

Writing, publishing, and sharing a popular science book: Lessons learned from *Under the Sky We Make*

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How can scientists communicate the urgency of the climate and ecological emergencies, and help inform and inspire the public to participate in the sweeping transformations needed for sustainability?

No one knows! But we're running out of time, so we better figure it out fast. My latest attempt was to write a commercial book, *Under the Sky We Make: How to be Human in a Warming World* (Penguin Random House/Putnam, March 2021). Here are some key lessons learned.



WRITING

	ACADEMIC PUBLISHING (PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE)	COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING (NONFICTION BOOK)
Intended audience	Fellow researchers	Best friends from college
Purpose	Expand frontiers of human knowledge	Solve a problem for the reader
Scope	Focus on thoroughly answering a specific research question	Empower readers with facts, feelings, and actions to work towards a fossil-free world where people and nature can thrive
Use of personal stories	Verboten; some are still fighting the losing battle against use of the active voice and/or first person	Highly encouraged; my readers now know that my parents and sister evacuated from a California wildfire made worse by climate change; my grandfather helped invent factory farming for turkeys; and that I met my husband on Tinder
Competition with your day job	Medium; publishing papers is the most institutionally valued part of your day job (even if it's the one you spend the least time actually doing)	High; don't expect academic accolades for writing a popular science book, even if it's rigorously researched

PUBLISHING

	ACADEMIC PUBLISHING (PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE)	COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING (NONFICTION BOOK)
Timeframe	Years to research and write; 1 year or more from submission to publication	Years to research and write; typically takes 2 years from book deal to having books on shelves
Submits text to potential publisher	You	Your literary agent. See my advice on getting an agent , and recommended sources for informing yourself about publishing.
Cover letter on submission	Written by lead author. Excerpt: "We enthusiastically submit our article, TITLE, and believe these findings will be of interest to the journal's audience."	Written by literary agent. Excerpt: "Saving ourselves from planetary ruin, Dr. Nicholas argues, requires radical belief in our own authority and value, alongside a deep understanding that no one will ever hand us power; we're going to have to seize it for ourselves."
Role of editor	Gatekeeper who decides if your article goes out for peer-review; shapes direction of text; and makes final decision on publication	Gatekeeper in charge of acquiring (buying) your book for the publisher; once sold, gives feedback shaping direction of the text; acts as ambassador between the publishing house and author
Fact checking provided by publisher	Peer reviewers who are experts in the field	NONE! Prepare to secure your own friendly reviews from subject experts, AND pay professional fact checkers out of pocket (ca. \$6,000+) to go through the whole text. (Read Emma Copley Eisenberg's piece in Esquire to get fired up about fact checking.)
Graphics	Key results conveyed in figures	None in text; important for social media & website
How you're assessed by potential publisher	How many papers has the author published, in which journals?	What is the author's "platform," i.e., how many people are likely to spend \$20+ to purchase their book?
Published per year	2.5 million articles (STM Report, 2015)	100,000 hardcover books in the US; 2.6 million books sold online (Elle Griffin, 2021a and b)
Likely number of readers	<100	<1,000
Length (words)	4,000-8,000	Around 70,000
Payment	You write grants to pay yourself to do the research, then pay up to \$5,000 to make your work free to readers	Publisher pays you a wildly varying amount (from \$5,000 up) to write the book. Your literary agent gets 15% of everything you earn (and they deserve it!)
You'll rely on this industry giant your readers love to hate	Elsevier	Amazon

SHARING

	ACADEMIC PUBLISHING (PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE)	COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING (NONFICTION BOOK)
Publicity campaign	Possible press release by journal or university press office; author Twitter thread	Publicist from the publisher will help book media interviews and pitch your book to media outlets; authors are expected to invest substantial time to pitch journalists, podcasts, book talks, readings, social media outreach and collaboration
Use in teaching	Might get added to grad seminar syllabus	Potential All-Campus Read or introductory course text
Giving talks about the work	Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion	Tell stories and engage in conversation to draw in the listener; provide actionable takeaways
Industry view of social media	The old guard still grumbles, but most have begrudgingly accepted it can help boost your science	Basically mandatory, highly valued
Industry view of newsletters/author mailing list	What?	This is the most valuable way to connect with and cultivate an audience for your book. Ideally, start a newsletter years before you publish your book. (Not two months before, like me. But check out my newsletter anyway: WeCanFixIt.Substack.com)
Metric you'll obsess over	Citation count	Book sales (private data) and Amazon reviews (public)
Alternate career path that seems more effective and lucrative	National Geographic photographer	Podcaster or Netflix producer (there are way more listeners, and WAY more viewers, than readers out there)
Tendency to compare yourself to others who are more successful	High, but comparison is the thief of joy	High, but comparison is the thief of joy
Likelihood reader will write a heart-felt note saying your words touched them deeply	Almost zero	Small but non-zero <3