Writing an American Government Textbook: Lessons Learned

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Our experience with textbooks comes from writing *American Politics Today*, an introduction to American government and politics that is designed as a first-year introductory class and which is taught at virtually every university and college in America (Bianco and Canon 2021). Introductory textbooks represent an extreme case in the textbook universe: they are comprehensive tomes, aimed at large-class adoptions, and revised frequently; they feature numerous ancillaries (e.g., test banks, instructors' manuals, and digital content); and they involve significantly more hands-on work by editorial and production staff. At the same time, we believe that our two-decades-and-counting experience writing "The Big Book of American Politics" highlights three important lessons for scholars who are contemplating a textbook project: keep it simple, listen to advice, and acknowledge opportunity costs.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

When developing a textbook, first consider the target audience. You are not writing for your colleagues or even for politically engaged, informed citizens. Students enrolled in an introductory course typically are first- or second-year students (or, in some cases, high school seniors) who know little about political science debates and research findings. There are huge gaps in their understanding of contemporary politics. Although their interest in American government may be relatively high (i.e., they are enrolled in the course), few are politics junkies or policy wonks.

Successfully engaging this audience requires a different approach than for a journal article or an academic-press book. You are writing for an introductory course—the first political science class for many students. Rather than providing the last word, the goal should be to give students a way to think about politics, provide basic facts and a sense of contemporary politics, and leave them wanting more.

The key is simplicity. Sentences and paragraphs must be shorter. Research findings must be described in plain language, with extra attention to the significance of results and technical terms given only when absolutely necessary. It is important to remember that students are reading about these concepts for the first time and do not have the background to place them in context.

Although this description suggests that writing an introductory textbook is similar to developing an introductory lecture, we find that being a good instructor does not translate into a talent for writing clean textbook copy. When we began to write our textbook, our expectation was that the process would be tedious but straightforward. After all, we both had been teaching for more than 15 years and received favorable evaluations for our introductory courses. However, we soon learned that this was not the case. A good lecture flows from point to point without becoming mired in details. A good textbook fills in the gaps of good lectures. At the same time, a textbook must stand on its own, moving beyond facts and figures to offer students a way to make sense of these details. Finding this light touch was not straightforward. Most notably, attempts at humor that work well in the classroom often fall flat on the page. As our first editor at W. W. Norton & Company, Steve Dunn, memorably advised one of us, "Your sense of humor. It's not working. Stop."

An important way to achieve simplicity is to develop and implement a set of guiding themes for the textbook. When we began our endeavor, themes seemed more like a marketing strategy—a way to distinguish our textbook from our competitors. Seven editions later, we now realize that these themes are the fundamental insights that we hope students will draw from the textbook. They allow students to connect the disparate set of theories, facts, and outcomes that are necessary components of an American government textbook. Themes also provide micro-level guidance for drafting chapters, sections, paragraphs, and even sentences; one of us taped the admonition "hammer home the themes" to his laptop for the entire writing process.

Early in the drafting process, we settled on three themes: politics is everywhere, politics is conflictual, and rules matter. Furthermore, we decided that the textbook would be "ruthlessly contemporary," reducing coverage of American political history in favor of contemporary political events. These themes were consistent with how we thought about American politics: they tied neatly into existing research findings; they were easy to illustrate using current events; they were simple enough for students to remember; and, most important, they gave us a way to focus the textbook. Why is compromise difficult to achieve? Because Americans have different wants. Why do we need to talk about congressional institutions and bureaucratic rulemaking? Because rules are policy. Why should we care about what happens in Washington? Because politics is everywhere—and even if you do not care about politics, politics still cares about you.

LISTEN TO ADVICE

The most striking feature about writing an introductory textbook is the number of people who are involved. At different

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stages of the publication process, you will deal with a bewildering number of queries, advice, and requests from editors, reviewers, production staff, and ancillary developers. It is a different environment than research and teaching, in which (except peer review) you have almost complete control over and responsibility for content. As the author of an introductory textbook, you will become the "front person" for a large enterprise, much of which deals with issues about which you know little.

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An important lesson we have learned is to listen to these experts. Pushing back has real opportunity costs, in countless email exchanges discussing minor details with copyeditors, graphics designers, digital media experts, and editorial assistants. More important, reflexively contesting requests and queries amounts to throwing away information. Editorial and production staff generally know more than you do about what adopters want or what looks good on the page. Consider your book's cover: no doubt you have an opinion—but do you really know enough to decide? Practice saying, "Your idea sounds good. Let's go with it."

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Similarly, it is important to remember that reviewers have the same degree as you do and teach the same course. Even if you disagree with their advice, their comments flag issues that must be addressed. For example, one perennial review request is to add details on campaign spending in American elections, particularly independent expenditures and "dark money." Our reading of the campaign-finance literature is that the spending is overrated as an explanatory variable. Even so, the fact is that most introductory students believe that "big money" decides who wins. An elections chapter must acknowledge that concern, even if it presents a more nuanced view.

Reviewers also are essential for helping authors to overcome the imposter syndrome. Writing chapters in your area of expertise is challenging, but at least you have some confidence in what you are saying. Writing chapters for the first time on federalism, the bureaucracy, or the courts forces you to consider taking out a large malpractice insurance policy. There is a significant difference between knowing enough to do one or two lectures on a topic and providing the comprehensive breadth and important detail required of an introductory textbook chapter. The expert reviewers fill in those gaps, and you should listen to them.

The same lesson holds for divisions of labor in an author team. With due respect to Ken Kollman, who writes in this symposium about solo authoring an introductory textbook, just getting all the words on the page (i.e., 17 chapters of 15,000–20,000 words, plus numerous charts, photographs, boxed content, and sidebar quotations) is a daunting task. You will probably need one or more coauthors, particularly if you have ambitions to sustain your research program. But who? A running joke about our book proposal was how two congressional scholars would frame an introductory textbook: "eight chapters about the House, eight about the Senate, one about everything else."

Ultimately, the overlap turned out to be irrelevant, other than the coin flip on who got to write the Congress chapter. All author teams struggle to cover the full range of topics in American government. The relevant fact was that we had a high level of trust in each other's scholarly and pedagogic instincts, which was developed as assistant professor colleagues. Because of this trust, we could coordinate on broad themes, divide the work, and mostly stay out of each other's way. For other coauthors, this division of labor could generate continuity problems, but we have found that few readers can discern which coauthor wrote each chapter. Indeed, one author teaches a class every summer for high school teachers of Advance Placement (AP) American government. Many use our textbook, and questions about chapter authorship always produce nearly random guessing. We believe that agreement on themes produces this continuity among chapters.

Although it is essential to listen to advice, there are times to push back against editors and reviewers. For example, whereas we almost always defer to the excellent graphic designers and production team at W. W. Norton, when we objected to a cover design, a compromise solution was quickly found. Another time, one author was dismayed to see that a favorite photograph was removed from the federalism chapter after the last page proofs had been approved. The photograph of a father and son wearing Packers foam cheese heads at Lambeau Field was used to illustrate diversity in behavioral norms across the states. The photograph was restored in the next edition. Similarly, although reviewers make the important contributions, sometimes they want a level of detail that is not appropriate for an introductory textbook, or they ask for historical examples that would detract from our contemporary focus.

ACKNOWLEDGE OPPORTUNITY COSTS

Contracting to write an introductory textbook is one of the most enduring commitments you will make as an academic. It took seven years for us to go from contract to publication. The typical introductory textbook has a two-year revision cycle: (1) publish a new edition in January after the presidential or

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midterm elections; (2) start work on revisions in the summer of year 1; (3) work steadily until elections in November of year 2; and (4) send the new edition to the printer.

For us, our thematic decision to be ruthlessly contemporary drives a somewhat more extensive revision effort. Our rule is that more than 50% of the substantive examples and chapter introductions in each edition must come from the previous two years and more than 75% from the previous four years. This strategy ensures that we are referencing political events with which undergraduate students might be familiar.

Even without our emphasis on contemporary politics, all introductory-textbook authors must contend with new election outcomes, policy changes, recent court decisions, shifts in public opinion, updating tables and figures, and myriad other changes. Revisions also give authors the opportunity to address gaps in content or places where the text simply is not clear. Even after seven editions, we (along with reviewers and our editor) continue to find instances where the textbook falls short. Revisions also must address changes in American politics and in disciplinary debates. For example, in our most recent revision cycle, we expanded content that addresses issues of inequality and race and gender. We also continue to explore how to make better use of digital technologies as sales of e-books increase.

Revisions also mean the addition or deletion of content. Particularly in early revision cycles, we followed a "cut 15%, add 5%" rule to reduce the text and control the temptation to add features. Over time, we have eliminated several features (e.g., "Comparing Ourselves to Others" comparative politics content) that received low scores from reviewers. Early in the process, we and our publisher created a series of videos featuring the authors and cited scholars; the videos are still available on YouTube but are not mentioned in the textbook—again, because reviewers and students were not interested. At the same time, we added new content, such as the "Why Should I Care" feature at the end of each section. An "Essentials" (i.e., short) version of the textbook appeared on publication of the third edition, and we recently completed a new version aimed at high school AP classes. Furthermore, we are steadily increasing the amount and sophistication of our digital content while also being sensitive to gaps in the technology that is available to many of our students.

An introductory textbook is never done. You can expect to work on it in one way or another for about 18 months of each two-year cycle. To some extent, this reality reduces pressure—there is always a next edition to fix an awkward paragraph or a wayward chart. As our former editor, Pete Lessor, once advised, "You won't be happy with the book at least until the third edition." It takes several rounds of revision to sand off a textbook's rough edges as well as to market it to adopters, secure an audience, and refine themes and approaches. For the authors of a successful introductory textbook, research projects come and go, teaching and service responsibilities change, and even pandemics happen—but the textbook is a constant.

The subtler message is that would-be introductory-textbook authors need to enter the process with their eyes wide open. Writing an introductory textbook involves significant, ongoing opportunity costs. It will always be on your to-do list and, at times, will take over your life. You will not be as productive a researcher as you would be without the textbook project. You are spending time that could be used to create new courses, take on service assignments, write grants, or literally do anything else. Our experience is that most textbook authors (ourselves included) enter the process believing that they can avoid these tradeoffs. To our knowledge, no one has succeeded.

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WOULD WE DO IT AGAIN?

Yes. However, we are very fortunate to have worked with intelligent, well-networked editors (including our current editor, Laura Wilk) who knew the market and shared our enthusiasm about the project. Our press found sharp-eyed reviewers, invested in a first-rate production process, and—most important—gave the book several editions to build an audience. Finally, writing a textbook makes you a better teacher. You will become more informed about the vast literature on topics that you would not have explored, and you will stay more current on a broader range of topics. ■

REFERENCE

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