

Unlocking success as a book author: Navigating the essential soft skills of writing, gained through my PhD journey

Matteo Tardelli

Senior Biomarker Scientist
Owlstone Medical Ltd
London, UK

doi: 10.56012/opyj7455

Correspondence to:

Matteo Tardelli
matteotardelli1@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the journey of transitioning from PhD to a book author, emphasising the importance of soft skills cultivated during academic pursuits. Drawing from personal experience, the author underscores the parallels between academia and authorship, highlighting skills such as effective communication, networking, resilience, and self-discipline. The ability to translate complex ideas, build relationships, persevere through challenges, and maintain a structured writing routine proves essential in navigating the publishing landscape. Practical strategies are offered to nurture these skills, including engaging in conversations, participating in authorial communities, embracing a growth mindset, and mastering self-discipline. Ultimately, the article illuminates how the journey from PhD to authorship is marked by growth, challenges, and the development of crucial soft skills, laying a foundation for success in the dynamic world of publishing.

Many PhDs nurture the aspiration of becoming published authors, often achieving this within academia through scientific publications. However, transitioning from scholarly writing to crafting books for a broader audience requires more than simply weaving together compelling sentences. As an author of numerous

scientific and non-scientific books and articles, who has navigated the complexities of the publishing world, I can attest that many skills cultivated during one's PhD journey can be successfully applied.

My personal evolution into a writer was not solely driven by a love for language, but also by a desire to express myself in a different medium. The rigorous and occasionally stressful pursuit of a PhD unexpectedly provided an excellent platform for refining the essential skills for writers to achieve their objectives. Over years of research, analysis, and defending my dissertation before expert panels, I honed a set of soft skills that laid the groundwork for my writing career. In this article, I uncover the fundamental soft skills that empower PhDs to become aspiring authors.

The transformative journey:

From PhD to authorship

Pursuing a PhD equips you with the skills to engage with diverse audiences, whether it is presenting research or defending your thesis. You learn to translate complex ideas into a language that is understandable to both experts and laypeople. These communication soft skills extend beyond academia, becoming the cornerstone of connecting with readers through your writing, effectively conveying your message, and engaging your audience in a captivating narrative. This is a soft skill that we rarely develop during our academic journey, or without knowing, and proves to be instrumental when it is time to wrap up a publication, whether it is a short article or a book.



Academia thrives on collaboration. Building relationships with professors, fellow researchers, and conference attendees becomes second nature. Similarly, an author's world pulsates with connections – literary agents, editors, fellow authors, and readers. Networking is a valuable skill for writers, often overlooked in academia. A skilled networker understands the power of forging meaningful relationships, fostering a supportive community, and leveraging these connections to navigate the publishing landscape.^{1,2}

As we all know, research is riddled with roadblocks, failed experiments, and moments of self-doubt. Overcoming these hurdles with perseverance and a positive outlook instills resilience. This mental fortitude becomes your shield as an author, making you open to constructive criticism, rejection, and the inevitable periods of self-doubt. It fuels the determination to push through, refine your craft, and keep your writing dreams alive.

Completing a PhD demands tenacity. You manage deadlines, juggle responsibilities, and prioritise tasks – skills crucial for authors grappling with daily writing routines, meeting

publishing deadlines, and balancing writing with other obligations. Self-discipline becomes your internal motivator, driving you to dedicate consistent time and effort to nurture your manuscript and navigate the demanding world of publishing. Another driving force behind my decision to write two books in the PhD career advice field was witnessing my lab colleagues' lack of awareness about the diverse career paths available outside of academia. Assisting my peers and colleagues served as a significant motivator for me to embark on this journey. Therefore, my advice would be to choose a topic that you are truly passionate writing about.

In conclusion, three skills are crucial in transitioning from academia to authorship:

1. Effective communication skills are essential for successful publication, whether it's a short article or a book.
2. Collaboration is key in academia and writing, with networking playing a crucial role in forging connections and navigating the publishing landscape.
3. Resilience, developed through overcoming challenges with perseverance and a positive outlook, along with self-discipline and tenacity, are vital traits for authors to navigate the demanding world of publishing.

Cultivating authorial skills: practical strategies for success

So, as you can observe, a PhD journey extends beyond the realm of academia, not solely focused on publications and technical proficiency, but also equipped with soft skills essential for authorship. In the subsequent sections, I will delve into practical advice and exercises to nurture these skills in your writing journey.

- **Enhance your communication abilities:** Engage actively in conversations to grasp diverse viewpoints and refine your articulation through workshops or public speaking engagements. Seek feedback by sharing your work in writing groups or online forums and adapt your communication style to cater to different audiences. Consider starting a blog or writing articles to strengthen your ability to convey complex ideas clearly and engagingly.³
- **Develop networking proficiency:** Immerse yourself in the authorial community by attending industry events, conferences, and workshops, forging connections with fellow authors, editors, and agents. Participate in online forums related to your genre to

establish your presence and offer your expertise through guest posts or pro bono services. Remember, authentic connections and active listening are key to effective networking. From my personal experience, engaging with fellow authors who specialise in writing for particular journals within the career domain has significantly boosted my visibility and facilitated connections with editors. This networking effort has consistently led to opportunities to collaborate with new editors and secure additional commissioned work in the field of career development.¹

- **Foster resilience:** Embrace a growth mindset, taking on challenges as opportunities for growth. Celebrate your accomplishments, practice mindfulness techniques to manage stress, and surround yourself with a supportive network. Each morning, I use a gratitude journal to set a positive tone for the day ahead. This practice allows me to acknowledge and celebrate the aspects of my life that bring me joy, while also identifying areas for growth and improvement. Additionally, I prioritise daily meditation sessions, typically lasting at least 10 minutes. Engaging in breathing exercises during meditation helps me disconnect from the myriad tasks at hand and approach situations with a sense of calm and mindfulness.

Learning from feedback is crucial for enhancing writing skills and gracefully navigating setbacks. I actively seek and capitalise on feedback from others regarding my writing, internalising their input to present an improved version of myself in subsequent writing opportunities. This iterative process enables me to continuously refine my craft and adapt to new challenges with resilience and grace.

- **Master self-motivation:** Set achievable writing goals, break down tasks into manageable steps, and establish a dedicated writing routine. Make use of productivity tools like Asana and employ time management methods such as Toggl to maintain concentration and monitor your advancement. In the past, I experimented with a strategy akin to the Pomodoro technique, where I assembled a to-do list and a timer. The procedure involves setting the timer for 25 minutes and dedicating that time solely to a single task. Upon completion of the session, mark off one Pomodoro and jot down the tasks



accomplished. Subsequently, enjoy a brief 5-minute break. After completing four Pomodoros, take a longer, more rejuvenating break spanning 15 to 30 minutes. Remember, your writing journey is unique, so adapt these strategies to suit your needs. Cultivating these soft skills will not only improve your writing but also equip you with the resilience and adaptability needed to succeed in the dynamic world of publishing.⁴

Soft skills to thrive as an author

In traversing the intricate path from PhD scholar to accomplished author, one embarks on a journey rich with challenges, growth, and self-discovery.

Embarking on a journey of discovering confidence, navigating obstacles, and seizing opportunities requires a multifaceted approach. This encompassed various soft skills such as open-mindedness, curiosity, self-awareness, empathy, creativity, adaptability, and self-motivation.⁵ These attributes played pivotal roles in shaping my path through the challenges of academia and the intricacies of the publishing world.

- **Open-mindedness** was essential in embracing diverse perspectives and being receptive to new ideas. It enabled me to explore unconventional paths and consider alternative solutions to problems that arose during my PhD studies and while navigating the publishing landscape. Curiosity fuelled my desire for knowledge and pushed me to delve deeper into topics of interest, fostering continuous learning and growth.
- **Self-awareness** played a crucial role in understanding my strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. By recognising my limitations, I could proactively seek opportunities for personal and professional development, honing my skills to overcome obstacles and excel in my endeavours.
- **Empathy** allowed me to connect with others on a deeper level, understanding their perspectives and fostering meaningful collaborations. This skill proved invaluable in both academia and publishing, where effective communication and interpersonal relationships are paramount.
- **Creativity** empowered me to think outside the box, generating innovative solutions and approaches to challenges encountered along the way. Whether it was devising experimental methodologies during my PhD

research or crafting engaging content for publication, creativity served as a driving force behind my success.

- **Adaptability** was essential in navigating the ever-changing landscapes of academia and publishing. Flexibility in adjusting to new circumstances, embracing change, and overcoming setbacks proved instrumental in seizing opportunities and staying resilient in the face of adversity.
- **Self-motivation** served as the underlying force propelling me forward, even in the face of daunting obstacles or setbacks. It fueled my determination to persist in the pursuit of my goals, driving me to continually strive for excellence and push beyond my comfort zone.

Thus, the transition from academia to authorship demands a mastery of technical prowess and the nuanced art of communication, networking, resilience, and self-discipline. As we reflect on the multifaceted nature of this transformation, it becomes evident that the foundation laid during the rigorous pursuit of a doctorate serves as a great start and fertile ground to build upon for cultivating the essential soft skills requisite for success in the literary realm. It is imperative to maximise the potential of your PhD journey. Based on my observations, many individuals tend to underestimate the value of the numerous opportunities available to establish a solid foundation (comprising both essential soft skills and technical expertise) to launch their careers on a promising trajectory, whether in industry or elsewhere.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

Matteo Tardelli has authored two commercially available books on transitioning from a PhD to industry.

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Author information

Matteo Tardelli, PhD, is an experienced professional who transitioned from academia to various industries, including biotech and consulting, and now assists PhDs in similar career shifts. Published in *Nature* and *University Affairs*, he shares insights on post-PhD career success through talks at Ivy League institutions and conferences worldwide. As an author, Matteo's books *The Salmon Leap for PhDs* (2020) and *Beyond Academia* (2023) have sold over 4000 copies each on Amazon, with *Beyond Academia* receiving over 100 positive reviews. His *Beyond Academia* Newsletter features human stories on PhD careers.