8

Writing up

Introduction • Drafting and re-drafting • How to argue • How to criticize • Who am I writing for? • Grammar, referencing and plagiarism • Using tables, diagrams and other illustrations • Panics • Summary • Exercises • Further reading

Introduction

Research without writing is of little purpose. There are, of course, other ways of communicating your research and its findings, most notably through oral presentation, but writing them up remains of paramount importance in most areas of research. The research report, thesis or dissertation, the journal article, academic text and conference paper remain the major means by which researchers communicate with each other, and with other interested parties, across space and time. The rapid development of new information and computer technologies may have changed the speed and scope of such communication, but it has not altered the importance of writing as the means for communicating.

It is something of a contradiction or paradox, therefore, that many researchers, both novice and experienced, are extremely reluctant or fearful of committing their ideas to paper. This is perfectly understandable in the case of the new or relatively inexperienced researcher, who may have little idea of their potential readership or what might be expected of them. That it is common among older and more experienced researchers would seem to indicate a distaste for the writing experience, partly due, no doubt, to a preference for other aspects of the research process, as well as a continuing lack of confidence in their abilities.

Writing up is not just a critical, but a continuing, part of the research

process, which should start soon after the commencement of the research project, and continue to and beyond its completion. So don't be misled by this being the penultimate chapter: writing up begins as soon as you start thinking about and reading around your research.

The purposes of this chapter, then, are to encourage early and regular writing, to identify the different skills and issues involved in writing up research, and to build up confidence by confronting the concerns commonly encountered in writing up.

This chapter has the following sections:

- **Drafting and re-drafting**: how to progress your writing up.
- **How to argue**: the organisation and structure of your writing.
- **How to criticize**: placing your work in the context of that of others.
- **Who am I writing for?**: writing appropriately for your audience.
- **Grammar**, **referencing and plagiarism**: some hints and tips.
- **Using tables, diagrams and other illustrations**: when and when not to.
- **Panics**: common worries encountered in writing up research.

Drafting and re-drafting

The matter of format reveals in part the whole philosophy for the research paper. The keywords in this philosophy are organization, discipline and convention . . . in my experience, students tend to carry over into the realm of the research paper attitudes and aims, formed in the field of creative writing, that have no place in research . . . Organization is necessary for the efficient allocation of one's time and effort, and for the presentation of a paper whose internal structure is balanced and sound, and whose argument proceeds along logical lines. Discipline is central to the long labour of sifting authorities, and adding one's own critical comments only when these authorities have been fully assimilated. Conventions are vital in a context where one writes not for oneself, but for a critical public.

(Berry 2004: 3)

I realised that I was trying to ensure that my ideas were 'right', so that I could be sure when voicing them, and not expose myself to either undue praise or criticism. I despaired of achieving this, especially given some of the thorny, long-running questions in the area (such as whether men and women are **really** the same or different), and the many committed camps of theorists. I envied the makers of films such as 'Thelma and Louise', who seemed to be able to present multi-faceted explorations of gender-related issues without taking the mincing steps of academic debate. Happily I woke one morning with a revelatory insight – that I would never get it

right, that seeking to do so was a futile waste of energy, that I should proceed with this 'truth' in mind and allow myself to be more playful in my explorations.

(Marshall 1995: 28–9)

Writing up your research should start early and become a regular and continuing activity. It is also likely to be an iterative or cyclical process. That is, you will draft a section or chapter, then move on to some other activity, and return one or more times to re-draft your original version. This is partly because as the totality of the research thesis or report takes shape, what you have written in subsequent sections affects what you wrote earlier and necessitates changes in it. It is also the case that as your research proceeds you find out more, read more, and change your mind about some things.

Two key skills here are, therefore, recognizing when you need to re-draft your report or thesis, or part of it; and knowing when you have done enough drafting, and it is time to present your report or thesis, and then move on to something else. Writing up, like other aspects of research, is at root a set of pragmatic skills, honed through experience.

> The importance of recognizing when you have done enough is the subject of the next chapter, **Finishing off**.

How to recognize procrastination and what to do about it

But what do you do if you just don't know how or what to write, or you don't feel like writing? We have all, at one time or another, sat in front of a blank screen or sheet of paper. You may be suffering from any of the 20 forms of procrastination listed in Box 8.1, or from some other unmentioned version. At such times, the suggestion that you just start by writing anything seems trite and unhelpful. You might find some comfort and assistance in Box 8.2, which contains 20 practical suggestions for overcoming procrastination.

Whatever your reasons for procrastination, the basic advice has to be to do something, whatever works, to get you writing something, and preferably something which will be of use to you. What you write is unlikely to come out straight away as a polished and finished piece of work, however good and experienced at research writing you are. The point is to aim to produce some writing as regularly as you can, and then work from that. It is likely to get somewhat easier as you progress, though there will be more and less difficult times throughout.

Most of the problems and suggestions contained in Boxes 8.1 and 8.2 are dealt with, directly or indirectly, later in this chapter. The remainder of this

---

Box 8.1 Twenty forms of procrastination

1   I just can't get started.
2   There's too many words to write.
3   There's too few words to play with.
4   I've never written an academic thesis before.
5   I've never written a work report before.
6   I'll do it tomorrow.
7   I'm not in the mood.
8   I'd rather be surfing.
9   It's too noisy to concentrate.
10   I can't type.
11   My computer has broken down.
12   It's all been done already.
13   What's the point?
14   The oven needs cleaning.
15   It's too difficult.
16   I'm no good at writing.
17   I've only got half an hour.
18   I wish I'd never started.
19   I don't feel very well.
20   The children will be home soon.

---

section tackles three of the most common issues encountered in drafting and re-drafting your writing.

Editing and re-working your writing

Once you have written something – anything – the writing up process becomes in part a process of re-writing what you have already written. You will need to re-write in order to:

• bring in new material, ideas and thinking;
• reduce the length of what you have written;
• revise old sections to refer to newly drafted material;
• alter the structure of what you have written;
• respond to the suggestions made by your readers;
• remove any inadvertent repetitions.

Re-drafting is a normal event. It does not mean that your original draft is useless, merely that the writing process takes place over a period of time, during which you do what you can to make your report or thesis as effective as possible.

Box 8.2 Twenty suggestions for overcoming procrastination

1   Make notes on what you have read.
2   Make notes on interviews you have conducted.
3   Make notes on your last discussion with your supervisor or manager.
4   Draft your contents page.
5   Type out your references or bibliography.
6   Draft the structure for a section or chapter.
7   Type out the quotations you think you may use.
8   Note down the points you think you will refer to.
9   Set yourself a target for writing a given number of words each day, week or month.
10   Speak your ideas out aloud, tape record and then transcribe them.
11   Write anything so that you dirty your page or screen.
12   Work out how many words you will devote to each chapter, section or sub-section.
13   Write up to your word limit, and then edit what you have written.
14   Give yourself a treat, but then come straight back.
15   Think about all the other times you procrastinated, and what you did about it then.
16   Don't allow yourself to do anything else until you have written something.
17   Give someone else the responsibility to oversee your writing.
18   Talk it through with somebody else.
19   Try writing at a different time of day, or time of the week.
20   Just write anything.

The process of re-drafting is made a lot easier if you are using a computer. This will enable you to easily access those sections you wish to change or update, to move sections of text around, to make simple alterations throughout the text, to check your spelling, and may even produce a contents page and index for you. If you don't have access to a computer, you will still need to do these kinds of things, but it will probably take a little longer.

> You may want to refer back to the section in Chapter 5 on **Using computers**.

One question often posed about re-drafting is how often to do it. This depends partly on your own preferences, and partly also on the length of your project in both time and words. The longer the project, the more likely you are going to want to re-draft at a number of stages, and your work is likely to benefit from this. For relatively small-scale projects, including those lasting less than one year, it may be best to first draft all of the chapters or sections

individually, though not necessarily sequentially, and have a single re-draft near to the end of the project. Either way, it is good practice to make notes on earlier drafts, as you go along, as to where and how you intend to make changes.

> **Hint**: It's a good idea to meet with your supervisor, mentor or manager before (and after) you produce your final draft.

Writing to the appropriate length

The need to reduce the length of what you have written has already been mentioned as one of the reasons for re-drafting material you have already drafted. You might also, though this is probably less likely, need to increase the length of what you have written.

   Writing to the appropriate length is not easy. You may have a specific limit, perhaps both a maximum and a minimum, set on the number of words and/or pages which your report or thesis can comprise. Or you may have general guidance, or perhaps no guidance at all; in which case it could be a good idea to set your own limit, and then check this out with your likely readers.

   There are two basic approaches which you can then adopt for writing to a given length:

- the **planned** approach, where you sketch out the contents of your report or thesis in some detail, allocate a given number of words or pages to each sub-section, and then endeavour to keep to those lengths as you draft;
- the **slash and burn** approach, where you initially draft without reference to any length constraints, and then subsequently cut down or extend your drafts as necessary.

Whichever combination of these approaches you use – it is unlikely that you will be able to rely solely on the first approach – you will probably need to employ a range of simple techniques for getting your initial drafts to the appropriate length in the re-drafting process.

   To contract your writing, you might use any or all of the five techniques outlined in Box 8.3. These techniques avoid the use of artificial and self-defeating methods, such as reducing your print size, increasing the size of your page, or placing more material in appendices outside of the main text. All researchers have to engage in editing their work at some time; most have to do it repeatedly. It is both a courtesy to your readers, to reduce the amount of time they have to spend in getting to the nub of your argument, and a means of helping to ensure that you have more readers.

Box 8.3 How to contract your writing

---

1   Remove unnecessary, qualifying or repetitive words, and perhaps clauses, from sentences.
2   Summarize one or more sentences, perhaps whole paragraphs, in one sentence.
3   Delete references and quotations which are not essential to your discussion.
4   Replace lengthy descriptions by tables or charts where possible.
5   Remove whole sections, or perhaps even chapters, where these are not central to your argument.

The need to expand what you have written is a less obvious skill in writing up, but all researchers have to face it when they first begin to turn their outline into the finished report or thesis. It may also be necessary at a later stage when you, your supervisor or manager, detect imbalances or omissions in your work. You can't assume that your readers know all that you know, so there may be a need to put in more explanatory material. To expand your writing, you might use the five methods listed in Box 8.4.

Box 8.4 How to expand your writing

---

1   Look for more references and quotations on the subjects or issues which you are writing about.
2   Build individual sentences up into paragraphs by developing your argument.
3   Add new sections, or even chapters, or relevant material.
4   Integrate appendices within the main text.
5   Take more space to discuss your methodology, and how well it worked.

Coping with interruptions

when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way. Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse . . . You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right – from ten o'clock to one.

(Woolf 1995: 1–2)

You may not be so fortunate! Most researchers, particularly those carrying out work-based projects and those who are studying part-time, have to learn to

cope with interruptions. This can be particularly irritating when they occur during the process of writing up, since then the need for peace and quiet can seem to be particularly strong.

The obvious way of coping with this problem, if possible, is to confine your writing to times and places when you are unlikely to be interrupted. Do it at lunch time, after working hours, when the children are at school or when they have gone to bed. Do it in a separate study, in a library, in a quiet room, away from home and work if necessary.

If these suggestions are impractical in your case, you might be best advised to do your writing up in a very planned way. That is, outline what you are going to write in considerable detail, so that you can then do it bit by bit or sub-section by sub-section. This way, you are less likely to loose the thread of what you are writing when you are interrupted, or, if you do, will need to spend less time to recover it.

Hint: When you stop writing for a period, write a note for yourself on what you planned to do next. Map out your plans several steps ahead if you can. This should be very useful in getting you back into writing quickly next time.

How to argue

Organization

Writing up your research, whether in the form of a work report or an academic thesis, requires particular skills and forms of organization. The extent to which you make use of these will vary depending on the size and scope of your research project.

However, in organizational terms, your report or thesis is likely to include, as a minimum:

1 An introduction, at the beginning, and a set of conclusions, at the end. These may be supplemented or perhaps replaced by, respectively, a summary and a series of recommendations.
2 A series of distinct sections or chapters, which may be further divided into sub-sections or sub-chapters. Each section or chapter may have its own introductory and concluding passages.
3 References to existing research and publications, possibly illuminated by selected quotations. A list of the material referred to will be included, probably at the end of the report or thesis, possibly in the form of a bibliography.

In addition, your report or thesis may include:

4 Tables, diagrams, charts and other forms of illustrations (the use of these is discussed in more detail later in this chapter).
5 A number of prefatory sections, such as a preface, abstract, dedication and acknowledgements; and/or supplementary sections, in the form of appendices.

> The use of prefatory sections and appendices is discussed in the section on **Added extras** in Chapter 9.

Argument

These organizational elements are the bare bones of any research report or thesis. To put them together to make a successful and effective argument requires four things:

- a context;
- one or more themes;
- some ordering; and
- linkages.

> You may like to refer back to the section in Chapter 2 on **Focusing**, which discusses related issues at an earlier stage of the research process.

The *context* for your report or thesis, and for your research project as a whole, consists of your broader understanding of the area within which you are researching. This may operate at three levels:

- in terms of your disciplinary background: thus, if you are a sociologist, this will be sociology and sociological writings;
- in terms of your field of study: for example, the sociology of the family, transport economics, 16–19 educational policy;
- in terms of the methodology you are employing: for example, questionnaire surveys or participant observation.

Your report or thesis may not refer to all of these levels, but it is likely to include some reference to at least two of them if you are to provide an adequate contextualization of your study for your readers. This contextualization is likely to form an important part of the early sections or chapters of your work, with some reference back to it towards the end.

The *themes* of your report or thesis are the key issues, concepts or questions you identify as being of relevance and interest. These will both inform the research you undertake, so will be evident in your contextual discussion, and help to structure your analysis and findings. They are the aspects of your field of study or discipline to which your research is contributing. They could include, for example, development theory, gender relations at work, the spatial structure of the city, the effectiveness of different forms of staff training, or measures of monetary supply.

These themes are likely to be introduced early on in your report or thesis, forming part of its context. They will then be referred to throughout the main body of your discussion, as the running thread holding it all together. A significant part of the concluding sections will probably be devoted to reflecting on what your research has told you about these themes, and how they might be explored further in future. Exercise 8.1 is designed to help you identify the context and themes for your writing.

The *ordering* of your report or thesis relates to how you set out your argument in stages, and how you break it down into manageable chunks for the reader. We have already indicated some aspects of this ordering, by referring to the use of introductory and concluding sections, and suggesting an early contextualization and a later discussion and reflection. Some further suggestions as to what a typical academic thesis or work report might look like are given in the next sub-section.

Linkages have to do with how you aid the reader in finding their way through your report or thesis. They may take the form of regular references to the themes you have identified. They are also likely to be made apparent through cross-references between chapters, sections or pages. The aim is to present a coherent whole to the reader, however the report or thesis may be structured and organized. When done effectively, the reader should be able to quickly make sense of your work whichever page they start reading from.

What an academic thesis or work report might look like

Boxes 8.5 and 8.6 offer suggestions of what academic theses and work reports, based on a small-scale research project, might actually look like in terms of organization and structure.

It should be emphasized at once that these are just examples, albeit common ones. The indications as to chapter or section titles, and as to the relative proportion of the overall report or thesis which they would comprise, are meant only as guidelines. There are many other, and much more innovative and interesting, ways of putting together a report or thesis. Every individual case is likely to differ, not least in terms of varying disciplinary practices, and of the titles and sub-titles used. It would be excessively boring for the readers of research if all reports or theses were arranged in the same fashion.

Box 8.5 Possible forms for an academic thesis

A dissertation is far more than a passive record of your research and generally involves presenting an argument or point of view. In other words, it must 'say' something and be substantiated with reasoned argument and evidence. If you want it to be interesting as well as academically convincing, you will need to raise intriguing issues and discuss them, besides presenting your outcomes.

(Barnes 1995: 100)

The 'classic' dissertation structure is:

- contents
- abstract
- introduction (10% of words or space)
- review of the background literature (20%)
- design and methodology of the research (10%)
- implementation of the research (15%)
- presentation and analysis of data (15%)
- comment and critique of the outcomes or findings (20%)
- summary and conclusion (10%)
- references
- bibliography
- appendices

academics . . . say they enjoy innovative structures devised by their students, but they also warm very positively to this classic model.

(Barnes 1995: 130)

Health warning: Remember, though, to check on any regulations or expectations which may effect what your thesis or report should look like.

By comparison with academic theses, work reports tend to be briefer, otherwise they are never read, and to focus more clearly on the practical applications of the research undertaken. Research is rarely undertaken in the work setting just for the sake of it. However, as in the case of the academic thesis, the bulk of the work report is likely to be devoted to a discussion of the context for the research and of the results uncovered.

Three further differences may be noted. First, the work report is much less likely to include a separate section of references. Fewer works will typically be mentioned, and they will tend to be detailed in the text itself. Second, the work report is quite likely to be presented in terms of numbered sections and

---

Box 8.6 Possible forms for a work report

Short report
- Title page
- Abstract/executive summary
- Introduction (what you did and why)
- Materials and methods (how you did it)
- Results (what you found out)
- Discussion (what the results mean)
- References

Long report
- Title page
- Abstract/executive summary
- Acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- Introduction
- Materials and methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Recommendations
- References
- Appendices

(Hay et al. 2002: 88)

---

paragraphs, rather than chapters. Third, it may contain an executive summary at the beginning.

Exercise 8.2 invites you, in the light of these suggestions, to consider how you will organize your research report or thesis.

How to criticize

Where it is not explicit, criticism is implicit within research writing. Since you are always writing within the context of existing research and understanding, your research also constitutes your evaluation of others' work and beliefs. This is the essence of criticism: placing your work within the context of others'; acknowledging the deficiencies of that work, both yours and theirs; and then moving the debate forward.

You may like to refer back to the section in Chapter 4 on **Good enough reading**, particularly Boxes 4.9 and 4.10.

Criticizing is not rubbishing

Criticizing others' research and writing does not mean rubbishing them. You may, in certain extreme cases, feel that this is justifiable, but it is unlikely to achieve much. By the same token, the blind acceptance of others' data, arguments and conclusions, just because they have been published, or because they are widely accepted, is ill-advised. Even the most reputable authors may benefit from a little measured criticism.

Criticism is evaluation. It should be careful, considered and justified. It should also be even-handed, recognizing that you yourself are capable of error, and may change your mind in time. Anything may be criticized: underlying assumptions, arguments, methodologies, the accuracy of data collected, the interpretation of that data. You may also use your own research to critically assess others', where you feel these are in disagreement.

Criticism is about joining in a wider research debate with others you may never meet. Research is never perfect. It could always have been done differently or better. By joining in a critical debate, you can help to improve future research and understanding.

Using your sources

At the heart of critical writing is your use of your sources, your response to them and your written account of this. Much depends therefore on the reading you have undertaken, a theme dealt with in Chapter 4. Your sources cover more than just all of the published or unpublished materials which you may have accessed and studied in the course of your research project. They also include your broader engagement with ideas through discussion with others, as well as your own research data and your interpretation of this.

You should make full use of this range and variety of sources in your writing, where it is relevant to, or illustrative of, the argument you are putting forward. Thus, you will probably use selected sources:

• to build up the context for your own research, demonstrating existing thinking and practice;
• to exemplify and justify the methodology you adopted;
• to complement, or contrast with, your findings and interpretations.

You will likely have a mixture of positive and negative comments to make about these sources.

Establishing your argument

Do not, however, get swamped by your sources. Even if your aim is just to provide a synopsis of the literature, it is your argument and your interpretation that should be at the forefront of your writing. You need to control your sources, therefore, rather than have them control you. You will provide the summaries and the linkages; you will determine the order in which you introduce and comment on your sources; you will decide what else to add and how to progress the argument of your research.

This will involve establishing your voice and your argument early on in your report or thesis; maintaining it as the key thread running through your work; and returning to a fuller evaluation of it at relevant points.

Going back to the literature

As well as returning to your argument, it is also common to return to a discussion of existing research and understanding towards the end of your thesis or report. Having introduced and critically discussed a selection of this material early on, you can then relate it to your own research findings once these have been presented and discussed. You may wish to re-evaluate your earlier thinking and criticism at this point.

As this suggests, the whole process of criticism, like that of research as a whole, is cyclical and iterative. As a researcher, you are engaged in a continuing round of evaluation and re-evaluation.

Who am I writing for?

> . . . the researcher is also a narrator and an active producer of 'knowledge' in research . . . the researcher is also involved in writing his or her life, reflecting on experiences both within and outside the research context – both are also related. Here, there is the 'intellectual biography' of the researcher who not only 'translates' the experience of others but also writes and interprets their own life.
>
> (Roberts 2002: 85–6)

Voice and style

When you start to write up your research, there are two related issues which you will need to address, whether explicitly or implicitly, early on. These are the issues of voice and style:

- *Style* relates to how you write up your research, which may be determined by

the requirements of your audience, by your own predelictions, or by a mixture of the two.

- *Voice* has to do with how you express yourself and tell the story of your research, and is something you are likely to develop further as you write and research.

It's a good idea to study a variety of examples of research writing to get some guidance on both the range of possibilities and how you might approach your own writing. Box 8.7 contains extracts from an article which deliberately counterposed two very different forms of writing. Exercise 8.3 invites you to reflect upon styles and voices in writing. Box 8.8 suggests some good reasons why you might want to experiment with alternative forms of writing.

One of the key distinctions here is whether to write impersonally in the third person (e.g. 'it appears') or in the first person (e.g. 'I found'). Writing impersonally is standard for much research, and conveys an impression, whether justified or not, of considered and distanced objectivity. The first person comes across as more immediate, personal and committed, and does not deny any inherent subjectivity. Whether you use the first or third person will depend upon your discipline, your politics, your purpose and your audience. You may be able, or choose, to switch between them, perhaps confining your use of the first person to particular chapters or sections.

Representing reality

Another key factor to be borne in mind during your writing up is that you are in the process of fashioning and presenting a representation of reality. You are, in other words, telling a story, and need to be aware of the different techniques which you might make use of in so doing. Indeed, it has been suggested that constantly asking 'What's the main story here?' (Strauss 1987: 35) is a useful tool for data analysis. Your research participants and sources may be seen as the characters in this story, and will need to be introduced and developed as they would be in a novel.

This is not to imply that your research has been made up, or is arbitrary or wholly subjective. You will likely have devoted a lot of time and consideration to collecting data, assessing its reliability, and then interpreting what you have found. Yet, however much work you have done, you are highly unlikely to have exhausted your research topic, and you will not be in a position to write the last word on it. You will have partial and incomplete information, and should be aware of its deficiencies as well as its strengths.

Different audiences and conventions

The different demands posed by writing your research up for your employer and for academic credit are discussed in the section on **How to argue** earlier in this chapter. Each of these approaches has its own varying set of conventions

Box 8.7 Writing styles

Middleton's paper is written in two columns. It has been deliberately structured in this way to indicate the links between theory and 'lived reality' which can be generative of theoretical construction. It is also a response to, and demonstration of, postmodernist writing techniques. Middleton says 'This is an experimental piece of writing, which transgresses conventional academic forms in order to expose their constructedness.' An extract from the article is given below. The left-hand column is written in conventional academic form and is concerned to draw out the implications of 'postmodern theory for feminist pedagogy in education courses'. The right-hand column describes the 'location and circumstances in which the left hand column was written'.

TOWARDS A FEMINIST
PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHER
EDUCATION

Academic papers normally begin, as Dorothy Smith has described it,

> from a position in the discourse as an ongoing process of formally organized interchange. We begin from a position within a determinate conceptual framework which is identified with the discipline. . . . and by virtue of our training and of what it means to do the professional work in our discipline, we begin from outside ourselves, to locate problematics organized by the sociological, the psychological, the historical discourse (Smith, 1979: 146).

Postmodernism is becoming increasingly influential within feminist educational theory. Post-modernists have rejected the monolithic categories upon which previous feminisms have rested – 'the rationally autonomous individual' (liberalism); the 'essential feminine' (radical feminism); and the class-differentiated gender groups of Marxism. Post-modernist theories are based on a scepticism about the possibility or desirability of attempting to produce totalizing

INTERRUPTIONS

It is the last day of the Winter term. Tomorrow the August study break begins. Winter sun beckons me through my office window. I shall go home early – snatch this afternoon to write my proposal for AERA. I want to reflect on the experience of being a feminist academic writer – to write about the rhythms, and the fragmentations, of our lives. The harmonies, dissonances, and disruptions . . .

The phone shrieks. A breathless voice asks, "Dr Middleton – have you noted the change in date for the meeting of the Administrative Committee? It will now be at 9.00 on the first morning of the study break?" . . . I hadn't . . . The relevant agenda surfaces from the cascades of papers on my desk. I place it in my canvas carry bag and dig deeper under the piles of unopened brown envelopes for my copy of the conference paper instructions . . .

This office is seldom my space for academic writing. It is the place where I compose memoranda, file minutes of meetings, write letters in response to the contents of brown envelopes . . . It is also the space where I meet with students. I have made it as 'safe', as 'like home' as possible. The bureaucratic flooring is covered with a large rug – earth-colours -ochre red, gold, beige, black. There is an old armchair in one corner. The cream walls are hidden behind shelves of books. Above the smaller book-cases are pictures – a poster from Queensland; a batik from Kenya. Near the door is a sketch which my daughter, Kate, drew several years ago for a social studies project. Hippies – beads, flowers, banners . . . A 1960s protest march.

Like many of today's feminist teachers and writers I attended university during the 1960s and began paid work (in my case secondary school teaching) in the early 1970s – times of full employment and hope. Today, as an educator in the 1990s, I watch my students and my daughter moving into adulthood in times of economic recession and despair. The kinds of feminism and progressive educational theories which offered possibilities to my generation may seem to today's students irrelevant and quaint anachronisms. How can we, middle-aged and older teachers of women's studies

(*Source*: Middleton 1993: quotes from pp. 87 and 88, extract from p. 89)

Box 8.8 Alternative forms of writing

As more attention has been given to the connections between writing in the social sciences and writing in the humanities, there has been a growing interest in alternatives to 'traditional' forms of writing. There are some very good reasons why researchers may want to experiment with different writing styles:

- Engaging in experimental forms of writing allows the researcher to nurture her or his voice. This is important because it presents a counter-balance to a problem for many new, and established, researchers when they are over-reliant on the voices of others. For example, a poem does not require citations. You are freed up to create your new knowledge without feeling that you have to know everything that has been written on the topic.
- Experimental forms of writing are explicit attempts to engage the emotions of the writer and the reader. This can be either positive or negative. For example, Richardson (1992) describes how writing her data as poems enabled her to engage with the subject of her research in a much more intensive and joyful way. Alternatively, some readers may reject data-led poems because they do not conform to traditional expectations.
- Experimental forms of writing can give greater recognition to how readers create their own meanings. A common method for reporting research is one where the researcher's main aim is to guide the reader through the 'facts' of the research in a linear or cumulative way. The data is used as evidence of the findings. However, some researchers try to disrupt the idea that the researcher has all the knowledge. They want to leave more space for the reader to come to their own conclusions. Using different forms of writing is one way in which researchers try to do this. For example, the lines of a standard text are dense and often crammed onto the page. A short poem will have a much less cluttered appearance. The idea is that as the clutter diminishes, so the potential for thinking and feeling around, within, and through the words and lines grows. In the poem's refusal to run common phrases together, we are caused to pay attention and to notice that which we mostly skim over. And, while we may be tempted to speed read a poem, as is common in academic work, why bother? Their point is to open up the potential for new and unexpected ways of knowing.

and particular styles, as well as similarities. Whichever you are writing, it is critical – as we repeatedly emphasize throughout this book – that you are aware of, and adhere to, any and all regulations or expectations concerning your writing up.

Safe and risky writing

Even if you take note of any and all regulations or expectations affecting your writing, there are still safer and riskier strategies for writing up. When in doubt, as when you are a novice researcher and you are unsure of the likely response to what you are writing, it is almost certainly in your best interests to adopt a safe strategy in writing up. If you are rather more experienced, think you are on to something, want to give yourself an extra challenge or simply can see no other way of doing it, you may choose to write up your research in a less standard and hence more risky fashion.

You might, for example, opt to write in the first person, and perhaps in an autobiographical style. You might use a chapter or section structure very different from those suggested in this book: perhaps organized in terms of the timeline of the research project. You might include poems or fictional elements in your report or thesis. You might present your work in terms of a dialogue or a play. All of these strategies can work very well, and can further illuminate the representational elements and issues involved in doing research. You would be well advised, though, to do some sounding out among your assessors or likely readers in advance.

What you want to avoid is a strong reaction against, or rejection of, your report or thesis purely on the basis of the way in which it has been written up and presented. You don't want to have to do it all again, re-working your writing to a more conventional or acceptable style. So don't take the risk unless you really have the freedom and know what you are doing.

Non-discriminatory writing

Beyond any formal regulations, there is now a general expectation that all writing will strive to be non-discriminatory. To do otherwise would make you likely to offend your readers, at the very least. You may actually be provided with, or recommended to use, a style guide by your institution or employer. If not, the bibliography at the end of this chapter contains some helpful sources.

The basic principle involved is writing in such a way that does not denegrate or exclude particular groups of people on the basis of what may be fairly arbitrary characteristics: such as sex, age, ethnic group, religion, physical and mental abilities or sexual orientation.

Being consistent

Above all, whatever audience you are writing for, it is important to be consistent in terms of style and organization. Switching between styles is usually confusing for all concerned, and hence inadvisable, except in exceptional and/or carefully handled circumstances. Thus, if you have written your thesis or report in the third person, and in a measured style, it is unwise to suddenly begin using the first person. The main exception to this is what you write in

prefatory sections, such as a preface or acknowledgements, which lie outside of the main content of your thesis or report.

> The use of prefatory sections is discussed in the section on **Added extras** in Chapter 9.

Grammar, referencing and plagiarism

Two of the most common failings of written-up research – even of books like this one! – are errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, and mistakes in referencing or in the bibliography. Hence, one of the easiest ways of making a good initial impression on your readers is to ensure, as far as possible, that your presentation is error free.

One thing you must avoid in writing up is, knowingly or unknowingly, committing the sin of plagiarism, or presenting other people's work as if it was your own. This has become more common with the development of the Internet, and the increasing and easy availability of essays and publications online.

Grammar, punctuation and spelling

Many researchers, even experienced ones, have problems with grammar, punctuation and spelling when they are writing up. This is not unusual and should not be a cause for shame. Many of us may not have had a particularly good initial education, or were more interested in other matters at the time. For others, English is not their first language. However, once you begin to write up your research for consideration and assessment, as a report or as a thesis (and particularly if you are thinking of publishing some or all of it), your use of 'correct' grammar, punctuation and spelling becomes very important. Your readers are likely to be irritated, amused or put off by errors. They will detract from your ability to get your ideas across.

There is not enough scope in a book of this nature to provide detailed guidance on this subject, but Box 8.9 suggests a number of general points to bear in mind.

Beyond this basic guidance, there is a range of useful existing publications which you could turn to. Some of these are listed in the annotated bibliography.

If you are writing your research up on a computer, you might want to make use of the facilities which much software has for checking your spelling and grammar, and for suggesting alternative words to use. These can be very useful

for checking drafts, but remember that they will not recognize many specialist words or names, and, perhaps most importantly, that they will often use American English spelling.

See the section in Chapter 5 on **Using computers**.

Box 8.9 Some tips on grammar and punctuation

- Try and avoid long sentences. The sense of what you are saying gets lost, whereas a series of shorter, punchy sentences can advance the argument much better.
- Avoid one-sentence paragraphs. Paragraphs should contain a number of sentences on the same subject, and then lead on to the next paragraph, which will move the discussion on.
- Avoid beginning sentences with 'joining' words, such as 'but', 'and' or 'because'. These should normally be used to link clauses within sentences.
- Avoid incorporating lengthy lists of material in your text. Your writing should read as a flowing piece of text, not as a summary or precis. If you need lists, they are probably better placed separately from the main text in tables or figures.
- Understand and make use of the full range of standard punctuation forms; including, in particular, the colon (:), semi-colon (;), comma (,) and full stop (.).
- Use quotation marks ("and') consistently.

Referencing

One question you may face in writing up your research is whether to include a bibliography or just a set of references. The difference may be very small in practice:

- A set of references contains details of all the books, articles, reports and other works you have directly referred to in your thesis or report.
- A bibliography contains details of all, or a selection of, the books, articles, reports and other works or relevance you have consulted during your research, not all of which may be directly referred to in your text.

Whether you provide references or a bibliography may already have been determined for you. Alternatively, restrictions on the space you have available for writing up may lead you to restrict yourself to just essential references or a select bibliography. In other cases, you will have to decide for yourself which is the most appropriate strategy. It is very unlikely, and probably inadvisable on

grounds of space and repetition, that you will wish to include both references and a bibliography.

> **Hint**: Check your file of regulations and expectations, and follow the conventions of your discipline and institution.

Whichever you do use, you should make sure that you include full details of all the works you refer to, so that your readers can themselves track them down and examine them if they so wish. Box 8.10 provides guidance on referencing, based on the Harvard system – widely used throughout the social sciences and beyond – but check if your organization or university uses a different system.

> See also the section in Chapter 4 on **Recording your reading**, particularly Box 4.13.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism most commonly occurs accidentally or unintentionally, when writers are unaware of the appropriate conventions for referencing other people's work. Whether it is accidental or deliberate, however, and particularly if you are submitting a piece of writing for credit or possible publication, you are likely to be severely penalized if you are found guilty of plagiarism. So be scrupulous when you quote, refer to or summarize someone else's work: Box 8.11 provides some general guidance.

Using tables, diagrams and other illustrations

It can be a good idea to include tables, diagrams and other illustrations in your research report or thesis, providing that these are both permitted and relevant. Such illustrations may serve to illuminate, break up, extend and confirm your writing. Their impact and intelligibility can be heightened further if you have access to a colour printer.

Tables may be used to summarize information, usually in a numerical format, and to indicate the relationships between the different variables under consideration. Diagrams are also useful for indicating relationships and structures: they can convey ideas much more effectively than lengthier textual explanations.

Box 8.10 How to reference

Reference to a book:
Covington, M. (1992) *Making the Grade: A Self-worth Perspective on Motivation and School Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reference to a chapter in an edited book:
Weiner, G., Arnot, M., and David, M. (1997) 'Is the future female? Female success, male disadvantage and changing gender patterns in education', in A. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown and A. Wells (eds) *Education, Economy, Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reference to an article in a journal:
Osler, A., and Morrison, M. (2002) Can race equality be inspected? Challenges for policy and practice raised by the Ofsted school inspection framework. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28: 327–38.

Reference to a government report:
Department for Education and Employment (1992) *Choice and Diversity: A New Framework for Schools*, Cmnd 2021. London: HMSO.

Reference to material from the Internet:
Department for Education and Employment (2000) *Boys Must Improve at the Same Rate as Girls – Blunkett*. Available from: http://www.dfee.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2000_0368

Reference to a newspaper article:
Evans, A. (1996) Perils of ignoring our lost boys, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 28 June.

(*Source*: Lancaster University 2005b: 26)

While tables and diagrams are the most common and popular means for illustrating research reports or theses, many other kinds of illustrations are used. Maps may be included to illustrate relative locations, and are common in geographical research. Graphs show relations between pairs of variables, as in the case of time series or correlations. Photographs also have their uses, particularly for observational or case studies. Line drawings can be employed in a similar fashion. In all cases, these illustrations may be reproduced or original to the research.

Box 8.11 Plagiarism and how to avoid it

In plain English, plagiarism is cheating. This occurs when the work of others, either wholly or in part, is presented by you as your own work . . .

Naturally, in the course of presenting your own work, you will refer to the ideas, findings and explanations of others. Indeed, this is an expectation on our part which is encouraged as the standard road to academic improvement. But there is a clear distinction which you should always respect in your work: *it is one thing to make explicit reference to the work of others in your use of their work.*

It is something else again to use the work of others without any indication that this is what you are doing and so present others' work as your own.

There is a well-defined procedure to ensure that you act in an academically honest way. You should conform to the recognized standards of good academic practice. What this means is that you should explicitly acknowledge the ownership of the theories, ideas, evidence that you discuss in your work. This is especially so in the case of quotation, i.e. when you quote phrases and/or sentences taken from the work of others.

(*Source*: Lancaster University 2005b: 22)

Hint: Many computer programs contain facilities for producing tables. See the section on **Computer-based data management and analysis** in Chapter 7.

The question then arises: when should you use such illustrations, and when are they better left out? Box 8.12 offers some general guidance.

Panics

The process of writing up, like many aspects of doing research, is likely to give rise to a number of common worries, particularly among relatively new researchers. We end this chapter, therefore, by considering four of the most common reasons for panics:

- If it's new to me, is it original?
- I've just discovered someone has written this before.
- It's all a load of rubbish.
- Conflicting advice.

Box 8.12 When to use illustrations

- Where the illustration replaces a substantial piece of text (i.e. a paragraph or more), use it, but do not keep the text as well.
- Where the illustration serves to make a point which would be difficult to make, justify or support otherwise, use it.
- Don't use the illustration if it is copyright, and you do not have appropriate permission.
- Always refer to illustrations individually in the text. If you don't, there is no reason for the reader to examine them. They are there to be used as an essential part of your argument.
- In most cases, illustrations are better split up, and spread throughout the text close to where they are referred to. If they are gathered together, at the end of chapters or sections, or in an appendix, they are less likely to be consulted by the reader.
- Normally, the text should be the driving force of the research report or thesis. The reader will expect to encounter a near continuous text, interspersed with relevant illustrations. Large clutches of illustrations, or a text dominated by them, are likely to be off-putting.
- Don't use the illustration unless it is clear, unambiguous and well reproduced.

If it's new to me, is it original?

See also the section in Chapter 1 on **Will I have anything new to say?**

The answer to the question, as posed, is, we would suggest, 'yes'. Unless you have totally replicated somebody else's research, using the same literature, methodology, sample and analytical framework – a circumstance which is almost unimaginable unless you set out deliberately to do so – your research will be to some extent original.

You may have used the same methodology and analytical framework, and explored much the same literature, to study a different sample, and come up with much the same conclusions. This is still original research, however, in that you have used a different sample. It could also be very valuable, as replication research may confirm, deny or modify the conclusions of earlier studies.

Unless you are studying for a doctoral degree, trying to build up your research reputation, or are developing an invention for patenting, originality in research is unlikely to be that important. Highly original research is, as we said in Chapter 1, very unusual. So don't worry, and get on with your writing up.

I've just discovered someone has written this before

This is an observation quite often made by new researchers to their super-visors, mentors or managers, but it is never literally true. If it were, you would be guilty of some kind of amazing sub-conscious plagiarism. What is usually meant is that the researcher has just come across a book or article which makes many of the points their research has raised, or which has studied much the same issues or area. While it's preferable if the book or article has only been recently published, or has been difficult to get hold of, because this suggests that you have carried out a reasonably competent literature review, neither of these findings is cause for despair.

The most appropriate response is to add the book or article to your literature review, explain the circumstances of its discovery, critically assess its argument and then adjust your own report or thesis accordingly. It can actually be very useful to have a similar piece of research with which to confirm and contrast your own approach, argument and findings. It's also quite legitimate to start out with this deliberately in mind. While it may be disappointing to find that you are not first in the field, this is a common enough occurrence in research, and you are almost certain to find something in your own research project which adds to what has already been published.

It's all a load of rubbish

Again, this is a comment frequently made by researchers as they begin to engage with writing up. It usually means one or more of three things:

- you're bored;
- the writing up is not going as well as you think it might;
- you have become so familiar with a group of ideas and theories that they appear to you now to be no more than common sense.

These feelings strike all researchers at some time, and affect most of us with disturbing regularity.

There is no simple and foolproof response. You have to learn to find your own way around this problem, as it is endemic to research (and many other activities). You might, for example:

- take a break or give yourself a treat;
- seek somebody else's opinion on what you have written;
- remind yourself of how far you have travelled on your intellectual journey;
- use some of the suggestions given in the section on **Drafting and re-drafting** earlier in this chapter.

Research and writing are, in part, about becoming more self-aware.

Conflicting advice

As a researcher, you are bound to encounter conflicting advice sooner or later, most probably sooner. This is because research is about conflict and uncertainty. We research to better understand our world. Because we do not currently fully understand our world (otherwise we would not be researching), it is likely that our developing understandings will be at least partially conflictual. This state of affairs is, to some extent, encouraged by the way research and research careers are structured. Put simply, one good strategy for getting ahead and being noticed as a researcher is to disagree with the findings of existing research.

Every time you submit your research work for consideration or assessment by more than one other person, you are likely to get more than one view: on your reading, on your methodology, on your findings, on your interpretation of those findings. This may occur even when you only have one advisor, since they are quite likely to disagree with your views and change their own. So you will get conflicting advice. And some people's advice will count for more than other's, because they are an authority or have influence over the progress of your research.

> The problems which power relations can cause are considered further in the section of Chapter 9 on **The process of assessment**.

Probably the best way to cope with this, if you find it unsettling, is to teach yourself to consider it as a strength. In your reading, you should already have come across conflicting views. You are adding to these through your research. Your advisors, and their conflicting views, are helping you to do so. They are giving you the opportunity to respond, in your drafting and re-drafting, to some of the range of opinions of relevance to your area of research. The greater the range of the views you are exposed to as you are writing up, the better your report or thesis is likely to be, because it will have to have addressed many of the issues and questions which would otherwise have only been raised after it had been completed.

Conflicting advice is, therefore, to be welcomed, challenged and responded to.

Summary

Having read this chapter, you should:

- appreciate the need to begin writing as soon as possible, and to re-visit and revise what you have drafted;

- understand what is meant by critical writing;
- have a greater awareness of who you are writing for, and the alternative writing styles and voices which may be open to you to use;
- have a clearer idea of the structure and organization of your research thesis or report.

Exercises

8.1 Note down the context and themes for your research report or thesis. Draw a diagram or chart to make the linkages between these clear. What does this suggest for the organization and argument of your writing?

8.2 Draw up a chart of how you propose to organize your argument, giving chapter or section titles and summary contents. How much space (or how many words) might you allocate to each of your chapters or sections?

8.3 What writing styles are you comfortable with, and practised at? How appropriate are they for your intended audience(s). Discuss your preferences with your mentor, supervisor and/or manager.

Further reading

In this section, we list a limited selection of books that are of particular relevance to the topics discussed in this chapter, together with an indication of their contents.

Berry, R. (2004) *The Research Project: How to Write It*, 5th edn. London: Routledge.

A concise guide to the elements of writing a dissertation, research project or paper. The chapters include discussions of using a library, the Internet, preparing a bibliography, taking notes and composing the paper.

Creme, P. and Lea, M. R. (2003) *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Includes consideration of titles and key words, the role of reading in writing, organization and shaping, academic writing, and putting it all together on time.

Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M. and Anzul, M. (1997) *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words*. London: Falmer Press.

A comprehensive guide to, and analysis of, the processes of, and approaches to, writing. Successive chapters examine the purposes of writing, different narrative forms, analytic and interpretive modes of writing, negotiating,

collaborating and responding, and the effects of writing on the writer and readers.

Groarke, L. and Tindale, C. (2004) *Good Reasoning Matters! A Constructive Approach to Critical Thinking*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fifteen chapters with exercises address such themes as argument diagrams and components, definitions, bias, syllogisms and propositional logic.

Hertz, R. (ed.) (1997) *Reflexivity and Voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Contemporary ethnographers grapple with the problems and new conventions of ethnographic writing. Chapters discuss communication problems in intensive care units, fieldwork strategies in cloistered and non-cloistered communities, gender and voice, writing, the limits of informants and interactive interviewing.

Holliday, A. (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
How to plan, organize and structure qualitative research writing. Includes discussion of the use of identity, the avoidance of essentialist judgements, and the transfer of data to the text.

Lea, M. and Stierer, B. (eds) (2000) *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Focuses on research on student writing and its implications for, primarily, lecturers.

Lillis, T. (2001) *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*. London: Routledge.
Informed by UK and US research, argues for a perception of student writing as a social practice rather than a skill.

Murray, R. (2002) *How to Write a Thesis*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Focuses on the development of writing skills, and their use in the different stages of working on the thesis.

Murray, R. (2005) *Writing for Academic Journals*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Which journals to target, how to develop your argument, drafting and re-drafting, responding to reviewers' comments: these and related issues are covered in this book.

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2005) *Cite Them Right: The Essential Guide to Referencing and Plagiarism*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.
Accessible guide, covering everything you could imagine ever wanting to cite, from books through journal articles and sacred texts to patents and musical scores.

Seely, J. (2004) *Oxford A–Z of Grammar and Punctuation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ever been accused of using a split infinitive, or of writing 'it's' when you should have written 'its'. This guide will help sort you out.

Soanes, C. and Ferguson, S. (2004) *Oxford A–Z of Spelling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Over 2000 commonly misspelled words, with associated hints and tips.

Thomson, A. (2001) *Critical Reasoning: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Containing many exercises and summaries, this text deals with the identification of reasoning and assumptions, the evaluation of reasoning, and recognizing its implications.

Truss, L. (2003) *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. London: Profile Books.
Best-selling and amusing rant on the use and misuse of apostrophes, commas, dashes, etc.

Winter, R., Sobiechowska, P. and Buck, A. (1999) *Professional Experiences and the Investigative Imagination: The Art of Reflective Writing*. London: Routledge.
Explains and demonstrates how creative writing can be used successfully in the context of professional education.

Woods, P. (1999) *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Routledge.
Considers all aspects, including getting started, organizing your work, coping with problems and blockages, style and format, editing, writing alone and in a team, approaching publishers and getting published.