Chapter Nine

Presentation of report: gaining marks for 'readability'

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Introduction

Your dissertation is where you present your work in its final coherent form. It is therefore important that it represents your very best standard of work in every respect. While it may seem obvious, do make sure you leave sufficient time for draft-reading and spelling/ grammar checks. Lack of time to carry out such checks is a very common reason for marks being unnecessarily lost by dissertation students, which is a great shame when it is considered how much time has been spent on the project up to this point.

Finalising the title

Many people imagine that finalising the title is something that needs to be done before even beginning their dissertation or piece of research. In fact, it is likely that you will only come to finalise your title at the end of your work. This is because your work is likely to have evolved as you have produced it, and you may well have written a piece of work that has a different emphasis from that which you originally envisaged in your dissertation proposal.

Florentyna is wrestling with two issues: firstly whether she should mention the differences between the two types of data that she collected in her title (as it seems a defining quality of the project to her), and then, if she does so, how to say this as subtly and tactfully as possible in English. Where she would know how to do this in her first language, and her English is very competent in the everyday sense, she sometimes struggles to find more subtle phraseology. She discusses her problem with the college librarian, who directs her to a thesaurus. In the end she decides on the uncontroversial 'Trialling a forest school area in an English Children's Centre.'

Reflection Point: Looking back at Florentyna's progress in the previous chapters, what would you have chosen as a title? Don't forget the ethical requirement to show your final write-up to all who have participated in your research.

When finalizing your title, there are several factors that you may wish to take into account. First is the importance of including specialist terms that may help others to orient to your work. For example, it seems probable that for a piece of work investigating some aspect of Early Years, the term Early Years should be included somewhere, or similar. See for example Florentyna's identification of her setting as a

'Children's Centre'; examples of other terms which will immediately locate your research in early years are 'nursery' 'daycare' or 'pre-school'.

A second consideration is to keep your title reasonably short, but to make it informative. It needs to give the potential reader a clear indication of the scope of your work, and the main lines of enquiry. One way of doing this is to think of a main title, and then to have a subsidiary phrase after a colon which gives more detail, for example:

- *Closing the Gender Gap: problems faced by Nursery and Reception teachers*
- *Models of effective leadership in Early Years settings: A critical examination*
- *Teacher Stress and Burnout: Coping strategies for teacher well-being.*

Titles which are phrased in the form of a question do not read well, and should be avoided.

Activity: Think of a range of titles for Nick, Ellie and Sunil's projects. If you are reading this book in company with other students in your dissertation module, why not all come up with a title for each of the projects and then compare notes? You will probably be surprised at the range of variation.

Writing an Abstract

The Abstract is usually written in the third person, and is placed at the beginning of the work to give the potential reader a summary of the issue that was investigated, the main approaches used, and the general conclusions reached. It is conventional

to preface all social science research reports with an abstract; this practice developed so that those searching for published research on a specific topic could browse a list of abstracts to more quickly ascertain which reports would be most likely to offer relevant information. The length of the Abstract will vary according to circumstances, but about 200 to 300 words would be the usual length for the Abstract for a dissertation of 6000- 10000 words.

Activity: again, in company with other students in your dissertation group if possible, think up a set of bullet points covering the information that our example students should each include in their abstract. Get together and compare notes, followed by each person in the group working independently to construct one of the abstracts, then get together and compare notes again. Remember the old psychologists' maxim: an abstract should leave the reader knowing: what was done, why it was done, who the participants were what was found.

Reflection point: Abstract writing is another one of those skills that improves with practice. You will find that the abstract you write for your own project will be much improved if you can find the time to undertake practice exercises of this nature.

Sectioning your work appropriately

A key aspect of your work is setting it out in such a way that the reader is taken on a journey with you, the writer.

A useful analogy here is to consider the steps that you might take (before the onset of 'satnav' at least) if setting out to drive an unfamiliar journey. You may well have consulted a road atlas and got the general idea of the direction you intended to travel, after which you are likely to have investigated the route in more detail, possibly noting particular road numbers and place names. It is probable that you would have given particular attention to places where the road number changed, or to complicated junctions. Whilst travelling, you would find the presence of clear signposts helpful, giving you advance notice of junctions, clear directions and, possibly after complicated junctions, confirmation that you were still on the appropriate route.

It is very similar with academic writing. The reader needs to have a clear indication at the outset of the general route that they are intending to follow, and then regular signposts in the 'journey' through your work of where they are, what is coming up, what to expect, and what stage of the journey they are at. You as the writer have a responsibility to place these signposts appropriately throughout your work, rather than expecting your readers to find their own way. Just as in the analogy of the road journey, you will have to give particular attention to places where the argument becomes complicated, or where perhaps you as the author (and therefore your readers), intend to by-pass an issue, perhaps to return to it at a later point in your argument. Your readers should always know, intellectually, where they are in your argument, what has been covered, and the direction in which they are travelling. These 'signposts' can take several forms in academic writing; for example:

- "The discussion so far has revolved around the issues of …"

- "The next chapter will further discuss the findings".

- "There are two key research questions in this investigation. The first key question is …"

- "The second key research question is…"

- "I turn now to consider…"

- "In summary …"

The trick is to create a cohesive narrative without using clichés or unnecessary 'filler' phrases (see chapter 8 for further tips and hints).

Creating cohesive chapters

The most obvious way of sectioning your work is through dividing it into chapters. There will usually be guidance on how to do this in the assignment booklet that you are given by your tutor. You should make sure to follow these; the conventions we set out below simply give you one example of how this sectioning can be done within a dissertation/ practitioner research assignment text:

Chapter 1: an introduction, in which you set out the general context of your work and what you hope to achieve. By setting out these details, you are giving the reader an indication of why your work is important, how it relates to previous work, and the

scope and limitations of what you intend to argue. You may also touch on your own motivation for the work, but this should relate to other academic work and avoid becoming too 'personal'.

Chapter 2: a literature review, in which you place your research in the context of appropriate academic writing, and show how your work will contribute to a particular aspect of that context.

Chapter 3: an explanation of your methodology, in which you set out the specifics of your work, its rationale and the methodology;

Chapter 4: where you report on your research findings;

Chapter 5: a discussion in which you undertake a critical analysis, in which you analyse your findings as outlined in previous chapters, and relate them back to your literature review. It is possible to present chapters 3 and 4 as one unitary chapter entitled 'findings and analysis'; it is not unusual for this to be the convention in your institution for studies that have used principally qualitative methods.

Chapter 6 (or 5 if you have written a findings and analysis chapter): where you draw conclusions and make recommendations. Your conclusions should be appropriate. For example, you should check that they are relevant to the issues that you have identified in your title and previous chapters. You need to ensure that your conclusions and recommendations are consistent with the evidence and arise from that evidence. Try to avoid making your conclusions too pompous or too trivial. For example, an study into a particular situation in one setting is not likely to be making a major contribution to the understanding of that situation nationally or internationally; on the other hand, an in-depth study into practitioners' use of information technology

should conclude with something more substantive that the recommendation that teachers should discuss the use of information technology more at staff meetings. So state your awareness of the status of your conclusions and recommendations, and identify perhaps where further work might need to be done (see chapter 8 for further discussion of conclusion sections).

Activity: pick one of our example students and bullet point what content we might expect to find in each chapter, either as the chapters are outlined above, or in the format in which your dissertation module requires your write up to be structured.

Reflection point: which chapter do you think they might find the most difficult to write? If you have time, consider this question with respect to more than one of our example students, reflecting upon whether they might find different aspects more easy or difficult. Dissertations do tend to be quite individual in this way, and it is impossible to predict how this will pan out for anyone at the beginning of the module, as there are so many variables that can make a difference.

Activity: consider how these aspects 'made a difference' for our example students:

Ellie: attitudes from the management of the setting

Nick: his previous experiences of research and initial attitudes stemming from these

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> **Florentyna:** cultural and linguistic differences between herself and her colleagues
>
> **Sunil:** his tendency to leave things until the last moment, and to seek an 'easy way out' of difficulties that subsequently arise.

Stylistic choices

Sub-headings

Within each chapter, subheadings can be useful, although care should be taken to find an appropriate balance between, on the one hand, providing insufficient subheadings and, on the other, providing too many. If there are too few or too many, the argument can become very disjointed and difficult to follow.

Paragraphing

Careful paragraphing is also important. Here, again, you need to strike a balance between paragraphs which are too short (consisting of only two or three sentences, for example), and those which are too long (running over several pages). A paragraph should consist of a group of sentences which develop a particular theme or idea, and move your argument forwards. If you find this very difficult, ask your

tutor or your librarian if your institution has a tutor who works with higher education students on their academic writing skills, and if they do, make an appointment with him/ her to discuss this point.

Clarity of expression

One of the most challenging aspects of academic writing is expressing yourself clearly.

One of the keys to clarity of expressing yourself is being clear about what it is you want to express. This may seem like a statement of the blindingly obvious, indeed a truism, but a common fault in much poor academic writing is that it tends to obscure rather than reveal the main arguments. This means that, although you may not understand what you are trying to say when you start your work in your note-taking and your writing, you must be clear about it by the time you finish. Do not try to hide gaps in your understanding by writing convoluted sentences; if you do not understand what you are writing, there is very little chance that the reader of your work will be able to do so. In fact, it is very easy for an experienced reader or tutor to identify where a writer is writing without a full understanding of the issues or concepts. It may be relevant here to cite the expression: 'Mean what you say, and say what you mean'. The same point applies to academic writing that applies to charts and graphs- see chapter 7- if you are including a sentence that you don't really understand but think might impress the reader, the most likely result is the exact opposite. This also applies to using quotes when you are not quite sure what they mean, but look like they might just fit!

English may be an *evolving* language but it is not a *dissolving* one, so it is crucial that you write clearly, using Standard English, and using correct spelling and punctuation. It goes without saying that use of text speak or slang expressions will have the effect of severely limiting your grade, particularly in education studies/ early years where the award of your degree will form at least part of the set of qualifications that are accepted as evidence of a person's competence to support children in the development of their literacy skills. Where students use their literacy skills most frequently for short electronic communications (e.g., text, twitter) they can fall into the inclusion of abbreviations without even thinking. If this describes you, do make sure to check your final draft very carefully.

When you are reading books and journals, or indeed, listening to music, what you are reading or listening to will probably appear to 'flow' naturally. What is not apparent are the many drafts of the work that have been crafted during the creative process. It is important to remember that drafting, editing and restructuring of your work are normal aspects of the writing process, and essential to make your line of arguments clear. This is likely to take a lot of drafting, so do expect to write and proof read *all* of your chapters several times. Some students come into dissertation modules thinking that rewriting only occurs in connection with the literature review- this is not the case!

It is unlikely that the thoughts you have will come to you in exactly the most appropriate order. Therefore, an important aspect of writing is the willingness to accept the importance of proofreading, and of the importance of finding and correcting mistakes, and the willingness to delete sections of work that may become redundant as you work towards your final version. Just because you wrote

something a few weeks or months ago, does not mean that it automatically needs to find its way into your final version. Even if what you wrote previously was very good, it is possible that your subsequent writing means that earlier work can be revised.

Another saying that may feel daunting to you is the one which states "Genius is 99% perspiration, and 1% inspiration". You may feel very far from being a genius and feel very unsure about getting started with your writing. But don't wait for inspiration before you start. If you do so, you may be waiting for a long time. Better to start by putting in the 99% perspiration. One reason for writing even when you feel that you have little worth writing about is that the very act of writing can help you to organise your thoughts, and give you new ideas. A second reason is that, once you have something in writing, you can start editing it, adding to it, and so on.

Ellie reads the quotation below as she puts the finishing touches to her dissertation**.** She smiles and attaches it to an email that she sends to her tutor, thanking her for all her help. She writes on the email 'this is just what I was like when I first started... desperate to be perfect, so afraid to make a start. I thought you might find this useful to use with next years' students'.

Having bought the colours, an easel, and a canvas, the next step was to begin. But what a step to take! The palette gleamed with beads of colour; fair and white rose the canvas; the empty brush hung poised, heavy with destiny, irresolute in the

air. My hand seemed arrested by a silent veto. But after all the sky on this occasion was unquestionably blue, and a pale blue at that. There could be no doubt that blue paint mixed with white should be put on the top part of the canvas. One really does not need to have had an artist's training to see that. It is a starting-point open to all. So very gingerly I mixed a little blue paint on the palette with a very small brush, and then with infinite precaution made a mark about as big as a bean upon the affronted snow-white shield. It was a challenge, a deliberate challenge; but so subdued, so halting, indeed so cataleptic, that it deserved no response. At that moment the loud approaching sound of a motor-car was heard in the drive. From this chariot there stepped swiftly and lightly none other than the gifted wife of Sir John Lavery. 'Painting! But what are you hesitating about? Let me have a brush—the big one.' Splash into the turpentine, wallop into the blue and the white, frantic flourish on the palette—clean no longer—and then several large, fierce strokes and slashes of blue on the absolutely cowering canvas. Anyone could see that it could not hit back. No evil fate avenged the jaunty violence. The canvas grinned in helplessness before me. The spell was broken. The sickly inhibitions rolled away. I seized the largest brush and fell upon my victim with berserk fury. I have never felt any awe of a canvas since.

Excerpted from *Painting as a Pastime* by Winston Churchill (1950), online at

http://www.levenger.com/press/lpexcerptschurch.asp

Whatever the specific area of your work, it is likely that you will need to use some specialist terms or phrases. The general 'rule of thumb' is to remember that you are writing for an 'informed reader'. Where you use acronyms, you will need to make

sure that you provide either a Glossary or define the abbreviation the first time it is used. Beware of assuming that so-called acronyms, even if in common use, have the meaning usually ascribed to them: as one example, SATs is a colloquial term for National Curriculum tests in England, rather than a formal acronym. Another situation to consider carefully is where the acronym seems to have taken on a life of its own as a word: Ofsted being one such example.

Education makes use of many different acronyms and abbreviations. To those experienced in the immediate context, acronyms and abbreviations such as DfE, SATs, KS1, GCSEs, and even Early Years may need no explanation. There is a shared 'language-game' (Wittgenstein 1953). However, to those new to the context, or to those from other contexts (for example, the educational systems of other countries) these acronyms and abbreviations will probably require some explanation.

Reflection point: One of the writers of this chapter was once asked to review an Australian article for an international education publication. She recalls that she was soon completely lost, buried in the acronyms used by the author, which were not always fully translated. At times she couldn't even work out whether the writer was referring to primary or secondary education. It certainly make her think about how casually she would talk to colleagues about 'Ofsted; SATS; the EYFS; GCSEs; BAs; FDs; EYPs; EYPS.... this experience certainly made her more careful when using acronyms in her own writing!

Clearly, each chapter has a specific role in your work. However, there should be a narrative flow between each of them, so that on reading the closing paragraph of one

chapter, the reader is lead into the opening paragraph of the next. The opening paragraph of each chapter will then take up the narrative, set out the purpose of the chapter, and identify key aspects of the structure.

When editing and proof-reading your work, it is helpful to be able to take some 'distance' from your work. This means reading it as your own severest critic, and reading what is actually on the page, rather than what you think is on the page. Academic writing and proof-reading are hard work; you need to be prepared to apply intellectual rigour to them as well as a scrupulous attention to accuracy.

The advice of a 'critical friend' can be helpful; someone who you trust to give an honest opinion about your work (strengths and weaknesses) and who can come to it with a more detached eye than you as the writer. If you are a good organiser, why not see if you can persuade a group of students from your dissertation cohort to do this for one another?

 Another way of developing a more detached view is to put your work to one side for a few days, and then re-read it; in doing so, you may well be able to spot sections that can be improved. Reading your work out loud (or getting a friend or a computer system to do so) may also help. One of the most common mistakes when writing is to forget to include something often quite central to the reader's understanding of the research and/ or its context; this can emerge as a result of the writer becoming over-used to the material with which s/he is working. Developing your own critical eye, and making use of a critical friend can help to spot such omissions.

Finally NEVER take your dissertation to be bound after a re-drafting session in which you have corrected many errors. If at all possible, leave it at least overnight, and read through once more before committing to the binding process.

Referencing

As you know, part of your grade for your dissertation depends on the use that you have made of the relevant academic literature. This is important for several reasons. For example, you need to be aware of work that has already been done in your area of interest, so that you do not set out to do something that has already been done. Your awareness of existing work will also help you to place your ideas in the wider context. Another reason for reading the academic literature is that you may be able to extend existing work (even in a small way) and offer new insights, as your work develops from your stance 'standing on the shoulders of giants'.

As such, an important part of academic writing is the acknowledgement that you give to these others whose work has influenced your thinking. The fact that you have read widely in the area of your study, and have taken on board the arguments of others as well as possible gaps in the literature or of issues requiring attention, is a strength of academic work, and part of the skill of academic writing is *demonstrating* that you have looked critically at the theories and ideas of others working in your field of study and used these to construct your own debates and discussions. The details of references are provided to enable the reader to check the evidence upon which your arguments are based or to follow up further lines of enquiry.

Accurate and detailed referencing in academic work is not an optional extra, to be considered only as an afterthought (if at all) by the writer. It is, rather, an integral

aspect of successful academic writing. Experience has shown that those who give this aspect of the work their careful attention are often those who produce the most successful pieces of academic work.

It should be remembered that all statements, opinions, conclusions, and lines of argument taken from another writer's work should be acknowledged, whether the work is directly quoted, paraphrased or summarised. Failure to do so may lead to accusations of plagiarism. The exact way you do this will vary, but a common device is to use single or double quotation marks to show direct quotes. Note that when quoting, you must quote exactly. Sometimes there will be errors (for example, of spelling) in what you quote, but you should not correct these; instead you should write [*sic*] after the error to show that it is not your mistake. If you wish to omit part of the original source, you can do this by the insertion of ... to show where a section has been left out. Additions (to give a quotation sense in its new context in your work) should be indicated with the use of any additional words in square brackets.

The work to which you have referred to in the text (Internet sources, books, journals, papers, or other material) will need to be listed in a reference list at the end of your work. Again, the precise conventions will vary slightly according to the institution in which you are studying for your degree. You should therefore consult your institution's guidelines, and follow them exactly.

As well as referencing quotations, you should also acknowledge the sources of ideas. In general, ideas which are 'common knowledge' do not need referencing but ideas or lines of argument that have been suggested by others, do.

This means of course, that it is essential to keep an accurate and detailed record of your sources as you work. Software packages can help you, but of crucial significance (whether you use a software package or not) is you making an accurate record of your sources (see the record sheet template in chapter 3). Get into the habit of doing the following whenever you access a source.

For **books** record:

- The author's or editor's name and initials (and the name of the author(s) of the chapter(s) concerned if it is an edited book). (It is often helpful to record full names so that you remember whether the author is male or female, then you will know whether refer to 'he' or 'she' proposes.....)
- The year the book was published
- The title of the book (and the title and page numbers of the chapter if it is an edited book)
- If it is an edition other than the first
- The place in which the book was published
- The name of the publisher.

For **journal articles** record:

- The author's name or names

- The year in which the journal was published

- The title of the article

- The title of the journal

- The page number(s) of the article in the journal

- As much information as you can find out about the journal, including the volume and issue numbers.

For **electronic resources** record as much of the following as are available:

- The author's name or names

- The date of the resource used

- The title of the resource

- The edition if it states that it has been rewritten and not just revised

- The place of publication

- The name of the publisher

- The date you accessed the resource

- The electronic address or email

- The type of electronic resource (email, discussion forum, www page, CD-ROM, etc.)

- The page numbers from which you copied any information.

In writing your reference list, every detail should be correct, including author names, year of publication, and so on. It is also important to note the editions of any work, as changes to editions can be significant.

A key reason for accurate referencing is that the readers of your work may wish to follow up a specific line of enquiry and being able to locate sources quickly is essential.

Secondary Referencing

There may be occasions when it is difficult to find the original source of a quotation or a reference and you need to use a secondary source, which is where one author refers to the work of another. Wherever possible you should try to access the original source but, if it proves impossible, you should clearly indicate that you have **not** read the original piece of work and reference it appropriately. Remember, however, that such references rely on the author giving an accurate reflection of the contents of the original work and that often authors interpret (or misinterpret) what they are reading to support their own arguments. It is also not unusual for authors to give an incorrect page number for quotations they use so be very wary of citing these. Note that secondary referencing should be used very rarely, and preferably not at all (see chapter 2).

Common conventions

Two common conventions that you may need to use are:

et al.   is an abbreviation meaning "and others". This is used when referencing a source by more than two authors in the main text. All authors must be listed in the list of references.

[*sic*]   means 'so' or 'thus', and is used when there is a mistake in the

original text. It indicates that you have accurately quoted the

original text and not made the error yourself. When you use direct

quotations, you must reproduce the author's words *exactly*,

including all italicisation, spellings, punctuation, and errors.

Appendices

Appendices are frequently found at the end of research reports and dissertations.

What are they? It might be helpful to consider first what they are not. They are not

the place to dump a whole lot of information of only passing importance to your main

argument, but which you could not work out how to include in a chapter. Nor are

they an opportunity for you to try to get around a word count by, for example, placing

an outline of a particular learning theory in an appendix rather than summarising it

within the body of the work. In such cases, the work will be marked as though if did

not contain such an outline.

An appendix is however useful for including some complete tables of results, or

transcripts of interviews, where in the relevant chapter you have been able only to

show extracts. A good rule of thumb is that an appendix is a place for a reader to go

for further information, for example if s/he has found a quotation from an interview

particularly interesting, and opts to read the whole thing. What it absolutely is not is a

place to put information which is vital to the reader's understanding of your data,

discussions and/ or analyses. A grade will inevitably suffer if the marker has to dig

into your appendices for key information, and this is another common grade limiting

error in dissertations/ practitioner research assignments. Some students say at this point 'but the word limit was too short', to which the answer is 'you need to re-write and summarise more succinctly'. In every batch of dissertations/ practitioner research assignments, there will be some students who have managed to include the key information within the word limit, and who have used their appendices correctly, and some who have not. The key to a good grade is making sure that your dissertation is in the former category!

Conclusion

The key theme throughout this chapter has been to emphasise the need for accuracy and clarity. As your knowledge and practice skills increase, what may need to become more complicated is not the writing in which you express your ideas, but the thought that goes into your work. This is the view of philosophy taken by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work *Zettel* (Wittgenstein 1967), where he suggested that the purpose of philosophy is to untie the knots in our thinking, and that the result of philosophising is not another theory but rather the realisation that the knots in our thinking have been untied (Wittgenstein 1967, §452). However, he remarked that, in philosophy, our thinking needs to be as complicated as the knots it is trying to untie. This analogy can be extended to the broader field of academic writing as a whole; as the level of academic work becomes higher the 'knots in our thinking' may well become more complicated and require more effort to untie. But untying them is the task of the academic writer, so that the reader is presented with a clear line of argument, however complicated the thinking has had to be to develop that clarity.

We hope that this book has not only helped you towards a good grade for your dissertation/ practitioner research assignment, but also to untie some of these 'knots'

in your own thinking about your practice. We wish you well in your degree studies as a whole, and hope that your tutors will soon welcome you back to carry out research at the next academic level. Rest assured that if you have gradually developed your research skills by working through this book, you should find that you already have a comprehensive set of strategies to guide you through postgraduate research activities, and possibly one day to underpin an original piece of research that moves education into new and exciting arenas.

References

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