

Structuring and writing your dissertation

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Handy-Dandy Prescriptions for Ambitious Academic Authors

Session Overview

- Thoughts from an expert
- Thoughts from the top
- Thoughts from me

Nicola Harrington

- Allow time for the binding process.
- The importance of the linking of sections, what that actually means and the substantive/content implications became clearer - and more important - to me as a result of our bilateral exchanges and would perhaps be worth spending more time on explicitly during your session. Had I understood that better, it would have made the writing of the methods section easier.
- Linked to the above, it took me quite some time and your guidance to finally figure out how to present the findings, which in my case I ended up doing in direct response to the initial questions asked - maybe it should have been obvious, but I spent quite a bit of time splashing around with a lot of data and nowhere to go...what are the options, what are the risks of the options, how to keep it focused etc.

Nicola 2

- The appropriate use of different ways of presenting the materials e.g. I found the use of tables, figures, graphics etc to be different in an academic piece, where it seemed much more important that these be directly linked to and in support of a core and fundamental part of the argument than at work, where I might well put graphics in a written piece to "lighten up", or supplement with additional non-central information not referred to in the text.
- Use of annexes: other dissertations I had seen had multiple annexes, what are annexes really for and what should / should not have a place there
- Simple and seemingly obvious things that you often pointed out on drafts e.g. five line sentences lose people

Fussy Professor Starbuck

<http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/Writing/Fussy.htm>

Fussy Professor Starbuck's Cookbook of Handy-Dandy Prescriptions for Ambitious Academic Authors, or Why I Hate Passive Verbs and Love My Word Processor

I'm going to summarise some of his prescriptions. Keep thinking throughout, 'why don't people follow these'

Starbuck 1

General

- Just get it onto paper.
- Start with a seductive introduction (Daft and Weick)
- End with a memorable conclusion.
- Put the main ideas into the introduction and conclusion.
- Maintain a logical flow (AB --> BC --> CD)
- Tell readers the structure.
- Try to perceive your writing as a reader would.

Starbuck 2

- After you have it on paper, copyedit it.
- Writing a (paper) is a beginning, and should perhaps be half the writing time. Copyediting is the other half.
- Copyediting can instigate revolutions. Examine things in microscopic detail, you may discover basic concepts need drastic revisions. Nitpicking may show you that paragraphs or sections ought to follow different sequences.
- Clarity should be your primary goal.
- Stay within your data.

Starbuck 3

- **Use only one term per concept; avoid synonyms.**
What you may regard as interesting variety may cause confusion or bewilderment. clients, not beneficiaries, or the program's participants. consultants, not the change agent, the intervener, or the facilitator.
- **Avoid quotation marks unless you cite a specific source.**
Use italics (underlining) to highlight key words. Do not use quotation marks to pretend you're not saying what you are saying. If your words embarrass you, use different words. General hypotheses, are not "tested" using agency data; ...?
- **Use italics only to emphasize key words.**
Do not use italics (underlining) to emphasize important words that might be overlooked: If you fear readers might overlook an important word, you have phrased that sentence poorly, and you should rewrite it, putting the important word at the beginning or end.

Starbuck 4

- **Avoid footnotes.**
A footnote requires more effort than a statement in the main body of text, so you should use a footnote only for content that is more important than the main text. But this makes no sense! If readers should read a statement, include it in the text. If it is not that important, omit it.
- **Be concise.**
Effective shortening increases a document's clarity. Almost any document can be shortened by 25 percent(!), [do you believe this?]
- report back --> report
in 27 years of existence --> in 27 years
This is found to explain --> This explains
the manner in which --> the way, or how

Starbuck 5

- **Keep sentences short.**
Long sentences make reading difficult and often indicate muddy logic. Few sentences should exceed 20 words, and long sentences should have very simple structures.
- **[Avoid anthropomorphising.]**
"Based discussions with industry segments..." Would you want your sister to marry an industry segment?
- **Check the references.**
- **Work to make it interesting.**
- **Eliminate passive verbs.**
Relationships were found --> studies found relationships
The concept is borrowed from --> originated in
- Ed Ames' Law: Active verbs (run) > Adverbs (quickly) > Adjectives (quick) > Nouns (runner) > Passive verbs (ran)

Writing Myths

Being able to write well is a gift. OR
Writing is just a question of getting down what you know, it will all come together the time comes. OR
Writing is what you do last, that's why it is called 'writing up'.
WHY ARE THESE DANGEROUS? These are very unhelpful excuses for procrastinating, or for writing to a low standard.
COUNTER> You have to write to a competent standard, which is a learned skill for most students. The only way to acquire this skill is by doing it. Think of three ingredients that go together in developing writing skills:
1. Practise
2. Read quality journals (and aspire to those standards).
3. Get constructive criticism on your writing (peers as well).

Trajectory, flow, clarity

- Get your summary really clear & down on paper
- Explain any technical or difficult terms when you first introduce them (same for abbreviations)
- AB --> BC --> CD
- Use signposting
- Say, say, say
- Title, abstract, research question(s)

Apostrophes matter

1. They are used to denote a missing letter or letters
2. They are used to denote possession
3. Apostrophes are NEVER ever used to denote plurals!

The most common mistakes are:

Erroneous inclusion in plurals e.g. 2 organization's

Erroneous omission in possessives e.g. Starbucks site

Erroneous omission in contractions e.g. its a lovely day

Misplacement e.g. the peoples' princess

Possessives without: hers, its, ours, yours

Beware: you're doing well, and your hair looks nice

Glaring solecisms at the apostrophe protection society (yes)

<http://www.apostrophe.fsnet.co.uk/>

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