Pre-Writing

(This resource was created by Richard Wing, Yale University, July 2009)

Pre-writing is perhaps the most important part of the writing process as it lays a foundation for the writing that is to come. During this stage, writers establish the purpose of the work and the audience for whom it will be written as well as their argument and an outline for the piece. It is also a period during which preliminary research on the topic is conducted. Optimal pre-writing strategies eliminate confusion and minimize writer’s block while actually writing. Therefore, a mastery of pre-writing strategies is an invaluable investment that is a must for any serious, academic writer.

That’s great, but what do I actually do before I write my piece? Before you actually start writing, you need to get a few things together. Think about it like building a house: you’re going to need a plan, building materials, some tools, and a few people to help you out.

A Plan and Building Materials

Before you actually do any writing, you should really have a plan. What goes into a plan?

Step 1: The Purpose and The Audience

Before you even begin to think about what you’re going to say, you need to think about why you’re bothering to say it at all. What is the purpose of this writing? Are you writing an argumentative essay, a research paper, or a creative piece? Defining your purpose early on is essential because it leads directly to formulating general goals for your written piece. For example:

Why am I writing this guide?: I am writing this guide to provide a general overview of the pre-writing process and some tips for how to execute the steps involved.

Knowing your purpose beforehand keeps your mind focused when making decisions about your research and thesis later on. In this case, since I’ve decided to speak in general terms, I will not elaborate on the specifics of science pre-writing or about techniques to use once “writing” has actually begun. This focus will save me time and energy throughout the rest of the pre-writing process.

Once you’ve decided upon a purpose, you can move on to making decisions about your audience (and, really, language and scope). Your choice of audience will affect how you speak and what you say. For instance, think about the differences between explaining the same concept to a young child and an adult, science student. Your choice of vocabulary, analogies, tone, and, most importantly, scope would probably be different. For example, consider the following:
Framed for a child: An Irishman, John Tyndall figured out why the sky is blue. A type of gas called oxygen, which we also need to live, lets blue light shine through the brightest of all the colors. That’s why the sky is blue.

Framed for an adult, science student: The Tyndall effect, named after John Tyndall, an Irishman, explains why the sky has a blue color. In essence, the intensity of light refracted by ozone in the atmosphere is inversely proportional to the wavelength of said light. Therefore, since blue light has the shortest wavelength within the visible spectrum, it exhibits the brightest intensity when refracted by ozone.

A child won’t be familiar with terms like intensity, wavelength, ozone, or refraction. Additionally, knowing that the air in the atmosphere affects color is of primary interest for the child. The science student, however, is going to be interested (and required to know about) more advanced concepts. Therefore, knowing your audience beforehand is critical because it frames how you will think about and, ultimately, explain your topic during the pre-writing process.

Step 2: Preliminary research materials

Reading is essential to the process of writing. You need to be aware of as much information as possible in order to formulate an effective argument. You cannot complete all of the research that will be necessary to write your piece at this point. But, you can gather enough information to decide upon what has been said and what remains to be seen. For example, you want to:

1. Compile a list of references that might be useful for your writing.
2. Briefly read these references to get a sense of where the topic stands.
3. Begin thinking about what you can contribute, and write your ideas down.

Once you have conducted enough research, you can begin to think about what you’re actually going to contribute.

Step 3: The Thesis and The Outline

Now, you should be ready to formulate your thesis and prepare an outline for your piece. The thesis needs to be clear so that the reader knows how to focus in on what you say throughout your piece. For example:

Vague: Global Warming is real. Despite this, there is still a debate raging about what is actually happening with Earth’s climate.

Clear: The existence of Global Warming is supported by a bevy of data including temperature measurements over the last 100 years as well as ice core samples that measure the levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide over geologic time. These data refute the hypothesis that the carbon dioxide levels within Earth’s atmosphere are fluctuating within parameters that are consistent with Earth’s geologic history.
What does “real” mean? It’s vague. And, sure a debate is raging about Earth’s climate, but what is the point here, exactly? The second statement is clear: Global Warming is supported by data, and we’re going to argue that the opposing theory is incorrect. The clearer your thesis statement is, the easier it will be to argue your point and write your piece.

Once you’ve prepared a thesis statement, you’re going to need a road map to lay out how you will defend your argument. A rough outline that defines the major sections of your argument will serve this purpose. There’s no need to get too detailed here. You just need a series of “buckets” in which to throw ideas. For example,

I. Brief Introduction
II. Thesis (arguments)
III. Background to understand evidence
IV. First piece of evidence
V. Second piece of evidence
VI. Third piece of evidence
VII. Conclusion
VIII. References

This form of organization may seem intuitive as in, “I know these things need to go into my piece already.” The point of making the outline is to have something visual that helps you organize your thoughts when you get to the actual writing. It also gives you a rough “progress bar” so you can see how you’re progressing as you write.

**Tools**

In order to get any job done right, you’re going to need a good set of tools. The most important thing to be aware of is that you need to pick tools that work for you. In a physical sense tools are things like pens, pencils, paper, computers, chalk, etc. In an environmental sense, tools can be things like your home, the library, a coffee shop, the laboratory, etc.

You need to use the tools that will help you to write the best. For instance, while your computer can provide you with the resources of the internet and allow you to write faster, it may actually hinder your progress. This can be the case if you are addicted to email or surfing the web. Also, while it may be physically easier to work from your home, you may find that you have trouble focusing there. The library or even a coffee shop may provide you with a setting in which you can focus better.

**Fresh Eyes (i.e., other people)**

Your friends, coworkers, colleagues, advisors, etc. are invaluable assets when trying to formulate and organize an argument. Ask them for assistance when you get stuck or when you need an opinion on things like clarity and flow. A fresh set of eyes
can help you to see things in a new light or to clear up a muddled argument or a vague thesis statement. Furthermore, don’t simply ask them to read and comment. You can do things like have a discussion with someone and see what they say. Do they refute your argument? They might mention things that make your argument stronger.
Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements
(from theOwn at Purdue: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/)

I. Tips for Writing Your Thesis Statement

1. Determine what kind of paper you are writing:
   - An analytical paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.
   - An expository (explanatory) paper explains something to the audience.
   - An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

If you are writing a text which does not fall under these three categories (ex. a narrative), a thesis statement somewhere in the first paragraph could still be helpful to your reader.

2. Your thesis statement should be specific—it should cover only what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence.

3. The thesis statement usually appears at the end of the first paragraph of a paper.

4. Your topic may change as you write, so you may need to revise your thesis statement to reflect exactly what you have discussed in the paper.

II. Thesis Statement Examples

1. Example of an analytical thesis statement:

   An analysis of the college admission process reveals two principal problems facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds.

   The paper that follows should:
   - explain the analysis of the college admission process
   - explain the two problems facing admissions counselors
2. Example of an expository (explanatory) thesis statement:

*The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.*

The paper that follows should:

- explain how students spend their time studying, attending class, and socializing with peers

3. Example of an argumentative thesis statement:

*High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.*

The paper that follows should:

- present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that students should pursue community projects before entering college
Flow in Academic Writing

One of the greatest challenges in academic writing is to create documents which are ‘easy to read’. Some people say that this is a result of ‘good writing style’; others attribute easy reading to clarity of ideas. In fact, this feeling often comes from what is called ‘smooth flow of ideas’. Below are two passages which differ in their flow of ideas.

**Passage 1:**
The basis of our American democracy – equal opportunity for all – is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at our colleges and universities during that period. Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues.

**Passage 2:**
In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the basis of our American democracy – equal opportunity for all. During that period, tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income. If this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society.

The first passage seems choppy, and even disorganized. The second reads much better, and the ideas appear clearer. There are two aspects which attribute to the smooth flow of ideas in the first passage: cohesion and coherence.

**Cohesion is a sense of flow**, which shows the relationship between sentences, i.e., how easily the reader moves from sentence to sentence.

**Coherence is a sense of the whole** when all the sentences in a piece of writing add up to create a complete picture.

The Latine verb *cohere* means ‘hold together’. In Writing, Cohesion and Coherence mean easy movement through ideas. They allow the writer to control the smooth flow of ideas and present ideas in a comprehensive way, which reduces readers’ effort.
Kinds of Sentences

A sentence is a group of words containing at least one independent clause with a subject and a verb and expressing a complete idea.

Simple Sentences consist of one main (or independent) clause. To be complete, a simple sentence must have at least one subject and one verb. A simple sentence may also have a compound subject and/or a compound verb.

Example: Many international students experience cultural shock.

Many international students and postdoctoral fellows experience cultural shock and leave back to their native country.

Compound Sentences have at least two main (or independent) clauses, connected by
➢ a coordinator (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet);
➢ a conjunctive adverb (moreover, in addition, however, therefore);
➢ a semicolon (;).

Example: Men may exercise harder, but they may not exercise as regularly as women do.

Nuclear accidents can happen; therefore, nuclear power plants should have strict safety controls.

Motherhood causes some women to quit their jobs; others continue working despite having young children to care for.

Complex Sentences have one main (or independent) clause and one or more dependent (or subordinate) clauses.

Example: When an atom is split, it releases neutrons.

Dependent clauses can function in the sentence as nouns, adjectives or adverbs:

Noun clauses function as nouns in the sentence and can be used as subjects, objects, predicate nominatives, and objects of prepositions. e.g.,

Example: What is most important to him is his family. (subject)

That critic writes that Al Purdy is the best poet in Canada. (object)

You are what you eat. (predicate nominative)

She is very suspicious about what he said. (object of preposition)
**Adjective clauses** start with a relative pronoun such as *who, which, or that* and function as adjectives. The pronoun refers to a noun that usually precedes it directly.

*Example:*  
The woman *who bought the red dress* is my aunt.  
That dress, *which is my favorite*, was expensive.  
The problem *that he solved* was a difficult one.

Commas around the descriptive adjective clause indicate that the information there is not essential to the sentence. Absence of commas around a restrictive adjective clause, on the other hand, indicates that the information is essential to the sentence.

*Example:*  
The bull *that is in the pasture* belongs to Joe.  
The bull, *which is in the pasture*, belongs to Joe.

**Adverb clauses** function as adverbs in the sentence, modifying verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. They may tell how, why, when, where, etc. Conjunctions used include *although, after, if, because, while, since, whether, etc.*

*Example:*  
*When I arrived at the University,* classes had already started.  
Stan is happy *because he received a good grade on his history midterm.*  
*Although Bob is intelligent,* he doesn’t work very hard.
**Linking Expressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer’s purpose</th>
<th>Linking words and phrases</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To add an idea</td>
<td>in addition, furthermore, moreover, also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show time or sequence</td>
<td>meanwhile, first, second, then, next, later, finally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contrast</td>
<td>however, nevertheless, though, in contrast, on the other hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show result</td>
<td>therefore, thus, consequently, as a result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To emphasize</td>
<td>in fact, of course, indeed, certainly</td>
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<td>To provide an example</td>
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<td>To generalize or summarize</td>
<td>in general, overall, in short</td>
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</table>
The Most Common Sentence Structure Problems

A **Sentence Fragment** is an incomplete sentence. It usually lacks either a subject or a verb, or both, or contains only a dependent clause.

Incorrect: Studying very hard on weekends.
Correct: Studying on weekends is very hard.

Incorrect: Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of courses.
Correct: Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of courses, they have very little free time.

A **run-on sentence** is a sentence in which two or more independent clauses are written one after another with no punctuation (fused sentences) or with incorrect punctuation (comma splice).

Incorrect: His family went to Australia then they immigrated to Canada.
Correct: His family went to Australia; then they immigrated to Canada

Incorrect: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim it takes a lot of practice.
Correct: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim since it takes a lot of practice.
Correct: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim; it takes a lot of practice.

Incorrect: The experiment failed, it had been left unobserved for too long.
Correct: The experiment failed; it had been left unobserved for too long.
Correct: The experiment failed because it had been left unobserved for too long.

Incorrect: A newly arrived international student faces many problems, for example, he has to cope with a new culture.
Correct: A newly arrived international student faces many problems; for example, he has to cope with a new culture.

A **choppy sentence** is a sentence that is too short. Although short sentences can be effective, overuse of them is considered poor style in academic writing.

Incorrect: Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.
Correct: Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

Incorrect: Our results were inconsistent. The program obviously contains an error. A revision of the program is required.
Correct: A revision of the program is required because it produced inconsistent results.
A sprawl sentence is a sentence made up of many clauses with excessive subordination and coordination. A loose sentence also results from weak sentence construction and the inclusion of many phrases and clauses in no particular order.

Incorrect: In the event that we get the contract, we must be ready by June 1 with the necessary personnel and equipment to get the job done, so with this end in mind a staff meeting, which all group managers are expected to attend, is scheduled for February 12.
Correct: An all-staff meeting including all group managers is scheduled for February 12. During this meeting we should discuss the issue of personnel and equipment preparation and schedule a plan for completing the contract by June 1st, if the contract is received.

Incorrect: The lack of rainfall has caused a severe water shortage, so people have to conserve water every day, and they also have to think of new ways to reuse water, but the situation is improving.
Correct: The lack of rainfall has caused a severe water shortage. Although the situation is improving, people have to conserve water every day, and think of new ways to reuse water.

Incorrect: Although the blue whale has been protected for over 30 years and its numbers are increasing, especially in the North Pacific, where whale hunting has been banned, it is still at risk of extinction as its habitat is being polluted by waste from oil tankers and its main food, the plankton, is being killed off by harmful rays from the sun, which can penetrate the earth's atmosphere because there is a huge hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica.
Correct: The blue whale has been protected for over 30 years, especially in the North Pacific. Although its numbers are increasing, it is still at risk of extinction. This risk is primarily caused by waste from oil tankers polluting whale habitat. Moreover, a huge hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica allows harmful rays from the sun to penetrate the earth’s atmosphere and kill the plankton, which is whale main food.

Non-parallel structures are parts of a sentence which are listed as a sequence, but do not follow the same grammatical or structural principle. Parallelism in writing means that each item in a list or comparison should follow the same grammatical pattern.

Incorrect: The teacher wanted to know which country we came from and our future goals.
Correct: The teacher wanted to know which country we came from and what our future goals were.

Incorrect: This report is an overview of the processes involved, the problems encountered, and how they were solved.
Correct: This report is an overview of the processes involved, the problems encountered, and the solutions devised.
## Types of Clauses

### Independent clauses
contain both a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence.  
*Example: Jet lag affects most long distance travelers.*

### Dependent clauses
contain both a subject and a verb, but cannot stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses are introduced by subordinating conjunctions such as *because, what, if*

*Example: Although there is no sure way to prevent jet lag.*

## Independent Clauses

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<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Coordinators</th>
<th>Conjunctive Adverbs</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To add an idea</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>in addition, furthermore, moreover, also</td>
<td>Women follow more healthful diets, and they go to doctors more often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show time or sequence</td>
<td></td>
<td>first, second, then, next, later, meanwhile, finally</td>
<td>First, robots can perform repetitive tasks without becoming tired or bored. Second, they can fulfill tasks requiring pinpoint accuracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contrast</td>
<td>but yet</td>
<td>however, nevertheless, in contrast, on the other hand</td>
<td>Increasing the size of airports is one solution to traffic congestion; however, this is a long-term solution whose benefits may not be seen for many years into the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show result</td>
<td>so</td>
<td>therefore, thus, consequently, as a result</td>
<td>Native and nonnative English speakers have different needs; therefore, most schools provide separate classes for each group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To introduce an alternative</td>
<td>or otherwise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students must take final exams; otherwise, they receive a grade of incomplete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To emphasize</td>
<td></td>
<td>in fact, of course, indeed, certainly</td>
<td>The little girl hated spiders; in fact, she was terrified by them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide an example</td>
<td></td>
<td>for example, for instance</td>
<td>In the operating room, robotic equipment can assist the surgeon. For instance, a robot can kill a brain tumor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To generalize or summarize</td>
<td></td>
<td>in general, overall, in short</td>
<td>Hermes is not only the messenger of Zeus, but the patron of thieves. In general, he is the god of authorized and unauthorized transfers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Dependent Clauses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of clauses</th>
<th>Subordinators</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Noun clauses</td>
<td>what, where, why, how, where, when, who whom, which, whose, whether, that, if</td>
<td>He knows that his business will be successful. That there is a hole in the ozone layer of the earth’s atmosphere is well known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adjective clauses</td>
<td>who, whom, which, whose, that, where, when</td>
<td>Men who are not married are called bachelors. Last year we traveled to San Francisco, which is famous for its architecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Adverb clauses</td>
<td>a. time when, before, after, until, since, as soon as</td>
<td>When he won the money, he decided to buy a car.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. place where, wherever</td>
<td>She drove wherever she wanted.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. cause because, as, since</td>
<td>She got a parking ticket because she parked illegally.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. purpose so that, in order that</td>
<td>He drove fast so that he could get to work on time.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. result so ... that, such ... that</td>
<td>He drove so fast that he got a speeding ticket.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. condition if, unless</td>
<td>If she hadn’t won the lottery, she would have been very unhappy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g. concession although, even though</td>
<td>Although she thought she was a good driver, she got a lot of tickets for speeding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Punctuation marking

With noun clauses, no commas are used.

Adjective restrictive clauses are not separated by commas, but with adjective descriptive clauses commas are used.

Adverb clauses that come before the independent clause are followed by a comma, but if they come after the independent clause, no comma is used.
**Introductory Paragraph**  
Longman, White Plains, NY)

The introductory paragraph must introduce the topic of the essay and present its main idea.

The introductory paragraph has two parts:

- **general statements** attracting the reader’s attention to the topic;
- **a thesis statement** stating the specific topic (main idea) of the essay.

An introductory paragraph is like a funnel:

```
      General statements
      ↓
      Thesis statement
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**General statements**

- introduce the topic of the essay
- give background information on the topic

**Suggestions for writing the general statements:**

- do not start too generally;
- do not begin with ideas that are too far from the ideas of your thesis statement;
- use one key word or phrase (or a synonymous phrase) from your thesis statement.
The Structure of a Paragraph

The general structure of a paragraph is the following:

1. The topic sentence
2. Supporting sentences
3. The concluding sentence

Diagram of a paragraph, English style
Concluding Paragraph

The conclusion is your last chance to make your point clear.

The concluding paragraph consists of:

- A summary of the main points, or a restatement of your thesis in different words;
- Your final comment on the subject, based on the information you have provided.

The concluding paragraph should be introduced with a conclusion transition signal:

**in conclusion, in summary, in brief, in short, indeed**

Here are some basic principles you should follow to write an effective conclusion:

1. *The conclusion should follow logically from the body of the essay.*
2. *The conclusion must summarize the whole essay, not just one or two major points.*
3. *The conclusion should not raise any new points but must be related to the thesis statement or body of the essay.*

You can use different devices to make your final comment more interesting. Some of them are:

- emphasize the result of the ideas in the essay;
- offer a solution to the problems stated in the essay;
- predict a situation that will result or occur from the ideas introduced in the essay;
- make a recommendation concerning material presented in the essay.
Writing a Thesis or Dissertation

Writing a thesis or dissertation is perhaps the most daunting part of graduate education. A thesis or dissertation marks the culmination of thousands of hours of training, research, and writing, and it represents you for years after graduation.

Some of the stress related to writing your thesis or dissertation, however, is unwarranted. Dissertation writing is not unrelated to the rest of the academic writing you've done throughout your graduate career. Many of the skills you already possess can be applied to the dissertation writing process. Identifying the purpose of your project, expressing originality and significance, setting appropriate goals, and maintaining strong organization will help you as you develop a high quality dissertation or thesis.

We outline here a general guide, adapted from Lovitts and Wert's *Developing Quality Dissertations in the Social Sciences* (2009), for writing your dissertation. Though this booklet presents examples from the social sciences, the guidelines they put forth are applicable across disciplines. Please contact your DGS or the Yale Graduate Writing Center to borrow a discipline-specific copy.

1. Identifying the Purpose of your Dissertation

What is the purpose of your dissertation? It is but one part of your overall degree fulfillment. While it should reflect the standards and goals of other dissertations in your field, it should also prepare you for whatever career you decide to pursue.

**The Purpose of the Dissertation: Descriptions from Faculty in the Social Sciences**

(Table 1.1 in Lovitts and Wert 2009, p. 1)

The purpose of the dissertation is to prepare the student to be a professional in the discipline. Through this preparation the student learns and demonstrates the ability to conduct independent, original, and significant research. The dissertation thus shows that the student is able to

- identify/define problems,
- generate questions and hypotheses,
- review and summarize the literature,
- apply appropriate methods,
- collect data properly,
- analyze and judge evidence,
- discuss findings,
- produce publishable results,
- engage in a sustained piece of research or argument,
- think and write critically and coherently.

It is important to maintain an ongoing conversation with your advisors about their expectations for these goals. For example, how can you best demonstrate competency in your field? What parts of the dissertation are most important in your field? Take a moment to step back and look at the dissertation writing process as an outside observer. How would you expect a student to succeed?
2. Understanding Originality and Significance

“Originality” and “significance” are terms that come up frequently when discussing dissertations and theses. What do professors mean when they use these terms?

**Defining Originality**

Lovitts and Wert (2009) define originality using the results from a series of faculty surveys.

An original contribution offers a novel or new perspective. The faculty in the social sciences who participated in the study described an original contribution as 'something that has not been done, found, proved, or seen before. It is publishable because it adds to knowledge, changes the way people think, informs policy, moves the field forward, or advances the state of the art.'

To achieve this goal, you might develop an original insight or advance, or you might borrow a contribution from another discipline and apply it to your field for the first time. It is important to understand that the contribution is not necessarily your entire dissertation but something that is part of it (p. 4).

It is important to clarify, in early discussions with your advisors, what is expected of you in terms of originality. Consider asking for samples of exemplary completed dissertations, and think critically about how you can most clearly display your original contribution to the reader.

**Defining Significance**

What is significance?

The faculty who participated in the [Lovitts and Wert] study described a significant contribution as something that is useful and will have an impact, and is therefore publishable in top-tier journals because it

- offers a nontrivial to a very important breakthrough at the empirical, conceptual, theoretical, or policy level;
- is useful and will have an impact;
- causes those inside, and possibly those outside, the community to see things differently;
- influences the conversation, research, and teaching;
- has implications for and advances the field, the discipline, other disciplines, or society.

As with originality, there are degrees of significance. At the highest level, significance is a function of the field's long-term interest in the problem, the difficulty involved in solving the problem, the influence of the results on further developments in the field, as well as the degree to which the results affect other fields, disciplines, and even society (p. 5).

Again, it is important to talk with your advisors early in the process about their expectations for significance. Are you expected to make a significant contribution in your dissertation, or are you expected to demonstrate that you're capable of making a significant contribution in later work?

3. Aiming for Excellence in the Dissertation

Quality varies across dissertations. As you plan and evaluate your own dissertation, think about appropriate markers for important components of the project. If you answer “yes” to most of the following questions, you are probably working towards a strong dissertation.
Originality and Significance

Does your dissertation ask new questions or address important problems? Does it use current or new tools or methods? Does it expand the boundaries of the discipline? Does it have practical or policy implications? Would an interdisciplinary community find your project interesting?

Understanding of the Discipline

Does your dissertation display a strong understanding and command of preexisting literature? Is the literature challenged or advanced by your research? Does your dissertation clearly state the problem it addresses and explain its importance?

Research Design

Is your research project well-planned and well-executed? Does your dissertation utilize reliable data from multiple sources? Is your dissertation theoretically sophisticated?

Writing

Is your dissertation well-written and organized? Does it clearly explain your project and your findings? Does your writing engage the reader and advance their understanding of your research?

4. Maintaining Consistent Quality within the Dissertation

Again, expectations are crucial as you work toward a high quality dissertation. It is important to talk with advisors about what exactly they mean when they refer to the overall form (e.g., a series of essays or a book) and the smaller components of your dissertation. A typical dissertation is comprised of an introduction, a literature review, a theory section, a method section, a results or data analysis section, a discussion of these results, and a conclusion. With your advisors, discuss expectations for each section and map out a plan for tackling them.

5. Achieving Excellence

After years of training, you are probably already prepared to write a competent dissertation. The guidelines we've already discussed will help you turn that dissertation into an excellent one. We close with some tips for promoting that forward progress.

Practice Academic Honesty

Honesty is the keystone to academic work. The strength of your presentation and contribution are worthless if you plagiarize or misuse data.

Develop Professional-Level Writing Skills

The quality of your writing matters. Brilliant ideas and findings are easily lost in poor writing, not only in your dissertation but throughout your career. Your writing demonstrates your ability to speak to peers in your field.
Take Action to Improve Your Writing

Students often have trouble with grammar and composition, yet most faculty members (with good reason) do not want to devote hours to improving student writing. If the feedback on your drafts indicates that your writing could use some improvement, consider the following steps.

- **Know good scholarly writing** by familiarizing yourself with the writing style of authors recommended by your advisors.
- **Plan your dissertation** by mapping or outlining what you want to express prior to writing it. Show this plan to advisors and peers before you begin writing.
- **Plan the pieces of your dissertation.** Map or outline the order and content of each chapter before actually writing.
- **Write and revise** in separate steps to improve efficiency. After drafting a section, give it a break before going back to review and revise it. You will likely spot more errors than if you revised it while writing.
- **Follow convention.** There are norms for the form and style of dissertations in your field. Use handbooks of grammar and style; read books about academic writing; and understand the formatting conventions of your field.
- **Get feedback.** The feedback of others is extremely important. At Yale, go to the Graduate Writing Center for writing tutoring. Ask peers and faculty advisors for help with short revisions. Join a writing group.
- **Practice writing and presenting your research.** Take opportunities to practice both written and oral presentation.

Set the Bar

We've said it before, but it's worth repeating: set clear expectations. Setting worthy, transparent, and achievable goals will help any project.

Engage Your Advisors

Be sure to speak with your advisors throughout the process of writing your dissertation. Be clear about goals and deadlines. When you meet, have questions prepared and make sure you understand their directions. Be proactive about solving problems, rather than withdrawing. If you are not getting the guidance you need, consider talking with another professor or administrator who can help.

Engage Your Peers

Sharing your work with your peers is useful. Setting up regular appointments to discuss your research will not only keep you on track with your dissertation, but it will ensure that you have helpful colleagues in the future.

Applaud Yourself

Though you may feel like you are making incremental progress, you have already come so far in your academic career. Be sure step back along the way and acknowledge the work you have done. Writing a dissertation is an enormous endeavor, and you deserve credit for all you've achieved!
Work Cited