**About Writing a Thesis**

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The request from Bob and Robin to contribute to this project caused me to reflect, much more than hitherto, about the writing process. I realised that I have regarded it as a largely intuitive activity and have thought more about ‘why I write' (to coin Orwells' phrase) than ‘how I write'. I must confess to a distaste for the individualisation of social science resulting from the influential cultural turn and, therefore, this is not only the first of such personal reflections but also very likely to be the last as well. So that readers know more about where I am coming from: writing is the most rewarding aspect of my professional life. I am happiest, as a social scientist, when writing and regard many other tasks as a diversion from this aspiration (as it becomes increasingly the further you progress up the academic hierarchy). Also I have supervised the successful completion of nearly 40 doctorates. From this background here are the results of my  recent  reflections, prompted by this project, which I hope will be of use to someone.

The starting point, of course, is the research topic itself because this will be the main spur over the whole course of the thesis construction. It is your passion for and belief in your chosen research area that will drive you towards completion. For much of the time writing a thesis is a lonely pursuit and, if you do not have it to begin with and sustain this core commitment and belief in your topic, it will prove to be an extremely arduous one as well. Mills' The Sociological Imagination is an excellent reminder of the need for sociological enquiry and, for me, a perennial reference point. I recommend it if your sociological commitment is flagging. Once your topic is selected and confirmed what about the practical task of writing the thesis?

First of all you need a good role model (or two). I was lucky in my formative scientific years because I worked with one of the world's leading social scientists, Peter Townsend, who also writes beautifully (as well as prolifically). He taught me a great deal about style as well as content. Another, slightly later, major influence was John Westergaard who writes, in his second language, in a perfect classical style. Both Townsend and Westergaard are a pleasure to read for reasons of both content and style. Doctoral students need to work closely with their supervisors, and part of the latters' job is to provide guidance on style and presentation. If you do not find what you want there then you certainly will do so in the literature. But beware of emulation because some academics seek obscurity rather than clarity as a badge of identity (a point I return to below). Also look beyond the academic literature and, there, no better role model exists than George Orwell.

This is not to suggest, secondly, that you can simply adopt another's style but, rather, that your own one will develop on the basis of your reading. Moreover, it should not be set in stone but, like the English language itself, change organically. Those students for whom English is not their first language sometimes find that writing a thesis in English can be a daunting prospect. I have supervised many students in this situation and all of them have progressed over the course of their doctoral studies to reach at least the standard required to submit their thesis. Some have needed more support and coaching than others and, again, the supervisors' role is critical here. None the less the learning process is similar for all regardless of the country of origin: conducting literature reviews teaches us about the use (and mis-use) of language and how to structure arguments well (or poorly) as well as providing a necessary building block for the thesis.  For those who are not confident about their English (this usually applies more often to spoken than written language) all universities offer EFL courses or have language labs to assist. It might help also to read some straightforward English prose writers to see how dialogue is structured: Agatha Christie for example.

My third point concerns notes. However you take them and there are manifold approaches, the quality of your final script will never exceed that of your notes.  The more effort you put into the notes the better will be the chapter and eventual thesis. It is necessary to be a little cautious here, however, because it is possible to spend too long on the notes and fall into a block that inhibits you from progressing. The way to prevent this is to prepare a series of drafts for your supervisors' comments. This keeps up the flow of ‘public' work and ensures that you do not enter a frame of mind that sets the bar far too high with regard to what you should show to your supervisor.  The latter is not your examiner and their main job is to ensure that you complete your thesis successfully. Especially in the early stages of the doctorate you should be presenting work regularly to your supervisor, no matter how brief.

Implicit in that third point is a model of thesis preparation in which the ‘writing-up' part is not put on hold until all of the data is collected and/or the literature surveyed. This sequential model can lead to a student being overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the notes and data that require translation into chapter form. Instead, therefore, a more or less continuous ‘write-as-you-go-along' model has proved to be more successful in terms of thesis construction and timely completion. It is particularly  helpful for overseas students to practice writing in this way but, in my view, all doctoral students should follow this model so that writing becomes an everyday pursuit rather than something ‘special' to be saved for an appropriate (much later) occasion.

My final comment concerns the style of writing that you aspire to (and, speaking personally, after a long academic career, this aspiration is still not realised). As noted earlier there is a style in the social sciences that appears to convey the impression that you cannot be a theorist if you fail to construct your arguments in a form that automatically excludes the vast majority. These authors end up speaking to a very select few but, even worse, they put off many students who cannot penetrate their prose, even with considerable effort. Some doctoral researchers may fall into the trap of thinking that they must emulate this style in order to become ‘true' scholars. In my view a key role of the scientist, especially one whose salary is paid from the public purse, is to communicate to the wider society and not only the select few. This rests on intention and commitment first and then it is a matter of language and style. Orwell, again, put this perfectly when he said that prose should be like a pane of glass (ie it should not get in the way). One of the classic sociological theorists, Karl Marx, was also, like Orwell, a professional journalist and it is well worth reading some of this work to see how to relay complex ideas to a mass audience. The same goes for J.K. Galbraith.

So I always urge doctoral students to make an early strategic decision to communicate clearly: be direct and to the point. Imagine that you are conveying your arguments not to a potential external examiner but to a lay person who will want to know only the key points, the highly important elements of your findings with regard to advancing knowledge or methods, or their potential impact in policy or practical terms. Developing this ability to communicate widely, backed-up by careful social analysis, will serve you well throughout your career the course of which it is impossible to predict at the doctoral stage. Whatever topic you have chosen for your thesis you have my very best wishes for the successful completion of your doctorate. Remember that this will probably be your last opportunity to read widely around your subject.

**Suggested reading**

J.K. Galbraith, The Good Society, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996.

Karl Marx, Dispatches for the New York Tribune, Penguin Classics, 2006.

George Orwell, Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, Penguin, Especially ‘Why I Write' and ‘Politics and the English Language'.

C.Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, Penguin, 1958.

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