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How to Research and Write in Graduate School:

Below are my annotated notes of Anne Sigismund Huff, Writing for Scholarly Publication (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999). I have added my own ideas and advice directed specifically to the graduate students of HIST/MI 589: Religion in the Urban Landscape, offered Spring, 2000 at the University of Notre Dame. But what follows closely follows her book. I recommend all the graduate students taking this seminar read this book and I strongly encourage them to purchase the volume and keep it as one of your standard reference books.

Huff bases her model of research on the idea that academic research is participation in a conversation; it's participation in dialogue...a dialogue that spans space and time. If you write only for yourself, no one will care to read it, and your career will go no where because no one will publish what you write. Given that, she encourages clear communication as a means to active and fruitful participation in your particular conversations.

To get started in your research you must first consider what area you want to work on. She poses four questions that you should answer as you begin a research project (p. 9):

Which conversations should I participate in?

Who are the important 'conversants'?

What are these scholars talking about now?

What are the most interesting things I can add to the conversation?

Choose conversations (i.e. research questions) that will not burn out by the time you are ready to enter the conversation. In other words, choose a topic that will still be timely and make a contribution when you are ready to publish.

The academic life is all about active engagement in scholarly conversations. Prepare yourself to participate and influence the academic conversation(s) you choose to enter. Don't be tentative and don't hide behind the shield of "I'm only a first-year graduate student." Begin now: think in terms of which academic conversations you want to participate in. Begin now to formulate your responses to those already participating in this/these debate(s).

Along the way as you formulate your ideas you will want to talk with people. The worst thing a scholar can do is exist in isolation. People are often hesitant to ask others to listen to their ideas ultimately because they are afraid. They may say, "Oh I don't want to waste this person's time," and that is a valid point. We must respect one another's time. **BUT DO NOT ASSOCIATE YOUR SELF SO CLOSELY**

WITH YOUR IDEAS THAT YOU DO NOT RISK TESTING YOUR IDEAS BY SHARING THEM WITH OTHERS! Huff writes (p. 10), "People hesitate to seek or give advice because they do not sufficiently separate ideas from their carriers." She continues, "But what I am thinking about today is a very small part of who I am, and what you are thinking about today says relatively little about who you are."

Remember that. Some academics tend to pigeon-hole colleagues based on a single academic "performance," be it a conference paper, guest lecture or the like. Ideas develop over time and within community. Part of the academic life is to create a community in which people share and try out ideas. Another part of the academic life is to participate in just such a community, by both trying out and sharing your own ideas and by listening to others as they try out and share their ideas. The academic life is not just about the performance of these ideas, although this too is part of academe.

When it comes to choosing a research topic (pp. 38-9):

1. choose one that you are truly enthusiastic about
2. consider how your topic fits into your field of scholarship; your topic has to be of interest to others!
3. Be inclusive with what you include in your present work; don't ration your ideas in hopes of writing two articles instead of just one. Include all your relevant and sound ideas in your present work.
4. consider the need for this study. Is it necessary to further your field?
5. Do you have access to the relevant sources to research your topic?

Huff bases her ideas on the assumption (with which I agree) that scholarship is socially defined and pursued (p. 45)

Various kinds of conversations go into scholarship. The most formal kinds are articles and books, according to Huff. I would also add conference papers. These formal forms of communication are the venue for making definitive statements with the intention of influencing others. Scholarly work is all about influencing others. In order to pursue this, you must take yourself and your work seriously. You must then identify the works with which you will engage in your own work. Huff suggests limiting these to three or four written documents.

Just as I asked each of you at the beginning of the semester to bring in an article or book that you admired and asked you to discuss the author's method and how you expected to imitate it in your own work, Huff also suggests that you find an exemplar written work that accomplishes the kind of approach that you want to do in your own work. Your exemplar does not have to be on the same subject, but uses a method or approach that you find effective and that you want to do yourself. Keep this exemplar around for when you are writing and have questions such as how much detail to include. Your exemplar will be your guide on the conventions of scholarly publication. You are not to merely copy the exemplar. Instead you must be able to stand apart from the work(s) that you choose as exemplary and state what contribution you are making.

Writing:

chapter 6: Titles and Abstracts

The title of a work is crucial to attract readers and to accurately summarize the whole work. This semester in our discussions, a few critiques of works have ultimately rested on the title as misrepresenting the content of the work at hand. In addition, your title must be engaging to attract readers who are busy.

To write an effective title and abstract, you should have an idea of who your audience is. Imagine who your audience is and then put yourself in their place when you write. Do what you need to do in order to facilitate communication of your ideas and your argument to this audience.

p. 69: "The title and abstract locate the work in a specific scholarly conversation but also try to appeal to the largest possible audience." The trick is not to err in being either too general in your title, as to attract many unintended readers, or too narrow, allowing others who would be interested in your work to overlook it.

In addition, your title needs to be informative.

Huff suggests writing at least three different titles; write out the pros and cons of each title. Then discuss the list with others. Afterward, decide on the best working title for your work.

Your abstract is also used to attract readers. It should include a statement regarding the contribution of your piece to the field.

Outlines: (p.77)

An Outline provides practical assistance on several levels

1. it provides a summary of the order and logic of the work
2. it forces the author to highlight the main argument, major points, and supporting material
3. it gives the author direction and focus, so s/he does not need to rely on continued "inspiration" to continue writing. S/he can see the whole work in smaller, workable/do-able units.
4. as you take on larger and more complex works, you will benefit all the more from having established a habit of outlining, since outlines help you arrange your material in logical order. Whenever I read a paper that is diffused and disorganized, I ask the student to make an outline of the present work, before they set out to revise the paper. Creating an outline of what they had written allows them to see quite clearly what they had written spontaneously: a random order of ideas. Creating an outline before writing helps you avoid this; and writing an outline after you write, helps you see what you've done.

p. 79-80: Your job as a scholar is to say something new, but it is dangerous (especially as a junior member of the profession) to present your contribution in an unfamiliar format. "You risk losing [the attention of the audience] before payoff if you insist on unnecessary departures from the expectations of established discourse." Koziol (based on Kertzer) talks about the authority that comes from using widely recognized formulae of discourse; the same applies to academic writing. If you do not follow the formulae, scholars will likely not engage with your piece.

Outlines also help you identify where you are putting your most important piece of information: the statement of your contribution. Is it buried on page 4? Is it up front and highlighted with a subheading?

Evaluate your outline carefully. Many authors place give too much space to the contributions of other scholars and not enough space to highlighting their own contribution. Consider moving your conclusion to the top.

Part of the writing process is to discuss your work with others. To facilitate the process of getting good, helpful, and sound advice on your argument, give your outline to others to look over, not your draft. If your draft is unfocussed, vague, unorganized, your reader will get bogged down in advising you on how to clarify your writing. But what you want and need is feedback on your argument. Don't blame the reader if s/he gives you advice that you didn't want. Instead, facilitate the process of engaging her/him in the discussion you want to have on your argument by sharing your outline.

Introduction and Conclusion: (chapter 8)

The role of the introduction is varied: it must increase the reader's desire to continue reading. It must be provocative, but further it must lead the reader in the direction your argument will go and it must include critical content of what follows.

When evaluating your introduction, ask yourselves the same questions that any reader consciously or not asks:

1. is this work actually going to follow through and offer something interesting to me?
2. is it worth the effort and time it will take me to understand the point?

Readers who answer either of these questions in the negative will usually not continue reading.

Your conclusion needs to be able to stand on its own. The conclusion should not merely repeat what has already been said in the body of the work. Such repetition bores any intelligent and active reader. And yet, the reader who has stayed with you through the end will need to be brought back into the broader picture and be told how your analysis fits in. Those who have skimmed the work, and who most likely jump from your Introduction to your Conclusion, grazing here and there in between, will need to be told what the contribution you have made. Huff encourages the author to ADD one additional thought to the conclusion that further amplifies the work's significance.

Huff makes important statements about how to lay out your argument at pp.89-91. I emphasize one of these points which she makes on p.91:

“Lay a ‘bread crumb trail’ for the rest of the paper in the Introduction and continue it through the body of the work. In your abstract you should begin this trail with 3-5 key concepts or key words which then appear and are developed through the work. They all appear again, fully developed and analyzed in the conclusion.”

Presentation of Material (chapter 9)

The oral presentation of material being worked up into a written form is an important and necessary step along the way. Most scholars present their work in conference before publishing the work, hence the reason behind our class conference. The conference gives you the opportunity to present your ideas with authority and confidence in a formal venue. For her purpose in making the oral presentation an important part of the writing process, Huff adapts the context of a quote from Samuel Johnson, originally speaking about someone facing execution. Huff says that the commitment to make a public presentation clarifies the mind wonderfully. By presenting your work to others, you get immediate feedback from the looks of their faces; you know whether your ideas and presentation are interesting and articulate.

But be balanced in your own response to the feedback you get. Glean from the helpful and constructive comments that will further your thinking about your topic, and pay less attention to those complimentary comments that puff you up or to negative comments that could deflate you. Do not respond with your emotions. Instead enter into the presentation knowing that you are there for completely intellectual reasons. You do not need to get bogged down or elated by comments made from other peoples' emotions. Remember, the main purpose of the oral presentation is to get feedback that will further your work.

Your job in the presentation is to elicit responses. There are many ways to do that. Huff delineates some basic must-do items on p. 97:

1. capture the attention of the audience
2. identify your subject clearly
3. provide (briefly) an overview of the work already done in the area
4. specify very clearly the contribution that you are making
5. always leave them interested and wanting more

Even if you don't have a conference scheduled before you plan to write up an article, try presenting your material orally before you write your draft.

Huff, herself, has found that some of the easiest writing she has done followed the slides she used for presentation. So consider making up a PowerPoint presentation of your work. What points will you make into a slide and how will you articulate that point. (Keep in mind the best presentation slides have a minimum of words and often incorporate diagrams. Look at Huff's own slides on her webpage for ideas.)

While preparing your slides, keep in mind (p. 98) that the skillful presenter can reach out to a wide variety of people, eliciting their interest in her/his work when they were not necessarily interested before.

Oral presentation of your work often requires simplification of material, which does not mean watering down content, but does mean clear, precise, vivid language and voice.

Basics to keep in mind for your presentation (pp. 100-101)

Capture the attention of your audience

the first few minutes are critical; in conferences people in the audience come in and out all the time; your job is to keep them there by engaging them.

Some of your credibility will be established by the person introducing you; you do the rest in how you present and what you present.

Make eye contact with everyone; don't just look at one part of the room. And make some personal connection with the audience. (This advice needs to be adjusted when addressing a huge audience, where people are sitting above in a balcony. The one and only time I addressed such a crowd (1000 people), I endeavored to follow this advice of making eye contact, only to be greeted with glaring spot lights beaming from the balcony. I was blinded by them. In addition, when I saw a video tape of my talk afterwards, I saw that looking up toward the balcony wasn't effective. On tape it looked like I was gazing at the ceiling. So, my advice is if you decide to engage the people up in the balcony, do so not by just looking up there; you must actually bring them in by saying something specifically to them.)

Make sure the attention of you audience is on your main message and not on the bells and whistles you may decide to use to convey your message. In other words, don't create distractions for your audience. You must control, as much as possible, all the factors leading to the presentation of your main point: handouts, slides, other audio-visual media...If in the end they distract your audience, they're not worth it.

Take time away from writing to prepare your presentation. (p. 101) Often scholars invest too much time in writing their paper and leave too little time in preparing themselves and their materials for a sound and effective oral presentations. It's a dysfunctional decision. Remember: the oral presentation is a kind of thinking that you must exploit to refine your thinking. You shortchange yourself if you do not make an effective presentation because you were busy rewriting up until the last minute.

Also remember that audiences differ...even academic audiences. A conference paper at Kalamazoo differs from one at the Medieval Academy; and both differ from a job talk to a History Department, which in turn differs from a job talk to an Interdisciplinary Department. Know your audience and their interests. Know what you have to offer them.

Practice your presentation before hand, including outloud in front of the mirror. Be comfortable with your voice and use your entire body, from voice to gestures, to emphasize critical points. You may also try to rehearse before a group of friends. I did this before my interview at Virginia Tech, not on my research talk, but on my classroom presentation, since I had only occasional classroom experience as a graduate student. I know that the rehearsal made all the difference. Some faculty at Tech still talk about my classroom lecture that day as an example of good teaching. And I am quite aware of the many last minute changes—including changes made while I was in front of the classroom—based on the feedback I got from rehearsing it ahead of time with others who had undergraduate teaching experience. So whenever I hear someone mention that lecture, I quickly think of and acknowledge my colleagues who helped me by hearing me rehearse it.

Chapter 10: Body of the Paper and First Full Draft

This chapter begins to be redundant, as Huff has already been addressing the writing process all along. But some important advice is included here, such as the following:

Keep a folder on your computer or a drawer in your desk to "dump" material that is unnecessary for the present project. I prefer to call this my "Archive;" Huff calls it a "dump." Regardless, it is an important folder where you will store ideas for future projects while you keep your present project folder clear of those ideas and material that would only clutter your thinking.

Many scholars and writers have cultivated the habit of writing everyday. Make it a habit. If possible, set aside a specific time and place where you are completely in control of what goes on and you can write without disruption. For me, at least when I am in Blacksburg, that is every morning between 6-8:00 a.m. My dog, Gracie, likes to sleep late, so I know I will not suffer any disruptions during that time. I find it consoling to write in my study while hearing her not-so-delicate snoring emanating from my bedroom.

Cultivate the ability to stand away from the section you are writing and consider the work as a whole. In addition, cultivate the ability to truly stand apart from your writing and assess it for clarity and logical flow. Periodically, you may need to set a piece aside for a day or a week, or as in the case of a completed dissertation, even longer, so you can reassess the work and see it fresh.

Consider creating a writing group—a group of colleagues with whom you share your drafts. During my second year at Tech I formed just such a group of interdisciplinary scholars. David Burr, another medievalist, is in the group, but other than David, my colleagues pursue a rather wide variety of research in the Humanities. The interdisciplinary nature of the group has helped all of us write for larger audiences, as we are quick to point out insider terminology and argumentation. We meet every other week to discuss a pre-circulated article or chapter which one of us has written. It has become an important activity that we all look forward to in our professional lives in Blacksburg, and frankly it is one of the things I have missed, even though I still participate long-distance. The bi-weekly meetings allow an informal and open venue for the exchange of ideas.

I would add that from the beginning of your writing, you follow the style form of your discipline. With some variants, the standard style for Historians is the Chicago Manual of Style. Learn the style format now and use it regularly. It will save you time in the future. Over the years I have read dissertation chapters of people who state that they are about to submit, and I find their notes full of inconsistent reference styles. They tend to say, "Oh, I can do that at the last minute." But I'll warn you from experience, making references consistent over a book-length manuscript is time-consuming and tedious. Do not underestimate the time it takes. Avoid that tedium by learning the proper style now and use it consistently/ Also be aware that each journal or publisher may have its own style sheet. Request it when it comes time for you to prepare your piece for submission.

Chapter 11: Revision, Submission; Revision and Publication

Anticipate that most projects take longer than you originally anticipate. Expect to revise the work many times.

Revision takes place on many different levels:

1. check content (Use Appendix C, a checklist of important components of a published work)
2. revise for writing style; read through the manuscript JUST for style, looking out for repetitious passages, including redundant and recurring use of words. Is your language superfluous? Edit out unnecessary passages.
3. Read through looking specifically at grammar. Are you consistent in the voice you use? Is your grammar cumbersome? (If you spend anytime at all in Germany, you may fall into a rather common trap of Germanizing your English. I caution you to be on the look out for this.) Do not depend solely on the spell-check feature of your computer. Obviously use that feature first and then make a careful pass through the work looking for spelling errors. If need be, do this by reading through the text from back to front.
Also, make sure you spell all proper names correctly! The point at which you refer incorrectly to a colleague, you open yourself up for cheap attacks. Respect your colleagues enough to get their names correct!
4. Read through the text, perhaps out loud. Is this your real voice? Or is it stilted, pedantic? Or is it too informal?
5. Be careful not to fall in love with anything you write. Be prepared to cull any word, sentence or passage from the whole if need be. In addition, be prepared at any point in your drafting of the work to completely reorganize and rewrite every single word.

The chapter ends with several pages pertinent to the actual submission of a piece for publication. Make sure you read those pages.