

Chapter 5

The first words are always the hardest

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Introduction

My experience of writing, while particular to me, will not be unique. This chapter draws on that experience in the hope that it can be applied to your development as a writer. It emphasises the role of reading and regularly re-drafting material as you progress as a writer, and outlines the practical steps you can take to improve the quality of your writing.

Bookshops are full of other people's words. One bookshop I fondly remember, Ken Spelman's¹ in York, England, is a warm and inviting home to new and second-hand books. Its narrow passageways, framed by high wooden bookcases, are half-lit. There is the comfort of a small coal-fire in the winter, prices are written in pencil, and purchases are wrapped in brown paper. Browsing its shelves as an 18-year-old history student, it would have seemed quite magical to me to think that someday I might be writing something that could find its way into such an

¹ Ken Spelman's is an independent second-hand bookshop in York, England:
<http://www.kenspelman.com/>

establishment. After all, I thought, books are conjured up only by those with a natural gift to write and then always treated with reverence by the reader. Dissuading myself of this notion lies at the heart of my becoming an apprentice writer.

Reading purposefully

In 2008 I enrolled part time in a doctor of education degree programme. My intention was to study my practice as a secondary school history teacher and explore how my students learned to think historically. At this time there were no pressing deadlines to worry about and a freedom, not so much to write but to read widely. In a rather haphazard way I gradually tracked down some of the significant works in the field of history education. Each book represented a sort of dialogue in print, where the work of previous authors or contemporaries was discussed. As you begin your journey into investigating the literature, figuring out what this conversation is about and how you can add to it is very useful.

In snatched moments at school and at home I funnelled my attention into the works of three authors who introduced me to two concepts that I could explore further: historical empathy (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and historical significance (Counsell, 2004). My reading now became more purposeful. It consisted of trying to summarise the literature on these two concepts, working out where the leading edge was and what the gaps might be. It also involved searching for connections between authors and tracing where ideas had originated. My writing at this time could be described as note-making and was a way of organising this looking.

Still, it was hard not to be taken in by, and therefore accept unquestioningly, the ideas promulgated by the authors I was reading. In order to be less reverential of the literature, you have to develop the skill of critiquing academic writing. Here, Michael Bassey's (1995) eight-point framework of critiquing a research paper (see Box 1) can help. Bassey, an educational researcher and environmentalist, has written about how to make educational research more readable. His framework can give greater purpose to reading and might be a way of testing the trustworthiness of your early attempts at writing.

Box 1: Framework for a critique of a research paper

1. What *claim to education knowledge* is claimed? What advance in knowledge is the author claiming to have made?
2. What *conceptual background* does the author give for this research?
3. What *method* underpinned the enquiry?
4. Was the *collection of data*, as reported, appropriate, sufficient, and ethical?
5. Was the *analysis and interpretation of data*, as reported, appropriate, sufficient, and ethical?
6. Does the evidence of the paper, as examined in answer to questions (2) to (5), *substantiate the claim to knowledge* made in answer to (1)?
7. Is the *presentation* of the paper such as to enable the above questions to be answered?
8. Was the enquiry *worthwhile*?

Source: Bassey, 1995, p. 69.

Looking back, my earlier haphazard approach to reading could have been avoided by going straight to something akin to the *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education* (Levstik & Tyson, 2008), where the key works in the field are identified and the future direction of research is discussed. This is not because it promises a short-cut. High reading mileage is valuable because as you read you puzzle over problems and by increments advance your thinking to the next level. Instead, it is because handbooks highlight the breadth of your research field and help to make visible international perspectives. For a long time I was unaware, for example, of research on historical thinking from the Netherlands. This research leans towards the cognitive process of doing history and was a useful check on my tendency to see that process through an affective lens. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offer a way of accessing international perspectives within the area of research design and methods. Looking back, reading purposefully was a time of incubation from which my writing emerged.

Beginning to write

The doctor of education degree programme in which I was enrolled comprised a number of writing tasks, each about 2,500 words. These were a literature review, methodology, an article for potential publication and a research proposal. Each task was submitted as a draft and commented on by other graduate students and supervisors before a final version was submitted for marking. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that students began learning the craft of academic writing at an early stage.

Often several days elapsed between putting aside one draft, reading comments about it and then picking it up again to re-draft. Such scrutiny and thinking time help you to reflect on otherwise taken-for-granted practices. Critical friends such as supervisors, fellow graduate students and family members have an outsider's lens and may see what you might otherwise miss in the busyness of your studies. Far from feeling defensive about having your writing appraised, critical feedback should be sought because it nurtures a sense of intellectual modesty and fallibility that are necessary attributes to keeping an open mind about all educational endeavours, especially your writing.

My initial belief about graduate study was that a thesis is written up after the data collection stage has been completed. Although there is some truth in this, I had begun writing parts of my thesis earlier on. First attempts at a literature review and methodology were written a year before my data collection began. They were subsequently much altered, but upon starting to write my thesis it was reassuring that specific chapters such as the literature review were already drafted. Put simply, your writing develops as you progress through the process of graduate study. Sometimes the process of such study is mapped out, with thesis writing only signalled in the second half of the pathway. In contrast, my advice is to recognise that this process has a beginning—shortly after enrolment and in the purposeful reading stage—and that this is the time to start writing.

I now realise that a published article or book is the final iteration of a process of re-drafting. It was something of a revelation to me that writing involved so much *rewriting*. And yet many of those earlier drafts were not completely discarded. Some useful practical advice I received from a senior academic was never to throw any writing away.

Keep all your early drafts, even though they may be quite different from those that come later, because they will likely contain valuable ideas. I often went back to these (it helped to use dates in all file names) and rediscovered passages of text that were just what I needed.

Confronting writers' block

There are times when it is difficult to write anything at all. An area that I have often come back to when my writing seemed blocked was my role as the teacher researcher. Undertaking a practitioner enquiry cast me as an actor in the research, and therefore it was helpful for the reader to know my values and the role I was taking. Much of my writing about this subject found its way into my ethics proposal and later into my methodology chapter. Such material was relatively interesting to write about, so it was often a place I could begin writing or re-writing before moving on to a more problematic part of my thesis, such as identifying progressions in the historical thinking of students. You may wish to reflect on your research study and similarly identify parts that you can return to when progress elsewhere has slowed. When this approach did not work, however, I reached for my spiral-bound pocket edition of the APA style manual and contented myself with the necessity of checking my referencing.

Another way of confronting blocks to writing is to create a sense of urgency by setting short-term goals. For instance, I found myself writing ahead of time because I was presenting my research at conferences. After submitting a paper which summarised my research and some of its early findings to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), I was committed to presenting a poster at the 2011 AERA conference in New Orleans. Producing papers and designing conference posters will make you feel far more productive as a writer because deadlines have to be met and there is a practical need with such projects to express ideas concisely and with precision. Also, one conference or presentation tends to lead to another, so you find yourself having to keep on writing, and with so much practice you keep on improving your writing.

Writing workshops and clinics

The thesis is perhaps the longest document you will ever be required to write. A key piece of advice is to seek out professional help with

the practicalities of writing a long document. One practical tool for writing long documents is bibliographical software such as EndNote (www.endnote.com). Tertiary institutions may provide you with the licence to download such software, either for free or for a small fee. It will come with downloadable instructions, and your graduate studies librarian or similar will be able to guide you to courses or easy-to-follow in-house manuals on how to use it. EndNote is an extremely effective tool because it easily and quickly cites your references, and as your thesis document is redrafted, the references in the text and within the bibliography remain synchronised and current.

More broadly, most tertiary institutions offer learning sessions for graduate students in all aspects of the writing process. There may also be individuals within the academic community providing similar help in a private fee-paying capacity. The tertiary institution where I studied had a range of graduate skills workshops, including several on thesis writing. Information about these workshops is often advertised to graduate students within tertiary institutions, although a more proactive approach would be to arrange to meet the librarian responsible for graduate students. They can advise you on the most appropriate courses, which of these have a tendency to be over-subscribed (and hence the ones to enrol in early), and the frequency of courses. You may find that some workshops, though popular, only run two or three times a year.

Library workshops on how to use Microsoft Word templates to logically structure a thesis are of great practical help. Using templates to create a table of contents, and lists of figures and tables, means that your headings and captions automatically adapt to any changes you make to the content of the document (as long as you continually make lots of backups).

A key lesson I took from writing workshops was the idea that writing is something that people get better at through practice. The notion that writers are people who write on a regular basis helped to demystify my more romantic ideas of what a writer is. Writing regularly means being able to pick up each day from where you left off without having to spend significant amounts of time trying to recall where you got up to. It signals that progress is likely being made and that whether a little or a lot, writing each day helps avoid anxiety about the thesis not being

completed. The notion that writers are people who write regularly is a deceptively simple one but completely relevant for anyone working on a thesis.

There were a number of practical suggestions in a 2011 writing clinic offered by Professor Alison Jones about how to address common problems in writing that are worth sharing. Particularly helpful is her idea of PERL (see Box 2).

Box 2: Alison Jones's PERL paragraph rule

- **Point:** your *one* point should be stated in the first sentence of the paragraph (you could get a good sense of the article by reading only the first sentence of each paragraph). What simple point am I trying to make here, in my own words?
- **Elaboration/evidence/example:** provide an illustration of and evidence for the point. Elaborate on the point by reference to other research or arguments or data. How do I know this? What do I mean?
- **Relevance:** indicate how the point is significant to the question/argument addressed by your text. What has this paragraph got to do with the argument?
- **Link:** Each paragraph needs to be linked to the one before, usually in the first or last sentence of the paragraph. How did I get here?

Source: <http://www.rangahau.co.nz/research-proposal/54/>

Workshops and clinics offered by your tertiary institution are an excellent way to learn directly from experienced writers. Making the most of chance encounters and opportunities can also play an important part in developing as a writer. In 2008, when a leading figure in the field of history education research visited New Zealand, I was able to set up an interview with him. This helped me to establish that writing about an intervention that explored the affective and cognitive aspects of historical empathy and sought to trace changes in student thinking would be worthwhile.

Organising your writing

The motivation to write can stem from a simple desire to communicate research. This rather vague goal arguably becomes more focused if you try to set out the writing of the research design as a series of steps. For instance, one simple and effective question to begin with is: “What am I trying to find out here?” (Punch, 2006, p. 15). Punch suggests using a set of questions, outlined below, that help the researcher formulate specific research questions, which then inform thinking about data collection and methodology. This sequence gives a structure within which to organise writing. At its simplest, Punch’s (2006, p. 145) questions can be laid out as a series of small writing tasks, as follows:

- What is my research area? Have I clearly defined it?
- What is my topic? Have I clearly defined it and shown how it fits within the research area?
- What is the overall purpose of my research? What is it trying to achieve?
- Why is the research worth doing?

Writing in the middle and end phase of the thesis

At a certain point your writing will begin to focus more sharply on the reporting and discussion of your research findings. This writing will need to be logical and clear because it has the critical task of communicating how your findings contribute to the wider research field. It may be helpful to think of this middle phase in terms of communicating arguments, responding to feedback and establishing a flow in your writing.

My experience has been that there were several strong arguments within my thesis but that my writing had not made them sufficiently visible. This was because my arguments were obscured by a tendency to imply rather than explicitly state, and to not sufficiently distinguish one argument from another. A solution was to identify my arguments and the key evidence that supported them and then explicitly set these out clearly and logically in the discussion of my research findings. This meant writing about what the research findings were (or were not) saying and providing links back to the literature so that the reader could see the findings in context.

Those reading your thesis will be able to judge whether the arguments make sense. Feedback and critique will often help to ensure that you can return to arguments and more clearly communicate their intent. It will also help to identify what is not being discussed. As a writer you may have to unpick your writing in places and introduce new areas of discussion elsewhere. Questions will emerge such as, What is this paragraph saying? Does this paragraph belong here? Is this line necessary? Is that the word I really want?

This means that you will be going over your writing many times to make a series of small changes as you respond to your own critique and the comments of supervisors. This process of editing significantly improves the coherence of the thesis. Particular attention may also need to be given to the way the redrafted/edited text flows. Using sub-headings is helpful. For instance, chapters on 'findings' can be divided into: overview, findings, discussion and summary. Other sub-headings, such as points 1, 2 and so on, might be useful as temporary sign-posts for writing, to be removed later when the sequence of an argument has become clearer.

During this time you are likely to be trying to work out how often to approach your supervisors for feedback and guidance and when to simply keep on writing. This balance is quite fine: while it would be perilous to stray too far from the guidance of your supervisors, you are nonetheless writing with autonomy. Looking back, I was meeting my supervisors about once every 3 months. Our approach was for me to submit the latest draft of my thesis 2 or 3 weeks ahead of the meeting and then for them both to make detailed written comments on it. These comments, and their questions during the meetings, provided the impetus for me to begin writing the next iteration. You may find it useful to take a few days off from writing following each meeting to allow all of the things that have been discussed to take shape. While some written comments can be addressed quite straightforwardly, others are likely to require additional reading and thinking time.

My meetings were also about agreeing on the sequencing and titles of chapters and discussing the literature review and methodology chapters. Next, a discussion of the findings chapters followed, with an emphasis on ensuring they had a logical structure and that any claims to knowledge were warranted (Creswell, 2008). Much of my re-draft-

ing focused on writing more precisely and discussing my findings in the context of the literature. This is potentially a time when you will notice that you are writing for longer periods and subsequently you will need space away from family life to write. Therefore, sharing your progress and sympathetically negotiating with your family time to write is very important.

Perhaps there is no clear division between a middle and an end phase in the writing process. The latter almost arrives unexpectedly, as the editing is completed and the warrants are found to be water tight and clearly and logically communicated. Ironically, my final writing task, besides making changes at the proof-reading stage, was to write the introduction. My supervisor used the metaphor of a symphonic overture to talk about the need for the introduction to pick up on a number of important themes that would be threaded throughout a thesis. Arguably, it was only after each chapter of the thesis had been scrutinised, rewritten and, for want of a better phrase, 'ticked off,' that it was possible to pull everything together and write the introduction.

Conclusion

Reading this chapter you cannot see the earlier versions, which were perhaps more poorly written and started and ended quite differently to the finished product. Not seeing these iterations means that much of the scrutinising and hard work of writing is lost to the final reader. Even though they cannot be seen, however, the earlier iterations never quite go away (do not forget to save each iteration).

At the start of my doctoral studies I felt that writing was something that other people did. As a classroom teacher I was for the most part a consumer of research. Learning how to be a critical reader of research was my first step towards becoming a writer and producer of research. When I sat down to write my thesis I had already written the first words. They had been crafted, practised and improved elsewhere. By reading purposefully, following the advice of knowledgeable others and writing within a structure in which the research questions were foremost, I completed my thesis.

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