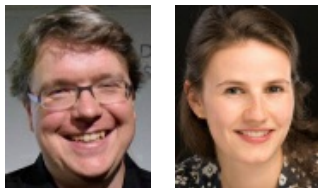
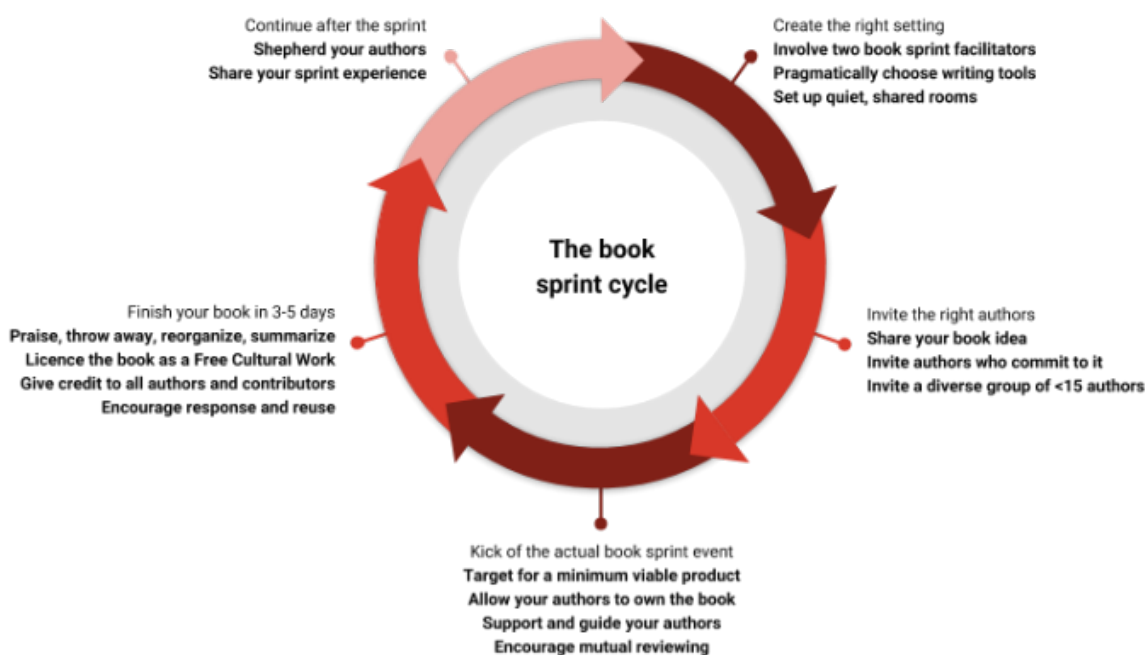


How to run a book sprint – in 16 steps



A “book sprint” is a method of writing a book collaboratively in only a short period of time, usually less than a week. **Lambert Heller** and **Helene Brinken** share insights from their own experience of facilitating a book sprint to write the *Open Science Training Handbook* earlier this year. Here, the process is measured out over a distance of 16 steps.

In February we ran a five-day book sprint at TIB, which resulted in the [Open Science Training Handbook](#), a 300,000-character knowledge resource which has so far received a lot of appreciation; from its use in FOSTER’s Open Science Trainer Bootcamps, to a number of ongoing translation projects. As facilitators, we consider this project to have been a success, one which would not have been possible without the 14 dedicated, experienced open science trainers from ten countries who volunteered as authors. At the same time, this project was also an interesting example of the application of book sprints as a method. In the spirit of sharing and co-developing book sprints as an open method, we are happy to share our experiences in the most book-sprinty kind of blog article we could imagine: as a structured, practice-oriented recipe on how to do book sprints, which is itself openly licensed, and open for comments.



A. CREATE THE RIGHT SETTING

1. Involve two book sprint facilitators in the planning and execution of the event

The book facilitator's role is to free up the authors. The authors should be allowed to focus solely on content creation, starting from day one of the event. To run a book sprint means handling challenges on multiple levels for several days: the group dynamics of your authors; the growth and management of the content itself; and all the attendant influences and interactions. (We'll touch more on all of these in a moment.) It can be helpful to share this responsibility, and so it is generally better to have two facilitators. Also, in order to help book sprints to develop and spread as an open method, you should have one facilitator with prior experience of book sprints, while it's enough for the other to be simply interested in learning the method.

2. Don't spend too much time selecting or preparing tools and technologies for your book sprint

Mostly, you should make sure that discussion of your tools is not getting in the way of continuous, collaborative writing that is accessible from the first day by even your most technology-adverse authors. Therefore, consider Google Docs or, if you (understandably so) have concerns about ownership/openness of using such a vendor, have a look at tools like [FidusWriter](#), [Wikibooks](#), or an [Etherpad](#) like [CryptPad](#).

3. Make sure to offer your authors a quiet, comfortable shared environment that allows them to focus on content creation

One large room or (better) two rooms work well, this is how the authors are free to choose how they organise themselves. Some might prefer a quiet place, while others might need some proper group discussion. Also, it's nice to have some light food and drink available, plus tools that help to visualise the content and structure (e.g. some whiteboards, pens, and paper). Essentially, just make sure the authors feel comfortable staying at that place, together, for most of the time throughout the sprint.

B. INVITE THE RIGHT AUTHORS

4. You want a group of authors to write a certain book: tell the world in only one sentence what this book will be about, including its main audience and intended impact for/with that audience

Book sprints are a method to get the work done of writing practice-oriented books. Authors of such books are people knowledgeable about that specific practice. Your book's potential readers/users are those interested in making a certain change, looking for support by reading that book. Therefore, release your book initiative as early as possible. Don't restrict yourself to your family and friends or the "usual suspects". Instead, be responsive to input from a broad audience of potential contributors and readers.

5. Be sure to select authors who are dedicated about spending several days doing almost nothing else but participating in writing a book, and who are ego-less enough to do this together

This is probably the most important step. Take your time to look for the right people. If you do not know enough people from your own network who definitely fulfil these criteria, don't hesitate to ask publicly, on all channels available, six months ahead of the event, [like we did](#) for our sprint. Many people you don't know yet could turn out to be a potential author of your book. Be sure to be picky about those who apply to volunteer for your sprint. Their strong motivation is key to the sprint's success.

6. Don't invite more than 8-15 authors to your book sprint, and definitely make sure to have a diverse group of authors

This is not just about complying with some abstract policy of morals. Having that diversity will help you to synthesise relevant knowledge from different perspectives and backgrounds, and deliver in a way best understandable for a broad, diverse audience.

C. KICK OFF THE ACTUAL BOOK SPRINT EVENT

7. Target for a minimum viable product (MVP): a book that can be fully understood and used by its intended audience, but which mustn't be perfect in any dimension

Good books are more than the emanation of authors' genius in 3-5 days. Reviews, corrections, formatting, illustrations, book descriptions and metadata, multi-format design, cover design, index authoring, typesetting, copy editing to a house style, and a range of other contributions that often take place outside of the authors writing need their own time and deserve their own credit. Help those people by delivering a MVP which stands on its own feet. (Thanks to Simon Worthington for inspiring conversations on this!) Of course, there are slightly different [recipes](#) for running book sprints, focusing more on a comprehensive process orchestrating all necessary contributions within the 3-5 days of the sprint event.

8. Allow your authors to own their book – collectively, to the fullest extent, and to the result of feeling responsible for it until after finishing the book

Authors arrive at the book sprint usually with an attitude somewhat like *“okay, you claim this book sprint magic works – now tell me just what I'm supposed to do”*, which is perfectly okay. Providing an author guide (even before the sprint event) which outlines the mission and objectives of the book as well as some practical advice for writing can help participants to feel prepared. However, when you begin to let the authors collectively outline contents and structure of the book you will notice how the notion of a joint responsibility comes up. Support the authors to execute on that!

9. Don't hold back, have everything ready for the sprint, use it when you think it's helpful — and let your authors write during the rest of the time

Three practical examples from the Open Science Training Handbook sprint:

- We applied [user-centred design](#) methods to set the scope for the book, and to foster a focus on the audience by letting the authors create personas, empathy, and journey maps of typical open science trainers. The results were briefly presented and stayed with us during the rest of the sprint, pinned to a whiteboard. (Many thanks to OpenCon 2018 for a cool workshop on *design thinking*.)
- We frequently inserted quick “energisers”, in order to have a quick funny and/or physical group action before and between longer writing periods. In one of the energisers, Patrick Hochstenbach, who later created the wonderful [illustrations](#) for the handbook, asked the audience to come up with a hand drawing of a certain concept related to the books topic, open science training, as quickly as possible. This exercise was funny and relaxing, and sharpened authors' senses for what might need to be illustrated in the book, and how.
- Starting around the middle of the sprint, we used a physical Kanban board to assign and keep track of book-related issues of all kind.

10. Encourage your authors to do the actual writing either alone or in groups of two authors. Encourage mutual reviewing and rewriting every few hours

Good writing often takes place alone or in pairs, but periodic mutual enhancement and review make sure that everybody actually acts like being behind the whole book.

D. FINISH YOUR BOOK IN 3-5 DAYS

11. Praise your authors and encourage them to celebrate what they achieve. But also, around the middle of the event, encourage them to start deciding on what to throw away, what to reorganise – and how to introduce and summarise the book

When drafting the book structure at the beginning, you will plan for more than you can actually get done. Deciding about what you finally try to get finished takes time and energy – as a facilitator you should consider this. When you decide on what to throw away (or enhance), you can also reorganise stuff. Also, your authors will be ready to assign one or two of them to write an introduction or summary, since by now all of you will have a pretty good idea about what the end product will look like!

12. Encourage your authors to apply a license suited for [Free Cultural Works](#) (our favourite: CC-Zero) to all of the content they produce in the sprint

Make it as easy as possible for readers to refer to your book, and to use and adapt it for their respective purpose. Don't expect them to contribute back in return. If ever, this is only likely to happen when you ask people directly to contribute, maybe while engaging with them on the content (e.g. training workshops where your book is used as a learning material).

13. Be sure to give anybody credit who contributed to the book in any role and by any means, during and after the sprint

Be loud, and be explicit about their respective roles or contributions. Have a look at standards like [CASRAI CRediT](#).

14. Starting with the last day of the book sprint, make the book available online, and be as inviting to comments, suggestions, and contributions as possible.

If you have read the steps so far, this step might not need any further explanation!

E. TAKE CARE FOR YOUR AUTHOR COMMUNITY AFTER THE SPRINT – AND HELP OTHERS TO START THEIR OWN SPRINT NEXT

15. If possible, ask the facilitators to shepherd your community of authors and contributors after the sprint

Keep up a mailing list, Slack channel, or similar, and, as a facilitator, tell your authors and contributors about successes (e.g. mentions and responses to your book, download numbers, etc.), ask them for opinions on enhancements, and let them know about new and related projects. Ask individual authors for help or contributions when you have good ideas on how to make the book better. (Thanks for coming up with the excellent term “shepherding” in this context, Bianca Kramer!)

16. Encourage your book sprint facilitators, authors, and contributors to publicly share their sprint experience

At TIB, we did this early on with our first book sprint, CoScience, in 2014. ([In German only.](#)) With the Open Science Training Handbook, we also did this via [short videos](#) we took onsite. About both book sprints, we gave a number of short talks on different occasions, e.g. at [re:publica 2014](#) in Berlin, which consequently inspired an number of other book sprints. Ultimately, this will turn out as essential in order to let book sprints develop further as an open method, accessible and owned by everybody who wants to contribute.

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