13   The Challenge of Writing-Up

'How will I ever manage to put this together on paper?'

THE WRITING CHALLENGE

> 'Composition is, for the most part,
> an effort of slow diligence and steady perseverance...'
>
> –Samuel Jackson

I have not come across many students who consider writing-up an easy or hassle-free process. Regardless of the dimension or scope of the project (your current project is likely to be your first or your biggest), writing-up is usually approached with a sense of apprehension and wariness. Well, it's no wonder when you consider that writing-up is likely to be a relatively unpractised form of writing that has major consequences attached to its quality. In fact, research is often judged not by what you did, but by your ability to report on what you did.

This chapter attempts to offer students some practical strategies for negotiating the writing process in a way that improves the overall quality of the project, and makes the task less daunting. It covers: the need to see writing as part and parcel of the research journey rather than just an account of that journey; the need to draft strong storylines that engage others in your research 'conversation'; the nitty gritty of preparing your document for submission and assessment; and, finally, the importance of disseminating your work.

Process or product

1. Write and submit a research proposal; 2. conduct the research; 3. write up the report. It was not long ago that this three-step process was seen as standard for conducting research and producing a report. And while less and less academics

advocate this process, it is a process whose legacy seems to linger in the practice of many supervisors and their students. This, however, can be perilous for those inexperienced in research. For many, 'writing' can be a huge obstacle. If you leave it until the end you risk writer's block, which can lead to inevitable delays in completion (Chapter 2 offers a fuller discussion of managing some of the difficulties associated with the research/writing process).

More commonly accepted (if not entirely practised), is writing as a process central to each stage of the research journey. It should be considered an activity that progresses as your research progresses. For example, if you formulate even your most initial ideas in written form, you will have begun to produce notes for the first draft of your 'introduction' and 'methods', and annotating your sources can lead to preliminary drafts of your 'literature review'. These sections can then be redrafted as you go through the process of data collection. Similarly, preliminary analysis and writing throughout data collection will provide you with a good start on 'findings'.

Keep in mind that even if you're a procrastinator and you're not that keen on writing as you go, it is a highly attractive option compared to facing the daunting prospect of having to start your writing from scratch when you complete your data collection and analysis.

Writing as analysis

Very few people can formulate all their ideas in their heads before they commit them to paper. Ideas almost always evolve as you write, and in this way each draft of your writing will drive the evolution of your ideas. 'Writing as you go' thereby provides much more than a head start to the report production process. Writing itself can be a form of analysis or even a method of inquiry.

Writing can be central to the construction and interpretation of meaning, and can move you from the production of specific descriptive understandings, through to broader synthesis, and on to crafting significant, relevant, logical, and coherent storylines. In fact, many find writing and rewriting the key to bringing storylines into focus. Now while this is true for all types of research (it is virtually impossible to evolve ideas if they stay planted in the realm of the mind), it is particularly relevant to research that sits under post-positivist (subjectivist, interpretivist, or constructivist) paradigms that demand iterative engagement with narrative, discourse and/or text.

WRITING AS 'CONVERSATION'

When I write or give a lecture, even though it's only my words on the page or my voice speaking, I try to remember that my goal is to engage my audience in a 'conversation'; and I try to keep the unspoken side of that conversation firmly in my mind.

For an audience to appreciate what you have to say, you need to engage their thinking, predict their questions, and respond to their inquiries. Very few people have

the ability to sit through a monotonous monologue or stay engaged in dry and turgid writing – they need to be mentally, intellectually, and/or emotionally involved.

When it comes to your research report, the ultimate goal is not just writing up what you did and what you found; the real goal is to explain, illuminate, and share your research with others. Writing-up is thus a communication process that demands consideration of your readers. They may not be able to iteratively respond, but it is their response that gauges your success. In writing up, it is therefore particularly important to consider how the frameworks you decide on and the storylines you construct will best engage your readers in an account of your research journey.

Deciding on a structure

When it comes to a framework or structure for writing up, there is certainly a 'standard' approach that is recognized, accepted, expected, and strongly advocated. This is the introduction, literature review, methods, findings, and conclusion format that dominates the literature. But there are also a host of alternative structural possibilities based on, for example: chronology – how events unfolded over time; or theory-building – how theory was inductively generated; or the findings-first model – where you give readers your conclusion up-front, then say how you got there. While these alternative frameworks are sometimes considered more appropriate for research sitting under the post-positive umbrella, deciding on the most appropriate framework depends on the 'conversation' you believe is best suited to both your story and your audience.

The standard conversation

If you consider writing up an interactive communication process, it's easy to see why so many researchers, regardless of paradigm, adopt the standard format. It is a format that: (a) is expected; and (b) answers a reader's questions in a sequence quite natural to the flow of a normal conversation. In fact, the 'standard conversation' is one you may have already had on several occasions as people ask you about your research. As shown in Table 13.1, the questions and their respective answers can easily structure a report or thesis.

While the standard format may not suit all approaches to research, it is a format that undeniably limits the work that readers need to do to make sense of your write-up, and therefore your research. This is something that should never be underestimated whether your goal is examination, publication, or broad dissemination.

Alternative conversations

In considering 'alternative conversations', it is essential that readers do not get 'lost' as you attempt to take them through your research project. While you may feel that an alternative framework best suits your research, it is absolutely crucial that readers do not end up scratching their heads and questioning the credibility of your entire research project just because they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the way you have chosen to write it up. Two cases where the 'risks' of alternative conversations are minimized, and perhaps even rewarded, are:

TABLE 13.1   THE 'STANDARD' CONVERSATION

The questions	The answers that structure the chapters/sections of the conventional report
So tell me what your research is about?	Title Abstract Introduction • research question(s) • hypothesis (as appropriate)
And why did you choose this particular topic/question?	Introduction • rationale
What do you hope to achieve?	Introduction • aims and objectives
I really don't know much about this, can you fill me in?	Background • recent literature and prior research (literature review – this is covered quite extensively in Chapter 6) • theory (current and seminal as appropriate) • context (social, cultural, historic, and geographic)
How exactly did go about doing your research?	Research design/Approach • methodological approach (framework) • methods (techniques/procedures) • limitations
And what did you find out?	Findings/results/emergent story • text, tables, graphs, charts, themes, quotes, etc. Discussion • analysis, interpretation, and meaning of findings
How would you explain the relevance/importance of what you've done?	Conclusion • implications • significance • recommendations (particularly important in applied research)

1. When you are using a format that is widely accepted as appropriate for your particular paradigmatic, disciplinary, or methodological approach. For example, the use of a 'theory-building structure' for studies that have adopted a grounded theory approach, or perhaps a 'chronological structure' for a case study exploring change.

2. When you know (or can confidently assume) that your audience is likely to be open to a more creative structure. If your write-up is to be assessed, consider whether your examiner(s) is likely to be open to the alternative, i.e. they have

written, or have students who have written, in alternative ways. If they are firmly planted in the positivist tradition, you may want to reconsider your approach or, if possible, your examiner. If your goal is to have your research published, the key will be to find a journal for which the alternative is quite standard.

You may, however, be determined to 'buck the system' and go down the creative and alternative route even without wider acceptance or any assurance of reader openness. If this is the case, it's essential that you argue the logic of your structure up front, and that this structure takes your reader through a clear and coherent storyline, such that the logic of the structure becomes self-evident.

Crafting the story

Good conversationalists not only know how to listen and interact, they also know how to tell a damn good story. Yes your write-up needs to report on your research, but it should do more … it should unfold, it should engage, and it should tell an interesting story. As the author of that story you will need to:

- *Become familiar with the craft* – very few authors are not avid readers. As you read through your literature, take note of not just content, but structure and style. Also have a look at theses or reports that have been well received. They may not be prototypes, but they can certainly give you some sense of the shape of your end product.
- *Find a voice* – this is quite tricky in academic writing. Under the positivist paradigm, the convention is to avoid the first person (this is so your research does not appear to be tainted with personal bias and subjectivities). But even within the positivist paradigm, this convention is relaxing since objectivity is no longer seen as reliant upon masking a researcher's role. While the conventional style may still be formal, it does allow for some use of an active first-person voice. Under post-positivist paradigms, recognition of researcher role is paramount. Consequently, there are no moratoriums against the use of first person. This, however, can leave students struggling to negotiate formality, as they move between a relaxed conversation and a logical/comprehensive research account. The key is a consistent style that will be deemed appropriate to your project.
- *Craft the story line* – whether you opt for a standard or alternative structure, your report will need to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and incorporate the answers to the questions (or similar questions) in Table 13.1 in some logical fashion. The goal is to engage your readers, peak their interest, and take them through your research journey in a way that unfolds the story and logically leads to your conclusion. Writing a creative working title, constructing one or more draft outlines, and writing a one-page abstract (a task many researchers find exceptionally difficult but extremely focusing) can help you organize the story you wish to tell.
- *Make convincing arguments* – the quality and credibility of your final document, as well as its individual sections/chapters, is largely dependent on your ability

to construct logical and convincing arguments. Whether it be a study's rationale, a review of the literature, or the presentation of methods, findings, and conclusions, the process of research demands more than simple summary and reporting. It is a process reliant on the ability of the author to convince, reason, and argue a case.

- *Write/construct your first draft* – you can think about it, and you can keep thinking about it, but it won't happen unless you do it. If you've constructed writing as part of the research process rather than its product, the bones of your first draft will be there for you to put together and flesh out. If, however, you follow the 'write up after' approach, you will need to gather the notes, and put it all down on paper. Regardless of approach, students generally find they need more time than they initially thought to write up that first draft.

PREPARING FOR SUBMISSION

There is no doubt that the journey from first draft to submission can be long and challenging. In fact, contrary to the desire of just about every fibre in your body, you may find that your final document does not retain much from that first draft. The irony of course, is that you couldn't get to that final draft without that first draft and all the drafts in between. Once you have written your first draft, getting to the submission stage relies on getting appropriate feedback and being prepared to draft and redraft your document.

Seeking feedback

Getting relevant feedback is essential in your ability to move from a first to a final draft. Now you might think that getting feedback would be a straightforward process, but that isn't always the case. You need to be specific in your requests, prepared for criticality, and able to process and respond to – at times – conflicting advice.

Asking for feedback
I once had a PhD candidate hand in a **first** draft of a chapter to a co-supervisor for comment. Well he got comments alright, but it was all to do with spelling, grammar, and even proper margins for quotes. While that might be really helpful for a final draft, it was completely useless at the first-draft stage. Even worse, this student had waited over two months for that ever so enlightening advice.

What this experience brings home is the need to ask the right people for advice, and to be specific in your requests. It's important to know where you are in the process and ask for comments related to your current needs. A good strategy is to ask your readers to comment on the same questions you need to ask yourself as you work through various drafts of your document (see questions in the next section). If it's a first draft, you'll probably want advice on overall ideas, arguments, logic, and structure, while later stages will see you seeking suggestions for consistency, coherence, readability, and, finally, copy editing.

These various types of feedback may see you asking a variety of people for their opinions. Keep in mind that while the advice of your supervisor(s) can be invaluable, so too can be the advice of colleagues, peers, and family. In fact, at some stage, it is worth asking a non-specialist to read your work to see if the logic makes sense to them – because it should. And don't forget to try to get a sense of time-frame. It can take some readers months to get back to you.

Now knowing who to ask and what to ask is one thing, but being willing to hand over what you have written is another. What if your fears of being 'incompetent' are validated? Handing over is always exposing, but keep in mind that fears of incompetence are often a crisis of confidence – not a lack of ability. And besides, it's better to find out if you are off-track early than wait until you have invested a huge amount of time in an iffy direction.

Receiving feedback
You get back your draft. If you're lucky, it's full of constructive, relevant, and thought-provoking comments. You should be happy – not only has someone put in a lot of time and effort, but they have provided you with a road map for moving forward. But instead of being happy you're devastated. In fact, you feel insulted, frustrated, and even incompetent. Now personally, I would prefer it if feedback on my own work was limited to validation of just how clever I am. But what I really need – like it or not – is criticality. You need more than validation to move forward, and you need to be ready to hear it. It's important that you don't take criticism personally, or take suggestions as insults. If you do, writing-up will become an emotional minefield.

Okay, so you've processed the feedback and are trying not to take it personally – so now what do you do? Well unreflexive incorporation is just as bad as ignoring the advice. You need to mentally take the feedback onboard, consider it in light of the source, and work through the implications the advice has for what you're trying to say. And of course this is particularly important if you find yourself getting conflicting advice. Talk to your supervisor/lecturer, but remember it's your work and you're the one who needs to make the final call.

Drafting, redrafting, and redrafting some more

Every year students come across a particularly eloquent piece of writing and tell me, 'But I just can't write like that. I'm not a natural writer.' The likelihood is that neither is the author of that particularly eloquent work. Yes, it may sing in its final form, but that final form may have taken draft upon draft to be realized. I have yet to read, assess, or write a first (or even second) draft that could not be significantly improved. From ideas and structure, to spelling and layout, the road to final submission takes all writers through a process of working and reworking their writing.

Reworking the first draft
There is no doubt that it's tempting to finish that last sentence of your conclusion and say 'I am done!', and certainly finishing a complete first draft is worth celebrating.

But don't get too carried away. When you step back, take stock, and rigorously assess your writing, you are likely to find that the process of writing itself has evolved your ideas, and that your conceptualizations have moved beyond what you initially managed to capture on paper. As you work through your first draft ask yourself:

☑ **Is this making sense? Does the logic flow? Do I need to alter the structure?**
☑ **Do I need to incorporate more material/ideas, or are sections really repetitive?**
☑ **Am I happy with my overall argument, and is it coming through?**
☑ **Does each chapter or section have a clear and obvious point or argument?**
☑ **Have I sought and responded to feedback?**

Reworking the second draft

Once you're happy with the overall ideas, arguments, logic, and structure, it's time to fine tune your arguments and strive for coherence and consistency. In doing this ask yourself:

☑ **How can I make my arguments/points clearer? Do I 'waffle on' at any point? Am I using lots of jargon and acronyms? Should I incorporate some/more examples?**
☑ **Do I want to include some/more diagrams, photos, maps, etc.?**
☑ **Is the structure coherent? Are there clear and logical links between chapters and sections?**
☑ **Is there consistency within and between chapters and sections? Do I appear to contradict myself at any point?**
☑ **Is the length on target?**
☑ **Have I sought and responded to feedback?**

Moving towards the penultimate draft

Being ready to move towards a penultimate draft implies that you are reasonably happy with the construction and logic of the arguments running throughout and within your document. Attention can now be turned to fluency, clarity, and overall readability. Ask yourself:

☑ **Are there ways I can further increase clarity? Are my terms used consistently? Have I gotten rid of unnecessary jargon?**
☑ **Are there ways I can make this read more fluently? Can I break up my longer sentences? Can I rework my one-sentence paragraphs?**
☑ **Are there ways I can make this more engaging? Can I limit the use of passive voice? Do I come across as apologetic? Are my arguments strong and convincing?**
☑ **Am I sure I have protected the confidentiality of my respondents?**
☑ **Have I guarded against any potential accusations of plagiarism? Have I checked and double-checked my sources, both in the text and in the references or bibliography?**
☑ **Have I written and edited my preliminary and end pages, i.e. title page, table of contents, list of figures, acknowledgments, abstract, preface, appendices, and references?**

☑ **Have I thoroughly checked my spelling and grammar?**
☑ **Have I done a word count?**
☑ **Have I sought and responded to feedback?**

Producing the final draft

You'd think that if you did all the above, you'd surely be ready to hand in the final document. Not quite, you now need to do a final edit. If it's a large work and you can swing it, you might want to consider using a copy editor (particularly if English is your second language). It's amazing what editorial slip-ups someone with specialist skills can find, even after you've combed through your own work a dozen times. Some things you may want to ask prior to submission are:

☑ **Have I looked for typos of all sorts?**
☑ **Have I triple checked spelling (especially those things spell checkers cannot pick up like typing form instead of from).**
☑ **Have I checked my line spacing, fonts, margins, etc.?**
☑ **Have I numbered all pages, including preliminary and end pages sequentially? Have I made sure they are all in the proper order?**
☑ **Have I checked through the final document to make sure there were no printing glitches?**

Box 13.1 Saying Goodbye – Scout's Story

I took the final draft of my thesis to the book binder in the same week I took my first born to kindergarten, so needless to say it was a week of high anxiety. Off went my baby; the baby I had conceived, nurtured, and cried over. The baby that left me sleepless and made me feel incompetent – but also the baby that saw me grow and cope in ways I would have never thought possible. When it was time to say goodbye, I was both proud and nervous, and it was only with great trepidation that I handed over that now somewhat matured baby to those in charge of the next phase.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot to tell you – I dropped my daughter off at school the next day and we were both fine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISSEMINATION

Before finishing off, I just want to quickly mention the importance of dissemination. Okay, as a student researcher your immediate goal may be a grade or even a degree, but don't forget that the ultimate goal of research is to contribute to a body of knowledge; and your findings cannot add to a body of knowledge if they are not disseminated.

If you've undertaken a major project, you might want to consider publication. In fact, if you're pursuing a PhD, it's well worth trying to publish some of your work as you go. Not only can it focus your thesis, it can also be invaluable for your career. Now the ultimate in publication is a single-authored work in an international

refereed journal, and this is a worthy goal. But it is one that can be quite difficult for the inexperienced researcher to achieve. Another option is co-authorship. Quite often, your supervisor will be willing to co-author a work, which will give you expert advice and put more weight behind your submission. Just be sure to openly discuss issues of primary authorship.

You can also consider presenting your work at conferences. Not only does this allow you to disseminate your work, it also gives you experience and confidence in this type of forum; can help you generate new research ideas; and of course allows you to network. Finally, you can disseminate your work (in either verbal or written form) to interested stakeholders. If your study is relevant to a community group, local government authority, or particular workplace, it's well worth sharing your findings. If your research has added something of significance to a body of knowledge, you might as well get it out there.

Further Reading

I think the best place to start your search for further readings is within your institution. Subject/course outlines, style guides, and manuals produced by and for your institution/programme will not only provide you with hard-and-fast criteria, they are also likely to steer you in directions that meet with more general expectations. You can then turn to readings such as the following for more detailed information on managing the writing process.

Arnold, J., Poston, C. and Witek, K. (1999) *Research Writing in the Information Age*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Evans, D. and Gruba, P. (2002) *How to Write a Better Thesis*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Strunk, W. Jr. and White, E. B. (1999) *Elements of Style*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Research write-ups are often a relatively unpractised form of writing that can challenge and intimidate students. Once considered an activity that commenced once research was complete, it is now commonly recommended as a practice that should be incorporated throughout the research process.
- Writing itself can be a form of analysis and can be central to the construction and interpretation of meaning. It can also be instrumental in the development of significant, relevant, logical, and coherent storylines.

- The goal of your write-up is to share your research with others. It should be thought of as a communication process or a 'conversation' that demands consideration of your readers.
- Your write-up can follow a standard structure that follows the introduction, literature review, methods, findings, then conclusion format, or it can follow an alternative structure that may better suit a particular project's aims and objectives. While alternative structures can allow for more creative expression, the standard format gives readers what they tend to expect.
- Your research write-up should unfold as an interesting story. As the author of that story you need to become familiar with the craft, find a voice, create a storyline, make convincing arguments, and get down to the business of writing.
- Preparing your document for submission involves getting appropriate feedback and being prepared to draft and redraft your document.
- Incorporation of relevant feedback requires both specific and appropriate requests and a willingness to, if not welcome, then at least accept criticality.
- Moving from first to final draft is a multi-stage process that sees you working systematically through the development of, logic and argument, coherence and consistency, fluency and readability, and; finally, copy editing.
- The ultimate goal of any research project is to add to a body of knowledge. Once your project is complete, it's worth thinking about broader dissemination.