

## 5 WHAT IS GOOD THESIS RESEARCH?

Doing research will occupy most of your time on the thesis. Actually, you will be performing three overlapping tasks: reading, research, and writing. As your reading becomes increasingly focused, it becomes integral to your research. So does your writing, which includes book notes and periodic research reports to discuss with your adviser.

These written reports blur the bright line between thesis research and thesis writing. Research is not something you do *after* you finish reading and *before* you start writing. It includes both, with a very happy result. It means that when you finally sit down to draft your thesis, you won't be starting from scratch. Large chunks will already be in place.

Beyond this focused reading and preliminary writing, what is your thesis research? It is the work needed to provide information, context, and contending perspectives about your topic—the work needed to answer the questions you have posed. You may acquire this basic information by reading primary documents, watching films, downloading survey data, conducting interviews, running tests, or finding still other sources to analyze. To provide a context for your work, you need to know the relevant secondary literature, that is, the analysis and interpretation scholars have already done on your topic.

These writers will not speak with one voice. They will ask different questions and often suggest different interpretations of the same basic data. They will offer varied perspectives and promote alternative theories. That's true no matter what your field is. To understand your topic fully, you need to understand these debates and then look beyond them to see what the debaters have in common and what their most fundamental differences are. Once you've grasped this literature, you may even choose to enter the debates yourself, adopting one stance and rejecting others, or perhaps finding a synthesis. In any case, you want to learn from the best work, engage it, and build on its findings.

**Tip:** Good research includes extensive reading about your subject. Learn the main questions, the common ground among experts, and the big debates.

Consider, for instance, a history thesis about African slaves arriving in South Carolina during the mid-1700s. Using primary documents such as ship manifests, bills of sale, and perhaps letters by slaveholders, you intend to study the slave ships and their human cargo arriving in the port of Charleston between 1740 and 1760. You would certainly want to read the best narrative histories about eighteenth-century slavery in general. That literature covers the triangular trade that brought slaves to America, the cotton plantations where they worked, and so on. These secondary works on slavery and Southern agriculture permit a richer interpretation of your primary documents because they situate the Charleston slave market within a wider social and economic context. As you read, you may discover gaps in the literature—questions not asked or topics not studied—which you can explore in your thesis. You may discover, for instance, that several articles deal with the size of slave families in Virginia and Louisiana, but rarely those in South Carolina and never for the decades you are studying. If that question interests you, you could fill an important gap in the scholarly literature if the primary documents reveal the data.

You also want to know which disputes surround your topic. What concerns the scholars who study your subject? Do some assert, for example, that the data for individual ships is not very good or that these ships are not representative? Is the most serious dispute about the number of slaves who died during the Middle Passage from West Africa to America? Are there brisk debates about the prices paid, the slaves' life expectancy, or their ultimate destination after sale in Charleston? Reading the secondary literature should alert you to these issues. You will learn which ones are well settled and which ones are hotly contested. Reading carefully should highlight the most interesting questions and the most vigorous debates. Some reflection about these issues and a little research may also reveal gaps in the literature, like the question about family size. When you discover questions and gaps like these, mention them to your adviser. She'll be a good source of feedback.

From your reading and conversations with faculty, you'll develop views on both primary and secondary sources. You'll learn which documents are

trustworthy, which should be treated with considerable skepticism, and which are entirely worthless. You'll learn which secondary authors are reliable and highly regarded, and you'll want to compare their views to see where they agree and disagree. This critical assessment is vital to your research, and it applies to every field.

With this background in the literature and some guidance from your faculty adviser, you can narrow your topic to a few closely related questions on the slave trade and focus your research. You will continue to work with primary documents and secondary sources to find the answers and, quite often, to produce still more questions for investigation.

#### DIFFERENT KINDS OF RESEARCH FOR DIFFERENT KINDS OF QUESTIONS

Because theses differ so widely in substance and method, they require different kinds of research. Investigating slavery in South Carolina is radically different from interpreting Wordsworth's poetry or studying charter schools. For historians, research usually means analyzing primary documents such as the Carolina ship manifests, often supplemented by other historical data and writings from the period. For students of comparative literature, it means close reading and careful appraisal of novels, poems, and plays in their original languages. For social scientists, it often means refining theories and testing them against empirical evidence. Some do that by building and testing formal mathematical models, others by exploring specific cases in depth. Still others analyze large data sets. Demographers examine population statistics; voting specialists look at surveys and elections; psychologists compare experimental test results; economists consider statistics on trade, prices, capital flows, and savings. For many social scientists, research not only means finding this raw material, it means actually generating it through surveys, tests, experiments, and more.

This varied data reflects the equally varied aims of research. For students of literature and history, the aim is to interpret and compare primary texts. For most social scientists, the aim is to construct and test causal models reflecting their theories of social life. For interpretive social scientists, the goal is to make human action, symbols, and communication intelligible, at both the individual and collective levels. Their work seeks to explain, but rarely in the form of causal explanations. They are more interested in exploring how social meanings are constructed. In fields as diverse as educa-

tion, social work, nursing, and public policy, the aim is not only to explain and interpret but also to evaluate current practices—and frequently to suggest more effective ones. Their audience reaches beyond the university to policy makers and working professionals.

Given these varied aims, what can be said about research in general? At least a few things, I hope, that can help students working on different kinds of thesis projects. Perhaps the most important is that your research should be tailored to your specific project and your individual skills. One size does not fit all. It does not fit all questions, and it does not fit all researchers.

**Tip:** Your research method should meet two criteria. It should

- Address questions posed in your thesis project (usually those in the proposal)
- Use skills you currently have or can acquire during the project

Picking the method that suits *your questions* and *your skills* is a central element of the thesis project. Several factors will influence your decision whether to work mainly with primary documents or secondary sources, with detailed cases or large databases. First, what type of question are you investigating (and in which discipline)? Second, what kind of explanation are you trying to develop and evaluate? Are you trying to interpret a novel, painting, or movie, or perhaps compare several from the same genre? Are you trying to understand the meaning of an important event or offer a causal explanation for it? Are you evaluating one or two cases in depth, or are you trying to find broad patterns encompassing many cases? Could your explanation be rejected if you found some confounding data? If so, then you need to search for that crucial data to test your explanation.

Third, what research skills do you bring to the project? To build formal models, you need higher mathematics. To test large data sets, you need statistical training. To decipher primary documents, you need to know the languages and perhaps even the handwriting. Different topics and different approaches have their own distinct requirements. That's why you need to take advanced courses not only in your major but also in related fields. That's also why you should ask your thesis adviser for suggestions about courses to take during your senior year. Perhaps you can acquire some additional skills useful in your thesis research.

## PLANNING FOR YOUR RESEARCH

The best time to start sorting out these research issues is soon after you've completed your proposal, while you are immersed in learning about your topic. By now, you've marked out your principal issues, compiled a working bibliography, and begun to read extensively. (Nag, nag!) The next questions to ask yourself are, "What kinds of research will best address my thesis questions? What will be most productive?" At a more personal level: "What kinds of research best fit my skills and training? What will be most rewarding and interesting to me?"

Your answers to these questions form your *research strategy*. Most likely, you've addressed some of these issues in your proposal. But you are further along now, and you can flesh out your answers. With your adviser's help, you should make some basic decisions about what information to collect and what methods to use in analyzing it. You will probably develop this research strategy gradually and, if you are like the rest of us, you will make some changes, large and small, along the way. Still, it is useful to devise a general plan early, even though you will modify it as you progress.

**Tip:** Develop a tentative research plan early in the project. Write it down and share it with your adviser. The more concrete and detailed the plan, the better the feedback you'll get.

This research plan does not need to be elaborate or time-consuming. Like your bibliography, it is provisional, a work in progress. Still, it is helpful to write it down since it will clarify a number of issues for you and your adviser.

## INFORMAL WRITING AS PART OF YOUR THESIS RESEARCH

You'll notice that I often urge you to write—even if it is brief and informal. Let me explain why. First, you learn as you write. We all do. Hard to believe, but true. It always surprises me, even though I've written for years. I sit down at the computer, fully expecting to write up what's in my notes, and—presto!—I always seem to discover something as I go along. I must be a slow learner because it's always a happy surprise to discover, once

again, that I actually learn as I write. William Zinsser, a superb guide in this and all other writing issues, entitled one of his books *Writing to Learn*.<sup>1</sup> It's an apt title.

Second, a little writing sets the stage for more fruitful talks with your adviser. Bring it to your next meeting and you will have something concrete to talk about. That will improve the conversation since it not only tells your adviser *what* you are thinking about but also *how* you are thinking about it. Third, these frequent little assignments encourage the welcome habit of writing down your ideas whenever they arise. Don't hesitate to do it, and don't delay until the end of the day. You have already set up some computer files for thesis ideas so you have the perfect spot to put any new thoughts. Writing them down not only preserves your ideas; it stimulates new ones. After all, ideas build on each other.

Jotting down your ideas and producing short documents also cracks the barrier between research and writing. Some of your informal writing—what we will later call “prewriting”—may wind up in your first draft, either as it stands or after some pruning. That will give you a big leg up on drafting the thesis. For all these reasons, it's valuable to write out items like your research plan and to amplify them when new ideas pop up later.

**Tip:** Develop the writing habit early in your thesis project. Begin with book notes, research plans, and interim reports on work you are doing.

#### WRITING A RESEARCH PLAN

To write out your research plan, begin by restating your main thesis question and any secondary ones. They may have changed a bit since your original proposal. If these questions bear on a particular theory or analytic perspective, state that briefly. In the social sciences, for example, two or three prominent theories might offer different predictions about your subject. If so, then you might want to explore these differences in your thesis and explain why some theories work better (or worse) in this particular case. Likewise, in the humanities, you might consider how different theories offer different insights and contrasting perspectives on the particular

1. William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

novel or film you are studying. If you intend to explore these differences, state your goal clearly in the research plan so you can discuss it later with your adviser. Next, turn to the heart of this exercise, your proposed research strategy. Try to explain your basic approach, the materials you will use, and your method of analysis. You may not know all of these elements yet, but do the best you can. Briefly say how and why you think they will help answer your main questions.

Be concrete. What data will you collect? Which poems will you read? Which paintings will you compare? Which historical cases will you examine? If you plan to use case studies, say whether you have already selected them or settled on the criteria for choosing them. Have you decided which documents and secondary sources are most important? Do you have easy access to the data, documents, or other materials you need? Are they reliable sources—the best information you can get on the subject? Give the answers if you have them, or say plainly that you don't know so your adviser can help. You should also discuss whether your research requires any special skills and, of course, whether you have them. You can—and should—tailor your work to fit your skills.

If you expect to challenge other approaches—an important element of some theses—which ones will you take on, and why? This last point can be put another way: Your project will be informed by some theoretical traditions and research perspectives and not others. Your research will be stronger if you clarify your own perspective and show how it usefully informs your work. Later, you may also enter the jousts and explain why your approach is superior to the alternatives, in this particular study and perhaps more generally. Your research plan should state these issues clearly so you can discuss them candidly and think them through.

If you plan to conduct tests, experiments, or surveys, discuss them, too. They are common research tools in many fields, from psychology and education to public health. Now is the time to spell out the details—the ones you have nailed down tight and the ones that are still rattling around, unresolved. It's important to bring up the right questions here, even if you don't have all the answers yet. Raising these questions directly is the best way to get the answers. What kinds of tests or experiments do you plan, and how will you measure the results? How will you recruit your test subjects, and how many will be included in your sample? What test instruments or observational techniques will you use? How reliable and valid are they? Your adviser can be a great source of feedback here.

*Tip:* Your research plan should say

- What materials you will use
- What methods you will use to investigate them
- Whether your work follows a particular approach or theory

There are also ethical issues to consider. They crop up in any research involving humans or animals. You need to think carefully about them, underscore potential problems, and discuss them with your adviser. You also need to clear this research in advance with the appropriate authorities at your school, such as the committee that reviews proposals for research on human subjects. Your adviser will know the ropes.

Not all these issues and questions will bear on your particular project. But some do, and you should wrestle with them as you begin research. Even if your answers are tentative, you will still gain from writing them down and sharing them with your adviser. That's how you will get the most comprehensive advice, the most pointed recommendations. If some of these issues puzzle you, or if you have already encountered some obstacles, share them, too, so you can either resolve the problems or find ways to work around them.

Remember, your research plan is simply a working product, designed to guide your ongoing inquiry. It's not a final paper for a grade; it's a step toward your final paper. Your goal in sketching it out now is to understand these issues better and get feedback from faculty early in the project. It may be a pain to write it out, but it's a minor sting compared to major surgery later.

*Tip:* Your research plan is a working product. You will change and adapt it as you work on the thesis.

#### THE PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL SIDES OF THESIS RESEARCH

So far, we have concentrated on the big issues: the questions you are posing, the theories and methods you are using, the explanations you are constructing. But there is also a personal, practical side to your plan, and it needs to be considered.

Your research strategy should rely on skills you have already acquired or those you can develop during the project itself. And it should be something you can do within the time available. These are reasonable—indeed, essential—considerations, and your research plan should not flinch from acknowledging them. If you can't read the Latin Vulgate Bible, then avoid research that absolutely requires it. You can still study the medieval church, but you will need to find a subject where the main documents have already been translated.

Similar issues arise in the quantitative social sciences. Some types of analysis require higher-level statistics or mathematics. Others do not. You can't skirt the issue simply by plugging in a high-powered statistics program. It will certainly crank out some results, but who knows what they mean? Unless you understand the methodological issues, you won't know how to interpret the results or, indeed, whether you have used appropriate procedures and produced any meaningful results at all. You'll be driving a Ferrari without a license. That's exhilarating . . . until you hit the first sharp curve.

If you are fortunate enough to have these skills—statistics, math, or languages—you have a wider range of research possibilities, and you can make good use of them. But even if you don't, you can still write a great thesis if you choose your questions and methods wisely.

Your research may depend on key documents. If it does, make sure they are readily available. Many historic documents are accessible in published collections, on microfilm, or online—but not everything is. A little reconnoitering early in your project can prevent some nasty surprises later on. You don't want to discover, several months into your thesis, that vital documents are available only in the basement of a Berlin museum. If you are studying U.S. foreign policy, you don't want to discover that crucial documents are still stamped "Top Secret." No matter that they deal with the Soviet Union and that this country is dead, deceased, expired, no longer among the living. The documents live on, still secret. Of course, you could try to declassify them, but there is no guarantee of success, and the process is glacial. After all, these are the people who run the U.S. Post Office.

Some problems like these always arise—it's a law of nature—and you need to cope with them, either by changing your questions (in big or small ways) or by tackling them differently. These are practical problems, and there are practical solutions. You just have to search for them.

**CHECKLIST: CONDUCTING RESEARCH**

- Familiarize yourself with major questions and debates about your topic.
- Devise a research plan that
  - Is appropriate to your topic;
  - Addresses the main questions you propose in your thesis;
  - Relies on materials to which you have access;
  - Can be accomplished within the time available;
  - Uses skills you have or can acquire.
- Divide your topic into smaller projects and do research on each in turn.
- Write informally as you do research; do *not* postpone this prewriting until all your research is complete.

## 6 USING CASE STUDIES EFFECTIVELY

Good data is the lifeblood of the social sciences. It is used to describe events, actors, and outcomes, to explain causes and interpret meanings. Before we can begin to explain why Thomas Jefferson High School is doing better academically than Millard Fillmore High, we need to be sure Jefferson really is doing better. That means we need a good measure of school performance and accurate data on the two schools. Likewise, before we can explain who voted for President Bush or why China's income has surged, we need solid data on American elections or Chinese economic growth. We don't want to spend time and effort trying to explain phantom "results."

Sometimes, the data needs to cover whole populations, like the U.S. Census, or vast activities, like trade, voting, or immigration. Demography, election studies, and most branches of economics rely on large databases like these. Analyzing them requires appropriate statistical techniques. Sometimes, however, the focus is on a small group, a single individual, or a revealing moment, such as how a family copes with unemployment. The data covers only a single case, but it needs to cover it in depth. Such detailed case studies are common in anthropology (for example, how a tribe lives in the South Sea Islands<sup>1</sup>), sociology (how a labor union<sup>2</sup> or urban gang<sup>3</sup> is organized), psychology (how a child's language and thought develops<sup>4</sup>),

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: G. Routledge, 1922). Malinowski lived with his subjects and took detailed notes on all aspects of their lives. His work established the standard methodology for anthropological fieldwork.

2. Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman, *Union Democracy: The International Politics of the International Typographical Union* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956).

3. William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943).

4. Jean Piaget, "The Functions of Language in Two Children of Six," in *The Language and Thought of the Child*, trans. Marjorie Warden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926).