep it! Jettison theory that is only there to show that you're familiar with your subject. Remember, a book audience trusts that the author is qualified to speak on the topic.

Also consider excising some **block quotes**. You're getting the picture that a book focuses on your perspective, whereas a dissertation may have relied heavily upon the cited work of others. Significant ideas other than your own are better paraphrased than quoted at length. This is especially true for notions that are well understood across fields. If you are in the humanities or social sciences, you probably do not need to quote Gayatri Spivak's definition of the subaltern, for instance. You might, however, quote a short sentence or two where it's important to preserve her turn of phrase. You should, however, give others credit for their ideas, either by formal citation or by recognizing in your prose the author and title of a relevant work.

One more tip for cutting material that detracts from your book concept: seek and destroy **extraneous examples**. What is extraneous to one person may be absolutely essential to another. But as you revise, be brutal. If an example does not move the story (that's your argument) forward, flag it for deletion.

A word of caution: Do **save** all of your deleted material in some other document file. You may find at a later stage that an excised example or discarded quote would address the concerns of your editors or reviewers.

Remember, you can always **cite your dissertation** wherever you've removed material that may be interesting follow-up reading. Nothing is ever really gone.

✧ *Organizing to Optimize* ✧

Now that you have a concept for your book and you've pruned the material, you must consider presentation. Every project can be organized in a number of different ways.

To open wide the range of possibilities for your project's organization, get your hands on some books in your field and outside of it. Inspect the tables of contents and read introductions if you have time. Try to derive the story arc from just these pieces of the books. Reflect on your own material. Should your most hard-hitting material come first, or is it better to place it in the middle?

Identify the main plot points of your own project. (Don't think of them as static topics; they are moments in the argument where something *happens*, where the story moves forward.) Here you must break free of the chapter divisions of the dissertation. Chances are, your book will have more and shorter chapters than appeared in the thesis version. You will aim for twenty- to forty-page chapters, but right now all you are doing is pulling out those **pivotal moments** for the project. One dissertation will harbor several of these.

Try shuffling the order in which these plot points might appear. Does any lightning strike? Does anything shake loose or present itself as a problem? Think of the journey that you want your readers to take. Which path is most compelling and ends up exactly where you want your audience to be?

In historical disciplines, oftentimes a straightforward chronological timeline will work best, but you can still consider shaking things up a bit. Think of the popular success of the film *Babel* and the television program *Lost*. These weave multiple trajectories and various moments in time through devices such as flashbacks, foregrounding formative events, and strong characterization. All of these tools are available to the academic writer as well.

As you perform sentence-level revisions, you will want each plot point—each paragraph and sentence even—to **build** upon the previous one and toward what comes next. You'll focus on making the development seem natural, inevitable, as a way of guiding your reader and gaining her trust. All components of the project strongly but artfully point back to your concept, and each should have a clear relationship at least to its adjacent components. This way, you are building your story at all times.

Once you have a general sense of the most illuminating relationships between the plot points, consider your book's **working table of contents** (TOC). The titles in a TOC can really sell a manuscript to a publishing house—and a

book to the buying public. Think in terms of twenty- to forty-page chunks. Just for yourself, give each chunk a working label.

Then set about crafting attractive, informative chapter titles for your book—or at least for the proposal that you will send to prospective publishers.

A TOC is an invitation to read further. It's a map for readers, booksellers, and reviewers. As you reread your material, be on the lookout for opportune phrasing of your own that might serve well as chapter headings. Refer back to the other scholarly books that you located. Sometimes there's a pattern that governs all chapter titles, sometimes not. Pay attention to the tone that these TOCs strike: some will be punny, others serious, and still others artsy. What tenor fits you and your project?

First, there are conventions that you would do well to avoid. All scholarly writers are aware of the tendency toward titles bifurcated with **colons**. Usually on one side of the colon is an abstract quip (or worse, a quote). The other half of the title explains the actual contents of the chapter, often in jargon. Such a title might look like this: "*A Rose E'er Blooming*": *The Petalled Paradigm of Urban Development in Early Modern France*. That example is nonsensical, of course, but you see the point.

Don't let this be your go-to formula. At best, a barrage of bifurcated titles is tiring. At worst, it obscures your message and limits your audience to the academics who have built up a tolerance to colon-based titles. Colons should still be an option for your revised TOC, but consider being seriously concise and straightforward. It's the combination of length, jargon, hyperabstraction, *and* the colon that makes this a losing formula.

In terms of **section headings**, some disciplines and academic journals will have predetermined formats that you must follow. In many fields, however, you are free to devise structure beyond the chapter titles. Just be sure that every section is long enough to warrant naming. Also, if you use section titles in one chapter, you must use them in other chapters. Consistency among book elements is essential. If you find that the insertion of section headings disrupts the effective flow of your writing, by all means forego them!

As with all early stages of revision, the key to successful organization is playing around and breaking out of the cognitive ruts you are sure

to have developed over years of studying your subject. Whatever you decide, your structure should work with your argument, highlighting its most interesting and significant aspects.

✧ Stylize the Substance ✧

Now that you've done the grand-scale reconceptualizing, you must get down to the nitty-gritty. First, refer to the charts in TWEED's Dissertation-to-Book Guide № 1: A Dissertation is an Auspicious Beginning. These will give you a sense of the different flourishes that characterize dissertations and books. You will also find TWEED's Guide to Academic Style on the website. Use it as a checklist for revision.

If you can, procure a copy of the **style guidelines** of your targeted publishing house or journal. Oftentimes available on the Web, this document will give you details on all of the broad and specific style preferences of the publisher. A house style guide will alert you to the kinds of formatting, grammatical, mechanical, and syntactical standards that your manuscript, if accepted for publication, will have to satisfy.

House styles will vary from press to press, but most outlets within any one discipline will be similar. The earlier you know these, the better. If you consistently follow a house style from a publisher in your field, your documents will be in better shape, no matter where you ultimately sign a publication contract.

It's worth reemphasizing: many graduate students are in the habit of **overqualifying** their statements. This is a defensive posture that doesn't befit the confident author. Be as simple and straightforward as you can. Besides making for convoluted reading, strings of prepositional phrases are red flags for overqualification. Here's an exaggerated example: "In some cases on some scale, it is perhaps useful to think of this in terms of certain other phenomena during what amounts to their peaks." You probably recognize this *rhythm* of writing. As you revise your content, be sensitive to overqualifying; it's just hedging. And it works *against* bringing your concept to light.

You've heard it many times before, but **show, don't tell**. This doesn't simply mean that you should explain your points. It means that you don't need to tell your reader what you will do before you do it ("In this chapter, I will

argue...”). Just emphasize your points through powerful syntax, creative repetition, and precise structure. Signposts should be clear without drawing attention to themselves. You want your material to unfold in a way that seems natural to the reader, not forced.

Minimize **jargon**. Vary **sentence length** without resorting to excessively long statements. Consider replacing overused **colons and semicolons** with periods. Generally, steer clear of **passive voice**—assert your authority by using active voice where possible. But you can use passive constructions strategically to great effect if they’re employed with restraint.

Utilize first-person **pronouns** (*I, me, my, we, us, our*, etc.)—and even second-person pronouns (*you, your, yours*)—with caution. While they can be engaging, they can also sound casual. Some fields, such as the social sciences, steer clear of first- and second-person pronouns because they can obscure the actual actors. This is a complex issue, but be aware that using *we* in a general way is often frowned upon: “we see that...” Consider using *we* only to refer to yourself and your co-researchers, if you have any. You can make your point of view clear without employing vague pronouns.

Adopt a non-stuffy but **academic tone**. Try reading questionable passages aloud. Would you feel sheepish adopting such a lofty manner in speaking with a colleague? If so, consider revising to bring the phrasing down a notch.

Because they distract your reader’s eye, think about which **citations** you can remove. This is tricky business, as you must attribute ideas that are not your own. So delete only those that you are absolutely sure are superfluous. Otherwise, you will do well simply to address passages that are littered with citations, perhaps several within one sentence. See if you can combine

the citations into one note, if your field or publisher uses notes. Beyond this, the problem of heavy citation can be addressed between you and your publisher. You may have seen scholarly books that cite without superscript numbering, instead correlating sources to signal phrases in the text and compiling them all at the end of the book. That’s just one way of dealing with invasive citations.

✧ *Making Time for It All* ✧

You now have a fleshed-out sense of what goes into revising your dissertation for publication: crafting a concept, conducting extra research, paring down, organizing the material that remains, and polishing your style.

Before embarking on revisions, plot time-sensitive goals. You’ll have to take into consideration outside deadlines, your other obligations, the size of your project, and the intensity of reformulation you prescribe for yourself, including any additional research.

Build in time for others to read it before you submit it to a press. If these readers are outside your discipline, so much the better.

An experienced academic editor can help you juggle these myriad concerns and stay on target, time-wise. Ask about developmental editing packages that address one stage or all aspects of your revision process.

✧ *Stay tuned for* ✧

TWEED Dissertation-to-Book Guide N^o 4:

The Curious Beasts that are Scholarly Presses & Acquisitions Editors

...in which communication and submission timelines are further illuminated.

✧ TWEED Editing ✧

With personal and professional experience in higher education, TWEED answers the call of the scholarly writer, offering editing tailored for academic success. Katie Van Heest, M.A., has a certificate in editing from the University of Chicago and offers an affordable range of services for scholars and students.

TWEED’s book preparation services give you a competitive edge. Revising your dissertation for publication? Writing a scholarly monograph or article? TWEED performs developmental editing that realizes the potential of your manuscript or idea. You create your own package from the range of available services: assessment, structural plan, thorough plan implementation, proposal development, consulting, and more.

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