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Academic Non-Fiction Crafting to Publishing

R. Sooryamoorthy

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Academic Non-Fiction

“The social sciences have benefited from the insights of French ‘deconstructive’ philosophy in its interpretation of ideological gaps and silences. But have the social sciences benefited from the accompanying philosophical language, in which theories and abstractions can obfuscate the human dimension of the issue under investigation? This book offers academics and senior students a language of clarity that avoids simplification while imbuing analysis with the resonance of human subjectivity at the core of the issue.”

—Professor Michael Chapman, *Research Fellow, University of KwaZulu-Natal
and Durban University of Technology, South Africa*

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To Prem Padmanabhan

PREFACE

This book is so dear to my heart. I distilled what I read, learned and wrote in my life to write this book. I wanted to share my experience in writing with the others. This is my first book on writing. I hope that the readers find it resourceful, practical and worth emulating.

I have a special word of thanks for Sarah Hills, my commissioning editor at Palgrave, who was the first to see value in this manuscript. She took particular care in this project and steered through its fruition. My gratitude also goes to the production team, who did a wonderful job in production. I am so grateful to the anonymous reviewers who offered constructive comments on the book. Thanks to my friend Vanessa-Neophytou for her excellent copyediting. She was my first beta leader of the book as well. Her highly professional approach taught me many things. My family—my wife Renjini, son Dakshin, daughter-in-law Hinako, and our cat, Zeus—lent the support the way they could. Zeus was my alarm who wouldn't allow me to overstay in my bed. And finally, to you, my readers, for choosing to read this book.

I met Prem upon his return from overseas. It was immediately after my master's. He hired me as an investigator for a survey. We continued our relationship even after the survey until today. My association with him oriented me to a different way of life, and I inculcated many things during this period. He stood by me in the difficult times. I dedicate this book to him to acknowledge his sincerity.

Durban, South Africa

R. Sooryamoorthy

ABOUT THE BOOK

Academic Nonfiction addresses a gap in crafting and publishing nonfiction, dealing with the challenge of making nonfiction enriched with facts, data and information captivating for a broader readership. The central argument in the book is that nonfiction need not be dull and exclusive, as is often the case. Breaking free from the stereotype of dry and exclusive academic nonfiction, the book provides practical methods for bringing nonfiction projects to fruition. Aiming to guide aspiring and seasoned writers, the book unveils techniques usually kept under wraps, emphasising that academic nonfiction can be both compelling and accessible. Covering essential aspects such as idea generation, time management, writing techniques, technology utilisation including AI, proposal writing, peer reviewing and more, it caters to a diverse readership, including general readers, specialised enthusiasts, students, educators, practitioners, policymakers and academic leaders. The book, designed for easy reading with short chapters, provides a toolkit for anyone interested in fact-based nonfiction writing.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|---|
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| ChatGPT | Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer |
| IMRAD | Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion |
| KDP | Kindle Direct Publishing |
| LLM | Large Language Model |
| ORCID | Open Researcher and Contributor ID |
| OUP | Oxford University Press |
| PM | Palgrave Macmillan |

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PART I

Foundations of Writing Non-Fiction



Nonfiction Horizons

Abstract The nonfiction genre encompasses various forms, with information-based, also known as fact-, data- or research-based, standing out as a prominent category. Typically, this form caters to a limited readership, comprised of specialists interested in the specific themes explored within these titles. This chapter contends that nonfiction titles can be written engagingly to attract a broader readership beyond specialists. Surprisingly, many do not consider seriously making nonfiction enjoyable by incorporating features commonly found in fiction. Drawing from illustrative examples found in successful nonfiction titles, this chapter demonstrates the imperative of rendering research-based nonfiction more engaging and appealing to general readers. It delineates the necessity for a book to guide making nonfiction captivating and elucidates the purposes behind the themes explored in the book. The chapter establishes the context for unravelling the mysteries surrounding the creation of research-based nonfiction, as well as introducing techniques to master the art of writing nonfiction.

Keywords Nonfiction • Fiction • Research-based nonfiction • Crafting nonfiction • Academic writing

About 13.5 billion years ago, matter, energy, time and space came into being in what is known as the Big Bang. The story of these fundamental features of our universe is called physics.

About 300,000 years after their appearance, matter and energy started to coalesce into complex structures, called atoms, which then combined into molecules. The story of atoms, molecules and their interactions is called chemistry.

About 3.8 billion years ago, on a planet called Earth, certain molecules combined to form particularly large and intricate structures called organisms. The story of organisms is called biology.

You just read the initial paragraphs of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* written by Yuval Noah Harari (2014). Through a blend of lucid prose and clear exposition, Harari navigates the reader from one scientific concept to the next in plain language. His book is a treasure of facts and narratives recounting the fascinating evolution of the human species. As you flip through the pages, absorbing knowledge becomes an immersive experience, like enjoying a gripping tale.

Turn the pages of the book to view the images. You will see the caption of a handprint from approximately 30,000 years ago. It reads, ‘Somebody tried to say, “I was here!”’ A thoughtful one! Explore the section titles in the book: Skeletons in the Closet, A Race of Cooks and Our Brothers’ Keepers—quite intriguing.

Unsurprisingly, this book transcended borders to become an international bestseller—it turns the journey of human history into a narrative adventure. This is a nonfiction title filled with facts and stories. But it reads like a novel.

Harari prompts us to question why nonfiction, based on facts, couldn’t adopt his approach—readable, enjoyable and accessible. Many predecessors and contemporaries, both before and after him, have demonstrated that it’s possible: Carl Sagan (*Cosmos*, 2013 for instance), Richard Feynman (2011) who conveyed complex ideas with simplicity and humour, Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*, 2011), Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 2002), Oliver Sacks (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 1998), Jared Diamond (*Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 1997) and many more.

There are titles I couldn’t complete reading, not even halfway through. Why don’t writers take a leaf from the authors who elevated nonfiction to a new level?

The inspiration for this book on writing nonfiction focused on research-based narratives sprang from pondering such thoughts. How can we make research-rich nonfiction more accessible to a broader readership, breaking free from the confines of specialised audiences? Why should exploring facts and information in nonfiction be associated with dryness, lifelessness and boredom? Research-based nonfiction needn't be dry and monotonous, which is the case with many titles. It shouldn't cater exclusively to specialised readers either.

Writing has given rise to a flourishing publishing industry. The 2022 report of the American Association of Publishers recorded a revenue of \$28.1 billion from publishing.¹ The industry grew by 11 per cent during 2018–2022. About 4 million books are released every year by traditional and self-publishers. These figures amount to 11,000 titles a day and 457 titles per hour.² Steven Piersanti, citing the Bowker, the organisation responsible for assigning International Standard Book Numbers (ISBN), reported that 2.3 million books were self-published in the USA in 2021. The 50 largest publishing groups worldwide made a combined revenue of 51 billion euros in 2017 (Clark & Phillips, 2020). Astonishing statistics!

Do these figures convey a message to us? Yes, of course. There's space for everyone to become a writer. The opportunity is there. What is required is the desire and the resolve to write.

Years ago, on a spring day, a new colleague joined my department. An imposing and composed figure, he carried himself with quiet, unwavering confidence. His impeccable attire caught my attention—a stark contrast to some of my peers who displayed a penchant for shorts and faded turtle-neck tees.

I was given the task of being his mentor, guiding him through the intricate web of life within the department and the labyrinthine structures of the institution. Often, we would visit the grand multistorey library, with its walls adorned in darkly tinted Italian glass. The library was a mere

¹The American Association of Publishers represents the leading book and journal publishers in the USA. For breakdown of the figures check <https://publishers.org/news/aap-statshot-annual-report-publishing-revenues-totaled-28-10-billion-for-2022/#:~:text=Estimated%20Industry%20Revenue%20for%202022,in%20terms%20of%20estimated%20revenue> (accessed 7 September 2023).

²<https://wordrated.com/number-of-books-published-per-year-2021/>. Accessed 7 September 2023.

stone's throw away from our offices. We strolled along the stone-paved path leading to it, being careful to steer clear of the prickly tips of the age-old yet short Cypresses.

As we walked through the main entrance and past the turnstiles, our gaze was drawn to three imposing display stands, each angled for optimal visibility before anyone could see the front desk a few yards ahead. The stands played host to the library's latest acquisitions in a vibrant array of colours and sizes.

My colleague had a unique ritual. He would reach out to these fresh arrivals, his fingers gently caressing their covers. His eyes would light up. Our library mostly stocked print copies. E-books hadn't become common yet. With a sense of reverence, he would draw them close to his chest. He would then turn the book over to look at the back cover before even glimpsing at the front. I would be right there beside him, not as absorbed in the new arrivals as he was but in silent companionship.

Then, he would turn back the book to reveal its front cover.

I observed his peculiar habit; he seemed more entranced by the books' exteriors than what lay within their pages. His eyes seldom past the covers. I hesitated to ask his predilection for the book jackets as we were still getting to know each other. One day, my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked.

What's it you seek within those covers?

He glanced at me with a hint of timidity in his eyes, then, gesturing to the writer's biography on the back cover, he replied.

I want to be like this one day.

His reply was immediate, showing me the profile of the author on the cover.

I would like to see my name in print, on a book cover like this.

His eyes filled with aspiration. After a brief silence, he declared, 'One day, I will write my own.' His tone resonated with conviction, and he continued.

I want the world to know my thoughts. But I don't know how to do this. When I see volumes like this, I can't help but wonder how these authors have managed to write so many pages.

People are drawn to books for many reasons. For my colleague, it was for his self-actualisation.

We've two broad genres: fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction was relatively overlooked (Wray & Lewis, 1996), but its landscape has, however, transformed. The rapid proliferation of information and the generation of knowledge has increased the production of research-based nonfiction works. Scholarly nonfiction has become an integral aspect of contemporary knowledge-based societies, where information and knowledge serve as foundational elements driving economic growth and development. So we've the scope and prospects to become writers of nonfiction.

There's no shortage of books about writing and publishing, for both fiction and nonfiction. A distinctive void nonetheless exists.

In my study, I have 19 books that I collected for my reading on writing, nonfiction and general writing. These include great works like Stephen King's (2000) *On Writing: The Memoir of the Craft* and William Zinsser's (1976 [2005]) *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. I have the book by Joli Jensen (2017), *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*, Joanna Penn's (2018) *How to Write Non-Fiction: Turn Your Knowledge into Words*, John Warner's (2019) *The Writer's Practice: Building Confidence in Your Nonfiction Writing*, Howard Becker's (2020) *Writing for Social Scientists* and other handbooks for writing such as the *Handbook of Writing Research* (edited by Charles A. MacArthur et al., 2006) and Sally Hayward's (2015) *Writing for the Academic Disciplines*. These are valuable resources to learn the art of writing.

I'm yet to find a book that aids writers in crafting nonfiction enriched with facts, data and information. More glaring is the absence of resources that encourage us to make scholarly nonfiction engaging and captivating.

This book aims to address the specific gap. The intention is to show prospective and established writers how to write in the research-based nonfiction genre that attracts both general and specialised readers. It's about writing in a compelling way to make the information and presentation engaging. That's where the future of this genre lies—not isolated from readers. The market for research-based nonfiction is expanding.