

Research Proposal and Thesis Writing at Tribhuvan University: From Topic Selection to Viva Voce

Dr. Min Pun (Nepal)

ABSTRACT

The major aim of this paper is to familiarize thesis opting students with proposal and thesis writing. Students who have opted for thesis writing have to go through several steps until the completion of the thesis writing process. For instance, students need to submit their proposals for approval from the department, conduct a research, prepare a report and then attend the viva voce. In this paper, several steps have been suggested for students who are studying at the Department of English under Tribhuvan University in order to avoid confusions during their thesis writing.

KEYWORDS: Proposal writing, thesis writing, topic selection, research, viva voce

INTRODUCTION

When students opt for thesis writing at master's level under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Tribhuvan University, one of the first things a thesis writer should bear in mind is that they have begun a research work, and writing for research purposes is different from writing in schools. A lot of things what the school writing teachers taught will be useful for students, but when students doing master's courses approach writing for research purposes: for instance, students write clearly to produce a good argument, constructing good paragraphs that are coherent and focused and so on.

Still, many students enter universities relying on writing strategies that served them well in schools but that will not serve them well here. Old formulae, such as the five-paragraph theme, are not sophisticated or flexible enough to provide a sound structure for a scholarly writing that students are supposed to do in their M.A. thesis that is "a demonstration in research thinking and doing" (Hart, p. 16). And many of the old tricks, such as using elevated language or repeating certain lines so that students might meet a ten-page requirement, will fail them at master's level.

So in Tribhuvan University, if students opt for thesis as an M.A. student of English Departments, they have to go through the following research formalities, through three stages to complete their degree. However, with the introduction of new MA courses, the students are required to attend the research methodology classes and sit in the final examination for 50 marks and other 50 marks will be evaluated from the thesis writing. Here are three stages to be followed by the students new courses:

- Stage I: Proposal writing,
- Stage II: Data collection/analysis (research) and writing, and
- Stage III: Oral examination

PROPOSAL WRITING

In the beginning stage, the students have to produce a research proposal before they start their thesis writing, often for approval from the concerned departments.

A research proposal is a plan that will solve a problem. It is, in general, an overall scheme, structure and strategy designed to obtain answer to the research questions or problems that constitute research project. It also demonstrates their understanding of research and communicate their 'research thinking' to others. A proposal helps to focus and clarify what is involved in research and plan its development. In short, it is important in the early stages of their work that they develop a pattern to guide their efforts (Hart 185). It should indicate research objectives, test hypothesis or obtain answers to research questions. It should also state their reasons for undertaking the study.

The purpose of the proposal is to help students to focus and define their research plans. These plans are not binding, in that they may well change substantially as they progress in the research. However, these plans are an indication to achieving the goal and discipline as a researcher. Students can write two types of proposal: proposal for academic purpose and a proposal for funding. The proposal is expected to:

- engage in genuine enquiry, finding out about something worthwhile in a particular context;
- connect the students' proposed work with the work of others, assuming that the students are acquainted with major schools of thought relevant to the proposed topic;
- create a particular theoretical orientation;
- create their methodological approach, and
- address the ethical concerns that may occur during and after the completion of the thesis.

Format for Proposal Writing

Many universities require higher degrees students to write a research proposal before they start their research. The following outline provides a guide to the structure and content of the generic research proposal:

- Title of the Study - Students should describe the breadth and depth of the topic. The title of their study should not be too broad and too narrow. They can use a title and a subtitle.
- Introduction/Background – It provides an overview of the topic and any background information that will help the reader understand their purpose. It should capture the reader's interest in the topic that they are going to undertake.
- Statement of the Problem (Research questions, if any) - It is a summary of the research topic; and students should describe the problem or issue and where the gap lies for their research and what their research will achieve.
- Objectives of the Study – (General and specific objectives) Specific, clear and succinct statements of intended outcomes from their research, for example, search and review of the literature and assessment of a debate.
- Hypothesis (if any) – Hypothesis is a tentative proposition which is subject to verification through subsequent investigation. Students need to state the whole idea of their study in one sentence.
- Review of Literature - Students should describe the history of the topic identifying

Crossing the Border: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

key landmarks studies which indicate the methodologies used and arguments made; they need to show issues or problems and indicate the research questions (for qualitative research) or hypothesis (for quantitative research). They need to aim to show what contribution their research will make to the literature.

- Methodology – It is a way to systematically solve the research problem. It may be understood as a science of studying how research is done scientifically. We study the various steps that are generally adopted by a researcher in studying his research problem along with the logic behind them. The overall research methodology includes the research design, selection of site, nature and sources of data, sampling procedure of data, techniques of data collection, and analysis and presentation of data.
- Delimitations - Students need to state the limitations for the research e.g. time period, language, subject areas, regions and sample.
- Significance of the Study - It is the rationale for doing the research on the topic; why the research needs to be done on the topic or problem. Students should refer to the literature, gaps in knowledge, potential usefulness of a methodology and possible outcomes.
- Tentative Chapter Division - Students do the content analysis of chapters.
- Works Cited – Students need to provide all the references that they have consulted and cited into their writing. They should consult MLA handbook for proper citation of the references.

DATA COLLECTION/ANALYSIS (RESEARCH) AND WRITING

In a simplest way, research may be defined as a careful, systematic, and patient investigation in some fields of study undertaken to increase the sum of knowledge, and discover or establish facts or principles. The second stage of research work involves two activities:

- 1) Collecting materials and analysis of data; and
- 2) Writing a report.

The first activity includes data collection and analysis of them. Students have to first identify a problem, then look into its nature and discover way for its solution and finally offer their conclusion. Then there comes the second activity of writing of a thesis or dissertation. They should apply the principle of criticism to the collected data and presents the facts along with their interpretations and conclusions in the form of thesis/dissertation. Therefore, a thesis “unfolds the results of research” (Watson, p. 44). Here, the word ‘report’ is used as interchangeable terms for ‘thesis’ or ‘dissertation’.

Thus, a thesis is a research report. The report concerns a problem or series of problems in students’ area of research and it should describe what was known about it previously, what they did towards solving it, what they think their results mean, and where or how further progress in the field can be made. A thesis is not an answer to an assignment question, but it is “a process of varied stages all of which need to be recorded at the time they are completed” (Bell, p. 124). According to Bell, it is important to understand the process of conducting a research and writing the report. The researcher already know the answer (or one of the answers), not to mention the background, the literature, the assumptions and theories and the strengths and weaknesses of them. Those who read the thesis do not know the answer. If the thesis

is for a Ph.D., the university requires that it makes an original contribution to human knowledge: students' research must discover something hitherto unknown.

Obviously the examiners will read the thesis. They will be experts in the general field of students' thesis but, on the exact topic of their thesis, students are the world expert. Students should keep this in mind: they should write to make the topic clear to a reader who has not spent most of the last three years thinking about it.

A thesis consists of an argument or a series of arguments combined with the description and discussion of research students have undertaken. In the case of a Master's thesis, the research is expected to make a significant contribution to the chosen field. This does not mean to revolutionize the field (though some PhDs may). They are expected to review critically the available publications in the field and attempt to add an element of original research to it. This may simply mean that students adapt someone else's research plan for the situation they want to investigate; in this way they extend the knowledge about an area. The supervisor will advise them about suitable research.

The following recommendations may help students to work efficiently, and, eventually, confidently while carrying out and presenting their research:

Firstly, the general responsibilities of students and their supervisors are set out in the Department of English. However, an important feature of these stated responsibilities is the expectation that a researcher will be fairly independent, and that students will ask for help when it is needed instead of expecting all the solutions from the supervisor. But the supervisor needs to guide the beginning researchers to find the solutions to the problem by themselves. Remember, though, that in the academic tradition, teach does not mean tell; rather, it means guide.

Secondly, for all students, it will be very important to know how to use a computer for accessing information and writing the thesis. Find out how the software can help them to do tasks like fill in citations, maintain a consistent style, create a Table of Contents, and import work done on other software. Also, students must also get to know how to use the systems in the library and the Internet Service Section that provides information needed to find publications.

Thirdly, the students need to be familiar with the writing conventions. These conventions are the rules that are helpful for the students to follow in their writing such as citations, reference lists, style (language free of gender bias, etc.), page setup, punctuation, spelling, figures and tables, and the presentation of graphics. They should discuss conventions with their supervisor at the beginning stages. If they need any help understanding how the conventions work, they may consult with their supervisor. The common understanding of this convention in the English departments of Tribhuvan University is to thoroughly follow MLA handbook.

Fourthly, students need to look for theses in their area of study. For instance, hundreds of theses are available for their perusal in the library. Students need to look at ones in their field to get ideas about the main features of their:

- o Organization
- o language use
- o use of subsections and styles for the hierarchy of headings/subheadings
- o page numbering and font

It will help students a great deal in the final stages if they have decided early on the conventions, the font and the use and style of subheadings and headings, and use

them consistently.

Fifthly, when students write, they often change or considerably develop what they think. Writing is not just translating into words the images of their thoughts; it is not as simple as that. In writing, they can transform their thoughts, redefine them or, with great pain and effort, give shape to their ideas. Thus, it is important to give their time to write. Some students like to start their writing from the very beginning of their research, which is not good. They will not have much time later, so they have to manage their time for writing as well. Remember, what students write is not necessarily what they will print in the final draft though in some parts it may be. It is not necessary to do all the thinking and then 'write it up'.

Not all writers follow the same method of writing, but one common way that most of the writers pass through the following stages while writing an essay or research report.

- o Assessing the writing situation
- o Exploring and planning
- o Drafting
- o Revising
- o Editing and proofreading



ORAL EXAMINATION (THESIS/DISSERTATION DEFENSE)

The thesis/dissertation defense is the final stage for the students of M.A. to get their academic degree and enter into the world of research in the actual sense. The thesis/dissertation defense is also called as 'viva voce', which is an oral examination conducted by word of mouth. It also means a thesis committee is a committee that evaluates a student's thesis. The words like 'interview,' 'thesis defense,' 'dissertation defense,' 'viva voce,' 'viva meeting,' 'oral examination,' etc. have been in use for the final stage of their research work.

An M.A. student needs to anticipate the questions that are likely to be asked in the viva. Actually, it is not nearly as bad as it sounds, provided that they enter it having prepared to them utmost and well in advance (Hall, p. 22). There are three reasons why M.A. students have to have a viva: it is so the examiners can see:

- whether it is students' own work;
- whether students understand what they did; and
- whether it is worth an M.A. (i.e. is a contribution to knowledge).

The viva voce or oral examination provides the opportunity for the students to meet the examiners, to explain and defend their thesis, and to spend an hour or two discussing the topic and their work on which they are probably a world expert, even if only for a brief time.

Students are clearly the most knowledgeable person at this meeting when it comes to their subject. And, the members of the committee are there to hear from the students and to help they better understand the very research that they have invested so much of themselves in for a couple of past months. Their purpose is to help them finish their degree requirements.

The following ideas should help them keep the meeting on their agenda. Firstly, the most obvious suggestion is the one seldom followed. Students need to attend one or more defenses prior to their. They also need to find out which other students are defending their research and sit in on their defense. At the defense, they need to try and keep their focus on the interactions that occur. The questions may arise like these: Do the students seem comfortable? What strategies do the students use to be comfortable? How do the students interact with the supervisor? Do the students be able to answer questions well? What would make the situation friendly? What things should they learn? In fact, the students can learn many important things from attending such a meeting.

Secondly, students need to find opportunities to discuss their research with their friends and colleagues. They should listen carefully to their questions. They also need to see if they are able to present their research in a clear and coherent manner. The students need to ask themselves the following questions: Are there aspects of their research that are particularly confusing and need further explanation? Are there things that they forgot to say? Could they change the order of the information and have it become more understandable?

Lastly, students should not be defensive at their defense. They should be comfortable with the examiners. Of course, they have spent a considerable amount of time on their research, so they want to defend everything that they have done during their research and writing. However, the committee members bring a new perspective and may have some very good thoughts to share. They need to try and be politically astute at this time. They also need not forget that their ultimate goal is to successfully complete their degree.

CONCLUSION

What I have focused on here is the certain skills necessary for the master's thesis. As a thesis writer or a researcher, students will be given an opportunity to take a topic, to design and carry out a substantial piece of investigation in a subject-specific discipline. The review of related and relevant literature will be very important to the research whether in the field or from a desk. This puts to the test their ability to search for and manage relevant texts and materials and to interpret ideas and data analytically.

In Tribhuvan University, the master's thesis is a learning activity because students will just begin their research work if they take a thesis in the final year of their M.A.

degree. Their thesis will be the evidence that they have acquired the necessary skills and can therefore be accredited as a competent researcher. The kinds of skills needed are those associated with research design, data collection, information management, analysis of data, synthesis of data with existing knowledge and evaluation of existing ideas along with a critical evaluation of their own work.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Judith. (1987). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. (1996). *MLA handbook for writers of research papers*. 4th ed. New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd.
- Guth, Hans P. (1988). *The writer's agenda*. California: Wordsworth Publishing Company.
- Hall, Derek, ed. (1993). *The new manual of public speaking*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- Hart, Chris. (1998). *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lohani, Shreedhar P., Rameshwor P. Adhikary, and Abhi N. Subedi, eds. (1996). *A companion to literature*. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises.
- Packer, Nancy Huddleston and John Timpane. (1986). *Writing worth reading*. New York: A Bedford Book.
- Watson, George. (1987). *Writing a thesis: A guide to long essays and dissertations*. London and New York: Longman.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Min Pun is Associate Professor at the Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal. He has conducted several pieces of training for school teachers of English since 2010. He has also researched on topics related to English teaching in Nepal and English Writing in Nepal, and published extensively in these areas. From 2003 to 2005, he had been Visiting Researcher at the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, the University of Tokyo, Japan.