

Michael Hammond (2022) *Writing a Postgraduate Thesis or Dissertation*,
London, Routledge

Preface

The aim of this book is to help you in your reporting of 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. The 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 a case 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 and 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.

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.