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Twelve Tips on Writing a Thesis

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Twelve Tips on Writing a Thesis

David Vaver*

Having supervised and examined master's and doctoral dissertations on IP topics over the years, I find that writers aren't always aware that supervisors and examiners share certain habits of thought. Here are some notes on how to humour them:

1. Examiners love a mystery; all have photographic memories. You may have an introductory section that says where you're going and what each following chapter or section contain: examiners will remember all this as they progress through your work. They'll never need to return to your abstract or first section to find out what you're on about now. So never say at the beginning of any section or chapter what it's going to show or why. Treat your writing past chapter 1 as a mystery novel whose *dénouement* will become clear only if the reader persists till the end of your requisite 100 or 200 or 300,000 word opus. Examiners all enjoy Agatha Christie: they believe her technique should apply *mutatis mutandis* to dissertations.

2. Speaking of *mutatis mutandis*: Examiners love foreign languages. So never be afraid to say in a foreign language what can be said as easily in English. In fact, the older the language, the better. You can be sure that hardly an evening goes by without your examiners dipping into their edition of Virgil's *Aeneid* in its original Latin or Aristotle's *Ethics* in their original Greek. So please do liberally display your linguistic breadth and knowledge by slipping in the occasional pithy Latin or Greek saying — and, of course, don't translate it: you don't want to insult your examiner. Don't be afraid of misspelling any foreign words either: your examiner will assume you are making a knowing joke when you write *de minimus non curat lex*,¹ instead of *de minimis non curat lex*:

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¹ The misspelling is also ungrammatical. It should read "de minimure" (ablative) instead of "minimus" (nominative). One mistake generates another.

“the law doesn’t care about a small mouse” is as true a saying as the more conventional view that it doesn’t care about other small things as well.

3. Examiners love long sentences, the longer the better. You can bet that at least one of your examiners is among the seven people in the world who have got past the first two pages of *Finnegans Wake*. So if you can write a sentence that takes up a whole paragraph, terrific. In fact, if you can take up two paragraphs with one sentence, finishing one paragraph with a line of dots and then starting the next paragraph with “... and further” and adding lots of material in parentheses, the examiners will realize that you have not only fully absorbed but also improved on Dickens’s writing style. Don’t believe what the European Court of Justice said a decade ago: that an ordinary sentence comprising just eleven words can itself be an original literary work entitled to separate copyright protection.² No sentence you write can possibly be a personal intellectual creation unless its word count runs to at least three figures.

4. Just as more is better when writing a sentence: Bigger is better when it comes to words. Polysyllables are much more impressive than shorter words. Be assured that examiners all have the latest edition of the standard *Oxford English Dictionary* by their side when reading your thesis. Although they know most of the quarter million words in it, they still enjoy refreshing their memory. So the more words you make them look up, the more you’ll go up in their estimation.

Examiners particularly enjoy not finding your word in the *OED*, but having instead to go online to the *Urban Dictionary*. You are thus, albeit indirectly, helping them understand the dialogue in the gritty films they watch on television. So they’ll be eternally grateful to you for their improved comprehension of current patois. And if you can come up with a neologism that is in no dictionary at all, bonus points!

² *Infopaq International A/S v Danske Dagblades Forening* [2012] EUECJ C-302/10; similarly *Newspaper Licensing Agency Ltd v Meltwater Holding BV* [2011] EWCA Civ 890 at [16]ff.

5. Examiners particularly like adjectives and adverbs. Dotting words such as “fair”, “reasonable”, “just”, and “unconscionable” around your paper, especially in differing combinations, is a special favourite of theirs. Such words always clarify thought. Never say something is merely “likely” if you can say it is “very likely” or, even better, “extremely likely” or “extremely unlikely”. You need not provide any supporting empirical data when using such words of degree: that is strictly for the pedantic — a rare bird (or *rara avis*) among examiners. And don’t forget those magic adverbs “obviously” and “patently”, followed by something off-the-wall. Examiners enjoy having their prejudices — otherwise known as “received wisdom” — given a good shaking.

6. Examiners find punctuation an unnecessary distraction. So don’t bother too much with commas, quote marks, colons, and semi-colons. Examiners have all read *Eats Shoots & Leaves* and heartily disagree with it. Context always tells one whether such a sentence involves a panda or an itinerant hunter. Anyway, since writing a thesis is a challenge, reading it should be a challenge too; and examiners are always up for that.

7. There is one exception to this rule of punctuation: **Examiners love apostrophes.** The general rule is that every page you write must have at least ten apostrophes. Sprinkle them liberally as if you were holding a pepper pot full of them, so that their distribution over the page is random. Where they’re located — before or after an “s” or indeed any letter — doesn’t matter, so long as you meet your quota.

8. As examiners read your paper, they will not know whether you have read and absorbed every item in your 50-page bibliography. So please confirm your diligence by quoting large extracts, especially from material found in rare book archives. **Examiners love long quotations, the more obscure, the better.** They are far more interested in them than in any original thought you may have managed to come up with.

9. You may then be faced with the agonising choice of deciding whether a quotation should go in the body of the text or in a footnote. **The rule of thumb is: when in doubt, put it in a footnote.**

The purpose of footnotes is to act as the repository of all the detritus you've picked up along the way that you have somehow been unable to work into the text. Nothing an examiner enjoys more is a page that contains three lines of text at the top, and the rest in a footnote, especially one that spills over on to the next page. This handily reduces one's reading time. Many examiners work on the general rule that if it's not worth putting in the body of the text, it's not worth reading. Unfortunately there is the occasional pedant who reads little else but the footnotes. Why make their task easier? Let them pay for their quirk.

10. Examiners don't mind if your footnotes get out of synch. When you insert fresh text accompanied by one or more footnotes, don't bother checking whether your footnote numbering or cross-references need changing to take account of the inserted notes. Some of the most interesting books are ones where the footnotes aren't aligned with the text. It indicates the writer must know a lot more about the hidden meaning of their sources than the reader possibly could.

11. Examiners don't care much about spelling, grammar, syntax, or square or round brackets in your citations. Your computer's spellcheck program is a wonderful device that will never let you down. My spellcheck program likes to change the spelling of people's names into something unrecognisable: it's probably some AI beta version that figures no-one could possibly know how to write their own name. So Judge Fysh (with a Y) becomes Judge Fish. Don't worry about that: nobody minds getting their name spelt wrongly, and anyway I'm sure your spellcheck program is more efficient than mine.

Don't worry either about writing "the data says this" even though "data" is a plural; don't worry about spelling words like "labour" or "honour" American-style without the "u"; and don't worry about dangling participles. When Hamlet says "sleeping in my orchard, a serpent stung me", we recognise it's Hamlet doing the sleeping and the serpent doing the stinging, because slumbering snakes seldom simultaneously sting. What's good enough for the Bard has got to be good enough for you too. And if the crew of the *Star Ship Enterprise* can venture forth "to boldly go where no

man has gone before”, why can’t you venture forth boldly to write what few have done before? And do pop in a mixed metaphor or two, just to show your examiners that you’re definitely the sharpest pencil on the block.

Only the anally retentive care about such blips. Your examiners are more hip. They are not of the school that believes there is some correlation between sloppy writing and sloppy thinking. In fact examiners often moonlight as editors of some minor law journal or other and don’t mind putting in the time to go through your work with a red pencil. They don’t find that in any way detracts from your work or distracts them from reading it conscientiously. Your examiners will be ultimately looking to see whether you have made an original contribution to the literature and they may find that the combination of wrong spelling, grammar, syntax, split infinitives, and so on, is exactly what creates that original contribution.

12. Examiners don’t care if you break the occasional rule. Some of the above rules are not inflexible and can be cheerfully ignored. I may have even done that myself while jotting these notes. The trick is to know which rules to safely ignore and which not to. That is partly what writing a thesis is about. *Facere est audere.*