

# HOW TO SUPERVISE (AND BE SUPERVISED) ON A RESEARCH DEGREE

*Tips and tools for supervisors and students*



Frank Rennie and Michael Rayner

## **Chapter 5:**

# **Starting to write**

### **Sorting the structure**

When is the best time to start writing the PhD dissertation? This really depends on what you have to say that is of any importance. Some people try to start too early – before they have done any primary research – while others attempt to put the writing off for as long as possible! Like any skill, writing gets better with practice, so the usual advice is to start early – perhaps within the first couple of months – but be prepared to edit, revise and if necessary, throw away, your early attempts. As supervisors of research students, we normally like to see the early attempts at writing in order to give some constructive feedback and help the student ‘set the tone’ at the correct level of the academic writing. This early writing does not need to be dozens of pages long, but it should come in fully constructed sentences – not bullet-points – and there should be a logical narrative which sets the scene of the research activities. It should be spell-

checked, fully referenced, and grammatically correct. In the initial stages, detailed comments and suggestions are required, perhaps using the ‘track-changes’ function, to give the student a clear idea of the standard required of the final text (the student is then free to accept or ignore this advice – and that response will tell a lot about the professionalism and the level of engagement of the student). Giving this level of feedback might not be true for all supervisors. In fact, we know of some established academics whose grammar and sentence construction lets them down badly, so they are unlikely to be very keen or useful critics of the finer nuances of the English language, however good they are in their own subject area. Our view is that the quality and impact of our writing is a reflection of us, and by implication, the work of one of our students is an indirect reflection on us. We therefore want students’ writing to be as good as possible and to show their ideas in a good light.

The quality of writing is important, because the production of a written dissertation – usually a maximum of 100,000 words in the UK – is the central work of the PhD, around which everything else hangs. The brilliance of the research,

the care and skill in crafting the research process, the novelty of the solutions and conclusions – even the defence in the viva – are dashed to nothing if the student is not able to communicate clearly and engagingly. In a nutshell, if the dissertation is laborious and difficult to read, if it contains silly errors, lack of references to evidence, or simply is written in a tortuous style or in ambiguous language, the readers (including the examiners) will become frustrated, confused, and perhaps overly critical. If they look for faults in the student's work, they will surely find them. On the other hand, if the dissertation is a pleasure to read, if it is well constructed and well presented, the reader might skip over any minor faults in their enthusiasm to follow the story. The examiners might overlook minor issues or even suggest how these could be easily improved. The skill is to construct a narrative which guides the reader through the research story, in much the same way as a novel, or a detective story, in which each chapter leads smoothly and logically into the next. Like most skills, writing is improved by training and practice, so starting a contents page with a skeleton list of the likely chapter headings and subheadings for the proposed dissertation might be useful. Encouraging the

student to break up the text into short sections and subsections, which can be edited and linked together in an ongoing process, helps to develop the storyline. (The headings can be rearranged, deleted, or added to as the writing progresses). The PhD dissertation does not need to be written in a totally linear manner, and it is quite common to double-back to add, modify, or delete earlier sections of writing as new facts become available or new academic articles are discovered. A key requirement is to be organised, and to approach the write-up methodically and systematically in easy stages.

## **Setting a routine**

Graham Greene used to say that he aimed to write 500 words every day. The novels were soon created. This might not sound like a lot of words, but there are two great advantages to this method. Firstly, 500 words every single day, even when some of the words are later amended or discarded, soon builds up to a substantial narrative. This narrative can then be edited, refined, extended or reduced. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the routine act of

writing down 500 words each day cultivates a mind-set which develops with constant practice, so that it becomes easier to express your ideas in writing. For some people, it may never become easy, but for most people it does become easier. It helps if the writer is also a regular reader. To become familiar with the way other writers express themselves in text, even if their language or the style is unfamiliar or even disliked, is a useful skill because it enables the writer to understand their own style, and how to capture in words precisely what they want to say.

Most academic writing has a different appearance in style to other forms of literature because there is a different purpose behind it. Scientific writing can also be creative, but analytical writing for an academic purpose – whether this is for science, arts, or the humanities – demands that the text is anchored in such things as theories, concepts, and evidence. Most non-academic writing (apart from things such as biographies or popular histories) do not normally require citations (such as '(Rennie, 2017)') but these citations are essential for academic work to provide the

sources of the evidence on which your subsequent ideas are based.

In order to get into a routine which suits your own working style and personality, you need to experiment a little. Some people, like Graham Greene, prefer to set-aside some time each day to write. Others only write when the mood takes them, when they feel inspired, or when a deadline looms over them. We might find writing very easy to do, and enjoy it, or we may have different behaviour patterns for different situations. We might be able to sit down and produce something very quickly when we need to (like a report of work done), but for deeper and more complex work (such as a journal article or research paper) we may simply start off with a working title and some headings to give the article a bit of structure. With the general 'story-line' in mind, we can then sit down to write the various sections when we think we know what we want to say. The article can be built up steadily, perhaps over several weeks, reading it again, and making any minor changes that are required. Getting new information or receiving feedback from a reviewer may require substantial re-writing to expand upon some point of

explanation. So, a routine is necessary to establish what the writer wants to say, building up the article as a story, then tweaking the final draft until everyone is satisfied. Other writers may write, re-write, and re-re-write as their ideas change and the article evolves. A key point in all of this is that the finished piece of text, whether it is a research paper or a dissertation, should be enjoyable for the reader, so try to avoid long, cumbersome sentences and clearly signpost the direction of your discussion. Numbered headings and spell checking is also important, so make sure that you develop your own routine to check and double-check each stage as you progress with your text.

## **Setting the tone of academic writing**

There is a lot of nonsense talked about 'academic writing' in some circles. A central myth is that it needs to be 'complex'. In fact, exactly the reverse is the case! In writing an academic text, the author needs to be aware of some of the same key issues as any author, whether the writing is fact or fiction, science or humanities. Firstly, the text needs to convey information to the readership. Even complex



ideas and intricate research can be conveyed as a story which captivates the reader's attention and (hopefully) helps their understanding. So good academic writing is not simply about the message, it is also, to some extent, about the style. A well-written chapter or article will be a pleasure to read and will stimulate the interest of the reader, even if they may not follow (or even agree with) everything that is claimed. For this reason, it is just as important to pay close attention to spelling, grammar, and the structure of an academic article as it is for a good piece of journalism, or a good book.

An academic article requires another couple of essentials, however, and these are 'evidence' and 'analysis'. The main reason for writing an academic article (or a PhD chapter) is to make known to the readership some new ideas – perhaps the results of a new experiment (or the confirmation by repetition of an earlier experiment) or perhaps simply bringing together scattered information to present a new way of thinking about the topic. Either way, the 'story' that is written will probably build upon earlier work, perhaps quoting some examples, or statistics,

attempting to construct a picture of how the new information was obtained. In this synthesis, it is imperative that the writer identifies the sources of evidence which are being referred to – even in passing – in the construction of the storyline. This sometimes gives academic writing a bit of a staccato appearance, with frequent interruptions e.g. (Rennie and Smyth, 2017) to the flow of sentences that differentiate it from a non-academic article. Nevertheless, these citations to the sources of evidence are absolutely essential in order to place the new piece of writing within the context of what is already known about the topic. Remember, the purpose of research, and the PhD in particular, is to make an original contribution to knowledge, by extending what is known into an area which is less well known, and by definition extending the sum total of our knowledge of the discipline. There are different conventions on how to draw attention to the sources of evidence which are used to give support, reliability, confidence, to the new ideas being expressed, and these citation styles – such as Harvard, Vancouver, APA – will vary with different academic disciplines. Students should check with their

supervisors on what is most appropriate (sometimes the required styles will vary between different journals).

With respect to the 'analysis' component of the writing, this will vary between different academic levels, and even within the same subject discipline. For instance, early-stage undergraduates may be allowed to be more descriptive in their writing, but late-stage undergraduates are expected to be more highly analytical, rather than purely descriptive. By the stage of embarking on a research degree, the student is expected to understand the importance of critical analysis, (and practice it) so that although a literature review chapter may in broad terms describe the state of current knowledge about the research topic, the reviews of the individual sources of evidence should not be solely descriptive, and should critically evaluate the strengths, limitations, and possible weaknesses of the source publications.

For this reason, we try to give particularly thorough feedback on the early work of any research student that we are supervising. We might use the 'track changes' function

to comment on every missing comma, typographic error, lack of citation, or inappropriate style format. If a supervisor can quickly and clearly set the tone required for the relevant level of the student's work, a benchmark can be established, and thereafter the student should be clear about the quality, style, conventions, and expectations required for the final product. At least, that is the theory...

## **Giving feedback**

For the supervisor, feedback is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the whole supervision process. The intention of feedback is to enable the recipient to benefit from critically helpful comments and suggestions on what is being done, but getting the correct balance is often difficult to find. To put it simply, the supervisor wants to provide the student with helpful advice to enable them to improve their performance, but to stop short of actually doing the work for the student. Viewed in this context, any feedback should consist of three parts; a note of what the student has done well; the identification of what can be improved; and suggestions for making improvements in the future. It is not

sufficient to say that, ‘Your citations are terrible’ without explaining how they can be improved. Simply listing the faults can be demoralising and is not sufficiently helpful for learning. We may or may not follow the trend to include a ‘Feed-forward’ paragraph, because we belong to the tradition that good feedback always includes within the commentary some instructions on how to make future work even better, so the need for a separate ‘feed-forward’ section is redundant.

That is the broad context, but the level of detail that a student can expect to receive, and the timeliness of such feedback, can be very much case-by-case, and diverse according to different supervisors. When we receive the first pieces of writing from a student, as they complete drafts of individual chapters, we may choose to give a detailed root-and-branch response, using the ‘track-changes’ function. We appreciate that not every supervisor considers this to be part of their role, but we take the view that it is our job to set the benchmark of quality for the student in the presentation of their dissertation. To do this, we can only give them an idea of the standard of writing that we

personally would be comfortable with if this was our own presentation. We do not tell the student what to write, but we encourage them by example to present their own work in the best and most appropriate manner. We work on the (possibly naïve) idea that every student wants to exert themselves to the highest standards possible, and therefore when we make suggestions on how to improve their work, these suggestions are made with the best intentions to benefit the student. We leave the decision on whether or not to accept our changes and comments to the wisdom of the student. If they feel that their original version is better, that is their decision, but if the External Examiner demands the same changes that we have suggested, at least we know that it is not because the student has not been given that advice by us, merely that they have not chosen to heed it.

Timing is another variable issue. At our university we are required that 'normally' (a wonderful word) we are expected to return feedback to students within fifteen working days of the submission deadline, and we think this is fair. The purpose, after all, of feedback is to help the student to

improve their future work, and this is best done while the submitted work is relatively fresh in their memory, and before the student starts making similar mistakes in the next piece of work to be submitted for assessment. In practice, with research students, ongoing feedback can be given in a variety of ways – written or verbal – using a diversity of media, including text, telephone support, chats in the corridor, and formal sessions either face-to-face or using video-chat. One of our colleagues prefers to make an audio recording of his feedback and email that to the students; another colleague would rather give feedback using Skype. It is wise to explore very early in the supervision process what works best for the individual student and the individual supervisor.

## **Editing – deciding what to keep**

Deciding what actually needs to be in the final version of the text in a dissertation or a journal paper can be a tough job. Some people do revision after revision, chopping and changing, cutting and adding, re-working the text until they are satisfied. Others might think the subject through, then

write the complete text straight off, only making minor changes later before submitting the final version. Whatever way works best for the author is the correct approach. The most important thing to remember is that whatever topic, the dissertation should tell a logical story to the reader. The role of the supervisor is often crucial at this stage, because the writer can frequently get so immersed in the subject matter that it can be difficult to see the wood for the trees. At worst, the writer wants to include everything that they know about the topic – just to be on the safe side. At the other extreme, the writer assumes that the readers will understand how the author is thinking, and tends to skip on the details, leading to ambiguity or misunderstanding by the readership. Having a ‘fresh pair of eyes’ read over the text can be of immense value – whether it is a friend, a partner, or a supervisor, just having a colleague giving an unbiased view can help to iron out any possible areas that might cause future confusion. Listen to them and try not to be too defensive: if they have the courage to question you, listen to their opinions. Try not to be pedantic – verbosity and clarity rarely go well together – and consider carefully if your



sentence actually contributes towards understanding the text, or is it just padding?

Usually, when writing something as chunky as a 100,000 word PhD dissertation, we would advise that each chapter or section should be drafted, then parked, until the general structure of the full text becomes more clear. Before starting to write the final chapter – the conclusions and any recommendations of the research – the author should pause, go back to the very start of the text, and re-read everything that they have written – making the necessary final amendments. Constructing complex narratives, such as dissertations or academic articles, need not be written in a completely linear fashion (i.e. from page one all the way through to the end) so re-visiting the advance draft gives an opportunity to shift paragraphs around, or add/delete information, and generally tidy up the text. This is also a good time to check that all the relevant citations to be referenced evidence are included, as well as inserting accurate place-holders for tables, diagrams, and images. The advantage of pausing before starting the last chapter and finalising the earlier text, is that the ‘story’ of the

narrative is now fresh in the memory (it may have been a very long time since the author wrote the first few paragraphs of the dissertation). Fundamentally, it is in the best interests of the writer that any readers can follow clearly and understandably the points that are being made. Spelling errors, overly long sentences, clumsy wording, ambiguous statements, and a lack of referenced evidence all serve to make it more difficult for the reader to understand, and ultimately this reflects badly on the appreciation of the text. A happy reader means a happy examiner, and a better chance that the work will be more widely read and esteemed.