

What do we want EAP teaching materials for?☆

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Abstract

This paper explores the various anti-textbook arguments in the literature to determine their relevance to the field of EAP. I distinguish between what I call a *strong* and a *weak* anti-textbook line, then review the corpus-based studies which compare the language EAP textbooks teach with corpora of the language academic writers use. After problematizing the methodology of some of the studies, I claim that the weak anti-textbook line most accurately describes the state of the EAP textbook market. Although this view is not against textbooks per se, it holds that the current state of commercial materials is highly unsatisfactory, and that publishers and materials writers must make greater efforts to ensure that research findings are operationalized in textbooks. I end on a happier note, however, identifying an EAP textbook which incorporates research findings into its materials, and avoids the dangerous generalizations about academic writing which are found in many of its rivals.

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1. Introduction

This paper takes its title from Allwright's (1981) provocative 'What do we want teaching materials for?' Contrary to the impression given by his question, Allwright does not, in fact, suggest that ELT textbooks have no value, or that commercial materials should be completely abandoned, but argues that language learning is such a complex process that textbooks cannot cater for the varied set of needs in classrooms around the world.

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Teachers and learners need the independence and autonomy to take responsibility for their own teaching and learning, and materials writers should modify their textbooks accordingly. Although Allwright is sometimes quoted alongside those who would have us rely wholly on locally produced materials (e.g., Thornbury & Meddings, 2001), it would be more accurate to identify two positions which we might term *anti-textbook*: the *strong* view advocates the abandonment of all commercial materials per se (Thornbury & Meddings), while the *weak* view finds materials in their current state to be unsatisfactory in some way (Allwright), but has no problem with the textbook in principle. This explains why some researchers like Swales put both pro- and (weak) anti-textbook arguments forward (e.g. Swales, 1980). Here I aim to assess whether these anti-textbook arguments have any validity in the field of EAP, and if so, whether it is the strong or the weak view which appears the most credible. Hence I first summarize some of the arguments put forward by the pro- and anti-textbook camps, before differentiating between strong and weak anti-textbook views. I then review corpus-based studies which compare the language textbooks teach with the language academic writers use, all of which find EAP textbooks wanting. I go on to critique the methodology of these studies, before arguing that, despite some reservations, their fundamental claim—that the textbooks are pedagogically unsound—holds good. However, I end on a brighter note. I argue that one recent EAP textbook, Swales and Feak (2000) is markedly superior to any of the textbooks analyzed in the corpus studies, and that it demonstrates how state-of-the-art research findings can be presented to students and teachers in an accessible way. Future materials writers, then, would do well to draw inspiration from this book which seems to break the typical EAP textbook mould.

2. The anti-textbook view

2.1. The inappropriacy of the EAP textbook syllabus

Although teachers may be under the impression that a textbook is the product of a careful collaboration between theoreticians and practitioners, this is a dubious assumption (Richards, 1993). Some of the relevant studies which compare pedagogy with real language use are described more fully in detail below. The essential point to bear in mind, however, is that all of these studies find a lack of fit between how academic writers write and what the textbooks teach about writing. Textbooks are found to understate the enormous disciplinary variation in style and language which corpora reveal (e.g. Harwood, 2003; Hyland, 2000, 2002a; Swales et al., 1998). It is felt that EAP textbook writers rely far too much on intuition or folk beliefs when attempting to describe academic discourse norms. Lockett (1999) echoes this sentiment:

[S]tandards of writing teaching on EAP courses have sometimes suffered from being (mis)informed by somewhat facile notions and received pseudo-wisdoms concerning the nature of academic writing. The tendency towards reliance on superficial, intuitive or impressionistic notions, which gloss the real nature of academic writing has, it must be said, to some extent been purveyed by the very textbooks/writing

handbooks which purport to give students useful guidelines and insights into the writing process. This sense of the relative inadequacy of some of these “secondary sources” further underlines the need for consideration of more “primary” descriptive material. (p. 50)

In short, there is a feeling that materials need to be far more research-led (e.g., Bhatia, 2002; Bruton, 1997; Swales, 1980, 2002).

2.2. *Textbooks as teaching manuals*

As well as failing to provide students with a true picture of academic discourse, the unsoundness of the textbook syllabus has still more serious consequences. Given that a good number of English language teachers around the world are more or less unqualified (Maley, 1992), the textbook and the teacher’s notes should serve to raise less experienced teachers’ awareness of pedagogical issues (Cunningsworth, 1995; Cunningsworth & Kusel, 1991; Littlejohn, 1992; Richards, 1993). The danger is, then, that teachers as well as students will be misinformed about writing norms. And even where teachers *are* suitably qualified, unless they have conducted corpus-based studies of writing themselves, or they have an expert knowledge of the research literature, they are likely to get the impression from EAP textbooks that academic discourse is far more homogeneous than is actually the case.

2.3. *Beyond criticism: the textbook as officially sanctioned knowledge*

Irrespective of their pedagogical merits, a teacher’s photocopies are seen as carrying less weight, as somehow being less legitimate than textbooks. The textbook conveys an air of authority, of officially sanctioned knowledge (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989) because it is a commercial product, meaning that learners (and some teachers) accept its claims unconditionally. It is ‘beyond criticism’ (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989), ‘reified’ (Richards, 1993; Shannon, 1987), although in fact textbook guidance is often at odds with research evidence.

2.4. *The (un)suitability of textbook writers*

In Dendrinis’ (1992) judgment, many of the ‘big names’ in textbook writing have acquired their status through having “developed an intuition for what kind of book can easily become a commercial success, but who lack theoretical knowledge and practical classroom experience” (p. 48). Indeed, other writers have been even more damning, insisting that textbook writers have a lack of knowledge of language learning theory, have no consistent methodology, fail to explain the rationale behind the selection of language to be taught, and base their materials on intuition only (Bhatia, 2002; Kuo, 1993; Sheldon, 1987, 1988). To make things worse, textbook writing is wrongly seen as a low status activity by academics, when it should instead be seen as scholarly activity (Alred & Thelen, 1993; Swales, 1995). This perception is thought to be at least partly responsible for the lack of EAP researchers willing to become textbook writers.

2.5. *The textbook as commercial rather than pedagogical artefact*

Rather than viewing the textbook solely as a pedagogical tract, we need to realize it is also an economic commodity to be traded in a competitive marketplace (Apple, 1984; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Gray, 2002; Jones, 1990). Marketability rather than pedagogical effectiveness is therefore said to be the publishers' main concern. Compared to publishers of fiction, textbook publishers produce relatively few titles, increasing the pressure on those that are published to be successful (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1982). The result is that editors are far more comfortable with rehashes of what has gone before than with something different (and refreshing). The danger is, then, that future EAP textbook writers will base their materials on books which were commercially successful, but pedagogically unsound.

3. The pro-textbook view

3.1. *Textbooks as developers*

While it is undoubtedly true that some teachers stick to textbooks slavishly, the pro-textbook argument is that this is not normally the case. There is plenty of research evidence that many teachers adapt commercial materials, using them as 'bridges' to stimulate their thinking and as the basis for providing the most appropriate classes in their context (Canagarajah, 1999; Gray, 2000, 2002). Textbooks thus becomes "spurs to creativity" (Harmer, 2001, p. 8), resources as well as/rather than courses (Gower & Bell, 1999; Richards, 1993), data banks which allow local input to be added to them (Kuo, 1993). Although portraying textbooks as scripts and recipes would appear to lend ammunition to the anti-textbook argument, it crucially misrepresents the way most teachers operate:

Coursebook critics, it seems to me, focus on *unthinking* coursebook use to make their case—as if all teachers used them this way all the time. Yet that is to suggest that all teachers see coursebooks in the wrong light—as monolithic manuals which have to be followed to the letter, like playscripts. But coursebooks are not like that and never have been. Like any lesson plan...,they are *proposals* for action, not instructions for use. Teachers look at these proposals and decide if they agree with them... (Harmer, 2001, p. 8)

So by suggesting new activities and approaches in the classroom, textbooks can develop both new and old teachers' repertoires alike, thereby acting as agents of change (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994).

3.2. *Systematic syllabuses and structure*

Commercial materials are said to be based around systematic, balanced syllabuses in a way a teacher's photocopies are not, since the latter are for the most part produced week by week rather than as part of an overall course plan. Hence the textbook syllabus reduces

the chances of gaps in the learning, and the learner knows where the course is going, since there is a clear structure throughout (Harmer, 2001; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; O'Neill, 1993; Swales, 1980).

3.3. Textbooks as products of research

Despite the claims of the anti-textbook camp, textbook writers claim their products are based upon research, although they fail to specify the kind of research they have in mind. Harmer (2001) puts it like this: “[Good textbooks are] the result of many years of experience and...much research and discussion with teachers, consultants and publishers” (p. 7).

3.4. Reinventing the wheel

Teachers' own material is said to duplicate material which already exists in commercial form. By refusing to adopt a textbook, teachers simply increase their workloads, needlessly reinventing the wheel when textbook writers have already done things for them (Swales, 1980). Hence the textbook makes the overworked teacher's life easier (Freebairn, 2000; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994).

The principal strong and weak anti-textbook arguments which concern us here are summarized in Table 1, together with the pro-textbook position.

A number of corpus-based studies of EAP textbooks are now reviewed in an attempt to determine which of the pro- and anti-textbook positions are nearest the mark.

4. Corpus-based research into the appropriacy of the EAP textbook syllabus

Studies which have compared what EAP textbooks teach with corpora of expert and/or student academic writing find textbooks wanting.¹ For instance, Paltridge (2002) points out that for all the handbooks and guides available on thesis and dissertation writing, precious little analysis has been done on actual texts, and less analysis still is included in textbooks. Unsurprisingly, Paltridge found that none of the books he analyzed offered learners the complete range of generic structures writers can in fact use in a thesis. Similarly, Moreno's (2003) analysis of 11 EAP textbooks' treatment of the language of cause and effect finds there to be 'great shortcomings' in the materials (p. 287). Not only is the coverage of the range of cause and effect language extremely limited, the linguistic items which convey

¹ This section approaches EAP textbook evaluation by comparing what textbook writers *say* to students and teachers about linguistic phenomena like hedging and modality, with what academic writers actually *do*, as evidenced by corpora. Of course, there have also been corpus-based studies involving EAP textbooks which have focused on other things apart from academic writing. A good example is those studies which analyze lectures and the textbooks' treatment of them, like Flowerdew and Miller (1997) and Thompson (2003). In line with the corpus-based studies of academic writing which is the main focus of this paper, both Flowerdew and Miller and Thompson conclude that the EAP textbooks' treatment of listening to lectures is less than satisfactory. As a reviewer pointed out, though, it should be borne in mind that EAP textbooks also provide more implicit opportunities for learning. For instance, reading texts can raise students' awareness of salient features of academic prose regardless of whether these features are actually highlighted by the textbook writer or not.

Table 1

Pro- and anti-textbook views: a summary

Strong anti-textbook	Weak anti-textbook	Pro-textbook
Textbook content, no matter of how unsound and inaccurate it may be, is reified, officially sanctioned, and beyond criticism of both teachers and learners	There is scope for both teachers and learners to be misled by textbook content	Teachers and learners make their own minds up about the accuracy of a textbook's content
The individual teacher is in a better position than the textbook writer to determine an appropriate syllabus for their learners. No matter how much structure the textbook can provide, if its syllabus is unsound, teachers and learners will suffer	While the textbook can provide structure, its syllabus should be flexible enough to allow the local teacher to input additional locally appropriate content	Textbooks provide the teacher and learner with a more considered syllabus and structure than week-by-week planning on the part of the teacher
Textbook writers' (and publishers') knowledge of applied linguistics research is patently lacking	Textbooks are taking far too long to incorporate the findings of applied linguistics research	Textbooks are products of years of research and dialogue between teachers, writers, and publishers
Textbooks do not make life easier for the teacher since the material will not be appropriate for local contexts and is unsound	Textbooks may make life easier for the teacher if the material is locally appropriate and pedagogically sound	Textbooks make the overworked teacher's life easier by doing their work for them
The fact a textbook is a commercial artefact means the pedagogical soundness of the materials will inevitably suffer	The fact a textbook is a commercial artefact means the pedagogical soundness of the materials may suffer	There is no inherent tension between sound pedagogy and product marketability

cause and effect relationships are normally presented as interchangeable alternatives by the textbook writers, and no guidance is given as to when one type would be preferable to another. In much the same way, corpus studies of modals and/or hedging (Holmes, 1988; Hyland, 1994, 1998; McEney & Kifle, 2002) all conclude that EAP textbooks and style guides are not only failing to teach the full repertoire of modal language, they are also failing to teach a number of items learners would find most useful, while providing misleading explanations for some of the language they do decide to include. And whereas a few style guides indicate the importance of hedging in academic discourse, according to others, hedging is to be avoided. Yet they are referring to a linguistic feature which is found in academic discourse very frequently. Hyland's (1998) corpus of biology research articles is "massively hedged" (p. 246), but his analysis of the style guides shows that Yarber (1985, p. 188) claimed hedging was "unnecessary," while Muller (1985, p. 328) calls hedges "padded expressions," and Smith (1985, p. 92) "wasteful signposting" (Hyland, 1998, p. 223). In a study of 22 EAP textbooks, Hyland (1994) reaches the following conclusions:

For the most part, modal expressions are simply introduced without system or comment and are summarily dealt with in a single exercise which fails to emphasise either their function or importance.

Generally, the range of modal verbs addressed and the information provided on their use is inadequate... (p. 247)

Although some of these inadequacies can arguably be explained by the time it takes to disseminate research findings, analysts are unconvinced that this fully accounts for the textbooks' unsatisfactory treatment of key academic language like hedging. Holmes (1988), Hyland (1994, 1998), and Williams (1988) all conclude that textbook writers fail to consult either appropriate corpora or appropriate applied linguistics literature when designing materials:

It is...not clear how exponents are selected, but I would suspect that authors too readily use introspection or a kind of educated hunch, rather than empirical research. (Williams, 1988, pp. 45–46)

These assertions are borne out by John Swales, undoubtedly the leading textbook writer and researcher in the field of EAP. In a notably honest critique of his textbook co-authored with Christine Feak, 'Academic Writing for Graduate Students' (AWGS) (Swales & Feak, 1994), Swales finds fault with his earlier work (Swales, 2002; Swales et al., 1998). He ascribes the unsoundness of some of the content advice to the fact that AWGS "was written before we became aware of corpora, and was based on our own lengthy experiences as writing instructors" (Swales, 2002, p. 152). Swales focuses on imperatives, showing that because the advice in AWGS was not based on corpus data, students are given an unrepresentative picture:

Of [Swales and Feak's] ten potential lexical choices, *notice*, *imagine*, *refer*, *observe*, *take the case of*, and *disregard* either did not occur in our corpus or occurred no more than twice in the main text. [...] They observe that verbs like *suppose* may occur in mathematical arguments, but here we find it commonest in non-mathematical philosophy. They make no mention of *see* outside of parenthetical contexts, and speculate that *consider* is 'probably rare outside (philosophical) arguments', whereas the current data suggest its common use in at least the major school of theoretical linguistics. (Swales et al., 1998, p. 118)

As well as revealing the dangers of relying on intuition to design EAP materials, Swales et al.'s (1998) criticisms also foreground the immense amount of variation there is in academic writing practices across the academy. Although EAP textbooks may claim to teach a style of writing which holds good across the academy, corpus-based research reveals the naïveté of this claim. The differences in academic discourse practices from discipline to discipline mean that a lack of specificity can mislead and distort (Bhatia, 2002; Hyland, 2000, 2002b).

5. Summary: the failing EAP textbook

What do these textbook studies tell us about the (in)validity of the pro- and anti-textbook positions? The fact that all of the research found the textbooks' syllabuses to

some degree unsound appears to render the pro-textbook arguments unconvincing and/or irrelevant. For instance, the textbook-as-developer argument in fact misses the point if the writer cannot be relied upon to disseminate the facts and raise teachers' and learners' awareness of the issues as a result. The position which is closest to the truth, then, is the weak anti-textbook argument: textbooks *can* help teachers develop—but only when they are properly based on research, and contain what they should. At present most are failing both teachers and learners, since the very fact that the textbook is a commercial product reifies its content, however inaccurate that content might be.

Similarly, although the pro-textbook lobby claim much research goes into textbook writing, the findings from the textbook studies suggest that most of this *research* does not involve a review of the applied linguistics literature. Readers may feel this is to be overly critical, since many advances in corpus-based research are relatively recent. In contrast, many of the textbooks analyzed in the corpus studies have been through numerous editions and were written some time ago. For instance, Day (1998), analyzed by Harwood (2003), is now in its fifth edition, and was obviously put together before systematic corpus research was carried out on features of academic prose. Hence it is unjust to accuse textbook writers like Day of wilfully neglecting corpus research, or of being (inexcusably) ignorant of it. However, we can ask whether publishing companies should still be reissuing textbooks such as these without completely revising them to take account of advances in research. By continuing to reissue such unsound advice as officially sanctioned knowledge (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989; Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989), presumably because of healthy sales figures, it would appear that EAP publishers are putting profits before pedagogy, as the strong anti-textbook camp claim. Meanwhile research into other areas like hedging and modality has been in progress for well over a decade, and publishers and textbook writers have had the time to take these results on board and modify their materials accordingly. Yet most materials remain unchanged, dispensing intuitive judgments, which fail learners and teachers. To take the example of modality discussed earlier, textbooks fail on three counts: (i) textbook writers misinform learners as to the range of modal language available to them; (ii) learners are given inaccurate descriptions of both the qualitative functions of modality and the frequencies with which the modals occur; and (iii) modal language is often stigmatized and is said to be unnecessary when in fact corpus studies show it to be a principal feature of academic writing (Holmes, 1988; Hyland, 1994; McEnery & Kifle, 2002).

Finally, the claim by the pro-textbook lobby that commercial materials make teachers' lives easier by doing their work for them is also false, at least in an EAP context. If teachers have enough knowledge of academic discourse conventions to perceive that the textbooks' advice on, say, hedging is faulty or incomplete, they will be obliged to do the research for their students that the textbook writer should have done in the first place. If they lack this knowledge, on the other hand, they may well be obliged to gain it in any case once they begin getting feedback from their class that the textbook advice does not tally with the students' experiences of writing successfully in their fields. Therefore, once again

the weak anti-textbook line seems the most accurate: textbooks *can* save teachers work, but only if the materials are of a high standard.²

Before we accept the conclusion of the corpus-based textbook analyses, however, and concur that EAP textbooks are failing teachers and students, we should note that the methodology of these studies leaves something to be desired.

6. A (partial) critique of corpus-based textbook studies

The idea of the corpus-based studies discussed above is that they are evaluating how sound EAP textbook content is. By comparing what academic writing *does* look like with what the textbooks *say* it looks like, the analysts would claim to be evaluating the material fairly. But the corpora the analysts use—normally *expert* corpora of journal articles—can be seen as inappropriate. It is oversimplistic to imagine that the textbooks should base the advice they give to student writers entirely on how experts write journal papers.³ Horowitz (1988) and Johns (1988) were reminding us that student writing and expert writing are entirely different genres nearly 20 years ago, and more recent studies which discuss student and/or expert texts (Crammond, 1998; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Harwood, 2003; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hyland, 2002a; Samraj, 2002, 2004) have enabled us to appreciate just how marked generic differences can be. It is therefore questionable how relevant expert practices are to students (Ivanič, 1998). However, the assumption implicit in many of the corpus-based textbook studies seems to be that textbooks should mirror expert language use. These studies fail to adequately address the fact that undergraduates and postgraduates are writing in a range of genres, all of which differ from the experts' journal article genre. It is not that the practice of using corpus data to evaluate textbooks is erroneous. Rather, what is important is making sure that the appropriate corpora are selected to enable this evaluation to be methodologically sound. Given the pre-eminence of the global, one-size-to-fit-all textbook, the EAP materials writer is in an unenviable position, requiring a wide range of texts which straddle a plethora of generic and disciplinary divides, consisting of a combination of both (successful) student and expert texts. In order to evaluate textbooks fairly, then, the corpus analyst should compare the language the textbooks teach with a battery of generically diverse student and expert corpora.

Corpus-based analysts should also take the time to consider the difficulties facing materials writers. Although more and more corpora continue to be made publicly available, the materials writer may well ultimately be forced to build their own corpora, especially if they want to base their materials on student writing. To make matters worse, tight production schedules may give textbook writers less time for writing and piloting than they would wish for (Bell & Gower, 1998; Bhatia, 2002; Crismore, 1989). So it would

² And as a reviewer pointed out, there would be teachers who would fail to do the necessary research regardless of their depth of knowledge of academic conventions. In classes such as these, then, it seems likely that students will continue to be misinformed because of misleading textbook advice.

³ As a reviewer commented, however, an evaluation of the adequacy of reading texts would be another matter, given that some students will be required to read experts' texts.

be understandable although unsatisfactory if writers only have the time to consult a limited number of corpora. However, studies like Hyland (1994, 1998) and McEnery and Kifle (2002) lead us to conclude that no corpora whatsoever are being consulted, whether we mean corpora of student or expert writing. An alternative explanation is that the range and size of corpora being consulted are so unrepresentative that they are leading to unsound pedagogical materials.

7. Conclusion

This discussion suggests that many of the pro-textbook lobby's arguments miss the point, at least as far as EAP materials are concerned, since the unsoundness of most textbooks outweighs many, if not all, of the benefits textbooks can confer. While the strong anti-textbook line goes too far, the weak anti-textbook position remains uncomfortably close to the mark. Returning to Allwright's question, we need teaching materials to raise awareness of key features of academic discourse for teachers and learners alike. But we cannot rely on most textbooks to do this to an acceptable standard at present. However, this is not to say we should abandon the textbook altogether. Rather, we should strive to raise the quality of textbooks being produced. In line with other work (Harwood & Hadley, 2004), this paper has argued that corpus consultation can do much to bring this about. Materials writers should resist the temptation, however, to assume that it is necessarily desirable to teach students to imitate expert practices. A range of expert and student corpora which feature various spoken and written genres and various disciplines should be used for awareness raising, with the aim of the corpus data being to enhance students' receptive and/or productive use. Alternatively, the corpus data may be used as a launch pad for classroom research into how the linguistic item in question is used by experts and students in the learners' local context. I close by illustrating how this can be done by providing examples of activities from a recent textbook, Swales and Feak's 'English in Today's Research World' (ETRW) (2000), which appears to succeed where its rivals fail, in that it avoids the sweeping generalizations about academic writing which other textbooks resort to by incorporating state-of-the-art corpus data into its materials.

Swales and Feak cite corpus figures from Chang and Swales' (1999) investigations into *informal* features of academic writing, which included the use of personal pronouns. With the help of the corpus data, concrete disciplinary differences are duly flagged up: "All the philosophers and all but one of the linguists used *I/my/me*, but only 4 out of 10 statisticians did" (p. 18). And although Swales and Feak could be criticized for basing their information upon expert data only, they get around this at least partly by asking the class to consider whether they would feel comfortable about using *I, my, me* and *mine* in their own writing (p. 18). This question then provides the opportunity for the EAP teacher to raise awareness of disciplinary and generic differences in pronoun use immediately after this exercise. Students are asked:

Have you come across or been told other prescriptive rules such as "never start a sentence with *however* as the first word," or "never use *which* to introduce a defining or restrictive relative clause"? Do you think such rules have validity? Have you been

told things about academic writing in your own native language that wouldn't work in English? (p. 19)

and the ensuing discussion is intended to focus upon the use of *I*, *we*, and pronouns generally. So although it would have been better if student corpora had been contrasted with Chang and Swales' expert corpus, at least the students and teacher can discuss their experiences of pronoun use in their own institution. Finally, given that Swales and Feak heed Johns' (1997) call for students to become researchers of their disciplines' practices "by asking users of [ETRW] to conduct mini-analyses of the language and discourse in their fields and to share their findings with others" (p. vi), these activities could be followed up by asking students to interview lecturers about their use of pronouns, and about how (un)acceptable they believe the use of pronouns in student writing to be.

In summary, then, it is not impossible to produce an EAP textbook based on the latest research. For similar high quality material to see the light of day, however, we need communication between publishers, researchers, teachers, and textbook writers to be enhanced. We also need more researchers to follow Swales' example and become textbook writers.

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