

Tips and Takeaways from Betsy Lerner

From the recent program: “What Academic and Other Writers Need to Know About Writing, Publishing, and Working with Editors (and Agents)”

Betsy Lerner, New York City-based author, agent, and former editor at Doubleday, recently spoke at an Olin workshop for graduate and professional students to discuss writing and publishing for non-academic audiences. She offered advice (and encouraging stories) for writing, publishing, and securing and working with agents and editors. The Graduate School provided copies of her book, *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers*, which offers practical advice, insider observations, and trade secrets about writing and publishing.

At the workshop, Lerner encouraged students to “Find your voice and tell your story...including the story revealed by your research.” She told them she would love to read a book about research, “I’m a deeply curious person, but you’ll have to write in such a compelling way that you help me understand it.”

Continuing, she told them that whether the story is chronological or thematic, the very first sentence should help the reader feel a personal relationship with the topic. That and a great title (plus an annotated table of contents, introduction, sample chapter or two and a bio that shows you are “marketable”) can help convince an agent to work with a writer to polish the proposal and sell it to a publisher, often using an “auction” to get the best monetary advance.

Once sold to a publisher writers have a year, or two years’ max, to complete and submit the manuscript to the publisher. Lerner shared the names and contact information of agents who would be good choices for new and aspiring authors writing about their academic research. Describing the process of writing and publishing, Lerner said, “To be a great writer you have to be sensitive. To be published you have to have incredibly thick skin throughout the writing and editing process.”

Lerner also presented a workshop on writing a great title, with students sharing their titles for a critique, including suggestions for improvement from other student-writers in attendance. Lerner also presented a session on writing compelling first sentence, again critiquing the first sentences that students provided from their own writing.

Lerner is the author of the 2010 book *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers* (which was given to students who attended) and two memoirs, *Food and Loathing* (2003) and *The Bridge Ladies* (2016).