

# Preface to the Third Edition

When I began to help to write the second edition with David, my own thesis was still under examination. I had used the first edition of his book, and—perhaps with a bit of bravado—asked David if he would like some assistance when he produced a second edition. He agreed to collaborate. At that time, many of my insights into writing a thesis were based on fresh, personal experience. Sadly, since then, David has passed on. I myself have been lucky enough to gain a full-time academic position and have now supervised several students. More than ever, I can see how important it is to manage the writing process throughout a research project.

I am fortunate to be working with Justin. Not only is he an accomplished supervisor and researcher in his own area of computer science, but he is also the author of a book on writing that is a strong seller in the field. His skills and interests are complementary to mine. Justin works and supervises in science and engineering; I tend to work on qualitative studies in the social sciences.

We have made numerous changes to the second edition. As well as a thorough revision of the text, we have added several new sections that clarify the process of thesis writing. We have eliminated dated advice on word processing and use of computers, for example, and brought forward and updated material concerning written expression. We put greater emphasis on the challenges of thesis writing, the experience of being a research student, the thinking that underlies methods, results, and analysis, and the issues of working with supervisors. Much of the material in this edition is completely new or rewritten, and our book is longer.

Over the years, as I have taught thesis writing seminars, I have used examples of work from my own students to illustrate good writing; I have also used work from John McDonald to show the characteristics of both good and bad theses based on his analysis of examiners' reports. I would like to thank my students, and John, for allowing us permission to use their work here.

For ease of reading, we decided to blend each of our perspectives and experiences—David's, Justin's and my own—into a single collective voice. I hope that you find our collaborative efforts help you to write a better thesis.

Melbourne, February 2011

Paul Gruba

Many years ago I was given a copy of Peter Medawar's *Advice to a Young Scientist*. Though written from the perspective of a biologist, I felt it had lessons for me (in computer science) despite the gulf in research practice between our disciplines. It touched on themes that I felt were lacking in other books on doing research, in particular, what it *felt like* to be a scientist, how one might change and grow as a consequence of doing research, how one might *become* a researcher. It was not that the whole book was on these topics—such a book would probably be rather dull—but I was struck by the perspective that it offered, and how it made Medawar's book different from any number of 'here is a formula for your dissertation' books that tried to reduce being a student to a mechanical process that somehow entirely sidestepped the core of the question of what doing research involves.

Some years ago I was introduced to the second edition of Evans and Gruba's *How to Write a Better Thesis*, and found in it some of those qualities that I had admired in Medawar. It became one of the three or four books I asked every student to read. In working with Paul to produce this new edition, I think we have found ways of strengthening its core messages and have built a text that complements and extends the many 'dissertation' books already on the shelves. Of course, in producing a book like this, it helps enormously to have as a basis a strong existing text, and thus I am grateful to David (who, sadly, I did not have an opportunity to meet) for having created *How to Write a Better Thesis*, and to Paul and David for the revision that produced the second edition.

The framework of this book is the mechanics of thesis writing, but the aim throughout is to help students understand how to conceptualize and approach the problems of producing a thesis, as well as to walk through the details of what a thesis should (or shouldn't) look like. Writing a book like this is something of a journey. It has furthered my understanding of how a student learns to become a researcher, and I have had to sharpen my thinking across a range of topics; it has been illuminating to capture some of the specific lessons learnt from the successes and failures of our students. I hope the book is also a journey for our readers.

A note on style: as Paul has said, we've made no attempt to distinguish between our experiences, including those of David, and have written in the first person. Every example is based on our experience of individual research students, and some of them have been fictionalized to an extent, both to avoid embarrassing people and, in many cases, to make the research more accessible to a general reader. Perhaps confusingly, we've sometimes changed the fictions for the students who were discussed in the previous editions. (Think of it as artistic licence.) In cases where we have quoted from a student's work as an illustration of good work, a full citation is given.

This book rests on our experiences with supervision and advising of upwards of a hundred students, as well as the hundreds of students who have been in our research methods subjects over the past two decades; far too many to name and thank individually, but I am grateful to them for the insights they've brought me and for our experiences together. It is not always obvious to a student how much the supervisor is learning from them, so let this book stand in part as a testament to how mutual a process graduate study can be.



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How to Write a Better Thesis

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