

Postgraduate supervision: the role of the (language) editor: *Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (Juvenal, Satire 6, 346–348)

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Abstract

The article emanates from the author's current position at a university of technology, where she conducts workshops on research writing. She also has wide experience as a freelance academic editor. The article is therefore largely empirical, in the sense of being guided by practical experience and observation, rather than a theoretical discourse.

While touching briefly on the requirements for research writing, the article highlights deficiencies of postgraduate students in respect of research writing, bibliographic citation and compilation, as well as delineating the role and responsibility of the supervisor in the writing process.

The ethics of editorial intervention, particularly in the case of theses and dissertations, are also noted.

Finally, the author's *modus operandi* in editing academic texts provides some guidance in respect of the technicalities of research writing. The article concludes with recommendations for improving the writing skills of ill-prepared students.

INTRODUCTION

The editor's job is not to produce a defensible thesis, it is to produce a thesis that . . . [flows] and is at least clean (Editors' Association of Canada 2006).

If editors respect the academic purpose of thesis writing and the priority of the supervisor, we can help students (and ourselves). As one member told us: "We are a valuable resource for students as long as we edit these papers in an ethical way – a way in which

... the work that students submit is indeed their own, only more polished” (Editors’ Association of Canada 2006).

Greek mythology recounts the story of a legendary mortal hero, Akademos (Hekademos), who, in return for revealing to the Dioskouroi (the Gemini) where Theseus had hidden Helen of Troy, was granted a garden wherein he could say whatever he liked, without retribution by the notoriously petty, fickle and mercurial Olympian gods. This eponymous hero gave his name to the Academy, where citizens of Athens could freely debate the issues of the day. In the light of this classical analogy, I shall address some of the thorny issues of research supervision and research writing, largely in the new university of technology, where, despite significant enrolments, throughput of postgraduate students has been less than satisfactory.¹

As a frequent editor of various types of research writing (research proposals, theses and dissertations, journal articles and conference papers), it might be appropriate to cite my credentials for appropriating this ‘thankless task’.² Like that of many women academics, for various reasons, mine has been a chequered (but nonetheless interesting) career. Aware of the exigencies of the job market, after school I embarked on a four-year BA (Bibl.), with majors in English, Latin, Librarianship and Journalism; this was followed by an honours and a master’s degree in English, culminating in a D.Litt. in English. I come from a privileged South African educational system, and attended a university where, in the Department of English, the tutorial system demanded a weekly essay, impeccably typed, meticulously proofread and edited, and compiled according to strict academic conventions (this was in the Jurassic period when footnotes with arcane Latin expressions such as *ibid.*, *op. cit.* and *loc. cit.* were the norm). I have been, in succession, a librarian in a university library, a lecturer in a university department of English, a librarian and lecturer in children’s literature in a college of education, a lecturer in English Communication at a technikon, and head of the departments of Library and Information Studies and Language Practice at the same institution. Since September 2002 I have been attached to Research and Technology Promotion at a new university of technology, where, in addition to compiling publications such as the annual research report, research guides and research policy documents, and updating the Research and Technology Promotion website, I also conduct workshops on research writing for postgraduate students and faculty, and help postgraduate students and faculty with some of the intricacies of bibliographic searching and compilation, as well as with writing research proposals, conference papers, journal articles, and especially theses and dissertations.

This article is not specifically about academic literacy, information literacy, problems of educationally disadvantaged students entering higher education, second-language (L2) writers, or research writing per se. There is a plethora of information, both national and international, on these topics, as these problems continue to exercise the minds of academics in increasingly egalitarian institutions of higher learning.³ The media, also, both in South Africa and the United Kingdom, have been increasingly critical of what

is perceived as a general lowering of standards of school-leavers (*Burger* 2001, 2002, 2004; *Weekly Telegraph* 2001; *Cape Times* 2004).

Instead of an academic discourse, I shall share some of my experiences as an editor of research writing in the traditional university, but especially within the university of technology (the former technikon), in respect of the general preparedness and abilities of postgraduate students, the duties of supervisors in respect of the writing process, and the role of the editor. I shall also touch on some of the most common pitfalls of research writing.

In a presentation to supervisors and executive management early in 2004, I highlighted the following problems of postgraduate students in respect of research writing:

- Many postgraduate students are writing in their second language (or in the case of students from Lusophone or Francophone Africa, in their third language); in addition, many supervisors are supervising in their second language.
- There has been a considerable influx of Chinese students at the university in the new millennium. Although these students have had many years of studying English, they have had little or no communicative fluency practice. In addition, there is no concept of plagiarism; to reproduce the book is what they have been trained to do (*Campus Mentis* 2002).
- Only 20 per cent of current Grade 12 learners entering higher education have a Grade 12 level of literacy; 80 per cent of learners entering higher education are functionally illiterate (*Cape Times* 2004).
- Tertiary-level students' comprehension of academic texts is roughly 40 per cent (*Burger* 2004).
- Many postgraduate students have little or no idea of sourcing material beyond the institutional library and the Internet.
- Style guides on referencing and research writing are available on the Library Services Intranet and Research and Technology Promotion website.⁴ In many cases, supervisors and students pay scant attention to these institutional guidelines; attention to the detail of scholarly writing is often also less than sedulous.

Deficiencies of postgraduate students in respect of sourcing material, compiling a bibliography or list of references, and writing, are outlined below. The duties of supervisors in the writing process, the ethics of editorial intervention, and, in brief, my *modus operandi* in assisting postgraduates with writing and bibliographic compilation, with some recommendations, conclude the article.

PREPAREDNESS OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Sourcing material

Many university of technology postgraduate students, most of whom will have a four-year B.Tech. degree with a module in Research Methodology, are woefully unprepared

to write a thesis. Their first question invariably is, 'How long should the thesis be?' They find it an almost insurmountable hurdle to write a concise and coherent research proposal, and there is little comprehension of the typical empirical research project, with its fairly common five- or six-chapter structure of Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methods, Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations. Students are often ignorant (despite library training and self-help information literacy web pages on the Intranet) of bibliographic searching beyond the safe confines of the online public access catalogue (OPAC) of their own institution. They frequently rely on the serendipity approach to sourcing material (books or journals 'lying around' in the library). They have little or no knowledge of CALICO, the collaborative library project of the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC), representing the four tertiary education library services in the Western Cape: the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Stellenbosch (US), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Consequently they are unaware that the facilities and services of all these institutions are available for their use, and that a book or photocopy of a journal article may be retrieved from these libraries within 24–48 hours. They are often unaware of interlibrary loan services and national and international database vendors such as Sabinet, NISC, EbscoHost, WilsonWeb, Ingenta, Emerald, Science Direct and the like. They do, however, know how to access and search the Internet, but frequently this is done without discrimination or evaluation of the information obtained or the credibility of the websites cited.

One of the tenets of research is that researchers do not replicate research by embarking on projects already completed at other institutions or currently in progress. Postgraduate students (and supervisors) are often oblivious of the necessity of checking local and international databases such as Union Catalogue of Theses and Dissertations of South African Universities, the Current and Completed Research database of the National Research Foundation (NRF), Navtech (these databases are all available on Sabinet), Dissertations Abstracts International (North American), or Index to Theses with Abstracts (British).

A literature review is not merely a random catalogue of previous research. A good literature review should not only survey relevant material; it should analyse central arguments and make relationships linking previous research to the candidate's envisaged research. Candidates must evince evidence of engaging with the literature, and the literature review should further provide a conceptual framework based on theoretical assumptions. Here many students fall short, their undergraduate studies having qualified them as practitioners without the requisite grounding in theory.

Compiling a bibliography or list of references

A bibliography contains all sources consulted, including those providing background reading, but not necessarily cited; references comprise only sources cited in the text. The bibliography (and for ease of reference the two terms are used interchangeably in

this article) is the backbone of the thesis, and in editing my starting point would be to check each reference for correctness in an appropriate and scholarly database. This is an onerous but essential task, as bibliographies (even from the best traditional universities) are generally riddled with errors, inconsistencies and omissions. The following are some common errors encountered in bibliographic citation and compilation.

- Textual references without corresponding items in the bibliography.
- Textual references without accompanying page numbers (or incorrectly cited page numbers).
- Bibliography not in alphabetical order. Items incorrectly filed.
- Incorrect spelling of authors, titles, publishers. (I recently encountered the noted American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, cited as publisher instead of editor and translator!)
- Transposing author's surname and first name.
- Vagueness about the use of et al. for three or more authors (and note that the possessive of et al. [in textual references] is not et al.'s!)
- No indication of editor or editors.
- No indication of edition, if not first.
- Incorrect date of publication (impression/reprint rather than edition date cited).
- Inconsistent use of sentence case and title case in titles of books, titles of journal articles and titles of journals.
- Confusion in respect of italicisation of titles of books and title of journals (titles of journal articles incorrectly placed in italics).
- Underlining instead of italicising titles (obsolete manuscript style).
- Insufficient details given for newspaper articles.
- Confusion between publisher and printer.
- Confusion about place of publication (especially countries, cities, US states, UK counties).
- Omission of page numbers of journal articles and chapters in books.
- Incorrect corporate author (frequently no author) cited in government publications and legislation (e.g. Acts of Parliament).
- Unnecessary details cited for publishers.
- Insufficient detail provided for conference papers.
- Confusion regarding the correct citation of Internet items.
- Date of downloading of Internet citations omitted.
- Changing American spellings of book, journal article and journal titles to UK or SA English; ditto US spelling/punctuation in quotations.
- General inconsistencies in respect of format.

A database such as SACat on Sabinet is invaluable for checking bibliographic details of books, as well as for ascertaining the correct form of corporate authors (especially for legislative items).

Writing

The requirements for research writing are generally no different from those for most other types of writing: clarity and precision; avoidance of ambiguity; adherence to accepted standards and current usage of grammar, spelling, punctuation and paragraphing; avoidance of clichés and unnecessary obfuscating jargon; appropriate tone; a register which is largely objective and impersonal, but not inflated or pretentious; and writing which is concise, avoiding verbosity and circumlocution.

Postgraduates demonstrate varying degrees of linguistic aptitude (or ineptitude) and scholarly rigour, in some cases exacerbated by an inability to use their word-processing program's language tools optimally. However, while Microsoft Word is useful in highlighting incorrect spelling and grammar, it is not foolproof, the comma after the relative pronoun 'which' being a case in point. Earlier versions of Microsoft Word insisted on a comma after 'which' (not always correct).

Computer literacy and awareness of stylistic conventions

Most postgraduates are generally fairly computer literate and familiar with Microsoft Word; however they are not always familiar with typing conventions and layout, and frequently produce documents typed in disparate fonts, and with inappropriate margins, inconsistent line spacing, incorrect page numbering, etc. These are often incorrectly typed in US English (e.g., behavior, program, analyze). It is important to default language to English (UK) or English (SA), otherwise Microsoft Word reverts to US English each time the document is accessed. If the writer is preparing a manuscript for publication in a US journal or book, American spelling and punctuation rules obviously apply.

Using the sophisticated Microsoft Word 'Styles' option for long documents such as theses means that an automatic table of contents, which is easily updated, can be generated. Typing the bibliography in a table, using the 'hide gridlines' option, facilitates alphabetical sorting of items.

Figures and tables

Many students (and some supervisors) are vague about what constitutes a figure, and what a table. Captioning is important. Figures and tables are numbered according to the chapter in which they appear, for example, the third figure in Chapter 4 would be Figure 4.3 or Figure 4-3, the second table in Chapter 5 would be Table 5.2 or Table 5-2. Figures are captioned in bold (10-point) below the figure. The same applies to tables, with the caption appearing above the table. Microsoft Word's 'Insert Caption' function is useful in this regard.

Consistency

Consistency is especially important in the use of abbreviations and acronyms, abbreviations and punctuation, punctuation in lists, brackets (square and round), fonts, hyphens

and dashes ('em' and 'en'), inverted commas (single and double), italics, numbers, capitalisation, -se vs. -ze word endings, and tenses. The latter are particularly problematic in the literature review (I advise candidates to cite authors using the present tense where possible), and the findings (these should be reported in the past tense). Captions and section headings are best typed in sentence case, with the exception of proper nouns (e.g. Government economic policy in South Africa, rather than Government Economic Policy in South Africa). Once again, consistency is all-important.

Common language errors

It is beyond the scope of this article to produce an exhaustive list of typical language errors or do's and don'ts. Some errors frequently encountered are:

- The influence of Afrikaans: 'study leader' rather than 'supervisor' or 'promotor' (note the spelling of the latter, despite the protestations of Microsoft Word); 'should', rather than 'must', unless the intention is emphatic; the ubiquitous problem of English tenses.
- The old-fashioned use of the apostrophe in abbreviations and acronyms: NGO's rather than NGOs (unless possessive).
- The use of a singular instead of a plural verb after et al., for example, Bloggs et al. claims that . . .
- No distinction between adjectival and postpositive use, for example, twentieth-century and twentieth century; well-developed and well developed.
- Difficulties with homophones (principal, principle) and malapropisms (access, assess; exacerbate, exasperate).
- A circumlocutory, cliché-ridden style, with expressions such as 'part and parcel', 'the vast majority'.
- Overuse of words or phrases, contributing to a pedestrian style of writing.
- Overuse of the passive voice and third person (in an attempt to maintain objectivity), contributing to a pompous tone.
- An over-insistence on avoiding gender bias, resulting in a tortuous he/she, s/he style of writing. (It is preferable to use the plural 'they', or choose 'he' or 'she' at the outset and explain in a brief footnote that this has been done in the interests of stylistic conciseness).

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

There seems to be an unwritten assumption by many supervisors (in fairness, not all) that no aspects of writing and/or bibliographic citation fall within their bailiwick. Academics are not necessarily language specialists, and may not be conversant with the finer distinctions between 'due to' and 'owing to', 'less' and 'fewer', 'affect' and 'effect', or what a split infinitive is and why it should be avoided. Supervisors should, however, be alert to consistency in respect of English vs. American spelling, usage

(‘data are’ or ‘data is’), hyphenation (‘co-ordinate’ or ‘coordinate’, ‘macro-economic’ or ‘macroeconomic’). Supervisors should also be conversant with the terminology (and its spelling) of their disciplines, and should at least have a nodding acquaintance with the conventions of capitalisation, punctuation, symbols, and bibliographic citation.

THE ROLE OF THE EDITOR

Editorial standards

Editors need to be cognisant of the extent and nature of editorial intervention permissible, especially in editing postgraduate students’ theses and dissertations.

At present, no standards for editing practice exist in South Africa. However, the Professional Editors’ Group has permission to distribute the Australian standards to its members and interested parties (M. Boers, pers. comm. 2006).

The Australian Standards for Editing Practice (CASE 2001) distinguish three standards applicable to editing of academic texts: Standard C: substance and structure; Standard D: language and illustrations; and Standard E: completeness and consistency. A policy developed by the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies collaboratively with the Council of Australian Societies of Editors (DDOGS: Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies 2005) notes that ‘[it] is expected that the academic supervisors of research higher degree students will provide editorial advice to their students’, and stipulates that professional editorial intervention should be restricted to Standards D and E, and that material for editing should be submitted in hard copy, since it is too easy for students to accept editorial changes in electronic copy without thinking about their implications. The name of the editor and a brief description of the service should be printed in the list of acknowledgements; also, if the editor’s current or former area of academic specialisation is similar to that of the candidate, this too should be stated.

The Editors’ Association of Canada/Association canadienne des réviseurs (1999)⁵ identifies three levels of editorial intervention: Level 1: technical (non-intrusive copy-editing; minimal intervention); Level 2: structural (more intrusive, but constituting rephrasing, rather than rewriting); and Level 3: substantive (reconstruction and rewriting). Within each level is a comprehensive description of what a competent structural and stylistic editor should be able to do. The Association’s Guidelines for Editing Theses (approved June 2006) are particularly specific: acknowledgement of the editor in the thesis; the editing may not affect the content or structure of the thesis; until the thesis has been accepted, the editor should keep a photocopy that shows hard-copy editing or a track-changes copy of electronic editing. The Guidelines even advocate a letter soliciting written permission and signed by supervisor, student and editor, stipulating what types of editing apply.

My modus operandi

Many of the postgraduate students who seek assistance are not first-language English speakers. One may feel that a student seeking a qualification from an Anglophone uni-

versity should be able to present and defend a thesis in comprehensible English; however in South Africa this is not necessarily the case. I have learned, through experience, to turn down theses which require major rewriting, rather than editing, since this type of editorial intervention raises ethical concerns in respect of the originality of the work (to which the candidate must attest in the preliminary pages of the thesis).

I am generally wary of commenting on content, other than to indicate obvious errors or anachronisms. I do caution strongly against plagiarism, especially when encountering vast discrepancies in style, with nary a quotation mark or acknowledgement of author in sight.⁶ I also remind candidates that too much reliance on secondary rather than primary sources is unacceptable scholarly practice, for example, Bloggs (2002), citing Muddle and Fuddle (1999). Only Bloggs should be cited in the bibliography, but the full bibliographic reference to Muddle and Fuddle (the secondary source) should appear in a footnote. Good scholarly practice, however, would entail the writer's consulting the primary source also, namely, Muddle and Fuddle.

The thesis writer will invariably and timidly enquire of the editor, 'How was it for you?' My reply is generally guarded, and restricted to language, logical sequence and format, since I am not qualified to deliver informed judgements on unfamiliar disciplines.

Working with postgraduate students chapter by chapter means that candidates can be trained during the process of writing the thesis. This is seldom the case, however; generally I am presented with a *fait accompli* in the form of the completed thesis. (My terms stipulate that this should be the final version, read and approved by the supervisor, and virtually ready for examination.) I begin at the end, with the bibliography,⁷ since this is the veritable backbone of the thesis, and must be impeccably correct and consistent. I expect candidates (if from an institution other than my own) to provide the institutional or faculty/departmental bibliographic style guide. I check each item on reputable and scholarly database vendors (e.g. Sabinet, EbscoHost, Google Scholar), and correct and reformat if necessary. Clients provide material in hard copy (for manual mark up), or electronically (for editing with 'track changes'). In some instances, students are amenable to my simply amending their text. Substantive problems are highlighted in the text, and a 'working document' is provided in which I indicate major problems and editorial changes.

Much of the editing of the thesis involves correcting not only language errors, but inconsistencies and incorrect or incomplete in-text referencing. I have learned, over the years, to be an inveterate and assiduous fact checker, and to check all spellings of unfamiliar names and places. Although the editor should generally not question the candidate's argument, statement of fact, findings or conclusions, incidental factual errors may be noted. Google is an invaluable ready reference tool in this respect. *The South African Style Guide* (Nel 2000) is particularly useful for checking details like whether South Africa's rainbow nation are black, white, and coloured, or Black, White, and Coloured; whether the global pandemic is HIV/AIDS or HIV/Aids; as well as where to place the hyphen in KwaZulu-Natal. I also find *The Times Guide to English Style*

and Usage (Austin 1999) extremely useful. The Oxford University Press's dictionary website, AskOxford.com, has a Frequently Asked Questions help line which addresses topical questions such as 'How should the term "website" be written? Should it be website or web site, and should there be a capital W?' The experts' answer (AskOxford.com 2006) is:

It always takes a little time for new words to settle to a standardized form. Our most recent dictionary, the revised 11th edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, published in July 2004, shows website as the standard form, and future dictionaries will reflect this. We also recommend capital initials for Internet, World Wide Web, the Web, but not for individual sites.

For e-mail, e-business, or e-commerce, it is email (no hyphen), but e-business and e-commerce (hyphen, lower case, unless it is the initial word of a sentence).

A current and reputable English dictionary is invaluable. (I prefer the *Collins English Dictionary* to the authoritative but less user-friendly *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.)

While I don't generally recommend Wikipedia to postgraduate students, it contains a very valuable Manual of Style, including the three major English spelling standards (British English with -ise; British English with Oxford spelling -ize; and American English) used by international organisations, publishers and major publications (Wikipedia 2006).

CONCLUSION

First-year students at universities of technology should receive formal and compulsory (credit-bearing) instruction in sourcing material and bibliographic searching. Although increasingly large classes make this difficult, there should be less 'pre-packaging' of content and greater emphasis on independent learning and concomitant reading and writing skills. Multiple-choice test and examination papers militate against developing the discursive essay-writing skills that are essential training for postgraduate writing. Second- and third-language speakers of English, if required, should receive intensive tuition from appropriately qualified practitioners of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Most first-year students receive some instruction in the use of the library, generally in their first term at the university. However, many students tend to 'fall through the net', and even after completing a four-year B.Tech. degree, have only a tenuous idea of how to competently source material, write up their research, or present it appropriately, with due observation of international bibliographic conventions and standards.

If universities of technology are to assume their proper place in the South African higher education hierarchy, research has to be rigorous, uncompromising in standards, and impeccable in presentation. However, in view of the ill-preparedness of many students entering higher education, as well as the relatively recent arrival of universities

of technology into the research arena, supervisors, faculty and support staff will have to provide the synergy to achieve these goals.

On a lighter concluding note, courtesy of Lynn Truss (2003):

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

“Why?” asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly edited wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

“I’m a panda,” he says, at the door. “Look it up.”

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

“Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like animal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.”

So, punctuation really does matter, even if it is only occasionally a matter of life and death.

Notes

1. The Department of Education (DoE) benchmark for postgraduate throughput is 29.7 per cent per annum of registered students; the CPUT percentage is approximately 10 per cent (R. Woodward, pers. comm. 2006).
2. ‘Do we all correct proofs, make bibliographies and indexes, and do all the rather humdrum thankless tasks for people more brilliant than ourselves?’ (Pym 1981, 7). Pym is, of course, being gently ironical.
3. The Information Literacy Standards compiled by the American Library Association’s Association of College & Research Libraries (2004) and those of the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California (2002) are especially useful.
4. Research and the Harvard method of bibliographic citation: a research writing and style guide for postgraduate students; Harvard for dummies; and a thesis template. In 2001, an Information Literacy course, subtitled A students’ resource to learn how to master information challenges, was developed for the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) by the then Cape Technikon. The course was based on a Cape Technikon prototype which was subsequently workshopped with librarians and academic support specialists at the five member institutions of CHEC. The course was aimed primarily at entry-level students, and was made accessible on the institutional libraries’ intranets (and subsequently modified and adapted to each institution’s requirements).
5. These Standards were written by the Committee on Professional Standards of the Freelance Editors’ Association of Canada (now the Editors’ Association of Canada), adopted by the membership on 27 April 1991 and revised by the committee in June 1999. They are under regular revision.

6. As well as occasional howlers, such as lofty references, in a 120-page dissertation, to ‘as discussed in Chapter 10 on page 435’.
7. This constitutes unauthorised editorial intervention in terms of the stipulations of the DDOGS (2005); however in my experience, most bibliographies bristle with errors and omissions.

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