

ROUTLEDGE STUDY SKILLS

WRITING A POSTGRADUATE THESIS OR DISSERTATION

Tools for Success

MICHAEL HAMMOND

The Routledge logo, featuring the word "ROUTLEDGE" in a purple, sans-serif font above a stylized purple graphic element that resembles a book or a flame.

ROUTLEDGE

Writing a Postgraduate Thesis or Dissertation

Writing a Postgraduate Thesis or Dissertation discusses the challenges that students encounter in their writing and provides thoughtful advice on how to address those challenges. It provides guidance on writing about literature, methodology and methods and shows the importance of stating a contribution to knowledge.

Providing key insight into the process of writing a dissertation or thesis, this book

- explains the process of writing and provides insight into strategies that support good writing
- considers the audience and purpose of a report as well as the voice of the writer
- discusses the structure and organisational features of theses and dissertations, highlighting the central role of the research question

Writing a Postgraduate Thesis or Dissertation is an ideal guide for doctoral and masters students in the social sciences.

Michael Hammond is a Reader in the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Warwick, UK.

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Michael Hammond

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Preface

The aim of this book is to help you in reporting a research project you have carried out, in particular to assist you in writing a dissertation or thesis. It does this by showing how you can write about your field of research, about the tradition of methodology and methods in which you are working, and about the contribution to knowledge you are making. Writing a dissertation or thesis is not easy, not least because there are different views on what counts as appropriate methodology, what makes a contribution and, for that matter, what is knowledge in the first place. This leaves you with a challenge. However, you can meet this challenge if you keep the expectations of your reader in the front of your mind.

There are a great many books on writing at higher degree level, so why another one? The contribution of this book is to present a holistic picture of writing social research. First, you need knowledge of writing as a process and an awareness of the strategies that help you become a productive writer. Second, you need knowledge of the way that academic reports are organised and the different tones that academics strike when writing about their studies. Third, you need knowledge of research methods, including an appreciation of the central role of the research questions and the nature of social research. This book will help show how you can develop strategies to enable you to draw on these different kinds of knowledge when you write.

► **Guide to the book**

The book is divided into six chapters. The first deals with writing in general. It celebrates writing as a way of allowing communication across time and distance while recognising the mental challenge of writing and the need for support and feedback. There are routines and strategies you can use to help address blocks on writing and ways to ease the process. For example, writing can be

broken down into stages, something we illustrate with an example of writing about community of practice. We then make the point that all texts are written with audiences in mind and readers, particularly the examiners who are reading your thesis or dissertation, want to see three things: Your knowledge of a field; the application of a methodology; a contribution to knowledge. The following chapters deal with each of these in turn.

Chapter 2 looks at ways of showing knowledge of a field of research. We begin by discussing reading and go on to look at ways of accessing literature, strategies for active reading, and the taking of notes. We discuss how to turn notes into coherent reporting and explain the importance of ‘frames’ for writing – these can be tables or simply headers which help you organise what you want to write. We look, too, at conceptual and theoretical frameworks and how these may form an important part of some, but not all, reports. We stress that there are different stances to take on the literature. Some researchers are deferential, seeing the literature as providing a secure knowledge base on which their own research can tentatively build. Others have a more ‘profane’ stance; they are more focused on the gaps and the biases. Both stances have strengths and limitations and part of being critical is to weigh up the value of each and to present a stance of your own.

In **Chapter 3**, we look at methodologies and methods. All research projects begin with a question even if, for some researchers, questions are very open-ended and change during the project. Questions are the thread that holds a project together and there should be a close relationship between questions, methodology and method. Discussion of methodology needs to consider the nature of social research, but should also set out the ‘nuts and bolts’ of your data collection and how your data were analysed. Again, a critical stance is needed. A thesis or dissertation needs to describe the strengths of the research but recognise that other approaches and other interpretations are possible.

Chapter 4 takes us into writing about a contribution to knowledge. Here, you need to be confident when setting out your findings while recognising limitations and things that could have

been done differently. A key point is that the reader is interested in the detail of a particular project but also wants to understand what is transferable or relatable from this study to other contexts. Most researchers will want to write not just about their contribution to theoretical knowledge but also to make practical recommendations for the different stakeholders involved in the projects.

After having looked at the content of a report in the previous three chapters, we now move in [Chapter 5](#) to the organisation of a research report. We discuss the hold the ‘standard’ format (introduction/literature review/methodology/findings/discussion) has as a frame for writing a dissertation or thesis. We describe the strengths of this format but the reasons why alternatives are sometimes used. We look at the role of signposting and sequencing in all report writing as well as the importance of using academic vocabulary and of expressing yourself clearly and accessibly. We discuss how you can develop a voice in your writing, using examples from the literature. The importance of proofreading is covered, no matter how irksome you may find this when it comes to your own writing.

A final shorter chapter reprises the important themes within the book and provides a reminder of the different kinds of knowledge and know-how you need to draw on in writing your report. A dissertation or thesis should take the reader on a journey from identifying a problem, devising strategies to address that problem, and setting out what we know now in the light of the study. You do not need to have a special talent for writing to write a valuable research report just make your meaning clear, be assertive about what you have achieved, but also critical and measured.

Each chapter contains examples of writing from different research contexts. Some of these are excerpts from articles in journals or books, but most are short vignettes in the style of a thesis or dissertation. These vignettes are taken from a range of contexts, including community of practice, online courses, riots and why some people riot, tourism and holiday destinations. Go to the ‘where to read more’ sections at the end of each chapter if these topics particularly interest you. However, no special knowledge of any of the contexts is expected.

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I hope the book gives you, the reader, encouragement to write, strategies for writing, and the motivation to add your voice to the academic community. The book has emerged out of several years of supervising students, often international students, at masters, and doctorate level. I would like to thank these students for opening up on their writing strategies, as well as colleagues who have helped me develop my own writing over time. Finally, I would like to thank Penny Nunn for having the patience to read several versions of the text. Anything I have got wrong is my own responsibility.

1

About writing

We begin by looking at the nature of writing and at ideas for helping us to become more effective writers. This chapter is divided into the following sections:

- Why is writing important?
- Why is writing a challenge?
- How can you become a more productive writer?
- Thinking about the process of writing
- An example of planning and writing

► WHY IS WRITING IMPORTANT?

Writing is important as it is the way we communicate across time and distance. We can reflect on our origins as a species from Darwin; we can use Plato's dialogues to investigate the nature of truth; we can use Confucius to explore concepts of sincerity; and we can articulate the rights of the citizen from Thomas Paine and from Mary Wollstonecraft the rights of women. In the world of social research, we can learn of the importance of social class from reading Marx; from Durkheim, we can follow the first coherent attempts at causal explanations for social phenomena;

2 About writing

and from Weber, we can appreciate the importance of beliefs in shaping economic systems. We can read contemporary accounts of topics including the influence of social pressure on decision making; how and why people riot; why populism appeals to some people but not to others; the influence of social networks on childhood; and on so much else besides. It is all there for us to praise, criticise, and reinterpret as we have access to texts. Texts allow us to both build on the past and, just as important, to know when we want to make a complete break and think about society in a new way. Of course, in modern times, speeches and films as well as written texts can be recorded and these provide important sources of information too, but written text provides the most efficient way we have to pass ideas from one context to another.

Writing is not only about communicating to others, it is about communicating to ourselves. No one fully understands how language works but we have all experienced that shift from half-formed association in our mind to tangible statement on the page. Language enables us to get our stories straight and writing plays a particularly important role as it allows us to refine what we want to express even as we write it. Writing lets us to find out more about who we are and to present a version of ourselves to the communities to which we belong. One very important function of writing is that it enables us to discover what we did not know we knew.

Writing is particularly helpful as we can only hold so much in our short-term memory. For example, if we try to remember four new items, say four new words in a foreign language, we will probably have forgotten them by the end of the day – and if we had held on to them, we would have expended a lot of mental energy in doing so. Put the same words on paper, or on screen, and we can retrieve them whenever we need to. Writing allows us to ‘park’ facts and ideas so we can get on with other thinking until we are ready to go back. Writing is a tool for remembering.

Writing is core to the experience of study as education is about both the communication of ideas and about self-discovery and learning to learn. Academic writing is not so much about recalling or describing events but offering an interpretation of

events – *the reasons* for the Arab Spring, *the role* of social cohesion through charitable giving, and *the rationale* for school reform. Academics employ a quite abstract and specialised vocabulary to express themselves. They talk about concepts that are *explored*, perspectives which are *expanded upon*, data which is *mined*, and shortcomings which are *identified*. Not surprisingly, much academic assessment requires students to write discursive texts and teachers typically spend a lot of time assessing those texts and providing students with extensive feedback on their writing. For sure, there is innovation in the process of assessment. Students may be expected to talk about their ideas, and in some cases, the viva is central to assessment at both masters and doctoral levels. Students will often take part in assessed group presentations, and even in joint performance, and some may produce multimedia content. All this is fine, variety is to be welcomed. However, students are nearly always expected at some point to write an extended reflective report and you will not get far in academia without producing a thesis or dissertation or both.

► WHY IS WRITING A CHALLENGE?

Writing is important in academia and for some it is pleasurable, even a joy, but it is also difficult and often frustrating. Many of us develop very effective strategies for avoiding doing it in the first place. One difficulty that all writers face is that in comparison to everyday conversational speech writing is ‘dense.’ The example below captures the cognitive demands made on the writer:

Writing is difficult as it requires attention to composing what you want to say and transcribing, that is, expressing yourself in a form that is appropriate for an audience. This is very taxing for many people as it is difficult to attend to both composition and transcription at the same time. Indeed, both composing and transcribing are demanding in their own right. In composing, the writer is striving to put into words what is often unclear, certainly incoherent in the mind. In transcribing, writers have to pay attention to the changing conventions of grammar, structure, vocabulary choice and assess what is appropriate for an imagined audience.

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In everyday conversation I can get over the same idea, that writing requires different foci of attention, in a way that makes much fewer cognitive demands:

Writing is difficult, or at least I find it difficult... um...as do many other people. It's complicated ... er... you have to pay attention to so many things at the same time and that makes it feel, well it feels overwhelming to be honest. Is that how you feel? I am not saying everyone else should feel the same way, I think some people find it a lot easier than I do. But the thing is you need to pay attention to composing. I mean getting it down on the page when you don't really know what it is you want to say, that is draining in itself. But on top of that you have to think about communicating to your audience. And you know the people reading your writing will want you to write it in a certain way... like you have to get the spelling right, use tenses properly and so on or they will not take you seriously. But then these conventions change over time. Take, for example, contractions like can't and shouldn't, this was once a complete no-no in terms of writing but in less formal text it now goes on. There is no reason for it to go one way or the other I'm just saying the changing nature of writing is what makes it harder to write.

When speaking we tend to use more words to say the same thing. We can backtrack (*or at least I find it so; I am not saying everyone will feel the same way*), go into definitions (*composing means getting it down on the page*), and provide more instances (*contractions, like can't and shouldn't*) if we sense our listener does not quite follow us. In conversation, we can also explicitly check for understanding (*is that how you feel?*) and we can use fillers such as *um* and *er, you know*, if we need time to gather our thoughts. Listeners tolerate the inarticulacy of speech as long as the speaker is responsive and understands how to take turns. In contrast, we generally expect writing, or at least academic writing, to be edited so that it is organised and concise. This is particularly difficult as writers have to guess what the reader already knows, what the reader wants to know, and where the reader should be challenged. But readers are separated by both time and distance, and this means that you as the writer need to engage in a continual

dialogue in your head with an imagined reader who may or may not measure up to the person in front of your page.

A further difficulty that many students find when it comes to writing for academic assessment is that the models for writing can be misleading. For example, nearly all journal articles follow a storyline: Here is what is known about X; here are some questions that address gaps in relation to researching X; here is a methodology that generates data; and here are the conclusions. This makes for efficient presentation, but it can leave the impression that research is a seamless step-by-step process. In reality, this might not be the case. Perhaps the researchers in the paper you are reading only knew what they wanted to ask when they were piloting the questionnaire; perhaps they had missed important literature and only accessed this after reviewer suggestions; perhaps they jettisoned some approaches to data collection which proved to be impractical; and perhaps there were fierce arguments within the research team about the key points they wanted to make. As readers, we learn little of this because the account has been structured to fit the available space. However, it leaves the process of carrying out research opaque and inhibiting for those wanting to write about their work in a more reflective way.

Not surprisingly, some writers feel a deep insecurity about their writing. As text is permanent, the writer cannot correct an offence given to someone else or edit a careless thought or even a simple typo. This can stifle many a would-be writer. A further challenge is that writing is not only mentally taxing, for most people it is more physically demanding than speaking. Of course, composition and editing have got easier with digital technology, and tools such as speech recognition allow the avoidance of keyboard entry. But, notwithstanding the tools we have available, the production of text is slow and it is rare that the writer gets the speed of composition in synchronisation with the speed of thought.

Insecurities about writing are often deepened by attitudes in academia. Writing is core to academic endeavour, but academics themselves tend to be poor role models for apprentice writers. If prolific in their writing, they can be dismissive of the difficulties