

THESIS INTO BOOK

Advice to the desperate

When we say a thesis is not a book, we are normally asked, What is the difference, and how can my thesis be transformed into a book?

The problem is that the two are supposed to be different. A thesis is written to be read by two or three examiners, as a demonstration of research capability. A book is written to be read by several thousand people, as a means of communication. This is one difference.

...a thesis usually aims to do certain specific and identifiable things. It seeks to make a single contribution to its field of study...If approved in an examination, it licenses the writer, the researcher, to practise as a professional in the field – hence the degree. It is thus part of being certified to do the real thing; it is not itself the real thing.

Robin Derricourt, *An Author's Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (Princeton, 1996), p.68

The story is told that when Oxford University introduced the DPhil degree (mainly to satisfy the demands of American students) the original regulations stipulated that a DPhil thesis be 'of publishable quality'. The philosopher/archaeologist R.G. Collingwood routinely failed theses he examined, pointing out that as a Delegate of Oxford University Press he frequently had to decline manuscripts of much higher quality submitted to the Press. The regulations were changed. Theses are no longer required to be 'publishable' in order to be passed.

This story highlights the difference between a thesis and a book. The similarity between the two is deceptive. A thesis merely *looks like* a book in the layout of sequential chapters, footnotes and references. In most cases it does not *read like* a book. For a publisher and the general reader this distinction is critical.

The thesis format (as stated above) is intended to demonstrate the writer's ability to formulate a research topic, undertake research, and present research findings in a sustained argument. It is a test. Within this format the writer must show an awareness of existing literature. The audience for a thesis is limited. If it is to have a wider audience it must be recast and redirected. And despite what many academic authors believe – that scholarly merit alone should decide whether a book is published – publishers must be convinced that a book can reach this wider audience if they are to commit their own investment to it.

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*'Treat your thesis as the **first** draft of your book.'*

'Put your thesis aside for a year before beginning to revise it.'

'The difference between a thesis and a book is the difference between a chrysalis and a butterfly.'

'A thesis is written for people who know much more than you do; a book is written for people who know much less.'

This is good advice from experienced thesis supervisors. No matter how many drafts the thesis has been through before it is presented and passed, it is still only a first draft of a book (if that). Your first draft gets the main argument and content down on paper. In your second draft you can reorganize the structure, select some passages for further elaboration, excise others entirely, and *cut the ms down to a practical size*. In your third or final draft you should concentrate on polishing your language, honing your argument, checking all references, researching and getting permissions!

Here are some points to consider when turning your thesis into the *second* draft of your intended book.

1) The first and last chapters are usually the most problematic. The first chapter typically involves a literature survey, setting the scholarly context of the work to follow. This can often be a breathless gallop ('Winehouse (2005b) argues against Eminem (2004c), while Dixie-Chicks (2006a, c & d) rebuts both and establishes a new paradigmatic presence, which is further disputed by...'). It is one way of demonstrating to your supervisor and examiners that you have read the background literature. It is not a good way of engaging with a wider audience and introducing them to the subject matter of your book. Find a more direct and arresting way to introduce your subject in chapter 1.

2) The final chapter, too, is often written at a gallop. It summarizes the findings, but, to cover oneself from the anticipated criticisms of the examiners, a candidate often reels off a list of unanswered questions arising from the thesis, 'that need further research'. Very often these afterthoughts provide a very good starting point for recasting your original questions, and thus the structure of your book. The answers to such questions might not require 'further research', merely further thought.

Think carefully: are you still satisfied with your original questions, as well as the answers you provided? You probably are the day after your thesis is passed. You shouldn't be a year later (thus the advice to leave it alone before starting to revise).

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3) The presentation of evidence is important in any thesis. Sometimes the material is absolutely new, or it runs counter to established thinking. Very often there are large sections where both author and readers trip over the evidence, so dense has it grown. The argument of a *book*, on the other hand, must flow more smoothly. *Is your thesis over-annotated?* Are there sections that can be extracted and published in journals to establish specific points in your argument? The reader of your book can then be referred to your articles for the evidence. Do tables, graphs and illustrative material merely repeat information in the text? *If so, they should go.* You can then present your publisher with a leaner, fitter ms.

4) Signposting and summarizing. Many theses have sections that read something like: 'In the last chapter we established that wheels are fundamentally circular. In this chapter we will see that the opposite can be said to be true of packing crates.' These sections are inserted as an aid to attention deficit examiners, so that they can easily find their place and remind themselves what they have read after wandering off to make another pot of coffee, or mow the lawn, or feed the cat. You want to adopt a more gripping style that rivets the attention

of your readers and carries them willingly along with the flow of your narrative or argument. So: *Drop the signposting. Read a novel. Pay attention to your writing style.*

5) Language: In a thesis the candidate often must demonstrate mastery of technical language or jargon. The more jargon-laden a ms, the smaller its potential audience. Think carefully: do you really need to situate yourself within 'a discourse analysis of the iconography of packing crates'? Can you find another way of saying the same thing, less mysteriously?

The editorial 'we' is now considered archaic. Some editors, and many readers, find it intensely annoying. *Write as yourself, not as a committee.*

6) A book, like a novel, should have a beginning, middle, and an end: you should set up an interesting situation, develop it, and provide a denouement.

All of this advice is aimed at helping you free yourself from the restraints of the thesis format and take wing in your imagination and your writing.

Remember that many theses, no matter how competent, can never be made into books.

Often the best books to emerge out of theses are books on the *same topic* as the thesis, but bear little relationship in structure, organization, argument or language

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