

CHAPTER 9.

USING GENRE TO TEACH THE PUBLICATION-BASED THESIS

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One key contemporary shift in doctoral writing is the growing prevalence of the publication-based thesis (PBT). A PBT refers to a broad category of theses that involve the publication of component articles during the thesis writing process. As students are increasingly encouraged to publish during the doctorate, the PBT is becoming an increasingly attractive option for many writers. Doctoral writers who choose this style of thesis will produce publishable articles while also crafting additional texts that transform those articles into an acceptable thesis. In this chapter, I will argue that doctoral writers who are undertaking this form of thesis will benefit from clear genre-based instruction to help them meet the unique challenges of the PBT.

An increased emphasis on publishing during doctoral study is leading to an increased prevalence of the publication-based thesis (Aitchison et al., 2010; Nethsinghe & Southcott, 2015; Sharmini, 2018). A publication-based thesis (PBT) is composed of some number of publishable articles, supplemented with linking texts. This type of thesis, increasingly prevalent in North America, has been common for much longer in European doctoral study (Guerin, 2016). The prevalence of this type of thesis can be generally explained by the need for speed in the communication of scientific results and the fact that many fields do not communicate research findings in book form. Given that the research community as a whole tends to benefit from the expeditious communication of results in scholarly article form (Jackson, 2013; Nethsinghe & Southcott, 2015), it is unsurprising that some doctoral writers are being encouraged to publish as part of their doctoral thesis writing process. While this move towards the PBT may sound natural and advantageous, the transition is not without challenges for doctoral writers (Robins & Kanowski, 2008). When a thesis is based on ongoing publication, decisions will need to be made about a structure for the full thesis that ultimately emerges from those publications. Those decisions will consider a range of factors: internal demands of the topic, supervisory preferences, doctoral writer assumptions, and

disciplinary and geographic culture. However, even with guidance, the inherent challenges of this thesis structure mean that doctoral writers may be uncertain about how to manage the writing task (Autry & Carter, 2015; Pretorius, 2017).

This uncertainty is exacerbated by the way that discussions of thesis writing often pay less attention to variant forms. Since treatments of thesis writing often assume—implicitly or explicitly—a more traditional thesis form, the issues connected to the unique features of a PBT may be ignored. As a result, the support that is available for thesis writers may still be failing to offer insight into the specific challenges faced by PBT writers. While the PBT is not novel, particularly in many scientific fields, it is not common in the humanities fields in which most North American writing specialists have themselves been trained. Much of the conversation, especially within the thesis advice genre (Kamler & Thomson, 2008), tends to assume the traditional thesis as its model. This assumption, however, can seem problematic in light of the growing prevalence of the PBT; it is crucial that those who provide writing support to graduate students are able to provide advice to doctoral writers preparing to write PBTs. In this chapter, I will discuss how situating the PBT within the broader thesis genre can facilitate teaching this form of thesis. I will begin by characterizing the PBT and its relationship to other thesis patterns before going on to discuss the benefits of employing a genre approach to confront the unique challenges of the PBT. Throughout, I will argue that a clear understanding of the generic workings of the PBT is essential for doctoral writers seeking to undertake this increasingly widespread form of thesis.

DEFINING THE PUBLICATION-BASED THESIS

To understand the PBT, it may be helpful to picture it in the middle of a continuum with the traditional thesis at one end and the portfolio thesis at the other (see Figure 9.1).

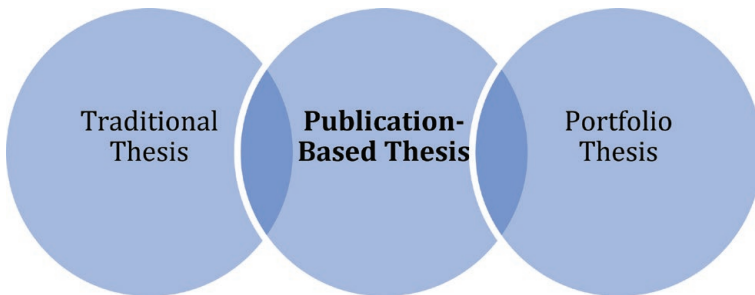


Figure 9.1: Continuum from Traditional Thesis to Portfolio Thesis. Three interlocking circles with overlap between traditional thesis and publication-based thesis and overlap between publication-based thesis and portfolio thesis.

At one extreme, we have the traditional thesis, also known as a monograph or big-book thesis, which is essentially a book-length text with a single, coherent narrative; this type of thesis is entirely integrated with each chapter providing additional development of a project set out in the introduction and resolved in the conclusion. In all likelihood, such a thesis will be publishable only in significantly altered form: either transformed into a monograph or even more transformed into an article or series of articles. At the other extreme is the portfolio thesis, a form of thesis in which a certain amount of publishing will “equal” a thesis, without requiring a separate text to be written. This type of thesis is also known as a stapler thesis, an evocative name that illustrates the mechanism by which the papers become a thesis. This process is sometimes called a Ph.D. by publication, a name that highlights the absence of an actual thesis: the Ph.D. is achieved by amassing a certain amount of publication without requiring that any additional text be generated. Between these two poles, we find the PBT, also known as the article-based thesis, paper-style thesis, or manuscript thesis. Since this terminology involves a lot of overlapping terms and since it is absolutely used differently by different people, I want to be clear that I am making a distinction between a thesis that is replaced by sufficient publication—what I am here calling a portfolio thesis—and a PBT. My decision to use the term publication-based thesis is deliberate: a PBT is a thesis that is based on publication, not a thesis that is replaced by publication. From a writing perspective, this distinction is crucial because a portfolio thesis can be a much more transparent writing task. The composite articles will need to be crafted according to disciplinary norms and journal specifications, both of which provide the doctoral writer with relatively accessible guidance. The PBT, on the other hand, challenges doctoral writers by requiring that the articles be supplemented with a novel type of text, one that is rarely discussed in pedagogical terms.

Presenting the PBT as part of a continuum is a useful way to help doctoral writers manage the extreme variability that exists within this model of thesis writing. In all PBTs, writers are being asked to produce published or publishable articles and then to write linking texts unifying those articles. Those linking texts generally include an introduction and conclusion as well as discussions of scholarly literature, methods, and results. The extent and placement of those linking texts can vary widely. It is easy to find examples in which the published papers are greatly transformed to become part of a highly integrated thesis; similarly, it is easy to find examples in which the published papers are completely untouched and only loosely yoked by the unifying thesis texts. The extent of this variability means that situating the PBT within a continuum can be instructive for a writer who is in the process of establishing the optimal structure for their own amalgamation of published material and linking texts.

To properly grasp the diversity of the PBT requires a discussion of both disciplinary and geographic difference. The prevalence of the PBT varies from field to field and does so in a predictable manner. In the sciences, where speed of publication in research article form is crucial, the notion of a thesis that builds on publishable articles has long made sense. In the humanities, where speed is less prized and where scholarly monographs are still a valuable currency, the traditional thesis remains central. In the social sciences, where scholarly communication has been moving more towards research articles, we see some growth of the PBT as well as continued replication of the traditional thesis. This disciplinary variation and the fact that practices are in flux in many fields make it vital that the PBT be conceptualized from a pedagogical perspective. Thesis structures also vary decisively along geographic lines; it can be hard enough to establish thesis-writing practices at a single institution, let alone across institutions or across countries. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to give an empirical overview of thesis-writing practices; my investigation of this issue within my own university has shown me that practices of thesis writing are highly local and often poorly supported by institutional discourses (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). The value of a continuum is that it opens a pedagogical space to talk about the model of the PBT without needing to specify the particular arrangement that any one writer might use to organize their work. Thesis writers need to design PBTs that meet institutional requirements and satisfy supervisory preference; both of those demands will naturally be influenced by disciplinary and geographic trends. Most thesis writers need pedagogical insights about the thesis that can then be adapted and shaped according to dictates of their particular writing situation; this need is particularly acute for those working in the relatively indeterminate space created by the variable forms of PBTs found across the continuum.

UNDERSTANDING THE THESIS AS A GENRE

Once this continuum has been presented, the idea of thesis as a genre (Autry & Carter, 2015; Carter, 2011; Cheng, 2018; Swales, 2004; Tardy, 2009) can be used to explain the rhetorical goals and constraints of the PBT. Using genre to teach advanced academic writing means alerting writers to the ways in which texts are designed to act in particular situations (Artemeva, 2004; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Miller, 1984; Paré, 2014). In order to broaden the teaching of thesis writing to include the PBT, it is crucial to see the structural patterns of the PBT against the backdrop of the broader genre of a doctoral thesis. A doctoral thesis can be seen as having two key imperatives: communicating research and displaying expertise. In a traditional thesis, these two elements are intertwined; in order to have the research findings taken seriously, a thesis writer must go be-

yond research communication to demonstrate their own expertise. The explicit performance of expertise can be seen as the defining aspect of the doctoral thesis: the goal of the thesis is the dissemination of novel research but that dissemination must be lodged within a broader framework of expertise. That scholarly display work is what ultimately allows the committee (on behalf of the department, faculty, and institution) to aver that the candidate's research has met the requirements of the Ph.D. In a portfolio thesis, on the other hand, the work of communicating research and displaying expertise are completely coextensive: the publications communicate the research while also, through the gatekeeping function of scholarly publishing, vouching for the expertise of the writer. In contrast to these two models, the PBT rests on a notable disaggregation of the communication of research and the display of expertise.

This disaggregation highlights why the PBT can be challenging to a doctoral writer. The doctoral writer has already communicated their research via the scholarly apparatus of a research article, a process that has been implicitly validated through the peer review process. The need to produce additional texts—ones which primarily exist to display expertise—may be puzzling. However, once the doctoral writer grasps the dual imperatives of the thesis genre, it is much easier to elaborate what the PBT requires of a writer. The basic form of the PBT is, of course, fairly straightforward: doctoral writers will readily understand that they must combine publishable articles with new texts that will transform that collection of articles into a thesis. The prevalence of this form of thesis means that many doctoral writers will expect to write one and will thus see doing so as natural. As time goes on, more and more doctoral writers are sure to be writing with supervisors who themselves wrote a PBT, which will presumably further increase their prevalence. For some doctoral writers, depending on discipline, the choice to write a PBT may be more daring; in some cases, those writers may need to convince their committee of the advisability of this form of thesis. Regardless of the route to the PBT, all doctoral writers undertaking this form of thesis will be entirely clear on its basic form. However, that superficial clarity can readily give way to a sense of puzzlement about the structure and purposes of the linking texts. In a PBT, the author has to demonstrate their expertise even though the research in question has already been shaped and presented in article form. To do so requires that the writer understand that there are rhetorical functions of the thesis that have not been exhausted by the published articles. That is, the writer needs to understand that they may need to demonstrate their expertise with a substantial literature review, with an extended discussion of methods and methodological rationale, and with a fuller account of their data. In order to provide this essential display work, the author has to create an infrastructure for the thesis: a surrounding set of texts doing the thesis work that the articles were not built to do.

To teach the PBT, we need to teach doctoral writers about the overarching genre of the thesis and then help them to understand how their linking texts must meet those generic demands. As Misty Anne Winzenried argues in “Learning to Argue about the Literature: Discourse Choices and Students’ Iterative Learning of Literature Reviews in Geography” (this volume), having genre awareness is not necessarily sufficient for the satisfactory production of the type of text in question; however, the introduction of genre raises the potential that a doctoral writer may be able to reframe their writing challenges in generic terms. The PBT has to do the same work as any thesis, but do so without the generic reassurance of a more integrated thesis. To help a doctoral writer find a more comfortable place from which to write, the challenges of the PBT need to be reframed as a by-product of a particular manifestation of the thesis genre. This reframing means, first, characterizing the challenges of the PBT as inherent to its disaggregation of research communication and expertise display and, second, treating the linking texts of the PBT as having distinct generic features. Grasping these features of the linking texts will allow doctoral writers to move beyond the idea that such texts are an arbitrary imposition, a kind of institutional busywork imposed on the writer even though they have already done the work of preparing their research for scholarly publication. Crucially, in my experience, exploring the justification for these linking texts helps doctoral writers to see that the difficulties of the PBT may be more in conception than in execution. In truth, writing the linking texts need not be as difficult as writing the articles; however, the degree of uncertainty attending those texts may mean that the writer finds them significantly more challenging.

CHALLENGES OF THE PUBLICATION-BASED THESIS

The most common challenges facing PBT writers are managing repetition and establishing coherence. Managing repetition is an issue since the publishable papers will already exist as standalone texts; when the writer tries to link the articles, they often struggle to write linking texts without simply repeating what has already been said. This concern about repetition needs to be seen within the broader context of thesis writing; the thesis writing process is already fraught with worries about repetition. Managing a book-length project inevitably involves anxiety about undue repetition. As writers live with a research project over a number of years, they can become so habituated to its fundamental dimensions that they naturally lose the ability to accurately conceptualize the needs of the reader; what the reader would experience as a healthy amount of repetition can start to feel, to the thesis writer, like a problematic degree of repetition. If this is, as I believe, a basic condition of thesis writing, it is exacerbated for the

writer of a PBT, who will need to engage in some fairly explicit repetition. Establishing coherence is also challenging because the writer must introduce and situate a collection of papers that may not blend seamlessly. To bring together an assemblage of papers that may have been written at different points in time within an evolving research agenda requires a degree of higher-order thinking that may tax a thesis writer, especially one who is deeply engaged with the current minutiae of their project. While it is entirely possible to advise doctoral writers on how to manage repetition and cohesion in their particular PBT, these writers could benefit from a better understanding of the overarching generic features of a PBT; indeed, the struggles of PBT writers may be best understood as a lack of familiarity with the purposes of the linking texts. By using the notion of the thesis genre to elaborate on the purposes of the linking texts, instructors could guide doctoral writers to a deeper engagement with these texts. The very notion of undue repetition and insufficient coherence arguably comes from a misconception of the thesis genre. Once its rhetorical features are laid bare, the work of the linking texts starts to make sense: they are the locus for crucial display work. The perceived challenges of repetitiveness and incoherence can be reframed through an elaboration of the purpose of these moves.

In practice, reframing these challenges means showing how the PBT works to meet its generic demands by displaying common subgeneric patterns of the linking texts. In my work with doctoral writers in the classroom, I identify three such patterns: isolated scholarly display, strong authorial presence, and mediated repetition. The scholarly display work of the PBT is isolated in that it must appear outside the bounds of the research article. These linking texts will generally include a distinct literature review that is either a standalone chapter or a significant part of the introduction. Similarly, extensive discussions of methods, technical details, or raw data—all of which were necessarily excluded from the published articles—may appear in a PBT either in the linking texts or in appendices. Drawing attention to the isolated display work of a PBT allows me to highlight the rhetorical value of these linking texts; while the published articles may have done the work of research communication, the thesis itself requires something more from the writer. Isolating that display of expertise may not feel natural to a writer, but the presentation of that expertise will feel requisite for the thesis reader. Not understanding the rhetorical value of this isolated scholarly display can have an inhibiting effect on the writer: even when a writer has a great deal to say on a particular topic, concerns about the aptness of their communication can undermine a writer's confidence. Taking a generic approach to the linking texts can give the writer the confidence to elaborate on crucial material that might otherwise have felt awkward alongside the familiar rhythm of the research articles.

A strong authorial presence can also be discerned across the linking texts of the PBT; indeed, authorial voice is necessary since the overall thesis will have a unique structure. Each PBT is put together in a singular manner, reflective of the way the composite articles work together; authors must assert themselves to guide the reader through that singular structure. It is common to see a real difference between the authorial voice employed in the articles and that found in the linking texts. This authorial framing tends to appear in the introduction and the conclusion; it may also appear in prefatory remarks or in comments attached to the published articles. Since doctoral writers often manifest a certain reticence about placing themselves explicitly in the text as the author, these linking texts can place unwelcome authorial demands. The essential dynamic of these texts is to provide the authorial framing that will bring potentially dissimilar elements together in a manner that guides the reader and provides an adequate conceptualization of the whole research project. Drawing attention to the authorial voice required in a PBT allows me to highlight the legitimacy of the authority claimed by the writer who uses these linking texts to explain the coherence of their overall research project.

Finally, a close examination of PBT linking texts shows mediated repetition: material that is notably similar to that found in the articles must appear with significantly different framing. This mediated repetition can be offered unapologetically by the writer because it is expected by the reader. Drawing attention to repetition as an expected and desirable feature of the linking texts allows me to highlight a more nuanced understanding of repetition. For the reader, expertly managed repetition is their only route to understanding the overarching narrative of the full research project; when a thesis writer hesitates to use the linking texts to reiterate their project from a broader perspective, the thesis reader may struggle to see the project in sufficient breadth. An understanding of these three sub-generic features—*isolated scholarly display*, *strong authorial presence*, and *mediated repetition*—can help guide a thesis writer to produce linking texts that meet the demands of the broader thesis genre.

VALUE OF A GENRE-BASED APPROACH

Teaching the PBT as a particular manifestation of the thesis genre provides a way to guide doctoral writers before they start writing; using genre to reframe the challenges experienced by the writer makes it possible to give guidance that anticipates writing challenges rather than just responding to them once the writer is already struggling. Elaborating these patterns can save writers both time and frustration by acknowledging generic anomalies and then providing strategic guidance. Teaching the PBT in this way has also convinced me of its inherent

value. By undertaking a PBT, doctoral writers are engaging with the pedagogical as well as the professional benefits of thesis writing (Aitchison et al., 2010). The traditional thesis is a highly pedagogical text, one that seeks to benefit the writer while requiring additional effort to arrive at publishable material for professional benefit (Paré, 2017). On the other hand, a true portfolio thesis can move the needle entirely in the direction of professional benefit without necessarily giving the writer the pedagogical benefits of thesis writing (Frick, 2019). Arguably, the PBT affords a doctoral writer the professional benefit of publishing while still requiring the development of crucial academic skills: the ability to articulate a sustained research agenda and the formation of an identity as an academic writer to communicate that research. As we saw above, the linking texts give the thesis writer space to articulate how the whole project coheres, even in cases when that coherence may feel elusive to the researcher. In a similar manner, the linking texts are an opportunity for the thesis writer to take explicit authorial responsibility for the text. Seen in this manner, the linking texts framed as crucial to the generic tasks of the thesis can potentially move from an unwelcome and arbitrary burden to an opportunity to build capacity in the realm of scholarly communication.

These intriguing benefits of the PBT mean that a doctoral writer undertaking this task may be getting a desirable blend of pedagogical and professional benefit from the thesis writing process. Given this possible benefit and the undeniable prevalence of the PBT model, supporting thesis writers by presenting its generic challenges and patterns is a worthwhile project. Doctoral researchers who are writing a PBT, even if they are doing so by choice, often express frustration at having to do anything beyond the already exacting task of publishing their research within a competitive scholarly communication context. Supporting these writers with an understanding of the generic challenges and patterns of the PBT can give them the ability to approach the linking texts with a sense of commitment to the value of those texts and a confidence in their own capacity to manage the challenges.

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