

ONE TIP

PRESENTED BY APA DIVISION 15

SEPTEMBER 2018 EDITION



**DR. JEANNE ELLIS
ORMROD**

People often ask me how and why I ventured off from a traditional scholarly-journal-articles career path into a textbook-writing path. My unintended side trip—which soon became a passion—began in the mid-1980s, when an editor from a prominent textbook publishing company stopped by my office one day hoping to convince me to adopt one or more of her company’s books for my classes. At the time, I was teaching a course on “Cognition and Instruction” and complained to her that all the available and potentially relevant textbooks were focused on (a) basic research and (b) a particular theoretical perspective. I hadn’t been able to find a book suitable for my multi-perspective, applied course. Her response: “Why don’t you write one?” I was so desperate that I did. The result was *Human Learning*, now in its 7th edition. Other textbooks soon

followed, each one because my editors and I felt there was a crying need for it.

Our field will always need new textbooks that keep up with emerging theoretical perspectives and evidence-based instructional practices. Following are key pieces of advice for those of you who want to include college textbook writing in your career path.

1. Write to fill a genuine need in the field. Don’t do it for the money; you may not get very much. Good textbooks come from authors whose primary motives are intrinsic ones, especially those related to enhancing other people’s knowledge and genuine understandings of key ideas in our field—knowledge and understandings that can ultimately help them become better teachers, counselors, parents, and citizens.
2. Don’t focus solely on the latest trendy theory. I’ve been formally studying psychology for more than 50 years now. My undergraduate courses in the late 1960s were almost exclusively behaviorist. My graduate program in the early 1970s

drew heavily from verbal learning research and early computer-metaphor information processing models—things that were “hot” at the time. I’ve since moved on to more contemporary cognitivism and social cognitive theory, as well as to sociocultural and contextual theories (e.g., embodiment, distributed cognition). All of these perspectives have important ideas and tools to offer future generations. Unless your goal is specifically to enlighten your readers about a particular perspective, embracing one of these perspectives as “the best thing ever” is foolhardy: Your work will quickly become outdated, and you’ll be doing your readers a disservice by leaving other useful perspectives outside their radar.

3. Make and keep copious notes both about current perspectives and research and about personal experiences and anecdotes. Keep up with—and keep track of—emerging theories and research findings, including those that credibly refute common misconceptions (e.g., about “learning styles” and “teaching to the right brain”). Regularly read professional journals; I especially recommend APS journals such as *Perspectives in Psychological Science* and *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. Search exhibition halls at conferences for edited books about important topics. Also keep notes about personal anecdotes that might colorfully illustrate abstract ideas.

4. Think of writing as a form of teaching. The stodgy professional writing style you see in professional journals simply won’t do. Nor will the include-everything-I-know approach you used in your undergraduate research papers. Instead, remember your audience—undergraduate and/or graduate students, almost certainly, and perhaps also the novice (and sometimes ill-informed) instructors who will be teaching from your book. Think about all the strategies our field recommends for effective instruction: clearly stated learning goals, organized presentation, concrete examples, visual aids, thought-provoking questions, regular opportunities for self-assessment, etc. In other words, practice what you preach.

5. Practice good self-regulation skills. Otherwise, you’ll never complete your book. Successful self-regulation involves not only cognitive factors, but also emotional factors that encompass both an ongoing sense of obligation to others and facilitative anxiety that promotes regular self-nagging. I explain what I mean in a supplement linked [here](#).

One Tip is published bi-monthly by the Membership Committee of APA Division 15 (Educational Psychology). In *One Tip*, senior scholars tell their stories and share insights for junior scholars. If you would like to contribute a piece, please contact Division 15 Membership Committee Chair, Serena Shim at sshim@bsu.edu.