Lessons Learned from Political Science Textbook Authors

Textbooks in Political Science: Advice from Authors

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Textbook authorship is at some distance from everything else that academics do. It is true that textbooks engage the central missions of research and teaching by illustrating disciplinary debates, describing research findings, and helping students to learn. However, success in the textbook market requires a profoundly different skill set from what is needed for research and teaching. This symposium draws on insights from authors of successful political science textbooks, ranging from newly published books designed for upper-level courses to several introductory texts that have appeared in multiple editions. The prompt was simple: What have you learned from writing a textbook—about the writing process itself but also about research, teaching, students, and the discipline?

Several central tendencies are in these reflections: the sharp differences between textbooks and other forms of academic writing (as well as classroom teaching); the need to manage workflow throughout the stages of writing, production, and revision; and how textbook writing provides a unique opportunity to see the discipline through the eyes of undergraduate students.

The contributions to this symposium also show that there are many ways to be motivated to create a successful textbook. Some authors work alone, others in teams. Some teams have sharp divisions of labor, other teams have all members review every chapter. Some authors began with clear ideas about a new argument or evidence that they wanted to put before students; however, for most, the motivation was a basic dissatisfaction with existing textbook offerings for their courses.

Writing a textbook is not easy; many new books never appear in a second edition. For would-be authors, this symposium provides insight about the pitfalls and opportunities that publication entails and what a successful textbook project looks like. ■

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