

A Short Guide to Writing a Thesis

ACU Series

1. *Faith and Reason*, 2004 edited by Anthony Fisher OP and Hayden Ramsay.

A Short Guide to Writing a Thesis

What to do and what not to do

by

Gerald O'Collins, SJ



Adelaide
2011

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry (pbk)

Author: O'Collins, Gerald, 1931-

Title: A short guide to writing a thesis : what to do and what not to do / Gerald Glynn O'Collins.

ISBN: 9781921511875 (pbk.)

Notes: Includes bibliographical references.

Subjects: Dissertations, Academic--Style manuals.
Authorship--Style manuals.

Dewey Number: 808.066378

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry (eBook)

Author: O'Collins, Gerald, 1931-

Cover and layout design by Astrid Sengkey



An imprint of the ATF Ltd
PO Box 504
Hindmarsh, SA 5007
ABN 90 116 359 963
www.atfpress.com

Preface

Having examined nearly two thousand substantial essays or term papers, supervised to a successful conclusion over two hundred master's theses and nearly one hundred doctoral dissertations, and examined over one hundred further doctoral dissertations, I have come to realise that I could pass on some street wisdom for those doing research in the humanities and the social sciences. From all that supervising and examining I have picked up a good number of ideas about writing essays and theses—about the things students should do and not do.

How might they choose a topic that they can investigate and turn into a short paper or a long dissertation? What should feed into their choice of a supervisor? How should they compile and organise their bibliography and set about writing the introduction? What are some tips for writing paragraphs and entire chapters and producing conclusions? What are ways of providing references, using helpful (or at least correct) punctuation, avoiding common mistakes in spelling, and improving their level of writing? When difficulties arise—for instance, with their supervisor—how might they cope with and resolve such difficulties?

Frequently presenting a dissertation and even a term paper at the honor's level involves some kind of face-to-face meeting with examiners. How might students prepare themselves for these oral examinations and perform more successfully? What suggestions can I offer for those who want or need to publish their theses in part or perhaps even in whole?

Research students in the English-speaking world already use such admirable works as Joseph Gibaldi's *MLA [Modern Language*

Association] Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and the latest edition of Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. But such books are much longer than the short guide I am offering. At times they go into detail about minor questions and occasionally seem to lack a fully practical edge. Post-graduate (also called graduate) students, as well as undergraduates, need clear advice about issues and problems that I have seen repeatedly occur over the years. How can they improve their style of writing? What can be done when difficulties arise with their dissertation or with their supervisor?

This guide offers some straightforward suggestions about doing research, putting the results into a convincing form, and dealing with difficulties that inevitably arise. The overall objective of this work is to provide students and their supervisors with some down-to-earth proposals about things to do and things to avoid when preparing and producing a long essay or a thesis.

I am very grateful to John Begley, Stephen Connelly, Anne Hunt, Catherine Playoust, Michael Smith, and Bill Uren for help, support and suggestions. I dedicate this work to the Australian Catholic University, who appointed me an adjunct professor and have now awarded me an honorary doctorate.

Australian Catholic University,
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Gerald O'Collins, SJ
16 June 2010.

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Chapter One

Choosing a Supervisor and a Topic

Students who need to write long essays or end-of-term papers often have only a limited choice of topics. Their lecturer or tutor prescribes a particular theme or a small list of possible themes, and that is that. The students may have been free in choosing the course (with its lecturer or the tutor). But, once enrolled for a course or a seminar, they will find that the topics for essays or seminar/tutorial papers will often be, more or less, prescribed.

Choosing a Supervisor

For those pursuing a master's or doctoral degree, important decisions come into play. At which college or university should I do (or can I do) my research and writing? What professor or lecturer should I approach with a view to finding a satisfactory PhD supervisor or dissertation director? Unquestionably, previous experience of a particular department, the availability of research grants, the possibility of being supervised by a leading figure in my chosen field, and a wide range of personal circumstances can affect my decision. Some institutions simply assign supervisors to those students admitted to begin research. But what of those students who enjoy some freedom in settling their thesis director?

They may recognise that several professors or lecturers could make suitable directors. Such possible directors could be younger and on the way up or older and heading toward retirement. The prospect of being supervised by someone who is already an acknowledged leader in his or her field and even a world-ranking specialist can be attractive. Yet students may sometimes be helped more

effectively by a younger, promising academic, who has the time and energy to follow their students' research closely and provide pertinent suggestions and criticisms. In general, supervisors who are regularly available and ready to comment quickly on the work in progress are to be preferred to celebrities who take many weeks to read their students' chapters and then have very few criticisms and corrections to offer. Here those students who are completing or have recently completed dissertations in one's department or faculty can, out of their own experience, give good advice about the comparative merits of supervisors.

Some possible supervisors gather their research students for monthly or even weekly seminar sessions, at which the students present the results of their work. The chance of profiting from such feedback may be a significant item to weigh in deciding on one's supervisor.

Dealing over many years with students hesitant about their choice of supervisor, I normally suggested sending a letter to possible supervisors, in which the students gave a brief 'curriculum vitae' (along with their address and contact information), indicated their general area of research, and mentioned that they would be phoning or e-mailing shortly to ask for an appointment. I also suggested that they should add that they were simply seeking some direction about their choice of research topic and supervisor and were not formally asking the professor in question to be their supervisor. Such letters constantly brought the students four major benefits. First, they saved time, as the students did not need to go into details about their previous work, personal circumstances, and area of research when they came for the appointment. The professor or lecturer already knew all that in advance. Second, the person they approached had the time to reflect on possible advice and even write up some useful questions and references. Third, taking time to compose such a letter showed an attractive seriousness of purpose and genuine respect for the professor or lecturer they had contacted. While writing such a letter in the past constantly proved an investment that brought good dividends, in the new age of e-mails such a letter arriving by post can prove even more impressive and useful. Fourth,

such an advance letter could take any undesirable pressure out of the meeting. The students were seeking for help and advice from an expert, and not necessarily asking the expert in question to become their supervisor.

Whether it happens quickly or more slowly, the choice of a supervisor for one's research is a momentous decision that represents a quantum leap in the life of students. Previously, when following various courses and attending different seminars, their academic and personal wellbeing did not depend on smooth and fruitful relations with only one person. They dealt, happily or less happily, with a series of teachers. Choosing or accepting a dissertation director means entrusting their present prospects and future advancement to just one person. Academically and psychologically this is a major, new step for them. I sometimes told research students, especially those taking on a doctoral director, that they were entering a personal relationship that was a kind of marriage. Their 'spouse' could make or break the course of their academic lives. Normally without indulging such dramatic talk, I would warn them: 'your director may not always help you in doing your research and writing your dissertation as much as you might expect. Just as happens in many marriages, there will be ups and downs and unfulfilled expectations. Both of you will need understanding and encouragement toward seeing the long task through to a happy conclusion.'

When giving such advice, I usually did not add that a few dissertation directors I had known have acted in ways that should be branded as unacceptable and even downright unjust. They could airily encourage students to 'take their time and spend a year or more reading around the topic'. That kind of advice easily ignores the need for students to move ahead briskly. Their financial resources often do not allow them the luxury of months or even years of leisurely reading. Academically they would be well advised to finish and defend their dissertation in a reasonably short amount of time, so that, now armed with a PhD, they can apply for positions at colleges or universities. Then, some supervisors take an inordinate amount of time to read the chapters their students submit to them. This can cause students distressing unease about the way

their research is moving ahead. At times the chapters are eventually returned with only a few comments and suggestions. Students may wonder whether their supervisor has given their work serious attention. All in all, every now and then I have been left wondering whether some dissertation directors are sufficiently sensitive to the personal, financial, and academic wellbeing of their students. This could happen with supervisors who take on too many students and too much outside work, and finish up failing to meet their students regularly and to give them the amount of attention and help that is needed.

Dealing at once with work that students present characterises first rate supervisors. It always strikes me as odd that some supervisors take weeks in reviewing and evaluating the work presented by their research students. They are going to do the reviewing and evaluating anyway. Why not do all that at once and give their students the vivid encouragement that comes from a quick and thoughtful reply?

In some academic institutions students may have more than one research supervisor. Provided the supervisors in question enjoy a reasonable working relationship and do not insist one-sidedly on a personal method and point of view, so that students feel themselves to be caught like the children of a dysfunctional marriage, multiple supervision offers considerable advantages—not least that students can profit from more intelligent comment. In general, one should say that the more feedback, the better.

Choosing a Theme

Let me offer twelve suggestions about choosing a theme for research.

(1) Some fortunate students, when they arrive at the level of a master's or a doctoral degree, find or are given a very well informed supervisor who suggests to them one or more fruitful themes for research—projects that he or she knows will work, without having the time personally to pursue them. Others students come to research with a clearly profiled theme they want to investigate. This theme may have emerged even years before—for instance, in the course of

their work on an undergraduate essay or paper. Or else something they once heard in a course or seminar or read in a book might have roused their curiosity and ongoing interest.

Someone in a literature course could, for example, have alerted them to the topic of midlife journeys in fiction. The power of youth is gone, the possibility of failure presents itself, and the dreams of earlier years turn out to be shallow or even pointless. This is the crisis of the middle years, a midlife journey that we find, for instance, in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*, and Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Tree of Man*, and *Voss*. Such works presents middle-aged men or women caught up in strange adventures and walking unexpected roads. A research thesis in literature could profitably investigate the theme of midlife journeys in the novels of White or else compare and contrast how some major authors have dealt with this theme.

(2) But many students come to research with a sense of their general area but without having formulated yet the precise issue they will take up. Besides engaging in discussion with possible supervisors, they can help themselves choose their topic by checking the titles and abstracts of theses in their area (e.g. in anthropology, education, fine arts, history, languages, law, literature, or psychology) that have been successfully presented in recent years. Such information can be available in printed form or on line. The research that others have been doing can readily suggest similar but new themes to be pursued.

(3) Insights into valuable topics for research could also be prompted by browsing through journals in one's area, or reading them on online. The articles, news and reviews that appear, for instance, in such journals as *British Journal of Sociology*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *History Today*, and *The Journal of Philosophy* reflect many issues that teachers and researchers in sociology, fine arts, history and philosophy, respectively, have been currently investigating and the kind of work that merits study and publication.

(4) A fourth avenue towards the choice of a dissertation topic can open up by reading entries in first-rate, contemporary dictionaries and encyclopedias. In philosophy, for instance, perusing some of the entries in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*¹, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*², and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online) can bring happy results. Some of their entries, along with the bibliographies, may easily suggest fresh lines for research.

(5) For those engaged in historical and literary research, trawling through archives might bring to light some unpublished material that would make a valuable subject for research and publication. When the letters, diaries, and unpublished work of some notable people become available, a scholarly edition of at least a part of such papers, with a substantial and appropriate introduction based on the necessary research, could be a welcome contribution. Obviously one should recall here the fresh possibilities for those doing research in economics and political science, when government archives open up decades of hitherto embargoed documents.

(6) In one's own city or country, the life and work of recently deceased leaders in education, finance, industry, politics, religion and sport offer interesting possibilities for research in such areas as commerce, education, history, political science and religious studies. Initial contacts with the institutions for which the deceased worked and with their family and friends will show whether it is feasible to select one such outstanding figures as a dissertation topic. Similarly, research students could select a period in the story of some corporation, political party, religious body or other such association. These groups might well provide much help for students engaged in examining their history.

(7) Whatever way students go in finding a thesis topic, input from others is normally essential. Many years ago one professor said to me when I was starting my own doctoral research at the University of Cambridge: 'A theme will come to you some morning when you are looking in the mirror and shaving.' This advice ignored the way

1. DM Borchert (ed), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols (2nd edn; Farmington Hills, Mich: Macmillan, 2006).

2. E Craig (ed), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols (London: Routledge, 1998).

in which fresh knowledge and insight come through contact with others, their interests, and their research. Later I recognised that, without realising it, he had revealed what he himself did. After landing on a 'bright idea', often an idiosyncratic conviction, he then set himself to 'prove' it in an article or a book. There should, of course, be something new about the theme chosen for research—at least at the doctoral level. But the knowledge needed for making such a choice is not normally given by 'inspiration from heaven' coming in front of a mirror but emerges through dialogue with others.

(8) The theme chosen should have its clearly defined limits and keep to a precise minimum. Dissertations in the humanities often involve studying a very specific issue or some particular writer at depth, or sometimes both, as when a student investigates X's idea of Y. Inevitably great authors have already generated a great deal of comment and interpretation. Research students in literature will can hardly expect to identify some new line to develop in examining and commenting directly on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, William Faulkner's novels, TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*, or the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. Yet, even in the case of major authors in literature, philosophy, or theology, there might still be a serious question or area that has so far escaped attention. Some years ago I examined an excellent dissertation on John Henry Newman's eschatology or teaching on 'the last things' to be expected in human history or in the history of individuals. Despite the massive secondary literature that had gathered around him through the twentieth century, no student had so far tackled his eschatology—at least from a theological point of view.

The way great authors have been received and interpreted in another part of the world yields some possible topics for dissertation. How, for example, have the novels of Shusaku Endo or the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore been received in the British Isles and North America? What reception have the plays of Shakespeare enjoyed in Japan, Korea or Singapore during a certain period (eg from 1945 to date)?

(9) The difficulty in finding authors who have not provoked much comment may be avoided by doing research into some important but secondary figure in the history, for instance, of education, law, literature, philosophy, or theology. Almost inevitably such writers will not prove as exciting as the major figures. Yet students will be delivered from the task of reading much secondary comment. They can do something clearly new, through becoming ‘the’ expert on this or that relatively minor writer.

(10) There are, however, at least two ways of doing acceptable doctoral work on central and much studied authors. Students can select a particular question and see how it was handled by three or four mainline thinkers. Normally, such a group should be selected on grounds that bring them together into a plausible ‘team’: they lived in the same century; they were in dialogue or debate with each other; they faced the same issues or made contributions in the same field. In philosophy one could imagine a thesis that critically presented a team of three or four major writers who in the first or second half of the twentieth century took up what David Hume had written on miracles. Such a thesis would enjoy two major advantages: it involves a careful study of Hume himself; it also allows the research student to become thoroughly acquainted with several modern philosophers. The thesis should confine itself to comparing and contrasting how these philosophers evaluated Hume’s thought. At the same time, researching such a thesis would bring a wider knowledge of Hume and some modern philosophers—a valuable educative process that would accompany the narrower project of composing the thesis itself.

(11) Another possibility entails casting the net somewhat wider by selecting an author who had written a landmark study, for instance, on Shakespeare and then examining where the study of the sonnets had been taken in the twenty or twenty-five years after that study. One could undertake something similar in the case of significant historical or literary figures. A critical and comparative account of works about George Washington, William Gladstone, WB Yeats, Mahatma Gandhi, or Sun Yat-sen—to pull in a few names almost at random—could produce some enlightening and even fas-

cinating conclusions about shifting criteria for evaluating their contributions and about the impact of new data that became available in the aftermath of the first scholarly studies of these figures.

(12) Finally, interviews conducted and assessed with scientific rigour can yield worthwhile results for those doing research in social history. One could imagine some fresh and fascinating conclusions emerging from interviews with scientists now in retirement who moved in a particular decade from the British Isles and continental Europe to the United States. There is surely much research still to be done in examining and evaluating historically samples of such a 'brain-drain'.

Living with the Topic

Over many years of work with research students, I experienced the need to warn them right at the start that, almost inevitably, some crisis would occur sooner or later. If they were forewarned, that made them 'fore-armed' when a serious difficulty arose. Students may become bored with their topic and with slogging away at the research. Financial and personal difficulties can arise. They may come to find their supervisor irritating and unhelpful. After a smooth run through their research, at the end they can meet difficulties that arise from a member of the committee involved with the submission of the dissertation or from one of the board of examiners.

Admittedly a minority of research students enjoy peaceful progress--from the start right through to the finish when their dissertation is examined and accepted. But the majority, sooner or later, run up against difficulties. Recognising that this might occur, without lapsing into anxious fears about what might happen in the next few months or years, can take some pain out of awkward situations that arise. Moreover, every college and university has one or more officials to whom they can turn: the head of the department or, even better, someone who oversees research and research students in the whole institution. At times sharing a difficulty more or less solves the difficulty. Students should not suffer in silence. If their supervi-

sor, for whatever reason, fails to provide the needed help, there is always someone else higher up to whom they can turn.

A later chapter in this guide will address other challenges that can or will arise. Let me now suppose that a student has chosen both his or her supervisor and topic, and move next to the task of research and writing.