

REWRITING YOUR THESIS

You've finished your thesis: how can you make it into a book?

AIATSIS, through Aboriginal Studies Press (ASP) is committed to scholarly or academic publishing in the area of Indigenous studies. However, the reality of academic publishing is that very few theses are published in book form nowadays without there being considerable rewriting. This is a worldwide phenomenon, not just an Australian one. It's due mostly to high costs of print production along with low sales, and the fact that there are now fewer University Presses which used to specialise in this kind of publishing.

If you're contemplating turning your thesis into a book — usually a large undertaking — you should be aware of the amount of work required. Although some examiners comment that a particular thesis should be published, they're usually noting that the ideas in the thesis should reach a wider audience. However, as they don't usually speak with an understanding of the world of publishing it's worth carefully considering other options before you begin work.

Consider the alternatives to publishing a book

If your main goal is to have your ideas read and shared, then consider depositing a copy of the thesis in relevant libraries. That way, other people researching or writing in the area can benefit from your scholarship.

Alternatively, technology (in the form of online publication or short-run digital printing) offers two different alternatives.

There are a variety of online publishers and having your thesis available online, as read only, in HTML or PDF and available for download, or as an e-book are some of the possibilities. However, because it's an emerging area, intending authors need to exercise care.

Short-run digital printing allows even large documents like theses to be printed in small volumes. Before undertaking this, authors need to be sure they can get the printed copies into the hands of those who want it, and that they can recover their costs, if that's their intention.

Differences between a thesis and a book

There are many differences between a thesis and a book and some of these are listed here. The main consideration is the readership: most of the other issues flow from that.

AUDIENCE

The audience for a thesis is a group of examiners. These form a group of informed, in-the-know readers with specialist knowledge. Their task is to examine the merit of the content of the thesis, and writers are obliged to reveal anything and everything about their subject.

In contrast, if you rewrite your thesis into a book for a more general audience, those readers won't have the same depth or breadth of knowledge. To write to a general audience usually means completely rewriting a thesis. At core: hold onto the ideas and start again.

CONTENT

Theses can delve into sometimes arcane subjects in great depth, or range across a variety of subjects, drawing links between them. But that's not what general readers want or expect.

If you want to rewrite their thesis into a book you need to make tough decisions about what the core subject of interest is. That may mean providing less detail and more context, or, alternatively, writing more about fewer themes or ideas.

LANGUAGE

Examiners understand the jargon and expect the formality of writing style that's appropriate in a thesis. Rewriting into book form means adopting a different writing style and avoiding inappropriate jargon.

STRUCTURE

Theses have a particular structure and specific elements: for example, preliminary pages, endmatter, literature review, detailed cross-referencing etc. Those intending to rewrite into book form need to be aware of the differences and be prepared to edit or delete these elements.

The next section gives advice about how you might proceed with the task of rewriting.

How to go about rewriting your thesis

If you're considering rewriting your thesis into a book you need to think about the audience, as realistically as you can. The truth is that not everyone will want to read your book, even if your friends and colleagues have shown an interest in your thesis.

Bookshops contain thousands of books, and many more are produced annually. Ask yourself whether people will walk into a bookshop, ignore all the other books available, and pay good money to buy yours.

The simplest way to determine the readership and thus the appropriate content and language is to answer these questions as honestly as you can:

- Who are the potential readers?
- What do they already know?
- What might they want to know?
- What would they expect of such a book?

ADJUST YOUR CONTENT TO THE NEW AUDIENCE

To rewrite your thesis into a book may mean picking out the most significant idea and writing on that subject. If that's the case, some of the ideas in your thesis might not make it into book form. You're going to need to make some tough decisions about what a general readership will be interested in, even if you're writing to an intelligent lay audience.

RESEARCH THE AREA

If you've spent years researching and writing you may not be aware of others who are writing in the same area. Spend time in libraries and bookshops to get an idea of what else exists. Then make sure that your manuscript is unique, has something to add to the subject, or takes a different approach.

At this stage you might also consider researching which publishers might be interested in your work. Be aware though that most publishers won't accept an incomplete unsolicited manuscript from a new writer or a proposal for a book.

CHOOSE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE FOR YOUR NEW AUDIENCE

Not only do you have to avoid inappropriate jargon when rewriting, you need to move from the formal writing register to something more like the middle register. Read up on some of the principles of plain English and put them into practice. These include:

- writing using the active voice, if appropriate (though don't do that if it's inappropriate to the manuscript and audience)
- using shorter rather than long paragraphs and sentences
- putting conditions and qualifications into separate sentences
- beginning paragraphs with topic sentences.

To help you write to a general audience consider doing some of the following:

- reading some of the many books on writing
- taking writing classes to practise writing in a different style
- joining a writers' group to get initial feedback
- becoming part of the writers' community.

SIMPLIFY THE STRUCTURE

There are some elements that belong in a thesis but not a general book; others should be tailored to the different readership. Here are some to consider:

- delete many of the preliminary and end pages in your thesis
- ensure your bibliography is very selective
- ditch the literature review
- take out a lot of the detailed referencing and footnoting — instead, consider rewriting the ideas into your own words
- use cross-references carefully
- avoid the often repetitious style of a thesis: intro/explanation/recap — a general readership will prefer your coming to the point quickly
- decide if you need all the images you've used — the permissions and reproduction costs might be expensive.

LENGTH OF YOUR MANUSCRIPT

Most books published for a general readership are shorter than theses, so be prepared to produce a shorter manuscript. While it's impossible to be absolute, many publishers are looking for between 70,000 to 80,000 thousand words.