

Book review:**Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision (Kamler & Thompson, 2006)**

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This text is an important addition to the literature on research students' academic writing. In their book, Barbara Kamler and Pat Thompson identify and de-mystify the pedagogies which underpin academic writing at doctoral level. What makes their book stand out from the many, largely skill-based, classic texts on postgraduate academic writing (such as Evans, Gruba and Zobel, 2011; Watson, 1990; Crème and Lea, 2008; and those on the technicalities of academic writing such as Turabian, 2007) is the emphasis on the development of scholarship; communication with peers as novice members of the academic community; and the ability to critique academic literature with both depth and precision.

Along with many colleagues, I often find that students, especially those who are new to critical academic writing at doctoral level, find that one of their hardest challenges is to find their own academic identity and 'voice'. Understandably, they tend to be overly-reverential towards the ideas of Dr X or Professor Y, accepting their ideas only because esteemed and established academics in their field say that it is so. In their book, Kamler and Thompson encourage supervisors to support students in becoming critical rather than passively accepting. They also encourage students to see writing elements of their thesis, such as the literature review section, as an inductive and creative act, where they, the doctoral student, are in charge of the academic literature rather than being the largely passive reporter and summariser of the ideas of others. They capture the challenge of this in their pithy chapter title on writing the literature review which they liken to 'persuading an octopus into a glass'. They also use the powerful metaphor of the literature review as a dinner party in which the student decides who to invite, which guests sit next to each other, and highlight the student's role in shaping the conversations and dialogues between the various 'guests' invited to the dinner party or to appear in their thesis. This, they argue, provides students with agency in that they are '*... not just a bystander or reviewer of the conversation but a participant*' (p.38).

Additionally, Kamler and Thompson acknowledge the challenge of coherently marshalling the large volumes of data and information within a doctoral thesis. They liken this to choreography and also emphasise the importance of having the central arguments running throughout the thesis - something which students often find particularly challenging in producing a piece of writing of this size. Without the discipline to link to the key themes and arguments, the pathology afflicting students is that they can often drift between topics whilst the focus of the thesis shifts away from the central ideas and arguments towards the (often interesting) but more peripheral ideas. This can happen in such a way that the coherence of the thesis as a whole is sacrificed to fragmentation, resulting in a series of chapters which are of intrinsic interest within themselves but do not link together in a seamless way.

These authors buck convention in terms of thesis writing by suggesting that rather than embarking on writing specific chapters at the initial stages of their writing, students address this by linking together what they describe as ‘tiny texts’. These, they say are ‘chunks’ of writing on a topic which can be stitched together seamlessly through further review and editing, thus enabling the central arguments to be understood and sustained. In a more conventional manner, they highlight the importance of signposts and headings. This has a resonance with my own work as a supervisor of doctoral students where, in order to develop a sound academic writing style, I often find myself encouraging students, particularly those who are new to academic writing at this level, to over-use headings and subheadings for structuring purposes but suggest that then to take many of them out later so as to provide a more seamless narrative and to help avoid either the bullet point ‘bittiness’ of fragmented text, or the ‘stream of consciousness’ style of writing in which there is a drift from topic to topic, but without a sustained focus or line of argument.

Kamler and Thompson also address the issue of writing authoritative text in their chapter on ‘The Grammar of Authority’. In this chapter, they consider the use of themes and rhemes in what they call ‘theme analysis’. They suggest using this for crafting research writing, paying particular attention to the patterns of themes at the start of a written clause and the rhemes that make up the rest of the sentence (e.g. the qualitative evidence to date [theme] has relied heavily on interviews with children, parents and teachers [rheme]) so as to make students’ writing more authoritative.

In summary, this is an important and insightful book. Although aimed principally at research supervisors, the book would also be useful to students in their second and third years of a full time research degree (at the post-registration stage) too. Some of the ideas may be quite complex and potentially overwhelming for students still on the first rung of the ladder of their research journey, but if used in combination with other books on the doctoral thesis production process, such as ‘The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research’ (Rugg and Petre, 2004), it seems likely to help students (and some novice supervisors too!) to fully understand the often subtle and frequently nuanced nature of doctoral level research, and this book should be commended for that contribution.

References (example formats below)

Crème, P. and Lea, M. R. (2008) *Writing at University*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Evans, D., Gruba, P. and Zobel, J. (2011) *How to Write a Better Thesis*. Victoria, AU: Melbourne University Press.

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Rugg, G. and Petre, M. (2004) *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Turabian, K. (2007) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Watson, G. (1990) *Writing a Thesis*. London: Longman.

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