Writing a Textbook Preface

For college textbooks, a well-designed preface can be a very effective vehicle. Professors can get a snapshot of the book’s level, approach, learning features, and ancillaries; students can also get a sense of how the book they’ve just purchased can be used as a learning resource. Sales reps can use the preface as a sales tool, and marketing managers can design ads that are consistent with the preface material. The preface can be the best resource for quickly understanding a book, its market and audience, and its features.

CRC Press Engineering textbooks use a systematic approach, variable by book level and market size, for prefaces. The following sections should be included:

1.) Overview
2.) Learning Features/Pedagogy
3.) Appendix
4.) Themes (if applicable)
5.) Ancillaries/Supplements
6.) Developmental Plan (if applicable)
7.) Guided Tour (optional)
8.) E-book Sections (if applicable)

1.) The first section can be unnamed (no heading), and it should give a concise and readable overview of the book. The lower the level of the book, the more a friendly, conversational style is appropriate; this helps create a sense that the book will be accessible for both the professor and for students taking the course. The book’s philosophy can be expressed, and a broad overview of the book’s features can be offered. Often a “how this book came to be” statement can be an effective way of drawing readers in. It is best to keep this opening section relatively short and general, with more detail provided in the subsequent sections.

2.) Headings can be used to identify and describe the text’s learning features, such as Chapter Openers, Objectives, Examples, Case Studies, Sidebars, Color Plates, Computer Examples, Chapter Summaries, Chapter Problems. For an undergraduate book, it is good to have these as separate sections, each describing the special approach taken with the given feature. Under Examples, talk about the consistent problem-solving approach taken, its component steps, the relation of examples to chapter problems, etc. If it is present, it is essential to emphasize the ‘international’ aspect or focus, particularly for multi authored or edited texts. UK/Europe lecturers like to know if there are examples or case studies from outside of the USA; this will make the book more attractive in those markets. Under Computer Examples the specific use of Matlab (for instance) can be laid out, and the approach and philosophy of computer use can be described, along with any technical information that’s needed. For more advanced textbooks it may be better to have just one section entitled Learning Features or Pedagogy to cover all the various items.
3.) If an **Appendix** is important to the text, a separate section describing the resources should be included. For instance, if tables are included in a Thermodynamics book, it’s good to describe them, and state how students can best utilize them while solving problems.

4.) If the text includes an important ongoing theme, a section with a heading should be used to explain it. For instance, if a book emphasizes the design procedures for a topic in a consistent way, a preface section called **A Focus on Design** can be used to go over it in detail.

5.) A preface section entitled **Ancillaries** or **Supplements** is needed; sometimes it may be best to divide this into student and instructor sections. Having this material in the preface requires getting the supplement plan finalized early on, so that mistaken information on the items actually available doesn’t get stuck in the book until reprint time.

6.) If a book has been built around an extensive **Developmental Plan** there should be a section devoted to that; and if that development included reviewers, survey respondents or accuracy checkers (who have given permission) we should list their names and affiliations. Every name is a potential customer who’s more likely to adopt if recognized in print; and other potential adopters will see names of people and/or schools they know, and will feel more confident about selecting the book. Accuracy checks are important to mention, in cases where they have been done by someone outside the author team. Class tests done are another very important feature to include and describe, since they can inspire greater confidence in possible users, especially if the book is a first edition.

7.) You may want to consider doing a **Guided Tour** feature in the front matter, right before the first page of Chapter 1. A Guided Tour walks the reader (professor, student, sales/marketing rep) through each important learning feature of the book; generally there is a screen shot of a page exemplifying the feature, with a heading and very short description next to it. Ancillaries are listed again, and if any screen shots from them can help readers understand the resource, they can also be included. While the longer preface sections describe a learning feature in detail, the Guided Tour shows it as it actually appears in the book or ancillary. A Guided Tour is a built-in demo and advertisement for the text, which can be pointed out in marketing campaigns, and left to its work of self-presenting the book.

8.) You may also want to include **e-book sections** in the Preface and the Guided Tour, if we know an e-book version of the text will be out soon. This can include the features built into the e-book, such as note-taking, book-marking, etc.