

1

Getting Started

“What?” thought the Emperor. “I see nothing at all. This is terrible! Am I a fool? Am I not fit to be Emperor? Why, nothing worse could happen to me!” ... And he nodded his satisfaction as he gazed at the empty loom. Nothing would induce him to say that he could not see anything.

—“The Emperor’s New Clothes,” *Andersen’s Fairy Tales*

WHAT DOES THE STORY of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” have to do with the purpose of this book, which is to help graduate students write theses or dissertations? In the well-known tale, two swindlers arrive at the Emperor’s palace, claiming that their cloth is invisible to anyone who is stupid or unfit for his job. The reality, of course, is that the cloth doesn’t exist. The swindlers pretend to spin, but they are actually spinning nothing at all, well aware that few people, even the Emperor, will be brave enough to acknowledge that they can’t see anything. Similarly, many graduate students, uncertain about what a thesis/dissertation is supposed to accomplish and having only a vague idea about how to write one, are afraid to acknowledge their uncertainty, fearing that they will be judged unworthy and unfit for graduate school.

Insecurity is the reason some students, like the Emperor and others in the palace, sometimes *pretend* to understand what for them may be a mysterious undertaking. They ask few questions and begin the process of searching for a topic and drafting a proposal without a clear sense of purpose. Many have only a general notion of a topic they may like to explore, are unaware of what is involved in transforming a broad subject area into a workable thesis/dissertation topic, and have little idea of what a proposal is supposed to look like. Anxiety causes some students to avoid writing as long as possible, engaging in extensive reading and note-taking as an avoidance strategy or procrastinating in other ways. Some develop writing blocks, even if they have never had difficulty writing in other situations.

What graduate students should also realize is that professors rarely receive formal training in teaching writing or in supervising students in research. Presumably, students are supposed to figure things out on their own through a sort of intellectual osmosis between academic minds. Some are able to find an advisor who is concerned about teaching and is aware of students' inexperience in undertaking a large project such as a thesis or dissertation. But many students are not so fortunate.

This book provides theoretical and practical insights into the process of developing a topic, drafting a proposal, and developing it into an effective thesis/dissertation. It also addresses practical issues, such as taking notes, selecting an advisor, and working with a departmental committee. Having worked with graduate students from a variety of disciplines, I have developed a number of approaches to thesis/dissertation writing that students will find helpful. Most important, I have learned that when students understand that scholarly work involves interacting with the ideas in an academic community and that a thesis/dissertation involves *entering the conversations* of that community, they are able to write with less difficulty.

This chapter discusses strategies for beginning the writing process and suggests ways of avoiding the “Emperor’s New Clothes” syndrome.

Difficulties Associated with Writing in Graduate School

The fact that so many students experience difficulty in writing a thesis or dissertation can be traced to a number of misconceptions about the preparation graduate students receive before they begin and about the nature of the task itself. Other factors contributing to student anxiety include the entrenched elitism associated with writing a culminating work and unrealistic expectations for originality.

Graduate Student Preparation

Although considerable scholarship has been published over the past 25 years about the “process” of helping *undergraduate* students learn to write, little attention has been devoted to the writing tasks graduate students face. Hence, a number of outdated and mistaken notions about graduate student writing ability exist:

- Graduate students write well enough to develop a thesis/dissertation proposal without further instruction in writing.
- A thesis/dissertation is similar to other papers students have written.
- Previous coursework adequately prepares students for writing a thesis/dissertation—that is, students who have successfully written seminar papers will, with relatively little difficulty, proceed through the thesis/dissertation process, from proposal, to draft, to polished document.

These misconceptions are counterproductive to developing an effective working relationship between a student and his or her advisor during the process of developing and writing a thesis/dissertation because they set up unrealistic expectations for students and minimize the role of the advisor. Most advisors are genuinely concerned with helping students, but they may not know *how* to teach writing, particularly the writing of a long scholarly work such as a thesis/dissertation. As a result, although advisors may

have little difficulty identifying (or complaining about) inadequacies in a thesis/dissertation, they often do not define its rhetorical goals and genre requirements for their students. Perhaps they have not consciously articulated these goals and requirements for themselves; maybe they feel that they shouldn't have to do so. Graduate school is associated with a lingering elitism in which students deemed intellectually "worthy" are those select few who can discern on their own what is regarded as acceptable. More commonly, though, students begin the process of writing a thesis/dissertation without a clear idea of its generic expectations—what it is intended to "do," what it is supposed to "look like," and what the established members of the discourse community are expecting it to "be."

Moreover, a number of advisors seem to expect students to know intuitively what is required of them because, if they don't know, they shouldn't have been admitted to graduate school in the first place. This is the legacy that has generated the "Emperor's New Clothes" syndrome.

Distrust of Collaborative Writing

Graduate student insecurity associated with writing a thesis/dissertation is partly due to the emphasis in the academic world on the importance of "originality," which is strongly associated with the idea of an autonomous writer working alone (usually in a garret). This legacy of the romantic tradition has persisted, despite the endorsement in composition scholarship of collaborative learning as a means of helping individual writers learn to write. The academy continues to endorse the idea of the solitary author and tacitly supports the assumption that, as Rebecca Moore Howard observes, "some writers are born with 'the gift.' The others can only be socialized not to make fools of themselves when writing—and to revere the writing of the truly gifted" (35). How many of us believe we have this "gift?" My guess is that a lot more of us think that a few others may have it but that we,

ourselves, do not. We may consider ourselves hard workers but not original thinkers—and this belief generates insecurity.

Misconceptions of “Originality”

The idea that a thesis/dissertation must be truly “original” can stifle your ability to write because you will find yourself waiting for inspiration to strike, which is likely to be a long, lonely vigil. And yet, what is known about the creation of original works is that they often build upon the works of others, with inspiration occurring within the context of an established tradition or form. An important way to think about creativity is that it can exist only within the context of a particular genre and that a thorough understanding of and familiarity with a genre is a prerequisite for working creatively with it. Thus, Mozart’s achievement in the sonata form can be understood as an outgrowth from an established tradition—that is, Mozart had to work extensively within the sonata form before he was able to create an “original” version of it. Similarly, Picasso had to have developed competence in traditional forms and colors before he could create the visual juxtapositions associated with his “original” style. And Charles Darwin, who is reputed to have “originated” the theory of evolution, was working at a time when many other scientists were exploring this same direction. An “original” work often builds on works that are less “original”—and this is certainly the case in the academy.

On the other hand, if you are from a non-English-speaking country or culture, as many graduate students are, your notions of originality may differ. In some cultures, imitation and emulation are privileged over original work, and it is sometimes the case that students incorporate the work of others into their own work too closely. Then they may find themselves accused of plagiarizing, when their intent was simply to show respect for someone else’s work. The concept of originality is tricky, so I suggest that you think about it in the context of your particular discipline

and raise it as a point of conversation with your advisor and other students.

Differences Between a Thesis/Dissertation and a Seminar Paper

Difficulties graduate students experience in writing a thesis/dissertation also arise from the fact that this culminating work is a different text genre than most students have previously encountered. As a student, you may have written a number of papers in seminars or courses, but, for the most part, the assignments were probably small in scope, well defined, and due at a particular time, requiring you to work intensively on a circumscribed task for a delimited period. In contrast, when you write a thesis/dissertation, it is probably the first time you will be faced with a large, unstructured piece of writing, and it is unlikely that anything in a previous class will have prepared you for developing or managing this kind of project.

The thesis/dissertation is also different from a seminar or course paper, in that it is intended for a broader audience of potential readers. Whereas the audience for a seminar paper is usually defined in terms of a specific professor whose approach to a topic has been expounded over the course of a semester, writing a thesis/dissertation involves addressing a wider and, to some extent, unfamiliar audience. An advisor may be the first person to read your work, but members of a thesis/dissertation committee at your university also will read it. In addition, and of paramount importance, a thesis/dissertation is written for a wider audience of scholars in a discipline who have published books and articles on the proposed topic. No matter what the discipline is, scholarly work involves joining a vast company of thinkers, essentially entering into a large group of collaborators whose ideas inform our own and by whom the thesis/dissertation must be considered worthy. Graduate students, however, don't usually think of their intended audience in this way and may be unaware that unseen readers and listeners are influencing and potentially evaluating

their work. As they begin their search for a topic, they don't identify potential collaborators when they craft their proposals and begin writing.

The Necessity of Beginning Early

Misconceptions about graduate student writing ability, the inherent elitism associated with graduate school, concern about the necessity for “originality” in the academy, and lack of awareness of what is involved in locating a workable topic are some of the factors that contribute to difficulties associated with writing a thesis/dissertation. Another is the fact that most graduate students don't begin even to think about their thesis/dissertation until they have completed their coursework¹ and/or passed the necessary exams. Some feel that they are not in a position to consider possible topics before they have immersed themselves in their discipline by taking courses—and, to some extent, this is true. However, it is also a good idea to consider possible topics as soon as possible, keeping alert for potentially useful ideas and texts, and making contact with faculty members involved in relevant research who may point you in the right direction and serve as an advisor.

Discovering a topic is a personal investment that requires intellectual and emotional involvement. If you begin to consider ideas early in your graduate career, you are more likely to “engage” with a topic and find something meaningful to say. The choice of a topic does not usually occur because inspiration, like a bolt of lightning, suddenly strikes, causing you to exclaim, “Aha! Now I have it!” It is more likely to happen when you have been actively seeking possibilities. My experience has taught me that creativity doesn't strike—it *evolves* when one has been grappling with a topic for a while, both consciously and unconsciously. You may

¹ In some universities and disciplines, particularly in the United Kingdom, students don't always take coursework in graduate school. Instead, they work with a mentor or advisor with whom they engage on research projects. Students who write a thesis/dissertation in this setting must begin thinking about a potential thesis/dissertation topic earlier in their careers.

be thinking about it during the course of a day—in the shower, in the car, while waiting in line at the supermarket—and turning it over in your mind until you find a way to connect with it and make it your own.

If you have devoted significant attention to finding a thesis/dissertation topic, and if you have been mentally tuned in to various possibilities, you will eventually discover a good one. Give yourself enough time and actively pursue the lightning bolt—don't wait for it to come to you.

Certainly, when I was a graduate student, at least some of the problems I encountered when I began to search for a dissertation topic were related to the fact that I didn't engage in the process soon enough. I was so caught up in jumping various academic hurdles before I came to the dissertation stage that I didn't begin to *think* about a possible topic or a potential advisor until the summer after I passed my exams. Then I spent a lot of unfruitful time fishing around, grabbing at various possibilities, scouting around for a faculty member to be my advisor, becoming anxious enough to consider dropping out altogether, and, eventually, after considerable frustration, coming up with an idea that I was able to develop and finding an advisor to help me do so. Until I finally found the right advisor who was able to provide adequate guidance, I bounced around from idea to idea, and the approach I used was absurdly haphazard and inefficient. In fact, it is amazing that I completed my dissertation at all.

An Exercise in Preliminary Thinking

Think about the classes you are currently taking or have already completed. Are topics in those classes particularly interesting to you? Spend some time making a list of possible topics that you may explore further.

Consider also whether you would like to work with certain faculty members. How much do you know about their areas of expertise? What courses do they teach? Can you arrange a preliminary meeting with a faculty member who could potentially serve as your advisor?

Suggestions for Getting Started

To engage productively in the process of finding a thesis/dissertation topic, I offer the following suggestions.

Begin the Process Early in Your Graduate Career

As you complete your coursework, be on the lookout for potential thesis/dissertation topics, for texts whose ideas interest you, and for faculty members who may work with you as an advisor. Perhaps you are interested in the published works of particular faculty members. You should make contact with these people early in your graduate career; make an appointment during their office hours to discuss possibilities. Enroll in a course taught by these faculty members if your program allows you to do so, read their published works, and avail yourself of opportunities to get to know them. Ask more advanced students about their advisors. Has the advisor been helpful and supportive? Sufficiently directive and/or concerned? Reasonably available? Prompt in returning drafts?

Collect Ideas

In addition to getting to know faculty members and being on the lookout for possible ideas, I suggest that you start an “idea file” in a file drawer or box. Whenever you come upon an article that contains potentially interesting ideas, make a copy of it and put it into the file, jotting down a note to remind you of why you wanted to save it. You can also jot down ideas in a notebook or open a file for this purpose on the computer where you can download articles of potential interest. At the end of a year, you will have a rich collection of ideas from articles, books, or lectures that can help you compile a review of relevant literature. One of them could help you discover a workable topic.

Become Aware of Your Own Writing Process

As you begin the process of writing a thesis/dissertation, it is helpful to become aware of the process you have developed over the years as a writer, in order to assess the extent to which it has been effective. As a graduate student, you have written a number of papers for classes, perhaps with great success. At this stage in

your career, I suggest that you become conscious of the activities you have performed by responding to the following questions:

- Summarize the process you usually use to write papers for classes.
- How much of the paper do you plan ahead before you begin to write?
- When you write, do you revise immediately, piece by piece, before you write additional text? Do you save revisions until all the text in a particular section has been written? Do you revise at all? What sort of revision do you do?
- What aspects of writing do you find most difficult?

Generating ideas?

Developing a main idea or position?

Doing research?

Beginning the paper?

Organizing the paper?

Providing transitions?

- Are you happy with your writing process? Do you find it effective? Would you like to change some aspect of it?

Reread your responses to these prompts and consider which ones you find most useful and which ones you would like to improve. Find an element in the process that you like the best or find most interesting or rewarding, and, if possible, begin with that one. Beginning with an activity you like at least somewhat can provide momentum for other components of the process that you may enjoy less.

Create a Timetable for Completing the Thesis/Dissertation

Creating a timetable helps you gain an overview of the process, and I recommend that you consult your advisor as you develop it. Does your advisor want you to submit each chapter as you write it? Or should you wait until an entire draft is completed? If your

advisor is willing, I recommend submitting each chapter as you write it so that you can begin obtaining feedback early in the process.

Form a Thesis/Dissertation Writing Group

Although the image of the lone writer scribbling in a garret is a popular fiction, writing entirely on your own can be lonely and intimidating, whereas sharing ideas with others is often enjoyable and rewarding. If possible, I suggest that you form a thesis/dissertation writing group with a few congenial fellow students. Meeting with fellow students on a regular basis will keep you focused on your task and serve as a bulwark against procrastination because you will have to report at least some “progress” to the group or confess that you haven’t made any. When you share drafts of your proposal or chapters from your thesis/dissertation with fellow students, they will be able to suggest new directions or note areas that may need clarification or explanation. In addition, when you critique the work of others, you gain insight into your own. Collaboration among writers is usually helpful for everyone, which is why professional writers often participate regularly in writing workshops.

Understand the Thesis/Dissertation as a Genre

The word *genre* appears frequently in this book, and it is important for you to understand how it is used in the context of a thesis/dissertation. In the past, the term was used primarily to refer to the *form* of a literary text, such as a poem, short story, or play. More recently, however, the word has been redefined in terms of *function*—that is, in terms of what it does or accomplishes. As Amy Devitt defines this new concept of genre, “People use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and ... these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances” (698). The thesis/dissertation has a particular function within the academic world; to write one successfully, it is important to understand its “generic” expectations—what it is intended to “do,” what it is supposed to

“look like,” and what the members of the academic community expect it to “be.” Thinking about a thesis/dissertation in this way enables you to view it in terms of the audience for which it is intended. When you consider generic features in terms of function, you will understand more clearly the sort of text you are expected to write.

Although theses/dissertations differ by discipline, institution, and country, most adhere to the following characteristics:

- A thesis/dissertation begins by identifying a problem or issue that is well defined and worth addressing. The problem or issue leads to a research question and a consideration of how it may be answered.
- A thesis/dissertation is a persuasive scholarly document that presents an *argument* and supports it with evidence. Its goal is to convince a committee and other members of the academic community of the following:
 - ♦ The problem, situation, or issue is significant to the profession.
 - ♦ The problem, situation, or issue has not been treated adequately in previous scholarly work (although it probably has been addressed before).
 - ♦ The author has created or discovered a credible strategy or direction for addressing the problem, situation, or issue.
- A thesis/dissertation enables the student to enter a scholarly conversation by engaging with other texts:
 - ♦ “Listening” to what other texts have to say
 - ♦ Understanding their main points
 - ♦ Discovering possibilities for expanding or perhaps refuting those points
- Originality in the academic world evolves from the voices of others. Students often become overwhelmed by their concern with finding something completely “new” to say, but a

thesis/dissertation often builds on ideas that others have already written about, extending an argument, addressing a gap, or modifying a point of view.

- In terms of the thesis/dissertation proposal, although not all proposals are the same, most devote sections to the following elements:
 - ♦ Explaining the problem
 - ♦ Showing its significance to the field
 - ♦ Showing that the author is familiar with relevant prior publications
 - ♦ Explaining the need for solving the scholarly problem in terms of a gap in the previous scholarship
 - ♦ Presenting a plan for research
 - ♦ Presenting a potential structure for the final written product

*Find Examples of the Type of Thesis/Dissertation You
Want to Write*

The library at your university should have a file of theses written in your discipline, and it is a good idea to examine several to get some ideas for the work you plan to do. Look at how the purpose was presented and at the structure that was used. You may even find one that suits your own goals quite well, and you can then begin by using it as a model. Start by imitating and then move beyond, developing your own ideas as you continue to reflect. Slavish imitation usually results in a mechanical, uninteresting text, but modeling in the initial phase of composing can be helpful.

In addition, the growing Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) can serve as a useful source of ideas. You also should peruse Dissertation Abstracts Online, which characterizes itself as “a definitive subject, title, and author guide to virtually every American dissertation accepted at an accredited institution since 1861. Selected Master’s theses have been

included since 1962. In addition, since 1988, the database includes citations for dissertations from 50 British universities.” These have been collected by and filmed at *The British Document Supply Centre*. Beginning with DAIC Volume 49, Number 2 (Spring 1988), citations and abstracts from Section C, *Worldwide Dissertations* (formerly *European Dissertations*), have been included in the file (see <http://library.dialog.com/bluesheets/html/bl0035.html>).

An Ideal Sequence for Getting Started

When you read the title of this section, “An Ideal Sequence for Getting Started,” you probably thought that an ideal sequence is unlikely to happen—and you are, of course, correct. Writing a thesis/dissertation rarely goes as smoothly as one would like, and life has a way of intruding on even the most disciplined of students. However, it is useful to consider what your “ideal” sequence may be. The pointers below, derived from the work of Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, may give you ideas about how to approximate that sequence:

1. Consider why you want to write a thesis/dissertation and what you plan to do when you have completed this project.
2. Locate an area of particular interest that you would like to study on a graduate level.
3. Select a university or research institution that has a strong reputation in the area you want to study.
4. Identify an advisor who has published widely in the area you plan to study and who is known for being an excellent mentor.
5. Work with an advisor to develop a question or hypothesis that will serve as the basis for a thesis or dissertation.

As a way of getting started, Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman make the following distinctions between a “problem,” a “question,” and a “purpose”:

- A *problem* occurs when we become aware of a situation that is unsatisfactory in some way. Awareness of a problem can raise questions, which can then suggest a research direction.
- A *question* is a statement about what you may want to know about the unsatisfactory situation you have identified.
- A *purpose* then becomes the explicit direction for your research. The purpose of a thesis/dissertation is to answer the question you have posed about the unsatisfactory situation.

Thus, “the search for a topic becomes the quest for a situation that is sufficiently unsatisfactory to be experienced as a problem. The proposal has as its purpose the setting up of a research question and the establishment of exactly how (and why) the investigator intends to find the answer. Problems lead to questions which lead to purpose” (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 48).

It is also useful to be aware of problems that can cause a proposed area of investigation to be rejected, either by a graduate committee or by another university group that approves thesis/dissertation topics. These are the most common reasons:

- The thesis or dissertation doesn’t have a main point, thesis, or position. It reviews relevant research, discusses antecedent texts, perhaps summarizes plots of literary works, but makes no argument. It elicits a reaction from readers that can be summarized as “So what?” or “What’s your point?” or “Why does this matter?”
- The subject is too broad.
- Key terms are poorly defined or not defined at all.

These suggestions can help you begin the process of finding a topic and writing a proposal. As you move along what can appear to be a meandering and perhaps treacherous path, keep in mind that it is natural to be confused or uncertain some of the time. After all, you have never written a thesis/dissertation before. So have courage! Forge ahead! And don’t be afraid to ask questions.

To Stimulate Thinking

Access a thesis or dissertation either in your university library or online that is concerned with a topic in your field. Ideally, it should be a topic you may want to address in your own work. Then respond to the following questions:

- What is the overall purpose of this thesis/dissertation? Where is the purpose stated?
- Examine the introductory section or first chapter. How much information is included in this section?
- Examine the structure of the thesis/dissertation as a whole. How many chapters does it have? How is the content divided?
- Look for the Review of the Literature. Is this in a separate chapter, or is it included in the introduction or first chapter? If so, is it used to justify the topic—to show that this thesis/dissertation addresses a critical issue in your discipline?
- What do you like about this thesis/dissertation? What elements can you adapt for your own work?

Share your responses with a writing group of other students who are working on a thesis/dissertation. What insights have you gained about a possible direction?

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