

The Grant Writing Guide: A Road Map for Scholars (Skills for Scholars)

College teachers like to buy books (and sometimes give them away, as this viral tweet recently illustrated). When I was teaching full time, it seemed like most of the conversations I had in the hallways of the English department were focused either on the books we were reading or on the practical problems we were having on the job. Like peanut butter and chocolate, being a college teacher and book buying were meant to go together.

Savvy editors and publishers who connected those two tendencies in recent years have been publishing more and more advice books on faculty work and life. A recent entry into this field: the Skills for Scholars series by Princeton University Press, spearheaded by Peter Dougherty. Formerly the director of the press, he stepped away from that position in 2017, not to fade into the background but to spend the final years of his career taking on a new challenge.

The Skills for Scholars series is the result of Dougherty's late-career ambition and should remain one of his greatest legacies as he prepares to retire this month from the press. His budding collection focuses on everything academics need to know to succeed in higher education — things like how to write a college syllabus, build life-changing courses, craft book proposals, and secure grants. The series now features 12 published books, two more due out early next year, and another 15 under contract.

The titles in this book series that first caught my attention were the ones focused on teaching and learning, such as Ken Bain's Super Courses: The Future of Teaching and Learning and The Craft of College Teaching: A Practical Guide by Robert DiYanni and Anton Borst . But the series also includes advice guides aimed at students, such as Jay Phelan and Terry Burnham's The Secret Syllabus: A Guide to the Unwritten Rules of College Success, and even one aimed at scholars leaving the profession: Christopher L. Catherine's Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide.

Academic writing will take the series spotlight in early 2023. As I have been finishing my own book on writing for academic authors, I have become a fan of the work of Helen Sword , and so I was pleased to learn that she has written a forthcoming book in the series, due out early next year: Writing With Pleasure. Her book will be preceded by The Grant Writing Guide: A Road Map for Scholars, by Betty S. Lai , out in January.

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If you're looking to refresh or polish your academic skills this winter break, the books in this series are a good place to start. The authors are experts in their fields, and they bring a scholarly mindset to the dispensing of advice and ideas. That marriage of scholarship and practical advice was part of what Dougherty wanted to capture in the project and what makes the series unique. Having "long admired great methodological publishing," he said that he "wanted to build something new for the press" and "help elevate the scholarly conversation" around subjects like teaching, writing, and career-building.

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When I first began reading and writing about teaching and learning in higher education, the two primary publishers were Jossey-Bass and Stylus. A few smaller houses and university presses had teaching and learning titles, but nobody else could match the output of Stylus and Jossey-Bass. But that situation has changed considerably since Dougherty conceived of the Scholars series. The trend of publishing books on academic development " especially in the area of teaching and learning " has become something of a movement, one that encompasses multiple university presses. Other publishers regularly releasing titles in this area include the University of Chicago Press, West Virginia University Press, Johns Hopkins University Press, and Harvard University Press.

The Skills for Scholars books offer career-based advice, to be sure, but they enfold it within inventive research frames. If you like your guidance on how to construct a syllabus mixed with a dash of Cicero, Max Weber, and John Dewey, you'll enjoy *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything* by William Germano and Kit Nicholls . If you want to enhance your students' thinking skills, try *How to Think Like Shakespeare: Lessons from a Renaissance Education* by Scott Newstok .

I love a good teaching tip and have made most of a career out of giving teaching advice. But pedagogical advice can fall flat or even be counterproductive when it's divorced from both research and specific disciplinary contexts.

In the Skills for Scholars books, you won't find checklists that you can post to the wall of your office, but you will find inspiration. You also won't find brick-like paragraphs (common to so much academic writing), dropping names and dates to document the source of every phrase or sentence. Such literature-review paragraphs serve a purpose but can make for stultifying reading. Few academic authors can resist mentioning every book and article they have read on their subject. The writers in the Princeton series use their sources in service to the subject, not as displays of their erudition.

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A final point in their favor: The books in this series are short " often clocking in at 200 pages or less. In an era in which we all feel distracted and crunched for time, that brevity is not unimportant. Who doesn't love a great book that can be devoured in a day or two, or even in the space of a few hours?

Laura Portwood-Stacer wrote one of the series's initial books, *The Book Proposal Book: A Guide for Scholarly Authors*, and earlier this year shared some of its advice in an essay for *The Chronicle* on "The High Anxiety of Submitting a Book Proposal." That's an essential skill for anyone in a discipline in which the scholarly monograph is the coin of the realm. "An author who understands the power of a strong proposal in the publishing process," she writes in the book's introduction, "is an author with more power over the fate of their book."

For a long time, faculty members were squeamish about the notion of professionalizing their fields. That same reluctance to publish books on teaching, writing, or administration seemed to color the thinking of acquisition editors at university presses. Career-advice guides were for those with bachelor's degrees "not" doctorate holders driven by the "life of the mind." People muddled their way into faculty jobs without the help of the kind of systematic thinking and research you can find in a university-press title.

Princeton's imprimatur has no doubt helped broaden acceptance of academic-career guides at a time when hundreds of graduate students are badly in need of advice about the profession "advice they may not be getting from their own advisers. Portwood-Stacer said that when she began submitting her own book proposal (on book proposals) to potential publishers, Princeton wasn't even on her radar as an option. Then she heard about its new area of acquisition: scholarly skills books. She found a willing collaborator in Dougherty, who helped bring her vision to life. While he is retiring this month, the future of the series looks bright. "For the past year I have been working with a co-editor," Dougherty said, "my colleague Matt Rohal, who will be assuming full editorship of *Skills for Scholars* when I retire."

If you're in need of a quick read this winter break and a little career inspiration, you can find both in this series.

Reference

[Straightforward Statistics: Understanding the Tools of Research](#)

[Motor Control: Translating Research into Clinical Practice](#)