The Personal versus the Conventional or Public Aspects of Research

Dr. Nassera Senhadji

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Bejaia, Bejaia, Algeria.

Abstract

Planning, drafting and writing a research thesis is an extremely personal endeavor or, from the beginning to the end of the process, the researcher will leave a definite imprint that is undoubtedly his from his finding an original topic to contriving a well backed-up research proposal. In this paper, we are going to describe in detail the extremely personal aspects of writing a thesis or dissertation which are finding a topic, using the library and the internet selectively, turning one's topic into an argument and the importance of the outline, contriving a well-backed-up research proposal. Opposed to the personal aspects of the research is the conventional: the student will have to conform to the regulations governing the format and presentation of the Master dissertation of his institution. Special forms are required for the style of the references, layout of the bibliography which the student has to follow very closely. These conventional rules make uniform not only theses but also the numerous articles written worldwide by millions of scholars. These conventions, in fact, help the personal aspects of the thesis acquire a public dimension.

Research methodology is of primary importance: we cannot follow any content if we do not have an articulation or organization with which it combines. The present paper is about the progressive steps in the research of a literary dissertation: finding an original topic and developing his style, using the library relevantly, turning the topic into an argument and the importance of the outline, writing a well-backed-up research proposal. This is what the first part of this paper will show. In the second part, we are going to notice that, although a dissertation is personal, it can also be extremely conventional since all writers must abide by 'the rules for writers'.

First, the student's personal involvement is, in his **choosing a topic** he can follow up provided he finds enough materials. The topic should be sharply defined, opening to important issues. Besides, once the student puts pen to paper, he pays particular attention to the written word because in writing, one should write with clarity and style. And the latter, **his style** will be '*the author's thumbprint, his mark'*, as Mavis Gallant expresses it in her essay 'What is style?'(165); nevertheless, the thesis will become a public record although it is very personal as we shall see later which shows not only the student's skill with language, but also his commitment to his topic. For the researcher, the writing process is both daunting and exciting: it requires the researcher to go through sources with a critical eye, and select materials according to his project. The student's **writing** will **be personal**, influenced by who he is, what his experiences were, whom his writing is intended to, his own style. Finding the right words to match his insight into his beliefs and values will be greatly stimulating. The more he writes, the more he becomes expert in expressing his ideas effectively.

Besides, Writing a **thesis** is both **challenging a**nd **stimulating:** it engages in personal knowledge gained from his **investigative** skill, arousing incessant questions around his field of research, probing key questions. His main effort will be to grasp **the essential aspects of his research question**, and know how to communicate them. In literature, there are many possible topics for a Master dissertation a student can explore: for example, he can study the work of a particular author, a theme or an issue; he can apply a specific theoretical approach to a particular text or group of texts**;** he can relate the historical background as a determining factor in the writing of selected authors; he can explain how a literary movement evolved partly from foreign influences and so forth. A master dissertation in Applied Linguistics on the other hand will set a lot of importance on the different steps the student has gone through to reach his results (the research design) and on the methodology he has used. Everything should be explained and demonstrated.

Furthermore, The researcher lives with his project from its inception to the final viva. As he reads, he synthesizes, compares and makes incessant connections between the different views he reads about, and he builds his own opinion according to what is most convincing to him.

Second, the student's personal implication is seen in: his checking whether he has **enough materials for his research**, or else he has to change his topic. He is going to **select various sources** from reference books, articles, but also from computer databases. It is not a simple search of books and articles. The student has to use his critical thinking to judge whether this or that material in the library or in the internet is **worth studying for his research or not.** Besides, once he has found and read the relevant documents, he has not to forget to **record all that he read preciously and meticulously for his footnotes, final bibliography or references.** He has to mention every detail: the surname, first name of the writer, one or several editors if any, the title, the year and the place of publication, the publishing house, the page of the quotes for the in-text citations for the footnotes, the page of the article where he took the quotation; the pages of the article as a whole; all this as he reads them one by one or else, he will waste a lot of time going back to the previous documents and even sometimes won't be able to find them again especially if it is a reference from another university's library. The best **advice** is to have **an alphabetically-indexed copy-book** where he will have **the emergence of his bibliography or references.**

Third, the student has to **turn his topic into an argument** or thesis because a thesis is, by excellence, *an attempt to prove or establish something by means of analysis and presentation of evidence (174)* as W.R Owens puts it in *A Handbook to Literary Research*. The student can achieve this through different means:

An argument for or against an existing critic (or critical position) in relation to the author or group of works you are studying.
An argument about the importance of a particular influence on a writer or influence exerted by him or her An argument for the importance of some hitherto little-regarded piece of evidence to the discussion of the work of some author or group of authors
An argument about the value of a new theoretical approach to a text or set of texts
An argument about the significance of a little-known or undervalued author or work.
An argument about some historical or literary-historical aspect of literature
An argument about the adequacy of existing scholarly texts of a particular work
An argument showing how a particular theme or concept may be related to a group of texts
An argument bringing together some aspect of a well-known literary text with a lesser known text or texts (Owens, 1998, 175)

All these topics imply **argument, analysis, and presentation of evidence**. A student should make the distinction between an argument and an unsubstantiated speculation and between an argument and simply an assertion. An argument has it that you must prove and justify whatever you say by including properly referenced citations from primary sources (critical books, articles, historical studies, etc..) In fact, a **thesis** helps the student **to argue and to develop his logic, to judge issues surrounding a topic, and to make a claim with reasons and evidence**. Simon Eliot well summarizes this outstanding quality every student should have when writing a thesis:

> *Remember, too, that your argument will be greatly strengthened if you recognize the force of points that might be made against- or that qualify- the case you are advancing. Try to suggest ways in which these objections or qualifications might be answered (in Eliot Simon, 1998, 178).*

This quotation is very important since in a thesis we are constantly justifying our point of view, reacting to how critics and researchers either confirm or refute our argument. This is the manner in which we answer

back or confirm our sources and evidences that matters. Sources will also contribute in different ways: as Diana Hacker (2008) will express it in Rules for Writers, sources will:

- *Provide background information or context for your topic*
- *Explain terms or concepts that your readers might not understand*
- *Lend authority to your argument*
- *Offer counterevidence and alternative interpretations to our argument*

But to help him do this, the student needs an **outline** to see his whole work in progression and see where it is best to include the quotations, references   and our reaction to them.

Another main personal involvement is the **drawing of an outline** because the student needs to have a bird's eye view of his whole work in progression that is why he needs to refer to it constantly to know at which point in the development he is going to insert this or that argument , definition, illustration. It is much easier to add, remove, and expand one idea at a certain place in the outline. The development of an argument is much better seen. The coherence and link between the chapters is much better captured in an outline than in a piece of prose. As Judith Nadell (2009) puts it:

> *....having an outline...before you begin the first draft makes the writing process much more manageable. The outline helps you organize your thoughts beforehand, and it guides your writing as you work on the draft. Even though ideas continue to evolve during the draft, an outline clarifies how ideas fit together, which points are major, which should come first, and so on (58)*

Ideas can be **reinforced, completed** or **erased** if they are secondary or not essential; in an outline, we can work on **the coherence (the overall organization**); everything should fit together. The outline is very **personal** too: some can contrive very detailed and highly structured outlines while others may jot down a few ideas. Sometimes, reflexions come rapidly flashing forth, and then you go straight to the outline to see where it is best to place them , while at other times, ideas just come slowly or not at all. Very often the best ideas and arguments do not come when we are sitting at our desk, but when on another activity, we cogitate about the thread linking our arguments in our thesis; we very often went back to the outline to jot down this sudden cropping idea! In addition, the structure should take into account the length; therefore, the student or researcher should manage a Master thesis, for example, of about 20, 000 words with each chapter of about 3000-4000 words each. The thesis should, of course, contain an introduction of about 1, 500 words for the whole thesis presenting what he intends to do, and why and a conclusion summarizing what he has done, explaining its importance, and how the subject might be extended. Both the introduction and the conclusion are best written near the end when the main body of the thesis is written up. As for the main body of the thesis, it will consist in gathering the evidence, analyzing it, and presenting your argument based on that analysis. Each chapter is a continuation of the one preceding it, and is a step forward in the development of the argument.

Another aspect which is deeply personal and shows the intellectual capabilities of undertaking the writing of a literary thesis is the student's **ability to prepare a well-backed up research proposal** before the writing of the dissertation. The length of this proposal is about a 1,000 words. In writing the literary research proposal, the student will indicate:

> **the title** of the thesis which may be changed in the middle or end of the finished thesis.
> **The thesis**   which consists in expressing what the argument is and the primary text you are going to use.

The Materials and Chapter structure The student will tackle the materials he is going to use more closely, making the relationship between these materials and his project, how he is going to organize and discuss them chapter by chapter in the final thesis. A provisional outline of each chapter is necessary and how each of them will be linked to the next. The student may give a title to each chapter and show he has evidence for his thesis. The student should refer to the secondary literature on the subject/ historical, critical, theoretical, etc, and indicate how he might use it. He may choose to argue to side with a commentator's work, or alternatively take issue against it. The student should be aware of the major secondary literature. At this point, the student has not argued his thesis, **merely outlined the materials and probable directions of his argument**. Finally, he will list the primary and secondary texts he intends using that should be **appended to the proposal** though again, this list will be **provisional** and certainly extended once the researcher begins serious work on the dissertation. This is what we call the emerging bibliography.

Opposed to the personal aspects of the research is the **conventional**: the student will have to abide by the **regulations governing the format and presentation of the Master dissertation** of his institution; special forms are required for the style of the references, layout of the bibliography which the student has to **follow very closely**. The sooner he knows which style to use for the in-text quotations and the bibliography, the better it is for him because he will get used to them, and won't reflect about them as he goes along; he won't waste too much time on them at the end of the thesis; he will by this time gotten used to them as he did the right presentation each time there was one. as , as a matter of fact, it is a progressive assimilation in a communicative context. It is a very demanding task on the part of the student since it requires a lot of attention to the minutest details like a comma or a full stop, but we may wonder why there are so many rules of presentation to follow. The main reason is that **these rules make uniform not only theses, but also the numerous articles written worldwide by millions of scholars**. **These conventions, in fact, help the personal aspect of the thesis acquire a public dimension.** Moreover, the society of language and literature, the Modern language Association, has a set of guidelines known as MLA style. Other groups of scholars prefer a footnote system, while others use a numbering system. These variations are not meant to confuse; **certain disciplines consistently use their preferred style.** It is important for the student to know which documentation style to use by asking his supervisor and acting accordingly; The APA style is used for the social sciences. For dissertations in literature, it is generally the MLA. Besides, concerning the presentation of a thesis, it should be typed in double spacing throughout except for the inset quotations and footnotes which are in single spacing. Items in the bibliography should be in single-spacing, and with double spacing between items. The page design is also important; the student should leave 40 mm at the inside margin for binding, 15 mm for the top and outside margin, and 20 mm for the bottom. Numerous other conventions should be closely attended to, such as the font size which should be 12, italic font should be used for titles of books, foreign words and phrases, etc, but underlining is also acceptable. Concerning the beginning of paragraphs, you should start the first paragraph of a chapter or section flush left , indenting the first line of the next paragraphs by four spaces or carry on flush left for all the first lines of all the ensuing paragraphs; as to the space left between the paragraphs, it is double-spacing. Moreover, the thesis should begin with introductory pages including a front page with a specific layout according to the university where it is defended, a dedication, acknowledgment, abstract, list of tables, list of figures, a table of Contents with all the parts of the dissertation with page references. Everything listed in the table of contents should correspond to the body of the dissertation. In addition, it is not necessary to mention that, of course, punctuation, grammar, spelling should be checked. Personally, the last reading of my thesis was to check the punctuation. Quotations have also a given presentation according to either the APA or MLA style.

It is the MLA style which is used in literary studies; it comes from the MHRA, Modern Humanities Research Association. In this MHRA system, a quote has a superscript number which refers to a footnote or endnote at the end of a chapter. In addition, it is not necessary to mention that, of course, punctuation, grammar, spelling should be checked. Personally, the last reading of my thesis was to check the punctuation. Quotations

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To put it in a nutshell, this paper has started showing to what extent, the individual researcher evinces **outstanding qualities of research that belong to him exclusively;** contrasted to this, he has to obey very strict conventions that belong to the realm of the public. So the question that crops up to our mind is: why do we need to be so strict about the presentation and format of the dissertation for? Thinking it out, it is precisely, this **formatting** that will **enable** a very **personal work** to be transferred **to the realm of the public.** It is in this very wrapping that the reader will access either the article, dissertation, or thesis. Those strict and demanding conventions will make the dissertation available to the greatest number thanks to these conventions which belong to the official academy (the rules for writers!). This is the price to pay for having our creation available to the greatest number!

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