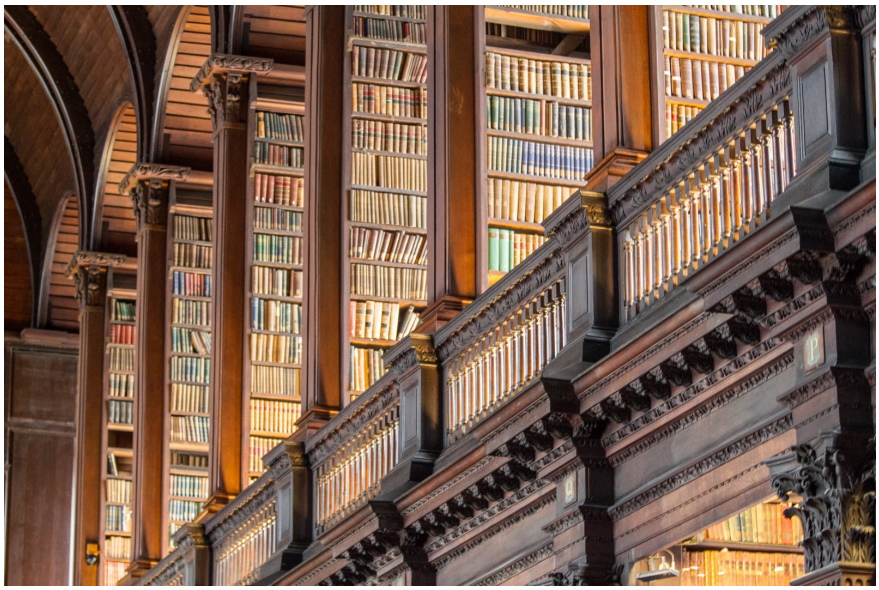
W. W. Norton Follow
Independent publishers since 1923. www.wwnorton.com
May 13, 2016 · 4 min read

10 Tips for Academics Writing for a General Audience

by Alane Salierno Mason, W. W. Norton Executive Editor



The Long Room, Trinity College Dublin. (Photo by Tony Webster.)

1) Keep your introduction brief, and introductory. Many academic introductions take on the task of presenting the entire book in miniature. In a trade book, the introduction to a book is the entrance hall—a place to hang up your coat, adjust to the temperature, meet your hosts, get a sense of why they have invited you over, appreciate their aesthetic sensibility and perhaps background, before stepping into the first room. It is not a quick tour around the whole house really fast before going through it all again slowly.

2) People the story. As one academic pointed out to a publishing panel, "You talk a lot about narrative. We academics all think our work has a narrative, but I think you must mean something different than we do. Do your narratives have to have people in them?" The short answer

is yes, the more successfully you can write about people, and use their stories to carry the weight of your research, the more likely the book is to reach a wide audience. It is, of course, not the only way to do so. In some great books, an idea or a place is really the protagonist. Making the reader care as much about the idea or place as he or she might about a human character is hard to do, but a literary achievement when it happens.

3) Let the people move. Often, a person in an academic book is a portrait on the wall—born at a certain time in a certain place, surrounded by carefully selected context, but not actually doing anything. Yet if you introduce a person actually doing something, and hang other information off the spine of that narrative, a non-academic reader is immediately more engaged.

4) Honor chronology. Academic work is often organized thematically, but in writing for general readers, chronology is almost always your best friend. It can heighten a sense of narrative and its inherent tensions and conflicts, forces a degree of clarity about cause and effect (or lack thereof), and, corresponding as it does with the way our brains and lives are generally organized, frees up the reader's mental space to focus on the rest of what you have to say.

5) Don't bury your favorite details. Sometimes young academics, in particular, put their most delightful and colorful material in the footnotes, saying they thought the material was too good to part with, but not strictly essential to their academic argument. If it's really too good to part with, it might be put to better use, as the proverbial sugar that makes the medicine go down, from a non-academic reader's perspective.

6) Avoid subheads. One might think that subheads help to organize material within a chapter, but much more often they serve to disguise (not very convincingly) a lack of organization and momentum. Like clutter, they make it hard to see what is really going on, in terms of the ideal arc of narrative or argument within a chapter. They might help as scaffolding while you're building, but once the chapter is drafted, throw those crutches away and see if you can make the material stand (or walk) on its own. Authors tell me this is both incredibly difficult and truly liberating; you can always put subheads back later if you decide

that they serve a truly artful purpose.

7) Don't talk down to your audience. To their credit, many academics are so excited about their subjects that they want to write a book that their mother-in-laws or personal trainers will read. But unless that person you would love to reach is someone who buys at least a half dozen books or more a year, and reads widely, he or she is not the person you should be holding in mind as your intended audience. Very few books make non-readers into readers. Regular readers and buyers of trade books by academics are generally more sophisticated than average, and don't want to be made to feel like they are still in high-school.

8) Accept that some subjects are inherently of minor interest and others fall into genres that have become overcrowded. Many talented scholars, particularly in history, have taken seriously the idea of writing for a broader public and still found that their books reach only a relatively limited audience, because, actually, there were a lot of dramatic trials in the 19th century that evoke issues that are still with us, and quite a few books about them, too. For most readers, these were still cases they never heard of that took place long ago involving people they don't want to know. Most books will reach only a limited audience, no matter how hard the author and the publisher try.

9) A book should not be one's first and only attempt to address the public. Essays and book reviews for newspapers or general interest magazines, public lectures, and radio commentary are great ways to cultivate both a public voice and an audience.

10) To recycle an old creative writing maxim, "**Break any rule when to do so serves a higher purpose**"—or, when you can write so brilliantly as to get away with it.

–Alane Salierno Mason (@amasonny), W. W. Norton Executive Editor

. . .

This list originally appeared on Norton's Tumblr as Nine Tips for

Academics Writing for a General Audience.

Subscribe to our monthly email to hear about Norton's newest books.