

Chapter 1

Introduction



This book about doctoral writing aims to help Ph.D. students and their supervisors master the gamut of writing challenges that can blight—or delight—candidature. The book presents lively and authentic reflections on practice and pedagogy rendered through a series of bite-sized vignettes, stories and actionable ‘teachable’ accounts. From its origin as an academic blog, this book reconfigures six years of posts into an accessible compilation of reflections from three well-known researchers in doctoral education: Susan Carter, Cally Guerin and Claire Aitchison.

Each of us has a history of academic work centred on doctoral writing support. Together we draw on over 60 years’ combined experience as academic developers, writing teachers and learning advisors in research support, and as supervisors of doctoral students. Our research emerges from an interest in pedagogy and practice. As an early practitioner and researcher in the field, Claire Aitchison takes a salient place in research about doctoral writing (Aitchison, 2014; Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Aitchison & Paré, 2012; Lee & Aitchison, 2009). Claire has pioneered a variety of pedagogical approaches and demonstrates here the way that her research, teaching and writing intersect to produce insightful reflections that speak to praxis. Cally Guerin’s practice shows similar interconnectivity: Cally has applied curiosity and theoretical leverage to issues of writing and identity (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Guerin, 2013, 2016; Guerin & Green, 2014; Guerin & Picard, 2012). Susan Carter spent eight years to 2012 establishing, designing and delivering a doctoral programme at the University of Auckland, and being available for individual consultation by doctoral students from across disciplines. She has spent more than 1,000 hours hearing doctoral students elaborating on a range of problems that returned often to writing-related riffs: how to structure and revise for clarity; how to demonstrate critical analysis in writing; how to understand what supervisors mean by squiggles in the margin; how to conform to the demands of the discipline and the doctorate per se while following a particular ‘desire line’ of interest (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 19–20). Our backstories are the foundation of this book. We bring our different voices together and share our separate experiences.

In 2012, the editors of this book came together to find a way of sharing and disseminating their knowledge and experiences of doctoral writing. Inger Mewburn (of ‘Thesis Whisperer’ fame) encouraged us to blog, and so ‘DoctoralWriting’ was born. Blogging is vibrant and often temporal—and we became aware that these beguiling characteristics were also impediments as the volume and breadth of topics became overwhelming. For example, by mid-2019, we had posted some 310 discrete blog posts, the vast majority written by us, and the blog had over 14,000 followers from all corners of the world. To reinvigorate the wealth of work that was at risk of disappearing in the vaults of time, we settled on a new venture to curate a reimagined presentation of our work into this book.

Why the Interest in Doctoral Writing?

Over the last two decades, we have witnessed an extraordinary growth in doctoral student numbers and a resultant growth in research and scholarship on doctoral education globally. It is not necessary to rehearse these changes here—the literature is replete with how significant doctoral writing is (Carter & Kumar, 2016; Paré, Starke-Meyerring, & McAlpine, 2009; Scevak, 2006), how much it matters to institutions (Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel, & Walker, 2006; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Nilsen, 2006), supervisors (Carter, Laurs, Chant, & Wolgramm-Foliaki, 2017; Denholm & Evans, 2007; Grant, 2010; Paré 2011) and, of course, students themselves (Can & Walker, 2011; Carter & Laurs, 2014; Jazvac-Martek, Shuhua, & McAlpine, 2011; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009). This literature also demonstrates how much trouble its production causes.

As practitioners, we have each played a part in this change: teaching, researching and disseminating knowledge into the field and through our work, all the while blogging about our daily challenges, ruminations and practices (Aitchison, Carter, & Guerin, 2018; Guerin, Carter, & Aitchison, 2015, 2016). Scholarly work has documented the big changes—while we have bounced between these and the everyday rituals of supervision and writing. Work with doctoral writing is the bread and butter of our interface with other practitioners, the people—doctoral students, their support staff and supervisors—those with their hands dirty in amongst the words and the sweat on the page.

Our focus here, and over the years, has been this labouring over writing. We recognise that doctoral writers and those supporting them face multiple challenges, many of which come to the surface in the iterative and social acts of writing. The need to stay calm and ordered, to expect and preempt challenges from the start, seems endemic to doctoral writing.

As well as demonstrating high-level writing expertise, the thesis or dissertation must comply with discipline conventions and expectations, please examiners, and fulfil the requirements for a Ph.D. It must show critical analysis and maintain a high standard of formal literacy. Precision as well as perseverance are required. How-to

advice is helpful (and we provide some of this), but we also talk about the grubby bits, the fun and pain, the stories of failure and success.

Doctoral writing tests emotional resilience, instigates a change of identity and realigns candidates into new social and scholarly communities. For these reasons, writing a thesis is an intense experience requiring academic, personal and emotional support. This book acknowledges that doctoral students and supervisors have complex and varied needs, and that they are often time-poor. Thus, we offer a blend of contemplative, provocative and practical resources delivered with insight and humour that extends beyond simple skills acquisition.

Because we focus on *writing*, our target audience is broader than many books about doctoral study. This book is about text and the human labour of producing it. It speaks to those who support doctoral writers, for example by describing practices such as workshops and taught activities; it also speaks to students who identify with the positive, solution-focused anecdotes.

Shaping the Book

The book reimagines our popular blog posts as a compelling set of themes arranged into chapters. It was clear from the outset that this rendition would not include guest posts, although these are certainly a central and important part of the community of practice associated with the blog; these posts are available on the blogsite at <https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com>. This book presents only our own writing and pedagogical insights, reimagined as a restructured and repackaged entity.

We mention what has been left out of this collection because so much valuable work has been produced by our guest writers (which, of course, remains searchable on the site). The blog also delivered two successful special series receiving some 20 contributions on doctoral writing and technology, and on social writing practices. Over 100 guests have contributed to the blog, bringing local and international perspectives from supervisors, language advisors, librarians, and doctoral students. Also absent from this book are the comments and other social media exchanges provoked by individual posts. Missing, too, in this rendition, are the accounts we have written on relevant conferences and community events, foremost of which is the Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference with which we remain associated. For many readers and guest writers, the blog encouraged spin-off activities, connections and sharing of practice, for example, via Twitter or personal email communication. We'd like to recognise those spin-off communities—the most recent of which is the active 'DoctoralWritingSIG', steered by Drs Susan Mowbray and Juliet Lum, who host regular, synchronous, online community forums in association with the blog.

The original blogs, written individually by each of us, were serendipitous; reflections mostly arising from a particular event or prompted by our practices and pedagogical understanding as supervisors, our work as writing teachers, in supervisor training or doctoral research. Compiling a book of these diverse, unrelated and often idiosyncratic musings required difficult decisions about what to keep and what to

leave out, how to balance popular posts against other considerations such as breadth and depth around a common theme.

Each chapter curates the relevant blog posts into a compatible dialogue around discrete aspects of doctoral writing practice. Reviewing work that has been produced over many years allowed us to identify enduring concerns and themes, and to present them afresh with a sharpened focus and in fruitful juxtaposition. The result is an eclectic set of perspectives on persistent themes in doctoral writing—a bit like a set of short stories or Pecha Kucha presentations. Enduringly, our stories and small ideas fit together here.

Navigating the Book

The chapters have been structured around popular themes relating to practice hot-spots. *Being and developing writers* brings together posts that celebrate the human dimensions of writing. This chapter explores joy, desire and struggle—writerly experiences that signify change and transformation for both students and those supervising them. Through the lens of writing, three areas are explored: supervision and writing support, writing and feedback, and how identity and emotion play out in writing and supervision.

Because productivity dominates many concerns about doctoral writing, *Managing productivity* comes next. This chapter looks at writing groups and social writing activities, retreats, boot camps, binges and the joy of shared experience. Processes, habits, and time management, schedules and writing spaces underpin what is essentially an interrogation of attitudes and how to swing them into more productive routines. Humour creeps into the consideration of doctoral writing, and the chapter finishes with an emphasis on the privilege and pleasure of this work we all pour time into.

The next chapter, *Crafting writing*, discusses what Sword calls ‘artisanal habits’ (Sword, 2017). Doctoral writing must gain acceptance within a discourse community represented initially by examiners. Arguably, the craft of writing relies on expertise in amongst the mechanics of language. Doctoral writing is strongest when clear, which is often achieved by hammering complexity into clean, simple prose. Word choice, grammar, syntax and punctuation play their role in establishing voice and demonstrating critical analysis. This chapter testifies that the three of us are intrigued by how the craft of writing can be taught and learned.

Writing the thesis is a hefty chapter because it is the thesis that preoccupies doctoral writers and those of us who support them over several years. This chapter begins with general advice about impact, early choices, ethics, and narrative. From there, we discuss structure and thesis design. We point out the importance of clarity around the argument and original contribution, then attend to writing about theory, critical thinking and data analysis. With those essential framing issues addressed, we run through posts on specific parts of the thesis. The term ‘thesis’ doesn’t signal that we are interested in only the traditional monograph. When publications or practice

shape the thesis, there remains the task of writing, and learning how to do that in accordance with discipline expectations. ‘Thesis’ is used here to refer broadly to the doctoral writing that takes the research through to submission.

We are aware that *Disseminating findings* occurs throughout the doctorate in different ways, and yet we chose to leave this activity for our final chapter, given that becoming a research writer, managing productivity, acquiring writing craft skills usually come ahead of dissemination, while the pressing demands of thesis writing continue throughout. In this final chapter, we think ahead to the foundations of a research career, considering publication processes, co-authorship, and profile building.

Every book takes time to produce and this one is no exception, drawing as it does from years of writing and musings on writing. We hope it gives you as much pleasure as it delivered to its authors.

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