A Guide for Faculty Book Workshops

prepared by

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for the

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CISSR
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This guide is designed to help everyone involved in a book workshop get the most out of it. It is neither a rule-book nor a rigid agenda. If this document succeeds, authors and workshop participants will carry with them to the workshop principles by which to restore focus to a meandering conversation, leaven an exchange that is dragging, cheer a discouraged author, or stop him when he recites a truism without thinking. Ideally, the author will have a clear idea of how to revise the manuscript after the workshop. But good conversation is its own reward too.

Sometimes the material under discussion includes the whole draft of the manuscript; sometimes only a book proposal and a couple of chapters are available for review. In any case, the book workshop is not like a dissertation defense. If the defense is about proving an author knows his stuff, the book workshop is about communication. The workshop should help the author articulate (or articulate more elegantly): 1) what question the manuscript poses; 2) what answer it offers; and 3) why it matters at all—to others who study similar phenomena but also to people outside of academia. This is a fundamental requirement of the workshop, and it is deceptively simple. The sheer density of research material that an author must integrate into his book can pull him down like a diver in freefall. A successful workshop will provide ropes up to the surface, if they are not already in place, to enable the author to communicate to others all that he has seen and understood during his archival and/or ethnographic dive.

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PREPARING FOR THE WORKSHOP

Things to bring:

- ▢ **A marked up copy of the manuscript for your own use.** If you need a hard copy sent to you by post, contact the organizer or author at least a few weeks beforehand.

- ▢ **The current table of contents and a version of the table of contents that you think is better.** Feel free to reorder and retitle chapters. A good table of contents will have chapters that all seem necessary to the success of the book and that appear in their only logical order. Chapters that are ordered chronologically are easier to plot. If a book is organized around themes, the ordering may need extra scrutiny. Chapters should not seem like collected articles, a common problem for revised dissertations. They should also be consistent in form and length without being formulaic.

- ▢ **A couple of line-edited pages of the manuscript for the author.** If you do not feel comfortable editing, simply print a couple of pages and highlight a writerly tic that irritates or distracts you.

Things to watch out for:

- ▢ jargon-filled passages that try to introduce too many concepts
- ▢ gratuitous neologisms
- ▢ clunky signposting ("In this chapter, I will show...")
- ▢ excessive abstraction within sentences (talk of levels, aspects, factors, structures or agentless processes described with nominalizations, e.g., intellectualization, routinization, and so on)
- ▢ confusing citational practices, such as long strings of author-date citations or unexplained quotes from other scholars
- ▢ tangled grammar (long sentences that include many shifts between grammatical subjects, pronouns with ambiguous referents, misplaced modifiers)
- ▢ formulaic prose or, on the other hand, artificially folksy or cliché-heavy conversational asides (see page 8 for resources on editing)

Answer (written or unwritten) the following questions:

How would you describe this book, in a few sentences, to a friend or colleague? What is the general argument, and why does it matter? Ideally the answer to the latter question will not be strictly methodological (e.g., understanding x demands attention to y) or relevant only to a small group of specialists. Focus on what the manuscript accomplishes rather than simply what it is about. It can be surprisingly helpful for authors to hear their projects summarized by sympathetic colleagues. Discrepancies between participants can also help flag ambiguities in the argument.

For what courses would you make the successfully revised version of this book required reading? And what are three to four other well-known books that would be assigned in this hypothetical course? What would students get from this book that they won't get from the others? Many authors, especially first-time authors, are still tentatively positioned in relation to other more established scholars in their fields. Discussing with colleagues how this book could secure a place for itself on syllabi is a way of prompting an author to make a claim for the comparative value of his work while also identifying the "comparable books" that publishers, who are tasked with fitting any new book into the existing market, expect to see in a book proposal. Do not choose unrealistic comparables (general audience bestsellers) or excessively specialized titles ($120 monographs). Aim for the middle.

AT THE WORKSHOP

In general, participants should commit to having productive disagreements; bland consensus won't help the author and will, frankly, be boring. Most important, everyone at the table should guard against the all-too-common tendency for conversations to pool into small, tangential eddies. Resist the urge to dwell in uncontroversial details and return often to the big questions—those listed above for which you should have thought of answers, and those listed below. This is the most important point of this guide.

With that said, focusing on the big picture does not mean losing sight of what is written on the page. Often what appears to be a conceptual problem turns out to be a writerly one, or vice versa. Your conversation about the manuscript should hold both the conceptual and the linguistic in unblinking view. It is never wrong to let what is on the page guide you. On the other hand, an ungrounded conversation about big ideas, however interesting, usually will not result in a better manuscript.

Start by answering the big questions

At the beginning of the workshop, the author will briefly take a few minutes to propose answers to the questions listed above (what the book accomplishes, why it matters, which syllabi she hopes to break into, and which books she hopes hers will be read alongside). Commentators should then chime in. Beginning the discussion with these questions will help everyone around the table assess whether they are excited by the same aspects of the manuscript. If you reach easy agreement on these issues—great!—keep going! If there are discrepancies or points of confusion, try to clarify the stakes, but don't get stuck here. There will be a chance to return to big-picture questions at the end of the workshop.

Discuss the main chapters

Before delving into each chapter, work together to trace the narrative arc of the book as it stands and ensure that it propels the reader from one chapter to the next. Compare the revised versions of the table of contents that everyone brought. Did anyone reorder chapters?

The chapter-by-chapter discussion can certainly go in the order set out in the table of contents (starting with the introduction), but progressing from page one to the end can seem a bit forced and plodding. Skip the introduction for now. Instead take a few minutes to agree on one chapter that is particularly successful. Which chapter is well written, convincingly argued, and elegantly structured? After you have agreed which stands out, dig further into the chapter and discuss all its positive qualities.

After you have discussed the successful chapter, go through the rest of the chapters, noting where each falls short of the high standard set by the best. Here you should follow the order of the table of contents. (Of course, if the manuscript is not yet complete, work with what you have.)

Your discussions should address each of the following points:

- ▢ How could the chapter title be made more compelling?
- ▢ Does the chapter appear in the most logical place within the manuscript? If not, where should it go?
- ▢ How could the overall structure be improved?
- ▢ Where does the author assume too much knowledge of the expected reader? Is there background information that might be necessary to reach a broader audience?
- ▢ Are there ways to make the chapter opener more compelling?
- ▢ Which concepts are essential to the argument, and which seem gratuitous? Is the conceptual scaffolding sound?
- ▢ Is the secondary literature treated fairly, and is it gracefully intertwined with the author's own argument? Which references can be cut or given less prominent treatment?
- ▢ When does the author project the strongest voice? When does he lose it?
- ▢ Which parts of the chapter are most reminiscent of a dissertation?
- ▢ Are there examples of deft transitions between empirical and theoretical registers? Which transitions seem strained or awkward?

Return to the introduction and strengthen the conclusion

It should be easier at the end of the workshop to return to the framing chapters: the introduction and conclusion. In addition to the above questions, pay special attention to the following.

INTRODUCTION

- The author has about two minutes to hook a reader. Are you hooked at the outset, or is there another more compelling entry point to the book?
- Does the introduction address itself to a readership of more than a handful of specialists? How could that readership be enlarged?
- Are the stakes of the project clear? The introduction does not have to outline the whole argument, but the importance of the topic should be plain.
- How can the last few pages of the introduction be revised to make the reader more eager to continue to chapter 1?

CONCLUSION

- The conclusion should look back on how much terrain has been covered while broadening the vista considerably.
- Does the author do himself justice in reviewing his accomplishments in the book?
- Could the conclusion be more ambitious, speculative, or suggestive?
- Does the book end on a powerful and satisfying note? How could it be improved?

Ending the workshop

Revisit the questions with which the workshop began. Has anyone changed his mind? Or has the workshop bolstered the consensus?

PREPARING FOR THE WORKSHOP

The success of the workshop depends on your having invited the right people, guided the conversation, and taken legible notes.

Inviting participants

Invite no more than five participants.	It is too difficult to have a conversation that involves more than a table-full of people, and you want everyone in the room to have read your writing and done a minimum of preparatory work.
The mix of participants should reflect your discipline and geographic area of expertise, but it should also include people who work further afield.	For example, if you are a historian of the Middle East, invite one or two people whose work mirrors your own. You should also invite an anthropologist or sociologist of the Middle East and a historian of Europe or Asia. Having this mix will ensure that you come away with an understanding of what questions might draw a variety of readers to your work.
Invite only people whose advice you think will be pertinent, specific, and constructive.	This is not the forum to assemble the most famous scholars in your field who may or may not read your work. A book workshop is one of the few forums left at which academic celebrity has little value. Cherish this opportunity!
Invite people whose suggestions you can afford not to follow up on.	For professional reasons, it may be politically perilous or simply stressful to have senior members of your own department involved in your book workshop since they may eventually review your promotion or tenure file. You also need to have the flexibility to reject certain suggestions if you find them unpersuasive of if they conflict with those that other participants have offered. The workshop gives you space to improve your project quite apart from the strain of professional auditing and review. Try to preserve the integrity and safety of that space.
If you have a relationship with an editor at a publishing house, feel free to invite her.	If the prospect of her participation frightens you, well, then don't. After the workshop—and before committing to major rewrites—you may want to confirm that she thinks the changes would enhance the project's appeal to her expected readership.

Helping participants prepare (logistics)

- ▢ Send participants a single PDF and a single Word file of the manuscript (or the proposal and chapters) at least one month before the workshop. Do not send a zip folder vor multiple attachments.
- ▢ Accommodate participants who would like to be mailed hard copies.
- ▢ Remind participants one to two weeks before the workshop to bring the items listed above (the printed manuscript, the line-edited pages, and so on).

AT THE WORKSHOP

If someone is not taking notes for you (the preferable option), jot down important points in the manner that you find most comfortable, but be aware that your energy and concentration will inevitably flag during the course of the day. One balanced tactic is to take a few quick notes while conversations are in full swing. Then, while participants are breaking between sections, spend five to ten minutes recording the most important points in greater detail.

Do not dominate the discussion. Facilitating occasionally means remaining silent while your readers have a chance to pursue a conversation among themselves. Also, receiving critique is not altogether easy, and it may be hard not to feel defensive. You can't let your need to defend your ideas get in the way of clarifying the response that your work has elicited. If you find yourself getting uncomfortable, refocus the table's attention on what is written on the page and ask: "which passage prompts your comment, and how can I improve it?"

Things to remember:

- ▢ Use an audio recorder.
- ▢ Bring this guide and return to it if you need help guiding the discussion.
- ▢ Collect the line-edited pages that participants brought to the workshop.

Work within your time constraints, and endeavor to stick with the schedule that you set beforehand. However, don't cut short a fruitful conversation just for the sake of timing. Some problems in the manuscript may demand considerable time to diagnose. Exploring one problem in full may reveal a recurrent issue in the manuscript, and discussing solutions to that one instance will give you the tools you need to address the others.

After the workshop—the same day

Spend a half hour after the workshop has adjourned writing everything that comes to mind. You likely will not already have in place a plan for revision. That's fine; just try to capture in writing the intellectual sparks that the gathering has generated.

After the workshop—the following weeks

Thank participants (of course), and follow up with specific questions if you find you need a point clarified or if you fear you have misunderstood a suggestion. Review the tape before deciding you need further assistance.

Start working on a general plan for revision; do not return immediately to sentence-level edits. Keep the broader perspective in view until you have articulated a revision plan that inspires your confidence. Only then should you attack fine-grained changes.

Remember that you need not take up every suggestion that the workshop has produced. At this point, you may be fed up with your manuscript and willing to take any suggestion that your readers offer you if it will only just make the revision process end. However, letting others guide you without staying attuned to where the project itself wants to go can be dangerous. You will never please every reader, and trying to do so may in fact diminish the appeal of your work. The workshop should leave you feeling more confident in your project—not less. Trust your instincts. You still know more about your work than anyone else does. If you find yourself pulled in too many directions, take a moment to think your way toward the right one. And then commit to it.

EDITING	
On Writing Well William Zinsser	This is a breezy general guide to the basics of classic prose.
The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century Steven Pinker, especially chapters 1-3	Pinker explores the mechanics of why exploring complex subjects can result in bad writing. He gets beyond scolding pretty quickly and moves to subjects that are of particular use to academics, including "the curse of knowledge," using concrete, visualizable language even when discussing abstract subjects, and creative ways of "signposting."
They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein	Useful for scholars who have difficulty incorporating the secondary literature without losing their voices or mystifying readers. See in particular chapters 2 and 3, on summarizing and quoting.
Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction--and Get It Published Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato	This book is geared toward trade nonfiction writers, but the substantive editorial advice is applicable to everyone who aspires to write a cogently structured book in fluent, accessible prose.
Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition Renni Browne and Dave King	Don't be put off by the title of this book; it is terrific for people who write ethnographic vignettes or long-form reportage. Specific advice about crafting effective dialogue, for example, can help elevate your writing from a dry I-was-here-and-this-happened account to something that people actually enjoy reading.
"Free Indirect Style" from That Self-Forgetful Perfectly Useless Concentration Alan Shapiro	For many years, a movement has been gathering within the social sciences to develop a new "experimental" style of writing that is more suited to the multi-perspectival nature of our world. For writers contemplating a more supple style of prose that eschews the dry analytical voice of traditional social science, don't go it alone. Read what other writers have to say, starting with the poet Alan Shapiro, who has written perhaps the most succinct exploration of what it means to escape our usual generic constraints and adopt a revelatory and fresh style of writing.
PUBLISHING	
Getting it Published A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books, Third Edition William Germano	This is a practical guide for an aspiring author on how to get published at an academic press with step-by-step advice about everything from the proposal stage to signing a contract and beyond.
From Dissertation to Book, Second Edition William Germano	A great resource for first-time authors, full of clear, widely applicable examples.
The Chicago Manual of Style, Seventeenth Edition	Definitive guidance on citation styles and all practical aspects of authorship (also available online at chicagomanualofstyle.org)
The Association of American University Presses Directory	A handy reference of all members of the Association of American University Presses. For a directory of links to individual university presses, see aaupnet.org/aaup-members/membership-list. Most university press websites offer submission guidelines and a list of editors by field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CISSR BOOK WORKSHOPS

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CISSR Book Workshops offer University of Chicago faculty the opportunity to present an in-progress manuscript to a small, constructive audience of experts. Faculty members who wish to workshop an in-progress book manuscript related to CISSR's core interests and priorities can apply for a book workshop award. The award is used to gather colleagues, editors, and other key readers; CISSR staff coordinate the logistics of the event, allowing faculty to focus their energies exclusively on the substance of the workshop. Visit the CISSR website to learn more about the workshops, submit an application, and download a PDF version of this guide.

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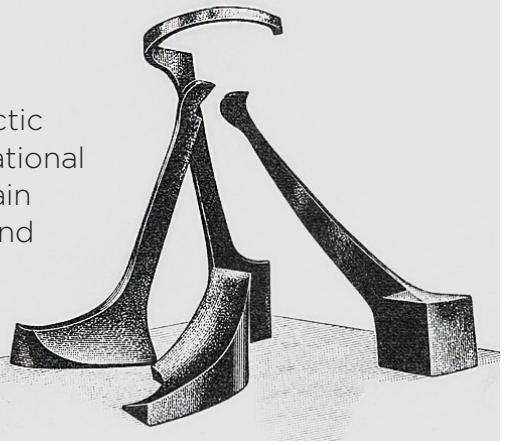

A rendering of Virginio Ferrari's 1971 sculpture, *Dialogo,* which stands at the entrance of the CISSR offices in the Albert Pick Hall for International Studies.

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