

## Palgrave Study Skills

- Business Degree Success
- Career Skills
- Cite Them Right (8th edn)
- Critical Thinking Skills (2nd edn)
- e-Learning Skills (2nd edn)
- The Exam Skills Handbook (2nd edn)
- Great Ways to Learn Anatomy and Physiology
- How to Begin Studying English Literature (3rd edn)
- How to Manage Your Distance and Open Learning Course
- How to Manage Your Postgraduate Course
- How to Study Foreign Languages
- How to Study Linguistics (2nd edn)
- How to Use Reading in Your Essays
- How to Write Better Essays (2nd edn)
- How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation
- Information Skills
- The International Student Handbook
- IT Skills for Successful Study
- The Mature Student's Guide to Writing (3rd edn)
- The Mature Student's Handbook
- The Palgrave Student Planner
- Practical Criticism
- Presentation Skills for Students (2nd edn)
- The Principles of Writing in Psychology
- Professional writing (2nd edn)
- Researching Online
- Skills for Success (2nd edn)
- The Student's Guide to Writing (3rd edn)
- Study Skills Connected
- Study Skills for International Postgraduates
- The Study Skills Handbook (3rd edn)
- Study Skills for Speakers of English as a Second Language
- Studying History (3rd edn)
- Studying Law (3rd edn)
- Studying Modern Drama (2nd edn)
- Studying Psychology (2nd edn)
- Teaching Study Skills and Supporting Learning
- The Undergraduate Research Handbook
- The Work-Based Learning Student Handbook
- Work Placement – A Survival Guide for Students to Work Placements – A Survival Guide for Students
- Write It Right (2nd edn)
- Writing for Engineers (3rd edn)
- Writing for Law
- Writing for Nursing and Midwifery Students (2nd edn)
- You2Uni

## Pocket Study Skills

- 14 Days to Exam Success
- Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and More
- Brilliant Writing Tips for Students
- Completing Your PhD
- Doing Research
- Getting Critical
- Planning Your Essay
- Planning Your PhD
- Reading and Making Notes
- Referencing and Understanding Plagiarism
- Reflective Writing
- Report Writing
- Science Study Skills
- Studying with Dyslexia
- Success in Groupwork
- Time Management
- Writing for University

## Palgrave Research Skills

- Authoring a PhD
- The Foundations of Research (2nd edn)
- The Good Supervisor (2nd edn)
- The Postgraduate Research Handbook (2nd edn)
- Structuring Your Research Thesis

For a complete listing of all our titles in this area please visit [www.palgrave.com/studyskills](http://www.palgrave.com/studyskills)

# Authoring a PhD

*How to plan, draft, write and finish  
a doctoral thesis or dissertation*

Patrick Dunleavy

palgrave  
macmillan

# 1

## Becoming an Author

In writing a problem down or airing it in conversation we let its essential aspects emerge. And by knowing its character, we remove, if not the problem itself, then its secondary, aggravating characteristics: confusion, displacement, surprise.

*Alain de Botton* <sup>1</sup>

The authoring process involves all the component parts of producing a finished piece of text, that is: envisaging what to write, planning it in outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of your text. At every stage a complex mix of intellectual and logistical issues can crop up. As de Botton suggests of problems in general, often there are genuine (permanent) dilemmas surrounded by more resolvable delaying or distracting factors. Neither the fundamental problems nor their penumbra of aggravations may be straightforward to resolve, but we can often make progress on the latter by making the issues involved more explicit. My aim here is to shed light on common authoring problems and to point out solutions which others have found helpful and that may also work for you.

I begin by discussing the importance of authoring as a generic set of skills at the doctoral level. A thesis or a long dissertation (I use these words interchangeably from here on) forms a critical element in all the main models of PhD education. Some key authoring principles have important application across many

humanities and social science disciplines. The second section considers the varying authoring tasks involved in the 'classical' model of PhD and newer 'taught PhD' models. The third section looks at a foundation skill for becoming a good author, which is to actively manage your readers' expectations.

Authoring is more than just writing

To write is to raise a claim to be read, but by whom?

C. Wright Mills 2

To do authoring at doctoral level is to become a qualified (and hopefully published) academic writer. It involves acquiring a complete set of 'craft' skills, a body of practical knowledge that has traditionally been passed on by personal contacts within university departments from supervisors to students. A basic theme of this book is that authoring skills are a crucial element to completing a successful doctorate. They are fundamental in achieving a coherent, joined-up argument for your thesis. Proficiency in authoring can also help you meet the requirements of 'originality' and making a substantive contribution to the development of a discipline, which are still key criteria for awarding a doctorate in good universities. And acquiring authoring capabilities is very important in finishing a doctorate on time and avoiding the long delays for which PhD students were once notorious.

Yet PhD students are only rarely taught authoring skills in an explicit way in universities. The knowledge involved has not often been codified or written down. Great effort is normally put into communicating to students the substantive knowledge of each discipline, with an intense socialization and training in its research methods. By comparison the teaching or training of students in authoring has been given little attention. Partly this reflects a widespread conviction amongst academic staff that at the PhD level becoming an effective writer is completely bound up with becoming a good researcher, and with mastering the subject matter of one individual academic discipline. Authoring a doctorate has often been seen as too diffuse an activity to be

legitimately or usefully studied in universities. Many, perhaps most, working academics might doubt that much useful can be said about the generic skills involved in authoring – outside the context of each particular discipline. Hence in offering advice about authoring to their students most university teachers and supervisors have had few credible resources to hand. Many advisers must draw largely on their own experience, of supervising earlier students, or perhaps of being a PhD student themselves up to three decades ago. This neglect of authoring skills is not universal. The editors of academic journals and most publishers of university-level books can and do draw a distinction between people's prowess in a discipline and their proficiency as writers. They recognize that good researchers can be bad writers, and that uninspiring researchers can still be good writers, interpreters and communicators. But the thrust of much doctoral education none the less remains that if you get the research right then the writing aspect will somehow just fall naturally into place.

This conventional approach assumes that beginning PhD students will be sustained by discipline-specific study skills inculcated in their earlier education, at first degree or masters level. As their research goes on they will presumably learn how to produce good (or at least acceptable) writing in the style of their discipline via a process of trial and error, 'learning by doing' over successive drafts – first of papers, then of chapters, and ultimately of a complete thesis. Doctoral students are mentored intensively and hence should get detailed criticisms and individual advice from their supervisors and perhaps other colleagues. This advice is always text-specific and discipline-specific, focusing on this or that substantive argument or piece of research, on whether a particular point has been proved sufficiently, or whether a given way of expressing an argument is legitimate or appropriate in its context, and so on. From many repeated instances of these comments and interactions the hope is that students will progressively build up their own sense of what can and cannot be said, how it may be said, and how other professionals in their subject will interpret and react to their text.

In undertaking research and in developing disciplinary knowledge the craft approach to PhD education still works well, even though it has been extensively supplemented in modern

times by much more formalized, extensive and lengthier processes of advanced instruction. And on authoring issues, many students will perhaps be lucky and have sympathetic staff as their supervisors, people who are themselves skilled and experienced authors and who are also prepared to devote a lot of time and effort to inculcating similar authoring skills via individual working with students. In these circumstances the by-product approach can still deliver outstanding results.

But normally the by-product model of how students learn and develop is far more problematic in relation to authoring skills. In modern universities the pressures of teaching, research, publishing and administration on qualified staff frequently cause this model to break down in one or several respects. Doctoral instruction via individual supervision is costly and time-consuming. One of the reasons for a more formal and collective trend in doctoral education has been to reduce the amount of individual teaching needed, with peer group seminars used more to help students to develop their ideas and communication skills. Even in the most traditional view of PhD education, which still stresses one-to-one induction of each student by a single supervisor, the transmission of authoring skills is vulnerable. Some supervisors may be indifferent writers, or not very interested in or proficient in developing other people's authoring capabilities. Their students can find themselves without any fall-back source of guidance. Above all, the by-product way of doing things can be very time-consuming and erratic, hence worrying and psychologically taxing for students. Informal or 'trial and error' methods may unnecessarily stretch out the period people take to complete a doctorate. And it may make the process of becoming a competent and talented author in your own right more problematic than it need be.

Here is where this book aims to be useful, in helping PhD students and their advisers to think more systematically about authoring skills. On the basis of supervising my own students over the years, and of teaching a large and intensive course on PhD drafting and writing at my university for more than a decade, I take what might be labelled an 'extreme' view by more conventional colleagues. I believe that in most of the social sciences and all of the humanities disciplines, a set of general authoring skills determine around 40 to 50 per cent of anyone's success in completing a doctorate. Of course, your

ability to complete doctoral-level work will be primarily conditioned by your own research ideas and 'native' originality, and your hard work, application and skill in acquiring specific knowledge of your discipline and competence in its methods. But unless you simultaneously grow and enhance your authoring abilities, there are strong risks that your ideas may not develop sufficiently far or fast enough to sustain you through to finishing your thesis at the right level and in a reasonable time. Doing good research and becoming an effective author are not separate processes, but closely related aspects of intellectual development that need to work in parallel. I also believe that authoring skills are relatively generic ones, applicable in a broadly similar way across a range of disciplines at doctoral level. Hence this book draws on a wide range of previous writings and insights by earlier generations of university scholars.

## Different models of PhD and the tasks of authoring

In contemporary universities there are a number of different models of what a doctorate consists of. The way in which you

| <i>Model of PhD</i>                                                                                                                  | <i>Supervision</i>                                                            | <i>Thesis requirement</i>                                                                         | <i>Found in</i>                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Classical model</b><br>focuses on thesis writing throughout, with only preliminary training or coursework                         | Either one or two supervisors (UK); or a small supervisory committee (Europe) | <b>Big book thesis:</b> an integrated set of chapters usually around 80,000 to 100,000 words long | British-influenced and European-influenced university systems, and more text-based disciplines |
| <b>Taught PhD model</b><br>The first stage involves coursework assessed by a general examination. The second stage is a dissertation | Main adviser, plus minor adviser, plus rest of dissertation committee         | <b>Papers model dissertation:</b> four or five publishable quality papers, around 60,000 words    | American-influenced university systems, and more technical social sciences elsewhere           |

need to develop authoring skills will vary somewhat across each of these models, as well as across different humanities and social sciences disciplines to some extent. There are two main types of PhD education: the 'classical' model associated closely with a 'big book' type of thesis; and the more modern 'taught PhD model', normally associated with a shorter 'papers model dissertation'. I show how the advice given here and in the rest of this book can be adjusted to match the model of doctorate that you are completing.

*The classical model of PhD* developed over centuries in Europe and is still dominant in university systems influenced by European and British or Commonwealth practices across most of the humanities and social sciences. The most traditional version of this approach conforms closely to the 'sorcerer's apprentice' tradition where students come to sit at the feet of an individual supervisor, a great man or woman in their field who long ago wrote a big book. Now the supervisor will inculcate the right spirit in the doctoral candidate in a hand-crafted way, passing on the accumulated wisdom of the discipline orally, and commenting at length on the student's successive writing efforts, so as to help her work them up over several years into a big book of her own. Socialization into the discipline used to be very informal in this approach. The relationship between supervisor and supervisee is a very strong bond, and one that is critical for the student's progress. In the British and Commonwealth model the supervisor is concerned only with developing the doctorate and assisting the doctoral candidate, and *not* with examining the final thesis. This separate task is usually undertaken by two (sometimes three) people not previously involved with the student's work. The examiners have a brief to maintain a consistent professional standard for awarding the doctorate across all universities (see Chapter 8).

However, in many places and disciplines coursework now plays a much more important role even in the classical model of PhD education. In Europe the single supervisor is also often replaced by a three- or four-person supervising committee, backed up by more active departmental tutelage of all their PhD students as a group. Here socialization into the discipline is semi-formalized and more collectively organized. And learning

how to become a professional author is somewhat more a matter of sitting in repeated research seminars, interacting with lots of different staff members, getting reactions to trial papers from seminar colleagues, and again receiving oral and written comments on draft chapters from the supervisory committee. Normally in European universities the several supervisors are also examiners in its final stages, with the job of deciding whether the student's final thesis should be accepted as a doctorate. They thus have an advisory/supportive role but also a regulatory/evaluative role. It can be hard for them to reconcile and manage the two roles together.

The different versions of the classical doctorate model work fine when everything aligns the right way, but badly if they do not. In the older, individualized version the transmission of ideas can take place speedily and smoothly if the supervisor and her student get along well at a personal level, sharing pretty much the same interests amicably. But things can often go wrong. Relations between the two can degenerate, with the supervisor becoming neurotic about a younger rival encroaching on her terrain, or the student discovering that her supervisor has feet of clay. Or they can become too close, with the supervisor being so dominant in the relationship that the student becomes a mere disciple, repeating or replicating rather than creating anew. Or student and supervisor can fail to connect, with the student's focus and interests diverging from the supervisor's expertise, while changing supervisors is difficult. Often busy supervisors are distracted by many other academic obligations, and may well be wholly absent on sabbatical or research leave at crucial times. Periods with 'fill-in' supervisors are often problematic.

The newer, more collective supervision variant of the classical model is generally more flexible and resilient, and so has tended to become more common over time, even in British or Commonwealth university systems. Having multiple supervisors and more formalized PhD training provided by departments means that students have their eggs in several baskets, some of which will tend to work well much of the time. Students are less dependent on their personal relations with just one person. If relations with one member of their committee go awry, they can often compensate by developing more

reliance on their most sympathetic supervisor. Students are also usually better covered for absences by one of their supervisors. But a supervisory committee can cause other problems. Students may well get conflicting advice from different advisers, between which they have to pick a difficult path for their own work. They may also have to invest quite a few personal resources in steering their supervisors towards some agreement and consensus on the way forward. And where senior people play roles in both supervising and examining the thesis, students may find it harder to handle their relationship with them.

However supervision is organized, the classical model of PhD always culminates in the production of a 'big book' thesis, usually limited to a length of 100,000 words. It must be presented in a conventional book format, with a succession of linked chapters and an integrated overall argument. A very high level of authoring skills is needed to produce and to structure this amount of closely ordered text. There is often a considerable mismatch between the way that authoring skills are developed in both versions of the classical model sketched above and the level of proficiency in producing and developing text that is needed for a big book thesis. Some parts of this book, such as Chapter 2, are very tailored to students producing this kind of thesis, and every chapter will be relevant for them.

*The taught PhD model* has two key elements. The first is an extensive and demanding programme of coursework usually lasting two or three years and assessed at the end, by a General Examination in the USA. The second element is a medium-length *papers model dissertation* undertaken for a further two to four years and assessed by a dissertation committee. The American PhD committee always includes the student's advisers plus two or three other senior staff who do not work closely with the student. The 'main adviser' is the staff member who principally guides a student in completing their dissertation (similar to the principal supervisor in the classical model PhD). The 'minor adviser' works with the student but less intensively. Some universities stipulate that the minor adviser should not be a specialist in the same area that the student's dissertation is in. The committee members may read the student's work at several stages, but especially when the dissertation is

complete, and they conduct the 'dissertation defence', or final oral examination (see Chapter 8). Normally a dissertation cannot be accepted without either all members of the committee agreeing, or without all but one member agreeing, including the student's main adviser and three or four other senior staff.

The 'big book' thesis is not appropriate in the taught PhD model, given the amount and the demanding level of coursework covered for the general examination. In this version of the doctorate, it is often not seen as sensible to make doctoral students plough through the chore of writing a single coherent mega-text, incorporating elements such as comprehensive literature reviews or other introductory materials that may not count for much in professional terms. The papers model dissertation asks students to write a smaller amount of text, certainly less than 60,000 words, and in a less joined-up form. The dissertation essentially comprises four or five papers written at a good research standard. The papers may not have to be very closely connected to each other, although there will normally be some short introduction and possibly a brief closing discussion of interconnections in the research or the joint implications of the chapters. What really matters is that each of the four or five papers should be of 'publishable quality'. That is, they should be assessed by the dissertation committee as new work that makes a scholarly contribution and hence is capable of publication in a professional journal (whether or not the papers actually have been published at this stage).

This approach has generally developed furthest away from the older 'big book' thesis in the more technical and mathematical social sciences. Here the main way of advancing knowledge is a relatively short article (of 8000 words or less) in a refereed professional journal. Writing whole books has long been very uncommon in mathematical and technically based disciplines, and it is less important in terms of communicating new research than authoring journal articles. In these disciplines research books have tended to decrease in numbers while journals have boomed. And book authoring has become more of a mid-life and later years professional activity, rather than being associated with the doctorate. Even in British- and European-influenced university systems, therefore, a papers model PhD thesis has become common in the more technical social sciences.

For students doing a papers model dissertation or thesis, Chapter 2 here (about the macro-structure of a thesis as a whole) is not necessarily relevant. If your four or five papers are not in fact closely connected then the overall sequencing of materials through your text is not an important issue. However, if your materials are more connected than this, then the advice in Chapter 2 may still be helpful in maximizing the impact and development of your arguments. Also there may still be issues about achieving a consistent style and presentation across your papers that are worth following up. And if later on in your career you should set out to write a book, then this chapter could be useful to revisit. All of the other chapters are still fully relevant in the papers model dissertation. Perhaps if your work is very technical or mathematical and raises few issues of literary feel you might want to skip the first part of Chapter 5, covering style issues. But there are some important principles for professional communication in here, which apply equally well to technical information.

Not all taught PhDs culminate in a papers model dissertation. Humanities faculties in many more traditional American universities may require a major, book-like dissertation as well as the completion of a general examination in order to award the PhD – making a very demanding overall standard. If this ‘mix and match’ format fits the situation in your university, then again the whole of this book should be relevant for the second half of your doctoral studies.

There is one other model, called a ‘*professional*’ *doctorate*, that has previously been rare but which may develop further in future. It basically extends the two or three years of coursework in the taught PhD model into a full four or five years. At a limit this approach may dispense with a final PhD dissertation altogether in favour of more assessment and the production of a number of smaller papers or the completion of a project or other non-written piece of practice. In other cases a very stripped-down dissertation is retained, perhaps 30,000 words long, without the clear originality or publishability requirements of the models above. Given the demanding amounts of years of extra coursework that students face in this approach, completing even a short dissertation at the right level may not

be straightforward. Instead you may find yourself under considerable pressure from other project and course work on tight deadlines, which eats into your time for authoring and developing research. At the same time the very short theses or long essays completed under this model (and possibly some of the assessed papers also) will still have to operate at more advanced levels than those which are produced by masters (MA or MSc) students. Again students doing a professional doctorate might skip Chapter 2. But they should find that the rest of the book is highly relevant to their situation, especially for producing advanced text at a good scholarly level but written under acute time and workload constraints.

### Managing readers’ expectations

The book speaks only to those who know already the kind of thing to expect from it and consequently how to interpret it.

*Michael Oakeshott, about cookery books* <sup>3</sup>

A book, like a landscape, is a state of consciousness varying with readers.

*Ernest Dimmet* <sup>4</sup>

Producing a PhD is normally a longer piece of writing than anything you have ever done before. If you have to tackle a ‘big book’ thesis then it may easily be the longest text you ever complete, even assuming you enter an academic career and keep writing for another several decades. As a university teacher you will rarely get three or four years again to work full time on a single research project. Perhaps you will publish books, but most academic books have to stay between 60,000 and 80,000 words long, while ‘big book’ theses can be up to 100,000 words – with students typically taking it to the limit. Even where your doctorate has a papers model dissertation, this will normally be because your discipline’s dominant type of academic publication is journal articles. And so your dissertation will still be four, five or even six times more text than a full paper. It may be equivalent in length to four years’ academic research output in your later career, but all wrapped up together in a single pair of

covers. So the simplest reason why it is important to think systematically about how to author a doctorate is that producing this much joined-up text for the first time is unavoidably difficult. The longer the text the more taxing it becomes for you as an author to understand your own arguments and to keep them marshalled effectively.

It is also harder for your readers to follow your thoughts as the text grows in size. Readers' difficulties will increase the more unfamiliar is the material they are asked to grapple with – a substantial problem for thesis authors who are supposed to be undertaking original research. Almost by definition, much of a new thesis may be unfamiliar even to experienced professional readers. The epigraph from Oakeshott, above, stresses that even the apparently simplest text (like a cookery book) rests on a shared set of conventions between an author and her readers about how that kind of book should be written. Knowing your discipline's conventions inside out will help you do authoring more reliably. Yet as the Dimnet epigraph also points out, different readers may still code the same text in different ways. Trying to think consistently about how readers will understand your text, writing with readers in mind, is a fundamental aspect of becoming a good author. It is not something that is external to the process of producing and understanding your arguments, but rather an integral stage in helping you be most effective in organizing and expressing your thought.

In one way or another all authoring involves you in constantly managing readers' expectations and recognizing that different people in the readership will have different perspectives on your text. Writing your thesis to be accessible to the widest feasible readership can help you in becoming a better author, by developing your own ideas and improving the clarity and direction of your research design and finished thought. Most doctoral dissertations may never get published, but many others do see the light of day, as complete books in some cases but more generally in the form of one or several journal articles (see Chapter 9). Writing with readers in mind will hugely help the quality of your text, and maximize your chance to be one of the published group, and hence to feed into the development of scholarly thought. The alternative outcome is to produce only a 'shelf-bending' thesis, one which after submission

goes into a library and over the next two decades slowly bends a shelf. A thesis that is never published in whole or in part may be read at most by one or two later scholars in your own institution. Or perhaps some very diligent researchers elsewhere may be sufficiently interested in exactly your topic to find and borrow your work. But, equally likely, it could remain unread by anyone else beyond your supervisors and examiners, like Thomas Gray's roses 'born to blush unseen'.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing things from a reader's perspective is not an easy task. Academic authors typically spend so long in developing their research, clarifying their theories, and expressing their arguments in a close-joined way, that they can find it very hard to see how their text will be received and interpreted. For PhD students this problem is especially acute because the thesis is their first extended piece of writing, and usually has a limited audience whose reactions are difficult to ascertain in advance. In addition (as I discuss in Chapter 2), PhD projects usually become closely bound up with people's identities as a beginning scholar and apprentice researcher, making it hard for students to be self-aware or critical about their work.

All these features mean that some students can write obsessively with only two or three readers in mind, namely their supervisors or advisers, and perhaps the examiners. Since advisers, supervisors and examiners all get paid for their roles, students often picture them as incapable of being bored. They are assumed to be so committed to absorbing the text that they are unconcerned about how (un)interesting it is. And since examiners are senior figures at the height of their profession, they are also often pictured as completely unconcerned about the readability or accessibility of the thesis. They are presumed capable of mastering any level of difficulty. Sometimes they are also seen as pedantically obsessed about the details of research methods and about scholarly referencing for every proposition. Adopting anything like this kind of orientation can have a very poor effect on the quality of the text that you produce. In publishing circles PhD theses are often a byword for unreadable arguments, pompous and excessively complex expression of ideas, and an overkill in referencing, literature reviews, and theoretical and methodological detailing.

Like other forms of mild paranoia, research students' defensive mind-set bears little relation to the facts. Rational PhD supervisors, advisers and examiners do not carry out their role for the money, still less for the dubious academic kudos involved. Instead most professors and other senior figures undertake supervision and examining for three reasons: they hope to encounter or foster fresh and original work; they want to induct promising young scholars into the disciplines to which they have devoted their lives; and they see it as a duty to colleagues in their department and in the wider profession. So providing them with a clear and accessible text is only the most basic politeness which they can expect. Writing to be understood by the widest possible audience of informed, professional readers will help ensure that your advisers and examiners form the best impression of your work and can carry out their tricky task in the speediest and easiest way. By contrast, a complex or obscure text, written in a crabbed and inaccessible way, makes working with you more off-putting. In the endgame of finishing and submitting the dissertation it may even raise fundamental doubts in advisers' or examiners' minds about your ability to carry on professional activities essential for a later academic career, such as effectively teaching students or publishing regularly in journals (see Chapters 8 and 9).

There are many different ways in which your writing will generate readers' expectations. Any accessible piece of text longer than a few pages must include 'orientating devices', ways of giving advance notice of what is to come (discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4). In addition academic dissertations usually require a very developed apparatus for situating the particular work undertaken in a wider context of scholarly endeavour. In a 'big book' thesis the most important signalling elements are a review of the previous literature, and one or more theoretical chapters. In any research dissertation or paper readers look very carefully at the author's own statements of what their study will accomplish. Readers become disappointed when authors do not give any indications of what is to come in later chapters, sections or paragraphs; or signal that something will arrive and then it never does; or deliver something different from what was signalled; or draw them into spending time on a project which turns out differently from what they

thought. Each of these outcomes makes readers worry: perhaps the author does not know what she thinks, does not understand the topic she has set out to tackle? The implication soon follows: perhaps this book or article is not worth my time or attention? For thesis examiners or a dissertation committee this feeling may very easily spill over into: maybe this thesis does not meet the standard that a doctorate should? Hence for PhD students, more than for most authors, these are dangerous thoughts to engender.

Authors can often create readers' expectations inadvertently, without intending to do so. Doctoral theses and academic research papers commonly start with some level of literature review. It is quite common for beginning students to wax lyrical in these sections about the limits or inadequacies of previous research in their field. Most people write literature reviews early on, often before fully appreciating the difficulties of grappling with research materials and extracting useful or interesting information from them. Hence it is easy to get carried away by a conviction that using different methods or a new theoretical approach will generate much more illuminating results. But if you make some strong criticisms of earlier work, what impact does this have on readers? It tends to generate an expectation that your own research will be much better than what has gone before. After you have searchingly exposed what was wrong in previous studies, readers must believe that you are confident of being able to transcend those limitations. Hence every criticism you make can build a difficult threshold for your own research to surmount. Cumulatively the effects of overenthusiastic critique can be disabling.

Similarly, academic readers will pick up dozens of small pointers from the way that you write text, which will engender expectations about what you are trying to do. For instance, how you label schools of thought in your discipline, and how you then describe your own work, will cue readers to where you stand in the subject's intellectual currents, who you are aligned with and who you are opposed to. Many commentators have detected tribalist tendencies amongst academics, such that they must cluster into schools of thought and create possibly factional conflicts amongst themselves. Others lament a prioritarian instinct that leads to a constant differentiation of

positions. Charles Caleb Colton observed wryly: 'Professors in every branch of knowledge prefer their own theories to the truth; the reason is that their theories are private property, but the truth is common stock.'<sup>6</sup>

Yet some aspects of academic differentiation and cue-giving are not just extraneous elements. Labels and jargon are great time-saving devices in academic life, just as they are in ordinary existence. If I can say to you, 'Dolly Parton is a *country and western singer*' then this four-word label sums up a lot of different features – dressing up in fake cowboy clothes with fringes on them, singing in a yodelling fashion with a slide guitar accompaniment, and favouring songs about rural backwoods themes, the trials of married love and American patriotism. If I have to spell out these features every time it will take a lot longer than three words to explain. Similarly, academic jargon is an essential element of maintaining a professional conversation (in person and in print) where meanings are precise and specialist topics can be handled flexibly and economically. If your PhD thesis is to be interesting at all then it is inevitable that it will focus to a great extent on some kind of controversy in your discipline, some nexus of debate between different theories, or thematic interpretations, or methodological positions, or empirical standpoints. You will thus have to discuss positions, register criticisms, affirm some loyalties – in short take sides. Beginning students often underestimate the importance and pervasiveness of the side-taking cues which their text conveys. They pick up and use 'loaded' terminology or concepts without appreciating how some readers will decode its presence. So to manage readers' expectations effectively requires that you carefully judge all elements of your presentation, the explicit promises and the implicit signals which you give to readers about the intentions of your work and its relationship to the discipline.

## Conclusions

Starting work on a PhD dissertation inaugurates an apprenticeship not just in your chosen academic discipline and its research skills, but also in authoring. This aspect of your new role can easily attract too little attention, both from your

supervisors or advisers and in terms of your own priorities. But the craft skills of authoring are an important aspect of your role, critical for your success in progressing and finishing the thesis. It is an area where you can make solid and cumulative progress that will stand you in good stead throughout a professional career. The most fundamental aspect of authoring is to manage readers' expectations successfully, ensuring that they see the text as coherent, well paced and organized, and delivering upon your promises in a credible way. And for new PhD students, a critical step in beginning to manage readers' expectations is to define clearly the intended overall thrust of their thesis – its central research question.