



Africa Institute  
of South Africa  
*Development Through Knowledge*

# FROM THESIS TO BOOK

*Guidelines for emerging Authors*





## FROM THESIS TO BOOK

These guidelines were developed by the HSRC Editorial Board at a workshop held for emerging authors in 2022 and are intended for writers of scholarly books.

### **Have a book proposal?**

Submit it to the Commissioning Editor.

Before doing so, though, we encourage you to read the Guidelines for Authors.

### **Commissioning Editor**

HSRC Press  
Private Bag X9182  
Cape Town 8000  
South Africa

T +27 (0)21 466 7878

F +27 (0)21 461 0836

[MNxawe@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:MNxawe@hsrc.ac.za)

### ***How are prospective publications reviewed by the HSRC Press?***

All reviews are independent assessments of the full manuscript on a double-blind basis (anonymous author-anonymous reader) by at least two recognised specialists in the broad area of the manuscript's focus, using the following criteria:

- the soundness and relevance of the social science scholarship to HSRC research priorities
- the importance of the subject matter and originality of the approach
- the strength of argument
- the clarity of the organisation and quality of the writing
- the clear theoretical framework, as well as conceptual coherence

Reviewers' reports are submitted to our independent Editorial Board for consideration. The Board, in turn, makes recommendations on the publication or not of manuscripts under review.

### **OPEN ACCESS**

#### ***What is open access?***

HSRC Press is Africa's leading scholarly publisher committed to the dissemination of high-quality social sciences and humanities research-based books, in print and electronic form. HSRC Press has an online open access platform, a pioneering model established in 2003, ensuring strong worldwide impact and dissemination of its distinctive, evidence-based books, as well as global access to the important research content inside these books. Our open access also contributes significantly to knowledge production. The worldwide access to our knowledge helps broaden the research base, particularly for African-led research, and results in high citation for researchers. Our online readership is 35 times the number of books we sell annually worldwide.

Based on 2013 Google Analytics data, HSRC Press book titles were downloaded from 212 countries worldwide in the 10 years since HSRC Press launched its open access platform. Initially, the US and Europe were our top regional users. Today, India and Kenya are on our top 10 list, with Zimbabwe, China, Brazil and Botswana among the top 20 list of countries that download our books. Africa is the fastest-growing region in terms of readership of HSRC Press books on open access, having grown from zero percent of our downloads in 2003 to over 25% in 2013 and more than 30% in 2016. Recent entrants to our open access platform include Myanmar, Russia and Indonesia.

#### **How to view or download books from Open Access**

In order to access downloads to HSRC Press titles please register using the button below. You need to be logged in whenever you want to read these selected titles. Once you have logged in you can browse the Books section. Titles available for downloads have been clearly marked "Open Access". If you are not logged in you will see the lock device next to download, prompting you to log in first. Once you have selected the title you want to download you can click on the "downloads" tab to download the book directly to your device.

## FIRST THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Not all PhD theses are suitable to be converted to books. If it's too specialised, it's better to do a journal article. Dissertations tend to be technical in nature, demonstrating adherence to all the technical requirements of the research process, whereas scholarly books, while rigorous, are focussed on compelling and persuasive arguments. While a great deal of work may be required to convert a thesis to a book, the process is all-important. Book proposals result in a binary of "Reject vs. Accept". Rejection is an outcome for many new book proposals, but this should not deter determined authors from persevering. Rejected proposals often lead to new ideas, fresh approaches and ultimately to great books.

## SHOULD YOU CONVERT YOUR THESIS TO A BOOK?

Intellectual and scholarly work including PhD theses are implicitly publishable, but not necessarily as a book. This will depend on the field, whether the content is suitable for a journal article or a book or other format, the subject matter, cohesion (a single set of ideas that is suitable for a book) as opposed to collections, the breadth of the targeted audience and the wideness of the potential readership. If one is to consider a book, the audience/readership should be a fairly wide audience, not just examiners.

A mental shift is required to convert a PhD thesis to a book: you are not publishing a thesis but rather a book based on a thesis. Never underestimate this shift, as it will affect everything from style to tone, to structure.

Your starting point should be to engage the publisher's guidelines for new book proposals. These are vastly different to academic proposals for theses and content outlines.

It often works to take a step back from your thesis and come back to it with fresh eyes.

## THESIS VERSUS BOOKS

### *THESIS*

Not every thesis is suited to conversion to a book. In general, if the topic is highly specialised, it is probably better for the author to convert their thesis to a journal article.

Should your thesis be suited to conversion, you will nonetheless need to do a lot of work to make this happen.

*Theses and scholarly books have these distinguishing characteristics:*

### *THESIS*

- Points towards a degree or qualification
- Narrow readership
- Has sequential chapters
- Shows checks for robustness

### *A SCHOLARLY BOOK*

- Points towards readership and research impact. Therefore, the pitch is different, for example how to engage with the Literature
- Wide readership; books are impactful and engage the attention of the reader. Therefore, the onus on a book author is to gain, grab and hold interest
- Readers should be able to dip in and out. Therefore, the structure of theses and books is different. The structure of a book does not follow the predictable structure of a thesis
- There is not so much need to show empirical methods and testing, although arguments made must

still be convincing and backed by evidence.

## SOME BROAD GUIDELINES

Books are structured across issues and themes rather than steps. The Literature Review and methodology need to be written into the content rather than as standalone chapters or sections. The reader should understand the approach taken from the main narrative. When crafting the outline for a book based on a thesis, consider how the theory and analysis hold together and what the focus is.

Ethical considerations and plagiarism checks are required for theses: make sure these same aspects are in place for books. Because books are aimed at wide audiences, critical considerations are:

- You want people to read your book, tweak accordingly to a book format (making use of the publisher's guidelines).
- Avoid esoteric jargon. If they are necessary, explain them to an engaged but non-specialist audience.
- Books have scholarly merit – therefore conversion from a PhD to a book does not mean dumbing down.
- Always consider the shelf life of your book concept: books should not become outdated too quickly and in general should hold their relevance in terms of knowledge production.

### Chapters:

The reader should be able to read and understand your book - not necessarily in sequence, but the reader should be able to chapter hop too.

**Structure:** Not based on stages of research like in a thesis, but it should be structured based on issues.

**Literature:** Generally formalistic, methodology woven into literature.

## GUIDELINES ON CRAFTING A NARRATIVE FROM A THESIS

There is no one correct way of converting a thesis to a book, therefore the following should be regarded as a general guideline. When converting a thesis to a book, you are creating and telling a story within the humanities that can appeal to general audiences as well as specialists in the field. It is important for the first few chapters of a book to situate the content.

Creative methods can be used in books to draw the reader in and spark the imagination, for example, the use of poems, photos, real-life experiences, content that brings the relevance to the start of the book.

The narrative of a book, unlike a thesis, moves away from the technical features and removes ongoing repetition used to make points in a thesis. In a book, one can front the methodology as a story to unpack the context, the ethical considerations, for example "White Woman in Little Beirut". In this way, the methodology can be an interesting feature of the book.

Most books mention the conceptual framing at the beginning – but not in a dense way. In some books, where the theory can be used to point out interesting observations, you may have chapters that deliberately focus on these aspects of the theory. So, it really is about keeping the story going, and keeping the reader's interest alive.

### *Titles and Blurbs*

Titles and blurbs tell a story too. Book titles must be intriguing, unique but also clear about the content. Titles for theses are hardly ever suitable for books. Titles, and the blurbs that tell readers about the book should be in plain language to ensure accessibility to wide readerships.

**Write a blurb for your book as an exercise:** does one, convincing story come through? If so, you can proceed with developing a book proposal.

Chapter titles need to reflect the imagination of the reader and spark interest. Details in writing are very

important. Write with the audience in mind, write analytically – no overexplaining. Ensure that your references are correct.

**Blurb** : people need to know what you wrote about in a short and informative way.

The Foreword to a book is important but need not be a contribution from an acclaimed scholar. It could be from a research participant or someone who is experienced in the field or who has lived through the context described.

## CRAFTING A BOOK PROPOSAL

Why write a proposal for a book? Now that you have a broad understanding of how to write a scholarly book, you may want to submit a book proposal. A proposal gives a clear idea of why you want to write a topic and who your audience is. It allows you to enter a conversation with the envisaged work as well as with other work that has been written in the field. A proposal helps to begin circulating ideas in a broader domain. It helps you to harness a twin discipline of being compelling and cohesive at the same time.

A proposal also helps to fine-tune and develop your narrative, as well as to foreground its originality and significance.

### *The importance of a proposal*

A proposal is imperative for making a pitch by persuading for the mobilisation of a readership to a central topic or idea. It is vital to have a sense of the type of publisher you want, and therefore to do research about the publisher and their footprint.

### *Components of a good proposal*

- There is no one size fits all for book proposals, and therefore templates are seldom recommended. A good proposal makes clear the argument or story for the book and foregrounds the one central topic or idea.

- A proposal makes it clear why the proposed content is suitable for a book (and not a report, or collection, or article, etc.).

- Good proposals highlight fresh ideas, what in the book will be new and/or whether the book fills a gap in the field (which could even be by way of offering an innovative or exciting shift in the debate).

- Good proposals also ensure that there is a sound conceptual frame to the book.

- Good proposals are analytical, clear, concise.

- Proposals include short synopses that zero in concisely on what the text is about; following this the proposal can go into more detailed description.

- A good proposal shows how the chapters flow together.

- It also shows that your book can be read in conversation with other texts and how it shifts the debate.

- The envisaged book specification and workplan can be included in brief at the end of the proposal (an indication of the anticipated word count of the manuscript and the date when the manuscript is expected).

## Elements to consider when preparing a book proposal:

- What is the book about?

- Does it fill a gap in the field?

- What is innovative about the book? Is it fresh, intellectual ideas?

- Is there a conceptual framework?

- Why is this a book and not a journal article?

- Title – brevity! What are the existing competing

titles?

- Synopsis
- Persuasiveness
- Intended audience
- Indicate a timeline of when the manuscript will be done.
- Include a short bio.
- Ensure to have a neat presentation of the proposal submission. Be sure to take care of the proposals, that shows the Board how much care you'll take with your manuscript.
- Proposal can be 10 to 15 pages long; include your most innovative chapters.
- Don't make claims in your proposal that the Board can easily refute.

### **Beware of the following:**

Proposals that are too descriptive and that do not foreground the freshness or convince the Editorial Board why a reader would want to read this book.

Premature book proposals, hurried proposals or proposals reflect that you are under pressure to publish.

Thin proposals that fail to answer all the key questions? Avoid at all costs.

Proposals that lack coherence and clarity.

Losing sight of the one, convincing story of your book. This should always come through. Work that is based on opinion. Your book must be based on evidence and interpret that evidence.

Submitting proposals to more than one publisher at a time. This can create unnecessary obstacles.

Working in isolation. It is important to get input to your writing, to talk to others in the field to prompt a community of practice.

The importance of wide appeal of books, even though scholarly in content, cannot be stressed enough. There is no rule for book first or article first.

If applicable, check whether any previously published components in your book can or should or may be republished in your book.

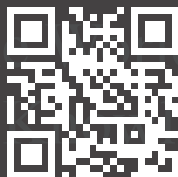
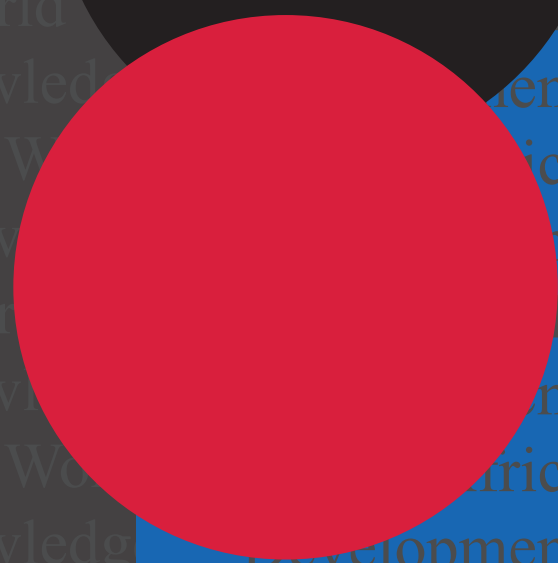
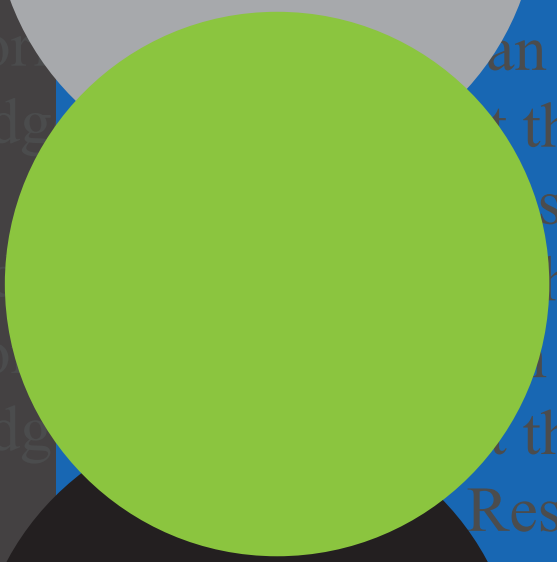
There are diverse ways to make your work relevant to the contemporary, for example referencing current contexts.

Your book should have relevance for at least 5 years. Authors must treat their work with high importance.

Lastly, and this is to repeat the earlier advice, the conversion of a thesis to a scholarly book entails significant reworking as well as a substantial mental shift.

We hope you have found this guide helpful, and look forward to receiving your book proposal.

Development through Knowledge  
Taking African Research to the World



[www.hsrcpress.ac.za](http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za)