

## PART FIVE

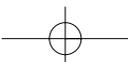
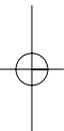
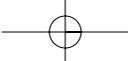
# Writing Up

Alasuutari describes writing a thesis as rather like learning to ride a bicycle through gradually adjusting your balance:

Writing is first and foremost analyzing, revising and polishing the text. The idea that one can produce ready-made text right away is just about as senseless as the cyclist who has never had to restore his or her balance. (1995: 178)

Alasuutari reminds us that 'writing up' should never be something left to the end of your research. Instead, writing should be a continuous process, learning as you go from your supervisor, your peers and from your own mistakes.

In the following five chapters, we will examine how this writing up can be accomplished efficiently if rarely painlessly. The five chapters address the following topics: how to begin your research report; how to write an effective literature review and methodology chapters; how to write up your data chapters and what to put in your concluding chapter.



# 20

## The First Few Pages

### *CHAPTER OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Recognize why the first few pages of your thesis are very important.
- Construct a title, abstract, list of contents and introduction which are appropriate, informative and attention grabbing.

### 20.1 INTRODUCTION

Nearly all dissertations begin with four elements:

- a title
- an abstract
- a list of contents
- an introduction.

If you follow my advice and devote most attention to your data-analysis chapters, then you may tend to treat these beginnings as routine matters, speedily disposed of. However, the impression you create at the start of your dissertation is very important and the writing of the first few pages should never be regarded as 'busy work', i.e. as a triviality.

In this short chapter, I offer some practical advice about each of these beginning sections of your dissertation.

### 20.2 THE TITLE

In the early stages, you will probably be asked to give a short title to your research for administrative purposes. You will almost certainly change this title before long,

**PART FIVE ● WRITING UP**

so do not attach too much importance to it. However, as Wolcott suggests, it is a good idea to be thinking about an effective final title and to keep notes about your ideas (1990: 70–1).

Titles should catch the readers' attention while properly informing them about the main focus of your research. My own preference is for a two-part title: a snappy main title often using a present participle to indicate activity. The subtitle can then be more descriptive. For illustration, two of my books were entitled:

*Reading Castaneda: A Prologue to the Social Sciences*  
*Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction.*

Among my papers, you will find the following titles:

'Describing sexual activities in HIV counselling: the co-operative management of the moral order'  
 'Unfixing the subject: viewing "bad timing"'  
 'Policing the lying patient: surveillance and self-regulation in consultations with adolescent diabetics'

Of course, using a present participle in the main title is merely my preference, intended to stress the *active* nature of your research as well as the fact that I study people's *activities*. Nor do I always follow my own rule. For instance, my 1997 book on AIDS counselling was entitled *Discourses of Counselling: HIV Counselling as Social Interaction*.

But titles do matter and need careful thought as any marketing person will tell you. So give this matter thought and discuss it with your supervisor. Then try Exercise 20.1.

**20.3 THE ABSTRACT**

This should succinctly cover the following:

- your research problem
- why that problem is important and worth studying
- your data and methods
- your main findings
- their implications in the light of other research.

There is usually a word limit for abstracts (100 words is common). So, as Punch points out: 'abstract writing is the skill of saying as much as possible in as few words as possible' (1998: 276). Within the word limitations, try to make your abstract as lively and informative as possible.

## THE FIRST FEW PAGES

Read the abstracts of other dissertations in your area and try out drafts on other students and see if they find your abstract clear and pithy. Know what your audience are likely to be most interested in and ‘emphasize your problem and content, not your fieldwork techniques’ (Wolcott, 1990: 81).

Wolcott also nicely sums up what makes a good abstract:

An abstract can offer a valuable opportunity to inform a wide audience, to capture potential readers, and to expand your own interactive professional network. Whether others will pursue their reading may depend largely on their assessment of your abstract, including its style. (1990: 81)

## 20.4 THE LIST OF CONTENTS

You may think this is a very trivial matter. Not so! A scrappy or uninformative table of contents (or, worse still, none at all) will create a terrible impression.

In order to be user-friendly, recipient design this list to achieve two ends:

- 1 To demonstrate that you are a logical thinker, able to write a dissertation with a transparently clear organization.
- 2 To allow your readers to see this at once, to find their way easily between different parts of the dissertation and to pinpoint matters in which they have most interest.

One useful device which helps to achieve these two things is to use a double numbering system. So, for instance, a review of the literature chapter may be listed as:

### CHAPTER 3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- 3.1 The background studies
- 3.2 The core readings
- 3.3 The study closest to my own

Of course, this is only an illustration. More detailed discussion of what a literature review should contain is provided in the next chapter of this volume.

## 20.5 THE INTRODUCTION

Murcott (1997: 1) says that the point of an introduction is to answer the question: what is this thesis about? She suggests that you answer this question in four ways by explaining:

**PART FIVE ● WRITING UP**

- 1 Why you have chosen this topic rather than any other, e.g. either because it has been neglected or because it is much discussed but not properly or fully.
- 2 Why this topic interests you.
- 3 The kind of research approach or academic discipline you will utilize.
- 4 Your research questions or problems.

Like this chapter, there is no reason why your introduction should be any longer than two or three pages, particularly if your methodology chapter covers the natural history of your research (see Chapter 22). The role of the introduction, like your abstract, is to orientate your readers. This is best done clearly and succinctly.

**20.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The impression you create at the start of your dissertation is very important. Your title should catch the readers' attention while properly informing them about the main focus of your research.

An abstract should describe your research problem; why that problem is important and worth studying; your data and methods; your main findings and their implications in the light of other research.

Your list of contents should allow your readers to find their way easily between different parts of the dissertation and to pinpoint matters in which they have most interest. Your introduction should explain why you have chosen this topic rather than any other; why this topic interests you; the kind of research approach or academic discipline you will utilize; and your research questions or problems.

**KEY POINTS**

- The first few pages of your thesis are very important.
- Your title, abstract, list of contents and introduction should be appropriate, informative and attention grabbing.

**Further reading**

Harry Wolcott's *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1990: 70–82) has an excellent discussion of how to present student dissertations. A further useful source is Pat Cryer's *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (Open University Press: 1996), Chapter 12.

THE FIRST FEW PAGES

**Exercise 20.1**

This is an exercise to encourage you to find a good title and abstract for your dissertation.

- 1 Make a list of three or four possible titles for your dissertation. Try to make the main title intriguing and the sub-title descriptive.
- 2 Now reverse the order, putting the sub-title first. Which works best? Why?
- 3 Try out your titles on students working in similar areas or using similar methods or data. Which do they think works best? Why?
- 4 Now try out two different abstracts in the same way.

**Exercise 20.2**

Show the introduction to your dissertation to a range of fellow students. Encourage them to tell you whether they feel tempted to read more. If not, why not? If so, why?

Now use their response to revise your introduction.