Dissertation versus Book

By Boyd Zenner, University of Virginia Press

As an acquiring editor at a university press, I often receive submissions from young scholars who apparently have not been given much, if any, guidance on how to revise a dissertation into a book. In today's tough publishing climate, it doesn't make sense for a prospective author to handicap him- or herself by sending out a proposal or manuscript whose appeal is obscured by typical "dissertationese," making it difficult for an editor to see the countours of the book beneath.

The difference between a dissertation and a book is straightforward. A dissertation is designed to show a faculty committee that an author is thoroughly conversant with and capable of analyzing the scholarship in a given field, and can substantiate--with suitable references--any claims advanced. At the book manuscript stage, this fundamental mastery is a given, and the emphasis shifts to what is original about the author's work, and to how clearly and convincingly this information is conveyed.

A book's argument should be logically conceived and tightly structured. Confidently advanced arguments do not call attention to their own existence with phrases such as "this study will demonstrate" and "my research suggests," nor do they lean (visibly) upon the assertions of others. A good manuscript must be solidly grounded in meticulous research, but this foundation--like that of a house--should not show. For the most part, appearances by other critics should be relegated to the scholarly apparatus and their comments not invoked directly in the text itself. (Let me add that the notes section is not the place to continue an argument begun earlier in the book: if a point is really worth making, it belongs within the text.)

Generally, the review of the literature with which dissertations in many fields begin should be eliminated in the revision process, along with quagmires of unnecessary specialized language and any other impediments to clarity and succinctness. The notion that "complicated ideas require complicated language" is nonsense, if "complicated language" is taken to mean jargon and stilted, passive-voice prose. Ideas, complicated or not, cannot be understood perfectly unless they are couched in lucid terms. This is particularly important if the author hopes to reach a cross-disciplinary audience and/or a general readership.

Obviously, the recommendations above are very basic. For writers seeking detailed guidance on revising their dissertations, two excellent resources (among the many available) are William Germano's GETTING IT PUBLISHED (Chicago 2001) and Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato's THINKING LIKE YOUR EDITOR (Norton 2002), the latter particularly good for those hoping to reach a wider readership interested in serious nonfiction.