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## GETTING PUBLISHED

*As of today, here is almost  
every single thing I know about writing.*

—Anne Lamott (1994:xxxi)

With Anne Lamott, I, too, can say that as of today, here is almost every single thing I know about writing. I conclude with a few thoughts about academic publishing.

As I look back, my experience with editors and publishers seems to have involved a lot of *luck*. It is difficult to distill lessons that might serve others except for the need for perseverance. How publishing will change in the near future, I dare not predict, for I have had a difficult enough time keeping up with its already changed nature and the constant restructuring of publishing houses. To my surprise, I discovered that my own publishing career has involved some 44 professional organizations, commercial publishers, and university presses. The lesson is that each publishing opportunity will prove a unique experience, not only for you but for your editor and publisher as well. Make the most of it.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, like everyone else in academia, I do have some opinions about how to get published. One of the best ways to locate a suitable

journal or publisher is to ask around among active and published researcher-colleagues in your field—not those who profess that they *ought* to be writing and publishing, but those who actually are. You might also do some reading on this specific topic, such as Powell's informative case study approach to understanding scholarly publishing, *Getting into Print* (1985) or Germano's more recent and highly readable *Getting It Published* (2001).<sup>2</sup> But prepare yourself: Regardless of the magnitude of your just-completed research—whether conducted pre- or post-Ph.D.—it is not too likely that you will be successful in getting it published in its entirety. You may have to settle for less.

That is not to say you shouldn't try. There is always the chance of connecting with the right publisher or editor at the right moment. But in addition to looking for ways to publish a monograph-length study, consider writing up smaller sections as journal articles. The fact that a more comprehensive version of your work exists elsewhere—if only in your dissertation or in copies of a final report available from you—frees you from having to recount everything while trying to say something. If there is to be a full account, I suggest you draft it first, even if you do not believe you will be successful in securing a publisher for it. Then, with the full account written up, look for ways that shorter pieces can be developed from it or about it. Pursue those assignments “one bird at a time.” Don't announce how many shorter articles you hope eventually to produce; get busy and begin drafting *one* of them.

If your writing has been done with an eye to promotion and tenure, be aware that journal publication is ordinarily much faster than publishing a book or monograph. In my experience, chapters invited for edited volumes, although a virtual shoe-in for publication, take the longest to reach the shelves, for it takes only one laggard among contributors to jam the works. Should you be among the early contributors, it may be *your* contribution that seems most dated by the time the book finally appears.

Long delays in publishing, regardless of the cause, are never a good omen. New materials arrive on publishers' desks every day, and new editors replace old ones. Manuscripts become less publishable the longer they sit, even when sitting in publishers' offices. Editorial promises

get reinterpreted, forgotten, and sometimes flat-out broken. The new game of musical chairs that the large publishing houses play as they are shuffled among megacorporations has exacerbated the problem and left authors with little recourse, especially with qualitative studies that produce modest returns at best. We are expendable.

Horror stories abound of manuscripts that were never published. I would not pay them much heed. Never allow yourself the luxury of giving up in total despair. I once had an enthusiastic editor at a university press write that he was "interested" in publishing a book-length manuscript I submitted for publication in a monograph series. He lamented that he did not have sufficient funds at the moment, and with my estimated 250 printed pages, plus photographs, my manuscript would be "relatively expensive" to publish. I wrote him off, interpreting his lament as a gracious rejection, but a rejection nonetheless.

I began exploring other possibilities. I responded eagerly to another editor's response that, if reconceptualized and shortened, my manuscript might fit into his new series. Unfortunately, the abridged and (too slightly, it seems) refocused study did not meet the second editor's expectations. I now had *two* monograph-length versions of my study, no publisher in sight, and a somewhat topical account fast becoming dated. In spite of its general social interest, I felt I should not invest more time on the topic. Its focus, the result of fieldwork in southern Africa during a year of sabbatical leave, was tangential to my scholarly interests except for the ethnographic experience itself.

Then, unexpectedly, a letter arrived from the first editor informing me that he had been allocated additional funds and was ready to put my manuscript into production. He wanted to know whether I had any last-minute changes. From the outset, he had every intention of publishing my study as soon as funds became available. That's exactly what his letter said, when I reread it literally.

Academic publishing houses, like academic journals, tend to carve their special niche, preferring depth to breadth. The publisher most likely to publish your qualitative study is already publishing qualitative studies. Publishers who already publish studies most like yours are most likely to be interested in yours as well, unless what they already have in

print is too similar to what you have written (rather than closely parallel, and thus complementary), or recent marketing experience has made them skittish. There is no reason not to try to dissuade them on either account, nor is there any reason to think you will be successful in doing so. Examine their publication list carefully, describing how your work will complement their existing titles rather than dilute their market. Authors are not particularly attentive to publishers; publishers are attentive to those who are.

At professional meetings, invest time at the book exhibits and search out publishers interested in the topics and approaches that interest you. Do a bit of eavesdropping on conversations at book exhibitors' stalls. Granted, most visitors are screening new materials, looking for studies to augment their teaching, or simply trying to keep abreast of their field, if only by title and author. But broaden your gaze to include everyone at the scene, not just the consumers of research and the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed publishers' representatives who are there to ring up sales. Lurking somewhere nearby (perhaps not at the booth; more likely off talking privately with other authors, but available to meet with you by appointment) are the acquisitions editors whose responsibility is literally to *solicit* books (i.e., discuss manuscripts and ideas with prospective authors) rather than sell them. Their conversation is of a different sort: They visit congenially with their authors-in-print, talk to authors with manuscripts (or ideas) about getting into print, and occasionally propose topics to prospective authors along lines that the publisher feels might be productive.

Too good to be true? Well, take heart from the story behind the first edition of this monograph. Editor Mitch Allen took me aside while I was perusing the books he was exhibiting at a professional meeting to tell me about a manuscript he wanted for the qualitative research series. The monograph he had in mind dealt with the subject of writing. And he wanted *me* to write it! It happens.

If there is any selling done in such circumstances, authors with ideas are doing it. But listen to those conversations and you will realize how astute most editors are, how knowledgeable they have become about what is being written in *your* field. They may dampen your

enthusiasm or redirect you to a competitor with that great idea you were certain they would covet for themselves, but most editors have a breadth of vision that can serve as a valuable resource.

To remain in business, academic publishers must keep an eye on their markets. Fortunately for us, that includes the library market and cross-over tradebook market as well as the market for large-scale text adoptions. Still, it can be disappointing to realize that a fine piece of research, exquisitely written, may not be considered for publication because it will not sell (i.e., is not expected to command enough market to make publication feasible). What sells cannot be the only basis for conducting research, however, and clearly, it is not. The market for qualitative studies is thin, oversaturated by our own successful efforts to convince publishers of potential markets that never quite materialize. In their view—and experience—as few as one out of ten books is likely to make money. My guess is that within each subfield, a few studies—our own modest shelf of “classics”—account for most sales and are the studies to which we all point as precedent. As Mitch has observed about this unique market, “The writers of qualitative research are the buyers of qualitative research. It is a closed system.”

We might appear to be advantaged by having university presses as another publishing option. Ostensibly, their mission is to advance scholarship rather than realize profits. But the day seems to have passed when university presses were willing to take chances by publishing materials with uncertain or thin markets. Increasingly, those presses not only have become self-supporting but are expected to make a return on the university's investment in them. Rather than serving as a fallback to guarantee that studies with thin markets will be published somewhere, university presses today tend to seek the better stuff, which they further enhance with their imprimatur. Although university presses were once instrumental in making publication possible in esoteric fields (certainly including ethnography), few of them today devote much attention to publishing qualitative/descriptive work.<sup>3</sup> If you would like to publish with a university press, look for a reasonable match between your manuscript and the books already on their shelves rather than attempt a sweeping canvass to see if anyone is interested. Commercial publishers

are even more leery of publishing research monographs. There is no reason not to try, but realize how difficult it may be to find an interested publisher, especially for your first publication.

You may be better off to locate an appropriate *series* in which to publish rather than hope to publish your work as a separate piece. An alternative is to find a small publishing house able to minimize risks by minimizing costs. In your eagerness to get published, don't lose sight of the fact that small publishing houses have small budgets for advertising: One can publish *and* perish, getting material into print that remains unknown. That is also the catch to the technological ease of desktop publishing. Being able to publish your own study does not resolve the question of distribution, even if recovering out-of-pocket costs is not a major concern. So-called vanity publishing (publishing at your own expense) or making your work available electronically raises questions of legitimacy, because it is done in the absence of external review. In the latter instance, although the legitimacy issue joins a host of other problems as yet unresolved, the opportunity to make your work readily accessible through electronic publishing is unprecedented.

If you are successful in finding a publisher, your happy anticipation may give way to frustration as you begin to wonder whether your publication is one of the world's best-kept secrets. Rather than bemoaning how little your publisher seems to be doing to promote your study, take responsibility to help spread the word. Send letters or announcements to your professional colleagues. Advise your publisher of the journals to which your book should be sent for review (supply addresses and the name of the current book review editor, not just the name of the journal), and follow up independently to make sure that the material was received. You can probably badger your publisher into distributing more complimentary copies than is customary if you supply names, addresses, and a rationale for your selection of recipients.

The real key to the marketing problem lies beyond the scope of qualitative studies themselves. Our studies are not adopted for classroom use on the scale that makes textbook publishing lucrative because they are not easy for instructors to use. They are neither self-teaching nor

self-evident. They *can* make teaching more exciting; they definitely make it more challenging. The best way we have to expand the market for qualitative/descriptive studies is by demonstrating their effective use in our own teaching. But that is another story, maybe even another monograph: *Teaching (Teaching up?) Qualitative Research*. I have had my say in the matter (Wolcott 1994:Ch. 12 and 13). Our responsibility as author/ researchers is to make sure that, when sought, the studies are there, well researched and well written.

## ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO GET INTO PRINT

Although I think “writing” from the outset of a study, and I begin thinking about a working title and Table of Contents almost as soon as I begin fieldwork, I do not think “publication” with that same single-mindedness. Writing up qualitative research differs from most writing done for commercial publication. In commercial publication, contract negotiations usually precede the major part of the writing. In preparing a textbook, it is not uncommon to invite an author to submit a proposed Table of Contents and a first chapter or two. In our work, the research act is not really finished until our studies are completed and accessible to others. *There is no such thing as unreported research*. The customary form for that documentation is a written account.

When we set out to find a publisher for a qualitative study, we ordinarily have a completed project in hand, not just an idea or prospectus. The research reported may not be written eloquently, but we do not approach publishers with the idea that they will fund research, although they may be willing to underwrite some costs in manuscript preparation as an advance on royalties. My preference with everything I have written is to do the writing first, then negotiate a contract. When the writing can proceed on the basis of an invitation or verbal agreement, so much the better, but I do not like the idea of someone already owning material I have yet to write.

Peter Woods (1999), who offers excellent advice in *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers*, takes exception to my “write first” approach. He calls it “risky business” and suggests seeking a publisher from the outset. I stand my ground that research conducted must be accessible in some form before it can be considered research completed. For writing *about* qualitative research, you must decide for yourself whether there are compelling reasons for writing up what you have to say, market or no. My feeling is that any time you have something to write, you should write it. And you should get the account recorded in your own way before submitting (literally and figuratively) to what someone in authority says you will have to do to get published. If writing is in your blood, you know what I mean. Gloria Steinem does (recall the epigraph to Chapter 1).

Whatever eventually compels you to inquire about getting into print, I advise against sending anything longer than a journal article to a publisher or editor without prior communication and an explicit request for more. If it is common knowledge that unsolicited manuscripts have only a slim chance of being published (Powell 1985:89), then the secret is to get a manuscript solicited. To solicit an invitation, send the title page and Table of Contents, accompanied by a carefully prepared letter (addressed to a particular individual by name, if possible) explaining not only what you have written about but why you have chosen that particular publisher. Better still, should you be so lucky, have a colleague with contacts at the press telephone or write on your behalf, especially if you are exploring possibilities for publishing your (revised) dissertation.

Describe the current status of your manuscript and any unusual circumstances surrounding it, such as how soon you could send a completed draft, or problems with clearances, ownership, or conditions surrounding publication. Although a broad inquiry might be sent to several publishers, once you receive an indication of serious interest, stop playing the field. If you are tempted to browbeat publishers or journal editors by claiming that a manuscript is under consideration elsewhere, recognize that the ploy can backfire. Who wants to invest time

and money in a go/no-go decision on a manuscript that may already have gone?

Journal publication seems the more realistic option for getting into print if you can pare down a longer manuscript. Journal-length manuscripts circulate easily among colleagues and editors. You do not need an invitation to submit a manuscript to a journal. However, you might communicate with an editorial office prior to submission if you are uncertain whether the content fits within a journal's scope, or if an article presents some unusual problem, such as requiring special graphics or exceeding customary length. Even in these cases, expect the reply, "Send it along and let us have a look at it." (Hint: I *always* find some excuse for checking first with the editor. Voilà! Back come the words I want to hear, "Send it along and let us have a look at it.")

An author needs to select journals with care and to demonstrate awareness not only as to their scope but to their formal requirements for submission. A cover letter that provides a brief introduction should also explain any aberration between the submission as made and the stated requirements of the journal. Minor deviations should be acknowledged and explained—for example, recognition that the citation style differs from that of the journal and will be reformatted if the manuscript is accepted. A manuscript should not be accompanied by an apology or a sweeping promise to do *anything* to get it accepted. Comply with the requirements and let the manuscript speak for itself, as it will have to do when published. Remember that most editors of professional journals are themselves busy researchers and teachers who must get on with their own work. They have every right to expect manuscripts to be in polished, proper, and final form, even if they subsequently ask for revision.

Nobody relishes rejection. Having a manuscript rejected is always disappointing, to old-timers as well as new authors. (After all these years, both my most recent journal-length article *and* my most recent book-length manuscript were rejected as originally submitted, although in each case, the rejection was accompanied by a letter explaining what changes an editor felt were needed.) The most difficult rejections are those that arrive without explanation or comment. Yet I know from hav-

ing to pen such letters as an editor, and having to make sure they would not be misinterpreted as giving false hope or phony encouragement, that sometimes there isn't anything to say except "Thank you for considering this journal."

In spite of efforts at multiple, external, and sometimes blind review, the review process can seem capricious. One problem is that final editorial decisions do not, and cannot, rest solely on the basis of outside reviewers' recommendations. Accordingly, a rejection or two should not lead to a premature conclusion that a manuscript is unworthy. Pay close attention to specific suggestions or criticisms noted as shortcomings. It may be a good idea to share a rejection letter with a close colleague; subtle messages between the lines sometimes escape sensitive authors. And as my always encouraging editor C. Deborah Laughton advises, never, never read as rejection a letter that says instead, "Revise and resubmit." *Just do as directed.*

Waiting for review provides another respite that can be turned to advantage. With the passing of time, one can usually return to a manuscript with a fresh look. If you are really brave, when your manuscript is returned, read it anew as though you were a reviewer rather than the author. Should the review process become too protracted, you might even develop a separate working paper or oral presentation in which you describe the kinds of feedback you have received and how you are dealing with it. I was having trouble getting past reviewers with a conceptual paper I was developing. I prepared a companion piece subtitled, "Notes on a Working Paper," in which I could take on my critics and give adequate attention to some excellent points that had been raised. This piece made for a lively keynote address, and it was subsequently published in conference proceedings (Wolcott 1991). Instead of beating me down, I treated the review process as a new source of data.

I never read anything of my own in draft—no matter how long I have been working on it—without a pencil, mouse, or trackball in hand, alert for sentences that can be shortened, ideas that can be expressed more clearly, and interpretations that can be strengthened. Once a manuscript is in production, however, compulsive editing must come to a halt. When something I have written finally appears in print, I read with

whatever sense of accomplishment seems warranted, never with a sense of disappointment. Those are my words, my sentences, my ideas. (And, after all that work, they better be mine, just as I wrote them, unless I have been advised of any but the most minor of editorial changes.) I stand by them. At the time they were written, they represented my best shot.

## ON NOT GETTING PUBLISHED

What if you are unable to publish your full account? And what if, realizing that its appeal is limited, you draft a couple of shorter articles reporting aspects of the work, but you are unable to find a suitable journal interested in publishing them? Is that the end of the world? Your career?

Well, not getting published may not do much for your career, but after spending more than four decades in university settings, I can report that I have never heard of an academic promotion or tenure decision based *solely* on someone's publication record. Failure to publish enough seems only a convenient peg on which to hang negative decisions. If you had access to the publication record of everyone promoted at most institutions of higher learning, I think you would be shocked at how little some people have published. (Presumably, they contribute to their institutions in other ways. If everyone were busy writing, who would prepare the institutional reports, call all those meetings, coach the performers, or ration the office space and travel money?)

True, at so-called research universities, you must write, create, produce, or manage *something*, but it strikes me as unlikely that anyone whose motivation for publishing stems only from a preoccupation with tenure or promotion would turn to so time-consuming an activity as qualitative research. Such individuals should not be looking for alternative *forms* of research, but alternatives to research that satisfy criteria for achievement and recognition.

There are numerous alternatives through which respectable contributions can be made to scholarship: synthesis papers, position papers, program descriptions, critical reviews, annotated bibliographies.

No doubt some, perhaps most, of your colleagues are publishing, but take a critical look at how many are publishing original research. What you are reading here, for example, is experience-based and in a scholarly tradition; it even deals with the sacred *topic* of research. But it is not research. Despite such humble origins, I expect it to find a place *somewhere* in the Great World Series in the Sky where academic achievement is recorded.

Assuming that you are committed to qualitative research, I urge you forevermore to regard writing as a vital aspect of the research process, rather than as an activity inexorably linked with publishing. Whether you publish is in no way as critical to your role as a qualitative researcher as whether you complete your studies by making them accessible to others. Every satisfactory effort at qualitative/descriptive research must finally come to rest in some tangible, processed form. Unpublished field notes are not enough. Comprehensive field reports drawn from them, completed but unpublished papers, papers modestly reproduced under the aegis of your agency or department, papers or poster sessions presented at conferences, reports of your work available electronically—all of these contribute and count toward scholarship and, as well, toward your credibility (and visibility) as a researcher who carries work to completion.

I also included titles of some unpublished papers in my professional vita (separately from published ones—I was not trying to pad, only to present a full account), and copies were available, should anyone have asked. I also mentioned them to graduate students, who may not recognize that a successful career doesn't mean that every effort along the way has been a success. Even success can impose a formidable barrier to further writing, especially if it comes with one's earliest publications. Those of us who have been at this awhile also hear whispers that we no longer seem to write as well or as engagingly as we once did. Nor does our every publication receive the recognition we might feel it deserves. We, too, have batting averages. Nobody scores a hit every time.

And thank goodness they don't. There's too much in print already. Not all of our work needs to be published, certainly not in the slick format of expensive journals and books. For the most part, our purposes can be

accomplished with less formal, less expensive formats, such as seminar papers modestly circulated to colleagues *without* the awkward accompanying question, "Where should I send this?"

The good news is that if you are determined enough, you can probably get published someday, somewhere, on screen if not on paper. Electronic publishing is opening things up in ways previously unheard of. Such journals already fill an important gap, offering a quick and inexpensive way to publish by putting articles directly on the Internet without having first appeared in print. The once-tedious process of collegial review has also been speeded up through rapid communication among authors, editors, and reviewers, with possibilities being explored that will surely see the review process become more rapid and more widely shared.

In time, electronic publishing may even become an entry-level prerequisite to publication in printed journals, thus allowing for better screening and selectivity for what is finally published. That might help to ensure that more of the better stuff makes it into print, and that what makes it into print includes more of the better stuff, without unnecessarily cutting down on opportunities for everyone to make their work accessible. But electronic journals are variously perceived as alternatives *to* publishing as well as alternatives *for* it, and we have yet to see how, where (i.e., in which fields), or whether they will come to be regarded vis-à-vis "traditional" publication. Neither my eyes nor my patience seem well adapted for passively reading large bodies of text on screen, but I have been dragged into the computer era nevertheless. We can brace ourselves for extended discussions as the pros and cons are debated about something that seems destined to happen anyway.

By all means, stay with any worthwhile study until you have seen it through to the completion of a clearly conceptualized and well-written account. Make sure that, in some form, accounts of your research reach the hands of the people who share your interests. Without insisting that you must get published, ask their advice in helping to assess the audience you should reach and how much additional effort on your part seems needed and warranted. Published or not, you've

written up your qualitative research. Your work wasn't completed until you did. Or, if not actually completed, at least it is a beginning, and that is something.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

- ✎ There is no such thing as unreported research.
- ✎ There are many forms in which you can make your research available to others.
- ✎ Until you have at least a rough draft of what you have to report, there is no chance of improving it. Start there.
- ✎ No one other than yourself need ever see your early drafts.

### Notes

1. Journal articles and chapters invited for edited volumes account for the wide variety. Looking only at authored books tells a different story. Two were published by university presses, two were solicited and edited by George Spindler, and the four most recent ones were solicited and edited by Mitch Allen. In more ways than one, both men have had a great influence on my views and experience about writing and publishing.

2. See also monographs in the Sage series *Survival Skills for Scholars* that deal specifically with publishing a book (Smedley and Allen 1993) or journal article (Thyer 1994).

3. I thought it might be helpful to identify a few presses by name. I compiled a preliminary list and mailed a one-page questionnaire. One press responded with a form letter of rejection. Another saw little point in compiling such a list. Amber Wilson at UC Press was kind enough to list 27 categories of qualitative study that that press pub-

lishes: African studies, anthropology, art history, Asian studies, classical studies, cultural studies, European history, film, fine arts, gender studies, geography, Jewish studies, Latin American studies, law, linguistics, literary studies, Middle Eastern studies, music, natural history, philosophy, photography, political science, religious studies, science, sociology, and women's studies (personal communication, 15 August 2000). However, six months passed before I received the response. Fair warning: University presses do not seem to be bending over backward to solicit manuscripts. Meanwhile, why not start your own list of possible publishers, based on book exhibits and conversations at professional meetings, the books widely read in your field, and publishers' catalogs?

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