



Resensies / Reviews

Die ander letterkundige storie

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Doing research. 2nd ed. Bloemfontein: Sun Media. 140 p.
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Reviewer: B. van Rooy
Vaal Triangle Campus, Vanderbijlpark
North-West University

Doing research is a short how-to introduction to research for complete novices. The most likely reader is a student who is about to start with a research Masters degree, while honours students may also derive some value from the book. This revised edition appeared originally in 2005 when it was a single-volume outcome of a research development project at the Central University of Technology.

The context of the book is the pressure on tertiary institutions to increase their research output – both articles and postgraduate studies. At the former technikons, where research was not inscribed in the institutional culture to the same degree as the traditional universities, the need for guidance was all the more pressing.

The book is presented in sixteen chapters, labelled as themes that address basic concepts in research, postgraduate supervision, aspects of a research toolkit such as empirical research and modelling, and a larger proportion devoted to the writing and presentation of research including referencing, linguistic style, layout and conference presentations. Compared to the first edition, the revised edition is considerably more condensed: from 207 to 137 pages in the main body, and from 26 chapters in five sections to sixteen themes without any subdivisions.

Theme 1, “Doing research: navigating the process”, provides context about the need for doing research and postgraduate studies, and offers basic definitions of the research process. A lot of emphasis is

placed on challenges/stumbling blocks that prevent output to be produced. This is followed by theme 2, "What is postgraduate supervision about", offering a range of tips to students and supervisors alike, such as symptoms of students not coping, the importance of record-keeping, and quality assurance within higher education. The theme is written collectively by six authors, and totals five pages and a paragraph. This gives the impression that each contributor added some information from his/her own area of expertise.

The next four themes deal with the planning and design of research projects. Theme 3, "The research process", expands on the introductory concepts from theme 1 and concludes with a list of practical steps to enrol for a study. In theme 4, "Proper research proposals", more detail is provided on the proposal document, which is already introduced in theme 3. Theme 5, "Empirical research" offers basic information about data collection and statistical analysis, including sampling, experimental design, surveys and questionnaires. It even includes an appendix with random numbers (p. 45). This is followed in theme 6 by a crash course in an alternative strategy, modelling of data using mathematical, statistical or physical models.

Theme 7 addresses the important issue of "The quest for academic integrity", with emphasis on intellectual property and plagiarism. It offers specific guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism.

Themes 8-11 deal with the writing process, closely followed by two themes devoted to referencing. A very general and brief (3 pages) overview of "Scientific writing" is offered in theme 8, with emphasis on ten questions that address matters of content and substance (including research problems, concepts, research design, literature review, data collection, conclusions and references). Theme 9, "Writing a research report", deals with the headings and sections typical in a report, especially the earlier parts, such as title page, abstract, acknowledgements, content and the main parts that go into chapters. It offers a range of practical guidelines, such as how to write impersonally, using the past tense, choice of words, and even highlights the value of reading to be exposed to models of good writing. In theme 10, "Some guiding principles for legible academic reports", advice is offered on font types and sizes, headings, page numbering and other aspects of layout. "Matters of linguistic style" receive attention in theme 11, including grammar and expressions (choice of words), tone and paragraphing, with a section devoted to typical problems with punctuation. Themes 12 and 13 offer discussions and examples of two widely used referencing methods, the Harvard method and numbered references respectively.

The next two themes deal with oral presentation of research such as conference papers. Theme 14, "Practical pointers in presenting research" covers planning, an understanding of the audience, the selection of content (data, arguments), the need to rehearse, and advice for the day of presentation itself. "Verbal and non-verbal communication skills in presenting research results" receive attention in theme 15, complementing the focus on the content of presentation in the previous theme with information on the performance aspect of a conference paper. It also includes other advice on content selection and the organisation of the paper.

Theme 16 returns to an issue briefly introduced in theme 2, namely "Quality assurance of the research process".

The style of the book is extremely reader-friendly and accessible, with the prospective student being addressed directly in many of the themes. The text makes liberal use of imperatives, do and don't lists, and generally very short chapters. For somebody who knows practically nothing about research, this book will serve as a first introduction to know what he/she is about to encounter when enrolling for a postgraduate degree.

An area that is somewhat less satisfactory is the degree of overlap between themes despite the book being rather short. As a pedagogical technique, repetition may serve to enhance learning, but often, in the overlapping portions of themes, slightly different stories are offered to the reader. Thus, theme 9 repeats the traditional view that the passive voice and impersonal writing are to be preferred (p. 71), while theme 11 thematises this in a subsection and indicates that there has been a recent move towards more active writing styles (p. 85). Likewise, theme 8 offers ten questions that should be addressed in scientific writing (p. 63-65), while theme 9 suggests that research reports should answer five questions (p. 68), at rather different levels of abstraction and detail. A bit more editorial intervention to ensure consistency and non-overlapping content across themes may well be advisable if another revision is attempted in future.

The chapters often make use of bulleted lists, either statements, commands or questions. This is another valuable instructional device, provided that the lists are consistent across themes and are intrinsically sensible. Apart from minor cases of inconsistency, the technique is sometimes overused and leads to counter-intuitive formulations, such as the fourteen facts and myths about research (p. 13-14) where no distinction is made between fact and myth.

Hence it is unclear what the authors' views are, whether they believe it is a fact or myth that research is time-consuming, subjective, fun, can lead in unexpected directions, or whether it is a fact or myth that "you CAN DO research" (p. 14). It seems as if the authors, at times, in their zeal to be accessible, allowed the techniques to become more prominent than the substance being conveyed.

Overall, the book combines common-sense knowledge about research, such as one would expect most experienced researchers and supervisors to have, and brings all of that together in a single printed volume. For the complete novice, this is potentially valuable, but for any other reader, this book will have very little new information. At times, the authors rely on extremely general sources, such as theme 15 that exclusively quotes from undergraduate communication skills textbooks, including such highly improbably claims that the human brain has the capacity to listen to 650 to 700 words per minute (referenced to one of the undergraduate textbooks on p. 126). Psycholinguistic research supporting a processing speed of more than 300 words per minute is not common in the scientific literature – research on reading usually points out that reading at higher rates regresses into scanning or skimming, with not all words being attended to any more. There are a number of other similar instances, but it would serve no purpose to point these out. Suffice to say that in a number of themes, common-sense and popularised knowledge take precedence over research-based information, and hence much of the merit of the book lies in putting all the common-sense understanding of experienced researchers in writing for complete novices.