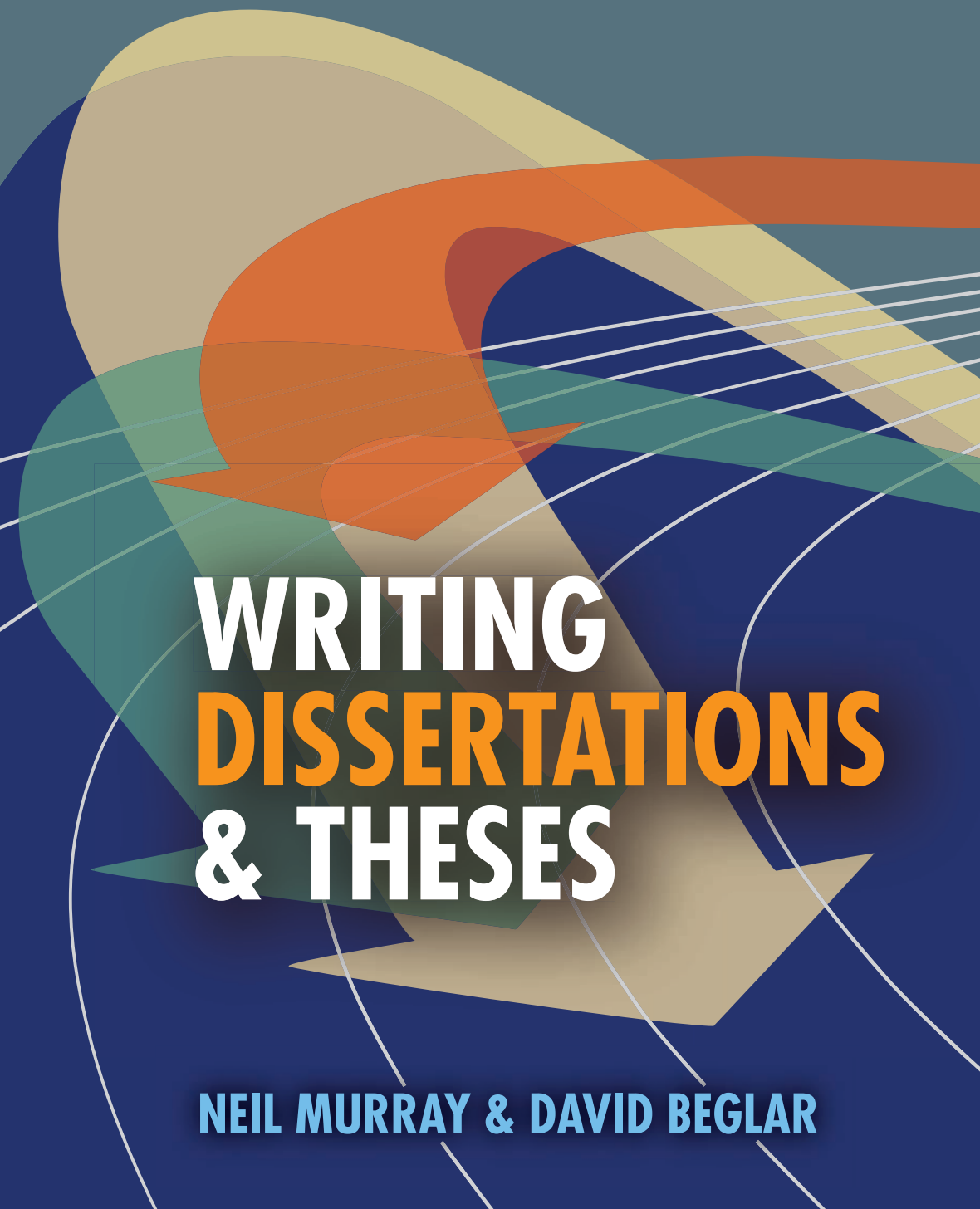
INSIDE TRACK



WRITING DISSERTATIONS & THESES

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WRITING DISSERTATIONS AND THESES

periodically search relevant webpages in order to check for any new sources or updates. Current awareness services include:

- discussion lists and newsgroups
- funding alerts
- journal alerting
- monitoring webpage changes (particularly important for referencing)
- new publications
- news of forthcoming conferences
- news services with email alerting.

Oral sources of information

Of course, there are also oral sources of information that can feed into the research process, and these can include the following:

- lectures
- seminars
- conference presentations
- professional organisations
- special interest groups (SIGS).

TIP All of these sources of information potentially have a role to play in stimulating thought and generating ideas on your part. However, unless they appear in writing – in the form of conference proceedings, for example – and have been subject to a process of peer review, they should be treated with caution in terms of making any written reference to them. Unless they are soundly documented, they have limited credibility. As such, should you choose to refer to them, it is advisable that you acknowledge their 'insecure' status.

IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING APPROPRIATE INFORMATION

Having identified the types of sources available to you, you will now need to begin a more detailed selection process whereby you sift through the enormous volume of information these sources place at your disposal in order to get at only that information relevant to your own research. This can seem like a daunting task and it can be

difficult to know where to begin. However, a few simple strategies can be surprisingly productive.

Know what you are looking for

While this might seem like an obvious piece of advice, it's not unusual for students keen to get their research under way to dive into the process of trying to select material without having considered carefully beforehand what kind of information it is they are looking for in anything other than the broadest of terms. In order to search and select efficiently, you have to constrain or set parameters on your search, and that means clarifying in your own mind which discipline areas, authors, concepts, journals, etc. are relevant to your particular study, as well as knowing how concepts relate to one another. By understanding conceptual relationships, you will be in a better position to identify potentially fruitful links and avenues of inquiry which might otherwise get missed.

Knowing what you are looking for in your search for information and giving time to considering the parameters of your search is the most fundamental information selection strategy in that it underpins all others. This will be evident as we look at the remaining strategies.

Search for titles of books or articles

One obvious place to begin your search and selection of material is to look for the names of books or articles that are known to you and that you recognise as relevant to your research.

Perform an internet search of relevant theories or concepts

There will, of course, be plenty of published materials 'out there' with which you are not familiar but which may be important – even critical – sources of information. One way of identifying such sources is to type into a search engine key words or ideas associated with your area of inquiry. Then, pursue those results that promise to be most productive. Some of the most widely used search engines are listed below:

All the Web	Google	HotBot	Vivisimo
AltaVista	Google Image Search	Mamma	Web Wombat
Anzwers	Google Print	MSN Search	Wisenut
ASK.com	Google Scholar	Scirus	Yahoo!

So-called meta-search engines such as Dogpile, Ixquick and Metacrawler allow you to search a group of search engines at the same time.

Perform a name search of relevant scholars

Similarly, you may wish to use your library's cataloguing system or an online search engine to generate works (books, articles, etc.) produced by individuals you know are associated with your particular area of research interest. Type in the names of scholars recognised in areas related to your research and follow up on those that appear to hold most promise.

Having identified sources that you believe, on a first take, are of potential relevance to your research, you will need to confirm as efficiently as possible whether they are indeed of value to you and worth reading in their entirety. There are a number ways to do this.

Read abstracts

All published articles will begin with an abstract. This is typically a summary of the content of the article and will normally run to no more than about 150 words. The main purpose of the abstract is to give the reader, at a glance, an overview of the article, allowing them to determine whether or not it is relevant to their own interests and something they wish to read in full. An abstract is therefore an important time-saving device that can help you select information quickly and effectively. As journals are increasingly being read online, most electronic journals come with abstracts for all articles that appear in those journals. If, based on its abstract, readers wish to read a complete article, then they can do so, provided they or their institution has subscribed to it.

Read synopses of books

Like an abstract, a synopsis is also a summary statement. However, instead of telling the reader what an article is about, it tells them what a book is about and what it covers. It may also be rather longer than 150 words, although this can vary greatly. There are a number of places you might find a synopsis of a book: on its back cover, in its preface or introduction (if it has one), or on its publisher's or other booksellers' websites. Like an abstract, a synopsis provides a quick way of ascertaining whether or not a particular book is relevant to you and therefore worth reading. There are times when it may indicate to you that while much of the book is irrelevant, certain aspects of it may be of value to your research.

Look through tables of contents

A quick read through of a book's table of contents will often give you a more detailed picture of its content coverage, its perspective and various emphases, and an idea of how much of the book is of potential relevance to you. For most students evaluating a book for the first time, after the title, the table of contents is normally the next logical port of call in the process of determining whether or not to use it.

Once you have identified those sections of the book (if any) that seem most relevant to your purposes, skim read them to get a better sense of their potential value to you, for although they may have appeared useful at first glance, on closer scrutiny they may be less helpful than anticipated. For example, they may be approaching ideas from an unhelpful angle, tell you nothing more than you already know, or perhaps lack adequate depth.

Check indexes

Tables of contents are generally more useful than indexes in determining a book's relevance. While a table of contents will give you a sense of the book's coverage, emphases and the level of detail in which different elements are discussed, an index will normally only tell you if a particular term, idea or author appears somewhere in the book. That appearance may be little more than a passing reference or it may be a complete section. This, however, does not mean that indexes cannot be useful tools in helping you to gauge a book's potential value. For example, a concept that is important for your own research may have little written about it in the literature. As such, while any coverage of it may prove helpful to you, it may well not appear in the table of contents simply because it will not warrant a complete section or sub-section. A quick scan of the index, however, will allow you find out quickly whether the concept is mentioned in the book. If it is, you can flick to the relevant page(s) and get an idea of whether or not the discussion of the concept is substantial and/or interesting enough to deserve your attention. It's also worth remembering that indexes will often indicate not only the particular pages on which ideas appear in the book, but also the page ranges in which those ideas are discussed (e.g. 38–44). Often, a fairly large range suggests that an entire section or sub-section may be devoted to it. Sub-sections, however, are not always presented in the table of contents and consequently the index may be the only way of identifying a relevant sub-section.

Scan books or articles for key terms

Although this can be a tedious, far less efficient way of identifying and selecting information, scanning books for key names, terms or concepts can sometimes be a necessary part of the research process, especially for books that do not have an index, as is sometimes the case with edited volumes. Flicking through a book can also give you a sense of its depth and overall academic quality and integrity – something that a table of contents will not necessarily provide.

Read bibliographies

The bibliographies of articles and books can be a rich source of further information on a particular subject.

Scan library shelves

Although, as we have seen, most searching today can be done electronically, a scan of the relevant sections of library shelves can sometimes throw up unexpected sources that were not in your original 'game plan' and which might not have appeared via an electronic search, simply because you did not input the necessary trigger word or phrase or had not considered an idea or approach that strikes you only as you look through the titles of books or articles that lie before you in hard copy. It may feel a little old-fashioned but wandering up and down university aisles still has its place, so be careful not to dismiss it as outdated and a waste of time!

Read book reviews

While it's important not to take everything you read at face value and to remember that people look for different things in books and will therefore often view them differently, online book reviews – particularly those written by academically credible individuals – can nevertheless give you a helpful glimpse into the areas a book covers, how it covers them and its overall strengths and weaknesses. Although general websites such as Amazon should probably be treated with greater caution in this regard, reviews appearing within respected journals should be given more weight, and, once again, can be accessed either in hard copy or online.

Ask a librarian!

Don't forget, librarians are often very well placed to help you in your search for relevant source material. As we saw ➡ on page 55, librarians today work within discipline-specific areas and therefore have more specialist knowledge than was previously the case. This means that they are better able than ever to help direct your searches and prevent you from wasting time by following unproductive leads. Even when you feel you've exhausted your searches, it's worth consulting a librarian to see whether there are any other avenues of inquiry you've not considered.

A final note

As you work through these strategies in order to identify appropriate source materials, you will feel as though you have embarked on a never-ending process. Just as you feel you may (finally!) have exhausted all possible leads, you come across another set of references . . . that, in turn, direct you to yet more. Hang in there though. Eventually, despite what you might think and the fact that there is always the possibility of further sources cropping up, the process eventually burns itself out. After a while you begin to find that, increasingly, you are referred to materials with which you're already familiar and/or which you may have read. This should be reassuring as it suggests you are nearing the end of your search and confirms that

A summary of strategies for selecting information

- Know what you are looking for
- Search for titles of books or articles
- Perform an internet search of relevant theories or concepts
- Perform a name search of relevant scholars
- Read abstracts
- Read synopses of books
- Look through tables of contents
- Check indexes
- Scan books or articles for key terms
- Read bibliographies
- Scan library shelves
- Read book reviews
- Ask a librarian

you've been comprehensive in tracking down relevant material. So, give yourself a gentle pat on the back. Now you can look forward to making notes and organising it all!

NOTE-MAKING

Once you've identified your source materials, you need to embark on the process of extracting and organising only that information you feel is of relevance to you. Particularly in the case of empirical research (as opposed to library-based research), it's important to remember that whether you are writing a dissertation or a thesis, note-making is not typically a neat process that is completed prior to planning, conducting and writing up your research. Although a good deal of reading and note-making will certainly take place early on once you have settled on a topic and before you begin to shape your research project in earnest, it nevertheless tends to be an ongoing process as you continually discover new material that's relevant to your research and which therefore needs to be factored in. This does not mean, however, that you cannot and should not approach this important task systematically. This section will look at some of the ways in which you can make your note-making more efficient and effective.

Directing your note-making

It can be a daunting and unproductive experience to have a pile of books and articles sitting in front of you without a clear plan of attack. Yet a surprisingly large number of