**The Handbook to Literary Research**

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no1 p. 11 : **Best practice**

In undertaking any research project, *always record the route you take*, whether via online or printed sources. This process is important, as you will benefit greatly by logging your research trail.

p. 13:

**Getting started with the Internet**

Using the Internet will be essential to postgraduate research. You need to be

aware of what you can find there, and develop key skills so that you can get the

most out of it. The Internet is a multimedia resource – you will find not just

text, but images, video clips, audio material and so on. Make sure that you are

aware of basic search skills, can manage your web browser and understand the

terminology in common usage before you start research.

p. 13:

**Using Google**

Although it is only a decade old, **Google** (www.google.com) has become an

indispensable research tool. As a postgraduate literary researcher, you will use it

frequently, but it does pay to understand what it does and doesn’t do. The biggest

problem you will face when conducting a Google search is the sheer number of

hits returned. There are a number of ways in which you can delimit search fields

and maximise the retrieval of relevant information. You can restrict your search

by language, domain, national territory, date-range,

type of material and file

format.

p. 14:

**Google Book Search** (http://books.google.com) offers a remarkable and constantly

growing virtual library; copyright material is available in limited

preview or ‘snippet’ mode (a page range or excerpt only), while non-copyright

books can sometimes be read, downloaded and printed in their entirety.

Google Book Search is often an excellent resource for accessing difficult to

acquire, pre-1900 primary sources, but there are two things that you should

always bear in mind when using it:

1 as a matter of routine, always note the exact bibliographical details of the

book (including edition details) accessed through Google Book Search, as

you need to be systematic and consistent in your citations from it; and

2 always record the precise URL for the digitised source, so that you can find

it again without having to repeat the original search. Accurate citation of

digitised books is every bit as vital as with a material printed source, and it

is wise to get into the habit of accurate and full citation of online sources

as quickly as possible.

p.14-15

**Wikipedia and evaluating data**

**Wikipedia** (www.wikipedia.org) is the world’s largest open-access

encyclopaedia, founded on the collaborative social knowledge construction or ‘wiki’ model; it

is a useful tool for literary researchers. Wikipedia provides a helpful first port of call, providing author biographies, indicative bibliographies, links to relevant external sites, and discussion forums.

p.16:

**Citing sources**

There is a serious ethical and legal imperative that shapes how you use your

research. Remember that *all sources, whether online, printed or unpublished, need*

*to be cited as fully and as accurately as possible*. Do not, for example, assume that

a quotation from an electronic source does not need to be cited as fully as one

from a printed book; each needs to be cited in full.

**The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography** ([www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com)) is the single most useful online biographical source for the literary researcher; you can print or download entries, or export them to your own email account. For American subjects, you should consult the **American National Biography** online (www.anb.org). General encyclopaedias and reference works available online that you might find useful include **Encyclopaedia Britannica** ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)), the complete **Oxford Reference Online** suite (www.oxfordreference.com), and the second edition (1989) of the **Oxford English Dictionary** (http://dictionary.oed.com). These sources will give you a general flavour of the scope of literary research, but in order to progress further, you will need to be able to use key

online tools to narrow your focus to a specific topic.

p. 17

the **Modern Language Association International Bibliography** of books

and articles on the modern languages and literatures (MLA, available

through the OCLC First Search website, http://firstsearch.oclc.org – simply

select ‘MLA’ from the list of databases)

p. 18:

*Primary sources and eBooks*

There are a large number of primary literary texts online, as well as considerable numbers of scholarly titles available as eBooks. **Bartleby** (<http://bartleby.com>) offers a range of verse and fiction, as well as a considerable reference suite, all of which can be read online, or downloaded (Bartleby supports Amazon’s eBook reader system, Kindle). **Project Gutenberg** (www.gutenberg.org/catalog) offers

more than 27,000 titles (largely fiction published before *c.*1935); you can browse the alphabetical author list, or search for a specific title. **Literature Online** (LION; http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk) offers the most comprehensive single source available (LION has incorporated earlier full-textdatabases, such as theEnglish Poetry database). You can search as well as browse, and every entry will link to an author page (giving you brief biographical details), a full list of the holdings of that particular author, as well as criticism written about them.

p. 20:

Another major resource that you will use is **JSTOR** ([www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

p. 21

the video-sharing

site **YouTube** (www.youtube.com) offers a remarkably

rich resource for the literary researcher. You can find video clips of interviews

with authors, film directors and artists, recent dramatic productions and

eyewitness news footage which may be unavailable elsewhere.

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**Editing literary texts**

*W.R. Owens*

The preparation of reliable texts of literary works is one of the most valuable

tasks a scholar can undertake. General readers as well as professional literary

critics depend on the accuracy of texts, and their work of interpretation or

evaluation will be damaged if these are corrupt or imperfect. The more detailed

a critic’s attention to the words of a text, the more important it is that the text

be accurate. The US critic F.O. Matthiessen was famously caught out when

he wrote admiringly of what he took to be a brilliantly incongruous image in

Herman Melville’s *White Jacket* – the ‘soiled fish’ of the sea. Unfortunately for

Matthiessen, ‘soiled’ was the printer’s invention; Melville had actually written

‘coiled’.

p.89

To engage with a research project in any discipline in a university is to work in

relation to an institutionalised space. Master’s or PhD dissertations by graduate

students or scholarly publications by academics in the discipline of English

Literature or Comparative Literature, despite differences in expectations, have

the following institutional considerations in common: first, they are produced

in the context of the practices of that discipline; and second, they address an

area of knowledge that is pertinent to that discipline. Researchers usually,

and necessarily, focus their investigations fairly narrowly in undertaking such

research – on specific texts and contexts, particular issues and themes. The

research focus is usually delimited in advance by a process of identifying a title,

preparing a proposal and chapter plan, getting acquainted with extant research

in the area, identifying a suitable methodology.

pp. 109-110

That Theory now

exerts an institutional pressure is, however, something that most students of

literature – particularly those embarking on research – will readily acknowledge.

Postgraduate students are given to understand that their projects and

dissertations must demonstrate an awareness of Theory, even if not directly

addressed to theoretical questions. In some quarters this causes anxiety, as a

wide-ranging

knowledge of various ‘schools’ of Theory seems to be called for.

This anxiety actually arises because of the misconceived manner in which

Theory is now presented in dominant academic discourse: as a body of knowledge

that is out there, distinct from and yet somehow inevitably relevant to

literature and criticism, which has to be acquired and applied. Though Theory

often enjoins historicisation and contextualisation, it itself appears as a

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peculiarly

ahistorical and acontextual formation. It is seemingly categorised

into ‘schools’ such as Liberal Humanism, Formalism, Structuralism, Marxism,

New Criticism, Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, New Historicism, Postmodernism,

Postcolonialism, Feminism, Queer Theory and so on, all of which

could be relevant in different ways anywhere in literature (any text, any

period, any place). In a contrary spirit, I argue here that Theory is not a given

field of knowledge with many ‘schools’ which has to be sampled and picked

from and applied, but is an institutional extrapolation from an ongoing process

of debating and thinking about literature and criticism. This process entails

questioning and debating disciplinary prerogatives (and often flows out of disciplinary

boundaries), and it is moreover a process which is itself contextualised

and historicised. Theory is the institutional extrapolation from a dynamic

and contingent process of thinking about literature and criticism – an extrapolation

from theory.

In fact, regarding Theory as a given field of knowledge is itself an institutional

ploy: a strategy for taming its dynamic and in-process

character, and making it

amenable to curricula and textbooks (key markers of academic institutionalisation).

The role of Theory textbooks in particular – which all students of

literature are now required to study and use at some stage – in promoting that

view is itself worth exploring. Theory textbooks are useful, of course, in offering

surveys and overviews and pat formulations to depart from, and literary

students and researchers should take recourse to them as points of departure

whenever it suits them. But these should not simply be accepted and used as

transparent reference books but also located in terms of the institutional processes

and significances of Theory. This chapter attempts to provide such an

awareness to supplement existing Theory textbooks, and can be regarded as

material supplementary to a standard Theory textbook. It is divided into three

sections. The first traces the process through which theory came to be institutionally

appropriated as Theory from the 1970s, and led thereafter to the

Theory Wars (including ‘against Theory’ and ‘after Theory’ debates). The

second section offers brief notes on three currently in-vogue

terms in Theory

(‘literary text’, ‘culture’ and ‘identity’), by way of demonstrating how these

incorporate contextually nuanced debates and negotiate disciplinary boundaries

– in ways which are often neglected in Theory textbooks. The third

section presents a brief critical appraisal of Theory textbooks themselves.

p.114

How theory should be fitted into the profession of literature led to

a heated debate (often called the Theory Wars) and certain institutional

responses. In the course of these, Theory in the institutionally recognised

sense settled and assumed its current shape. Within literary studies Theory

was concretised through curricula and canons and pedagogy, given form in

department memberships and recognition of academic status, transmitted in

categorisations of booklists and libraries, reiterated in funding practices,

ensconced in academic discourse at large.

p. 114-115

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p. 115

At another level, and particularly from the early 1990s onwards, the Theory

Wars were addressed to vociferous arguments ‘against Theory’ (by now

Theory was seen as institutionalised) – which marked a conservative response

ranging from cautious liberalism to downright right-wing

assertion. This was

particularly addressed to the perception that the political desire of theory had

turned into the institutionalisation of identity politics (along the lines of

race, gender and sexuality particularly) in Theory. In the cautious liberal

mould, Denis Donoghue was anxious to clarify that ‘I hope you understand

that I am not, in the vulgar phrase, “against theory”. . . . What I am against is

the confusion of theory with principles – or rather, the confusion of theories

with principles and ideologies’ (*The Pure Good of Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell,

1992, pp. 47–8). He later pointed to identity-based

‘schools’ of Theory as the

place where this happens (*The Practice of Reading*, New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1998, p. 100). Similarly, Stanley Fish expressed doubts about

identity-based

political aspirations being realised through the profession of

literary studies:

feminism, gay rights activism, and the civil rights movement did not

originate in the academy, and academic versions of them acquire whatever

extra academic influence they may have by virtue of something already in

place in public life; academic feminism, academic gay rights studies, and

academic black studies do not cause something but piggy-back

on its prior

existence.

(*Professional Correctness*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, p. 86)

p.123:

It may be recalled from the previous section that one of the institutional

responses to Theory was to propose a Theory-centred

cultural studies as a

departure from literary studies. Such a move was most lucidly conceptualised

in Anthony Easthope’s *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge,

1991). Easthope felt Theory had initiated a paradigm shift in literary studies

which undermined the hegemonic ideology that is at the heart of literature

itself, and recommended a separation of cultural studies, within which the

political direction of Theory could be more meaningfully realised:

Cultural studies should situate its pedagogic subject not primarily in relation

to truth but rather to the textual structures within which he or she is

actually constituted . . . Confronting textuality not just cognitively – as

generalisable meaning – but experiencing the work/play of the signifier and

to move secondarily to criticism and analysis may disclose for the subject

something of his or her own actual determinacy and situatedness.

(p. 180)

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**Planning and completing**

**a research project**

Deciding on a topic

Turning a topic into an argument

Working out a structure

Preparing a research proposal

Writing your dissertation or thesis

Presenting your dissertation or thesis

**DECIDING ON A TOPIC**

One of the points to stress at the outset is that the range of possible research topics in literature is very wide indeed. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, students occasionally find it difficult to make up their minds what it is they want to investigate. If you feel, momentarily, that you can’t decide what might interest you, you could try making a list of things that you would like to learn more about. Once you have a list of up to five or six things, you should take some time to read around each of them a bit, trying to think not only which seems most enticing and likely to hold your interest, but which of them your previous study has best equipped you to pursue. By ‘reading around’ I don’t mean reading aimlessly, or in a desultory fashion. On the contrary, you should be reading quickly and purposively, with questions in your mind, scanning material that seems potentially relevant to your areas of interest and getting an overview of it. The questions you should be asking include:

• What are some of the key studies in this field?

• What kinds of approaches have been taken to the subject?

• What are the key issues and questions in this field?

• Are there any possible gaps, or approaches yet to be explored?

A good general tip is: *choose a relatively narrow and sharply defined topic which nevertheless opens out into large and important issues*. Thus, for example, ‘TheUse of Parallel Narrations as a Narrative Technique in Richardson’s Novels’ or‘Tennyson and the Education of Women’, would be more suitable topics thanthe larger ones just cited. Remember, too, that there are many lesser-knownauthors whose works would repay study. Indeed an out-of-the-waytopic, providedit offers serious interest and the materials are available to carry itthrough, has certain advantages over a well-worn

or middle-of-the-road one.

**TURNING A TOPIC INTO AN ARGUMENT**

Having decided on your topic and limited its scope, the next step is to *give it a direction*. The way to do this is to develop out of your topic a set of *questions* you want to answer, or *problems* that you want to solve. Doing research is notabout gathering information or data for its own sake: the information or datais presented in order to answer questions, in order to try to change what isthought about something. Virtually every good dissertation will take the formof an *argument*, of an attempt to prove or establish something by means ofpresentation and analysis of *evidence*.

There are many possible ways of turning a topic into an argument. To give some examples, your dissertation might be one of the following:

• an argument for or against an existing critic (or critical position) in relation to the author or group of works you are studying;

• an argument about the importance of a particular influence on a writer, or influence exerted by him or her;

• an argument for the importance of some hitherto little-regarded piece of evidence to the discussion of the work of some author or group of authors;

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• an argument about the value of a new theoretical approach to a text or set of texts;

• an argument turning upon the nature of the genre of a work or group of works;

• an argument about the significance of a little-known or undervalued author or work;

• an argument about some historical or literary-historical aspect of literature;

• an argument about the adequacy of existing scholarly texts of a particular work;

• an argument showing how a particular theme or concept may be related to a group of texts;

• an argument bringing together some aspect of a well-known literary text with a lesser-known

text or with other media.

By framing your topic in some way such as this, you will find it easier to move on to the next stage, which is finding a way of structuring your dissertation or thesis.

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Between the introduction and the conclusion comes the body of work in which you *assemble* the evidence, *analyse* it and put forward your *argument* based on that analysis. This middle section will need to be divided into chapters, each of which would represent a major step in the development of the argument, and each of which would be long enough to accommodate the amount of evidence and the detailed analysis required.

pp. 191-192

An MA research proposal should probably be not more than 1,000 words in length. Its purpose is to show that you have a promising line of research and to indicate how you hope it will develop. Think of it as an exercise in persuasion: you are trying to convince your tutor or supervisor that you have evidence (although as yet unexploited) to support the argument you propose to advance. You should present it in continuous prose, but arranged under a set of headings such as the following.

*Title :* Do not feel bound by this: it is important to have a title that is clear and informative, but a first attempt can be altered in the finished product.

*Argument :* State as concisely as possible what your subject is and what your argument will be.

*Materials:* Go into more detail about your materials, i.e. the chief primary and secondary sources you will use and discuss, giving some indication as to their aptness for your project, and how easy it

will be to get hold of them.

*Chapters:* Show how you think your discussion of your topic may be organised, chapter by chapter, in the final product. This provisional chapter structure is very important, so make sure it is clear to the

reader how many chapters there are going to be, what is going to go into each, how they will connect with each other, and how long each is planned to be. If possible, give provisional chapter titles. You should be alluding throughout this section to the main secondary literature on your subject (historical, critical, theoretical, etc.), not just to demonstrate that you are aware of it, but to indicate how you might use it. So, for example, you might be planning to take issue with what some critic has said, or you may want to show how your work relates to, and perhaps extends or qualifies, some existing scholarship on your subject.

*Conclusion:* Clearly this will be provisional at this stage. You have not yet argued your case, merely outlined the materials and likely directions of your argument. You might also like to indicate at this stage what problems you think you might encounter along the way.

*Bibliography* A list of the key primary and secondary texts you intend using should be appended to the proposal – though, again, this list will be provisional and will certainly expand once you begin serious work.

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In very broad terms, there are two ways in which a thesis on a literary topic may be said to ‘contribute to knowledge’. One is by finding and analysing texts or documents that have not previously been known about or studied. Finding such material in literary studies is perhaps less common than it might be in a subject like history, where vast untapped archives remain to be explored, but it is certainly not unheard of. There is much to be done in the field of publishing history, for example, or in tracing the circulation of texts and their reception histories. Similarly, there are writers who for one reason or another have dropped from sight, or have not yet attracted scholarly interest, but whose works are well worth study. The other, and more common way of contributing to knowledge in literary studies is by presenting a new argument about a given writer, or set of literary works, or about some historical or theoretical issue, or some theme that is relevant to literature. The argument needs to be ‘new’ in the sense that it has not been put forward in these terms previously. How you present it will demonstrate your ability to engage productively with the work of other scholars in the field, and your ability to exercise independent critical judgement. You will need to be able to marshal and explicate existing theoretical, literary-critical or historical arguments in a coherent way, but even more importantly to

explore and analyse them from your own distinctive perspective

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**WRITING YOUR DISSERTATION OR THESIS**

Once your research proposal has been approved, you are ready to begin work in earnest. All your previous study has been leading up to and preparing you for this moment, but you will need stamina to keep going on a lengthy project, and you need to be organised about such practical matters as note-taking and developing a filing system. Most of all, you will need to start writing early, and keep writing all the way through. What follows is a brief list of Dos and Don’ts – mainly Dos – to help you with the business of writing your dissertation or thesis.

1 *Do* make sure that you have a clear timetable of contacts with your tutor or supervisor.

2 *Do* plan well ahead. Organise library visits and things like inter-library loans in advance. It is an infallible rule that everything (research, writing up, typing and correcting) will take longer than you expect, so *do* plan in some spare time.

3 *Do* start compiling a bibliography as soon as you start work. Record only one book or article on each sheet of paper or card, or in bibliographic management software such as EndNote or RefWorks…, so that later you can shuffle entries around. If you store notes on your PC make sure that you have a back-up disk that is kept up to date: never store important electronic information in only one place. To be safe from disaster such as theft, have a copy of your bibliography and draft dissertation or thesis both on the hard disk in your machine and on a memory stick or CD that you store away from your PC.

4 *Do* keep a weather-eye open for new publications in your own field, checking current abstracts, indexes and specialist bibliographies.

5 *Do* write as you go along. *Don’t* get so carried away by research that you only write notes (or even nothing at all) for weeks on end. Writing drafts is scarcely ever a distraction from research. When writing, make sure that from the very beginning you use the proper scholarly conventions: getting

it right from the start will save you an awful lot of time later on.

6 *Do* write clearly and crisply and avoid jargon wherever possible. Short sentences are more easily controlled than long ones.

7 *Do* take time to work out a clear and effective way to *structure* your ideas, to make sure that they are being presented in a logical order of progression, and that connections and transitions are signposted.

8 *Do* keep in mind that a dissertation or a thesis should take the form of an *argument* in which the writer must attempt to convince the reader of his or her case. Be honest with yourself, and make sure that you understand your own argument – and that it *is* an argument and not just an unsubstantiated

speculation.

9 *Do* remember also that an argument is not the same as an assertion. You must make sure that you prove, or justify, or offer evidence for whatever you say – by including properly referenced citations from primary sources (texts contemporary with those you are discussing) and/or from secondary sources (critical books, articles, historical studies, etc.). Remember, too, that your argument will be greatly strengthened if you recognise the force of points that might be made against – or that qualify – the case you are advancing. Try to suggest ways in which these objections or qualifications might be answered.

10 *Do* aim to have the first rough draft of your dissertation or thesis complete so that you have plenty of time to refine and revise it before the final dead Planning, line. Unless you’ve been very restrained, your first draft is likely to be over-length and you will need to slim it down. You will also need some time to add any introduction and/or conclusion necessary. As a general rule, you should always leave both the introduction and the conclusion until the bulk of the research has been written up.

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**Setting out references**

It is an absolute rule in scholarship that when a source is quoted or referred to or otherwise drawn upon in any extended piece of academic writing, it must be acknowledged and full details provided. By acknowledging your sources you are first and foremost giving proper credit to the author or authors of the source you have used (and if you did not do this you would stand accused of plagiarism). Second, you are enabling anyone reading your work to check back on how you have used or interpreted a source, so that they can decide whether they agree with the conclusions you have drawn from it. They should be able to ‘repeat the experiment’, so to speak. You need to provide citations or references in all of the following cases:

• when you quote from a source;

• when you paraphrase a source;

• when you refer directly to a source (but not actually quoting it);

• when your ideas are heavily indebted to the work of another scholar (whether quoted directly or not);

• when you wish to cross-refer to a source relevant to a point you are making. It goes without saying that your citations or references must be full and accurate in every respect, so that they can be identified and traced with ease by any reader of your work.

**p. 201-201**

**The ‘author–page’ system**

In the MLA version of this system, superscript numbers and footnotes/endnotes are not used. Instead, the surname or page number(s), or both, are placed inside parentheses at the appropriate point in the text, and the reader then knows to turn to the list of ‘Works Cited’ for the full bibliographical reference.

What is placed in parentheses will depend on the wording of the sentence. So, for example, if the author’s name is mentioned in the sentence, the name is not repeated in the parenthetical page citation. The following list gives some examples of citations and references, followed by the list of ‘Works Cited’ to which they refer. Note in the ‘Works Cited’ list that the MLA style is to underline main source titles, rather than italicising them, articles are placed within double quotation marks, and the second and subsequent lines of each entry are indented five spaces.

Roth’s *American Pastoral* trilogy ‘consciously alludes, both thematically and formally, to Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*’ (Morley 180).

John Richetti argues that *Robinson Crusoe* is ‘as much a novel of ideas as of personal experience’ (203).

Scholars have generally regarded the first two editions of *Paradise Lost* as well printed and containing few significant errors (Moyles31; Lewalski 455–6).

Norton’s two-volume study provides the fullest account to date of the history of translations of the Bible in English.

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In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that ‘Women are, in common with men, rendered weak and luxurious by the relaxing pleasures which wealth procures’ (145).

Saint Jerome said that a translator ‘takes over words like prisoners and conqueror’ (qtd. in Apter 99).

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