Thoughts on Textbook Writing

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I have been an author of an introductory American government textbook since 1986. It has been a rewarding intellectual experience and, in my view, has made me a more productive scholar—even though writing and continually revising a textbook entails an enormous amount of work.

In the 1980s, when the late Ted Lowi and I were colleagues at Cornell, Ted wanted to take another stab at writing an American government textbook. This was an era when the more "modern" textbooks such as Burns and Peltason (1963) and Cummings and Wise (1996)—tomes filled with illustrations and aimed at engaging students—were replacing the more monographic works such as Key's (1962) *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, which had sought to present the author's unique perspectives rather than attempt to cover the field. Ted had written a textbook that had many pictures—I remember that Jim Burns said he liked them—but it was idiosyncratic and did not do well in the marketplace. Jim said, "I told you so." Ted invited me to coauthor the new textbook and, with some misgivings, I told him I would give it a try. After all, I thought, how difficult could it be to write a textbook? The publisher wanted only about 800 pages—a piece of cake!

I soon found myself in a meeting with Donald Lamm and Roby Harrington, both of whom would become very distinguished editors at W. W. Norton & Company. Indeed, Don became president of the company and Roby served as head of the college division. Ted had assured them beforehand that I was very familiar with the introductory American government course at Cornell and loved teaching it (both were fibs). When Don and Roby left the meeting, Ted told me that we probably should start teaching the introductory course together and see where it would take us.

This course—I think it was called Government 101—was a huge production that met in Cornell's concert hall with about a thousand students and a large cast of teaching assistants. I was terrified for a variety of reasons, the main one being that I did not know much about anything. I knew a little, just enough to write a doctoral dissertation about my nominal field of expertise: political parties and elections. However, I knew less than nothing about the Constitution, Congress, the presidency, the courts, public policy, public opinion, and a dozen other fields that I somehow had missed in graduate school. Is it possible these fields had not been taught at the University of Chicago? That is the only possible explanation. Every one-hour lecture, moreover, required me to speak on a huge quantity of material.

As I struggled through this first semester, however, I noticed that Ted did not know much either, which did not seem to bother him, so we had cheerful and engaging conversations on the stage learning from one another. The students seemed to like it; we got good reviews. By the end of the term, Ted and I had a good idea of the topics we needed to cover in our textbook, and we developed a tentative division of labor. Now came the hard part: writing.

Reading and talking are the fun parts of scholarship. Writing is work. Moreover, ideas that seem perfectly plausible when you read or talk about them turn out to be useless when you try to link them to other ideas in sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters. The only way to determine what does and does not work is to try to write. Reading, talking, and even thinking are much overrated as intellectual activities. You learn by writing. It is the only way.

Ted liked to say, "Read as a producer, not as a consumer." In other words, do not read for pleasure—that is for dilettantes. Professional scholars read to drive their writing forward. This was the best academic advice I ever received, and it has taken me through 30 published titles. The next best advice I received was from the late novelist, Alison Lurie, who told me never to discuss book ideas prematurely. She thought that in the early stages of a project, advice from colleagues was more likely to be confusing than helpful. This is absolutely true and it is why I often become evasive when people ask me what I am working on.

At any rate, it took us more than a year to draft the first edition of *American Government* and another few months to revise and rewrite it. The final product was pretty damn good and sold very well! Jim Burns said it was a good try, but he still owned half the market and did not perceive us as a threat. Of course, almost four decades later, *American Government* has been through 15 editions (Lowi et al. 2019). Its sibling, *We the People*, is in its thirteenth edition (Ginsberg et al. 2021), whereas *Government by the People* (Burns and Peltason 1963) is remembered only by people my age. Sorry Jim.

I often think about why *American Government* and *We the People* have been so successful. The first obvious reason is that we have a truly stellar cast of authors: Ted Lowi, Margie Weir, Ken Shepsle, Steve Ansolabehere, Caroline Tolbert, Andrea Campbell, and Bob Spitzer. Writing a textbook is difficult and requires focus, concentration, an understanding of the field as a whole, and imagination. Generally speaking, good scholars can write good textbooks if they are determined to do so. The idea that the "star quality" needed for an outstanding scholarly monograph is not needed for a textbook is simply wrong. A textbook is more difficult to write because it requires having interesting things to say about the field as a whole. Moreover, it requires the ability to explain to students why everything about politics is fascinating and important, and how everything truly is related to everything else. This is much more challenging to accomplish than any scholarly monograph.

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Part of the challenge of keeping a textbook alive is maintaining your own interest in the field. I have noticed over the years that many textbooks disappear because of a phenomenon I call "author fatigue." That is, whatever interests initially brought an author to write the textbook waned without being replaced by new interests. For me, writing our textbooks *American Government* and *We the People* has been a source of constant excitement and inspiration, which has led me to explore new corners of the discipline. In addition to these textbooks, I also wrote books about war, violence, Reconstruction, bureaucracy, the presidency, Congress, state politics, public opinion, Jewish history, and even university politics.

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Why university politics? A silly deanlet told me it must be easy to write a textbook. Really? I decided to write a book exposing the outrageous activities of the silly and empty-headed deanlets who seem to infest today's colleges. In this way, *The Fall of the Faculty* was a direct descendent of *American Government*. In this and every other instance, my interest was piqued by some argument I was developing for the textbook. The moral of the story is that writing begets writing. Rather than suffer from author fatigue, I celebrated the joy of authorship!

I also learned that many textbooks died because their authors became complacent. They developed a winning formula and stuck with it until it no longer was. American politics changes dramatically every seven or eight years. A textbook should remain alive and vibrant, not mired in the political struggles of previous decades. When Ted and I started writing, Ronald Reagan was president. The history of the Iran–Contra Affair does not inspire much student recognition or interest these days. To be honest, many students would find it difficult to distinguish between the Iran–Contra Affair and the XYZ Affair. (Of course, to be fair to students, both did involve bribes.)

I make a major change in the textbook every second edition and minor changes in every edition. This is important even though it is hard work and seems to involve tearing apart an excellent and effective textbook. Those that do not change regularly die quickly. After almost 40 years, our textbooks are still very much alive. That cannot be said about too many textbooks.

It also is important to remember that the textbook belongs to the author(s), not the publisher. W. W. Norton & Company is a great publishing house. I like editors and I have worked with some of the best in the business but, at the end of the day, it is *my* book. My name is on the cover. An excellent young editor, whose editorial advice I respect, recently asked me how much longer I thought that I would be working on the book before I retired. I politely told him it was *my* book, not *the* book. However, I refrained from saying what I actually was thinking—namely, that I started writing *my* book before he was born and might still be writing *my* book when he retired. Political science editors read *PS* so he probably now knows what I was thinking. Sorry Pete.

Viewed correctly, writing is not a task from which one retires. Writing is learning, it is joy, it is life—even though it is damn hard work! Once you get used to it, it is a good habit. Stick with it; it builds character. ■

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