Literature Review: Guides to Dissertation Writing in the Humanities

by Dr Elizabeth Powell, October 2022

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Contents

Bibliography 3

Julia Cameron, The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering your Creative Self 8

Peter Elbow, Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process 12

Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers 15

Stephen King, On Writing: Memoir of the Craft 19

Verlyn Klinkenborg, Several Short Sentences About Writing 23

Helen Sword, Stylish Academic Writing 26

Joan Bolker, How to Write Your Thesis in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis 27

Umberto Eco, How To Write A Thesis 30

Wellington, Jerry, Ann-Mari Bathmaker, Cheryl Hunt, Gary McCulloch and Pat Skies, eds. *Succeeding with Your Doctorate*. SAGE Study Skills 2005. 34

Hopko, Joel, Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison, The Religion and Theology Student's Writer's Manual and Rader's Guide 35

Michael Kibbe, From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research 36

John Allan Knight and Ian S Markham, The Craft of Innovative Theology: Argument and Process 39

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, Quality Research Papers: For Students in Theology and Religion 43

Lucretia B Yaghjian, Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric of Theological and Biblical Writers 46

Bibliography

On Writing

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Overview

This review of guides for dissertation writing in the humanities includes fourteen books organised by a three-fold division:

1) 'On Writing', including two books that are primarily for creative writers (Cameron; King) but have been found useful by academics for book/dissertation writing; three works that are intentionally genre-busting, that is, whose advice on writing stems from the conviction that the fundamental principles of 'good writing' does not differ across contexts (Elbow 1989; Elbow 1973; Klinkenborg); and finally, a guide for academic writers that aims to shift disciplinary conventions by increasing the range and quality of styles/genres used in academic prose (Sword).
2) 'On Dissertation Writing in the Humanities' includes two guides selected on the basis of recommendations from academics participating in the project and one from the 'SAGE study skills' series, selected as representative in terms of content and written by faculty in Education departments based in the UK (Wellington et al).
3) 'On Dissertation Writing in Theology', includes five books for students at various levels in Theology & Religious studies, from the beginner tentatively exploring further scholarship (Hopko et al) to seminary/MA students (Kibbe; Vyhmeister) to the advanced MA/PhD student (Knight & Markham; Yaghjian). The kinds of theological reflection identified and addressed by these authors include Biblical, Systematic, Historical and Practical. The term 'philosophical theology' was not used by any author, though Knight & Markham and Yaghjian commend theological reflection that is 'creative' and 'constructive' in character.

Some Reflections/Conclusions re: literature 'On Dissertation Writing in Theology':

1) Claims concerning what is distinctive about research and writing theology are thin. Kibbe, Vyhmeister and Yaghjian directly address the question of what is distinctive about theology but with little elaboration and these claims do not shape the primary research skills/writing methods outlined.
2) Hopko et al and Yaghjian foreground the claim that writing is integral to the process of enquiry. Only Hopko et al fully integrate this claim into their advice concerning research method/process, commending the use of writing as the essential tool for every stage of the research process in accordance with other guides (Bolker; Elbow; Klinkenborg; Wellington et al.) All other authors in this group either strictly separate the 'thinking phase' from the 'writing-up phase' such as Kibbe or heavily lean towards this in their advice (Knight & Markham; Vyhmeister; Yaghjian).

Some Reflections/Conclusions re: literature 'On Writing' and 'On Dissertation Writing in the Humanities':

1) Many of these authors coalesce in their critique of what Klinkenborg calls 'the school model of writing' (also termed 'traditional' or 'classical' by others) (Bolker; Cameron; Elbow; Klinkenborg; Wellington) which can be summarised as 'think first, then write'. Klinkenborg most eloquently articulates the integration of 'finding' and 'making' in the practice of writing. Peter Elbow is the pioneer and still most authoritative voice among critics of 'the school model'; his introduction of 'free writing' techniques at every stage of research and the division between 'free writing' and 'revising' (or in Bolker's words, between the 'make-a-mess' part and the 'clean-up-the-mess' part) is widely influential. The guides by Bolker and Wellington et al (and Hopko et al from Theology guides) also embrace this alternative model. On a superficial reading, Umberto Eco's *How to Write a Thesis* [1977] is the epitome of the 'school model of writing' (involving, as Bolker writers, 'a lot of index cards') and may have been a significant contributor to the model's 'traditional' or 'classic' status. However, a more nuanced reading/use of Eco's book challenge this as he approaches the method of dissertation writing as induction into a way of life, an apprenticeship to a craft. The *techne* he outlines also is much more holistic than this critique allows and much of his research process involves a lot of original writing early on and at various stages (i.e., the 'Reading Index Cards' including one's own summary and evaluation of books etc), such that the final stages of 'writing up' are more a process of synthesising - finding/creating a coherent whole rather than starting from scratch. Wellington et al raise the question of

'when writing begins and reading stops' and suggest that there is a kind of tipping point when the latter becomes more the focus than the former.

2) Skills like 'listening' and 'waiting' are prominent in Cameron, Elbow, King, Klinkenborg, and to some extent in Bolker. There are some interesting connections here with Simone Weil's 'Right Use of School Studies' in *Waiting for God* (whose work isn't mentioned in the literature here). 'Magic' is also a term frequently arising in Cameron; Elbow; King) as the '*je ne se quoi*' or mysterious, non-reductive aspect of good writing.
3) Among the authors who include autobiographical content (Bolker; Cameron; Elbow; King), all describe significant failures and mistakes in their academic/creative paths as the origin of the wisdom they offer in their guides. Both Bolker and Elbow dropped out of their first doctoral programs and had to find new strategies for completing when they returned (each in different fields from their first); for Cameron, her writing practices had been intertwined with alcoholism so she had to find a way to be sober *and* creative; in his youth, King persisted through years of receiving only rejection letters before first getting published, and he completed his guide as part of the process of recovery from a life-threatening accident.
4) Many of the writers identify fear as the primary reason for not writing at all and for 'bad' writing (Bolker; Cameron; Elbow; King; Klinkenborg).

Some Reflections/Conclusions Overall:

1) All the authors of guides 'On Dissertation Writing in Theology' characterise writing as hard, difficult or painful. Hopko et al seek to ameliorate this through free writing techniques as does Yaghjian through her many formulas for different kinds of research papers, but the others state as simply the case and to get on with it (and for worst case scenarios, to get in touch with a writing centre). Among the authors 'On Writing' and 'On Dissertation Writing in the Humanities', the issue is more nuanced. For Klinkenborg (for whom 'all writing is revision'), the experience of writing as hard means that you're doing good work and the trick is to embrace it. Bolker, Cameron and Elbow aim to shift the experience (and characterisation) of writing as necessarily hard through their free writing techniques. Bolker and Eco encourage their readers to believe that writing a dissertation really can be enjoyable (Bolker) and even should be fun and a pleasure in itself (Eco). For King, writing is about 'getting happy' (326) and Cameron's creative path is precisely about 'letting go of the drama of the suffering artist' (xv). Interestingly, none of the authors describe the practice of writing as easy.

2) An intimate connection between the practice of writing and 'forms of life' is evident among many of the 'On Writing' and 'Dissertation Writing in the Humanities' authors: Bolker (building 'positive addictions' such as free writing); Cameron (creativity intertwined with spirituality); Eco (virtue of '*slow* research' for purpose of 'ordering the mind' as a pleasure/end in itself); King (about 'enriching' lives of readers and yourself or 'getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay?' [326]); Klinkenborg (cultivating habit of 'noticing' or 'attention' [40]). Despite nods in the direction of the connection between 'life' and 'research' among some 'On Dissertation Writing in Theology' authors (Kibbe; Vyhmeister; Yaghjian), including strong statements like theology concerns 'the whole of one's life' (Kibbe), the research methods/processes are generic and in effect hermetically sealed from the rest of life (at least as presented).
3) Taken together, the books reviewed here point toward the need for a guide to dissertation writing in philosophical theology that weds the holistic/spiritual 'way of life' perspective (eg., Cameron) with the *techne* of scholarly craft (eg., Eco) informed by educational models based on the integration of 'writing' and 'thinking' (eg., Elbow).

Julia Cameron, The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering your Creative Self

Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* resonates with this project's concern with 'forms of life' or 'spiritual practices'. The book stems from her widely successful course which she characterises as 'a spiritual workshop aimed at freeing people's creativity' and it is written for 'anyone interested in practicing the art of creative living' (xi). For Cameron the sustained flourishing of one's art/craft cannot be separated from the flourishing of one's person and whole of one's **way of life**.

Many creative writers and other artists attest it has served as a life-line both for themselves and their art.It finds its origins in her own experience as a recovering alcoholic whose previous success as a writer was bound up with her addiction. She paints this portrait of herself as a writer who used alcohol to get 'past the **fear** and onto the page':

> Creative in spasms. Creative as an act of will and ego. Creative on behalf of others. Creative, yes, but in spurts, like blood from a severed carotid artery.
>
> A decade of writing and all I knew was how to make these headlong dashes and hurl myself, against all odds, at the wall of whatever I was writing. If creativity was spiritual in any sense, it was only in its resemblance to a crucifixion. I fell upon the thorns of prose. I bled. (xiv)

The alternative creative path she was forced to discover if she was to be both sober and creative is fundamentally rooted in a turning of her creativity over 'to the god of creativity, the **life** force Dylan Thomas called 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flower' (xiv). She describes the character of this alternative path thus:

> I learned to get out of the way and let that creative force work through me. I learned to just show up at the page and write down what I heard. Writing became more like eavesdropping and less like inventing a nuclear bomb. It wasn't so tricky, and it didn't blow up on me anymore. I didn't have to be in the mood. I didn't have to take my emotional temperature t see if inspiration was pending. I simply wrote. No negotiations. Good, bad? None of my business. *I* wasn't doing it. By resigning as the self-conscious author, I wrote freely. (xiv-xv)

Principles from Alcoholics Anonymous shape the work in its fundamental orientation towards the 'Great Creator' who *wills* our good and creative action; our job is to find ways to attune/align ourselves to this so that it may flow through us. Akin to AA programs, the course's structure is divided into twelve weeks. Each week (and chapter of the book) aims at facilitating the recovery of a different aspect essential to creative living: a sense of *safety, identity, power, integrity, possibility, abundance, connection, strength, compassion, self-protection, autonomy and faith*.

The list of 'Basic Principles' outline the spiritual/theological claims that inform all the tools and advice given in the following chapters:

1. Creativity is the natural order of life. **Life** is energy: pure creative energy.
2. There is an underlying, in-dwelling creative force infusing all of life—including ourselves.
3. When we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the creator's creativity by being creative ourselves.
4. We are, ourselves, creations. And we, in turn, are meant to continue creativity by being creative ourselves.
5. Creativity is God's gift to us. Using our creativity is our gift back to God.
6. The refusal to be creative is self-will and is counter to our true nature.
7. When we open ourselves to exploring our creativity, we open ourselves to God: good orderly direction.
8. As we open our creative channel to the creator, many gentle but powerful changes are to be expected.
9. It is safe to open ourselves up to greater and greater creativity.
10. Our creative dreams and yearnings come from a divine source. As we move toward our dreams, we move toward our divinity. (3)

'Two Basic Tools' are outlined in the beginning of the book: 'morning pages' and 'artist's dates'. The former cultivates the outflow of thoughts, feelings, desires, and the latter cultivates the inflow of 'food' for the mind/soul etc through sensory perceptions (18).

The 'primary tool of creative recovery' or 'morning pages' are a form of **free writing** which Cameron introduces as 'an apparently pointless process', consisting of 'three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness' (9-10). It is a habit meant to help facilitate the artist's ability 'to evade the Censor' or the internal, perfectionist critic and to get onto the page and out of one's subconscious 'all that

angry, whiny, petty stuff' that 'stands between you and your creativity' (11). The content may at times be smart, colourful, or even facilitate a breakthrough on a specific problem within one's craft, but the essence of the exercise is to simply move the hand across the page and write whatever comes to mind. The process cultivates 'the artist brain' which 'thinks in patterns and shadings' rather than the 'logic brain' which 'thinks in neat, linear fashion' (12-13). She insists they are a **spiritual practice** in that they 'map out our interior' (15) and help one 'acquire and eventually acknowledge our connection to an inner power source that has the ability to transform our outer world' and 'to contact the Creator Within' (14).

The second basic tool, 'Artist's dates', consist of setting aside a period of time each week (about two hours) for a gratuitous activity that 'fills the well' or 'stocks the pond'.

> In filling the well, think **magic**. Think delight. Think **fun**. Do not think duty. Do not do what you *should* do—spiritual sit-ups like reading a dull but recommended critical text. Do what intrigues you, explore what interests you; think mystery, not mastery. (21)

The tool is about spending time with one's 'inner artist', to listen to its yearnings, longings, and needs amidst the many demands and responsibilities in one's life, including (or perhaps especially) in relation to the practice of one's craft. She insists, 'it is the *time commitment* that is sacred' and the greatest challenge of the tool is not letting the time get squeezed out by other commitments and obligations.

It is absolutely vital, Cameron emphasises, that this is a book *to be used*, not *read*. Many of the practices/exercises throughout are about learning how to *play* again, to awaken childlike dreams and hopes and to find the skills and beliefs to be willing/able to act on them. There is much in common here with what Peter **Elbow** dubs 'The Believing Game', his 'shorthand for **listening**, affirming, entering in, trying to experience more fully, and restating—understanding ideas from the inside' (*Writing without Teachers*, xxii).

RULES OF THE ROAD:

In order to be an artist, I must:

1. Show up at the page. Use the page to rest, to dream, to try.
2. Fill the well by caring for my artist.
3. Set small and gentle goals and meet them.
4. Pray for guidance, courage, and **humility**.
5. Remember that it is far harder and more **painful** to be a blocked artist than it is to do the work.
6. Be alert, always, for the presence of the Great Creator leading and helping my artist.
7. Choose companions who encourage me to do the work, not just talk about doing the work or why I am not doing the work.
8. Remember that the Great Creator loves creativity.
9. Remember that it is my job to do the work, not judge the work.
10. Place this sign in my workplace: Great Creator, I will take care of the *quantity*. You take care of the *quality*. (55)

Peter Elbow, Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process

Elbow's techniques for mastering the writing process are fundamentally aimed at facilitating the embodiment or communication of '*felt sense'* in written or external form. 'Felt sense' is a term coined by phenomenologist Eugene Gendlin, and is the '**magic**' which infuses writing of any kind with power. All of Elbow's techniques for 'mastery' are oriented toward this end.[1]

The conviction that all kinds of writing need both 'inventive fecundity' or 'intuition' *and* 'tough-critical mindedness' or 'conscious awareness' undergirds Elbow's practice as a professor of English and as both a creative and academic writer (36). Surprisingly, given this holistic understanding, Elbow's techniques encourage dividing or isolating the drafting stages of writing (which he associates with the 'creative' mentality) from the revising stages of writing (associated with the 'critical' mentality).

The primary aim of this division is to harness the power of the drafting process because it is here that, Elbow believes, the '*je ne se quoi*' of excellent writing is born. Excellent writing 'makes readers want to read it' (19) and has the qualities of 'life, energy, independence - and even - rambunctiousness and rebellion. Also qualities like voice and (the words are anathema among academics) realness, authenticity, the non-fake' (19). To write with power of this kind begins and ends with learning 'how to make room for felt sense' (14) or to build 'bridges between nonverbal felt meaning and a piece of language' (17). Attuning to 'felt sense' is crucial for resisting 'different forms of inarticulateness: too few words and too many words' (16), both of which, Elbow argues, are rooted in 'fear of wrongness' (16). [King and Klinkenborg also identify fear as the primary cause of 'bad writing'.]

Chapter 28, 'Breathing Experience into Expository Writing', is particularly relevant to the Templeton project's focus on academic writing. Elbow makes the observation that excellent writing is more rare in expository writing (academic

[1] See Eugene Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (New York: Free Press, 1962); ibid.,'The Wider Role of Bodily Thought in Sense and Language' in *Giving the Body Its Due*, ed. Marine Sheets-Johnstone (Albany, NY: SUNY Press). See also Sondra Perl, 'Understanding Composing' in *College Composition and Communication* 31.4 (December 1980), 363-9; and ibid., 'A Writer's Way of Knowing: Guidelines for Composing' in *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*, eds. Alice Brand and Richard Graves (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann/Boynton-Cook, 1993), 389-401, for other works which substantially inform the theory of Elbow's practice. [Would you like me to look at any of these - they sound really interesting!]

journal articles are especially singled out [341-42]), tending instead toward the 'more complicated, wooden, dead' (343). He locates the cause of this deficiency in tensions inherent to the genre itself, not its practitioners. He argues that by attending to this conflict and finding ways to work with it, expository writing can regain its verve or power, that is, work towards the capture rather than erasure of 'felt sense'.

He identifies two potentially conflicting imperatives in expository writing: the need to experience one's thought and the need to 'get your thinking straight' (342). It is more difficult to produce lively expository writing than descriptive or narrative writing because the former is more disciplined and because logical thought is not often how we actually experience thought (342). The process of disciplining one's thinking is more likely to increase distance from one's experience of thinking, a fundamental problem since 'words with power grow out of experience' (333). It is *not* more difficult because the subject matter of creative writing (such as a sunset, character profile or relationship dynamics) grows out of one's experience whereas the subject matter of expository writing, i.e., one's thoughts or ideas on or about X, do not (333).

To get in touch with or refresh the experience of one's thought, the same techniques apply as in any other genre: embrace raw writing for experiencing one's thought and then later revise to bring coherence to the writing. Revisions are thus less likely to prematurely edit out, dampen down or erase 'felt sense' and can instead work on its behalf. This overarching principle is complimented by further exercises or techniques tailored for the expository writer, such as 'put your body into it when you write (347), 'role-playing' (345), and 'getting a feeling for this dialectic of attention' between 'experiencing your thinking' and 'disciplining your thinking' (347). The chapter also flags up some institutional/social dynamics characteristic of academia which may further corrode the conditions of possibility for writing with power [342]).

Rooted in a coherent and compelling vision of the craft and practice of writing, this book is primarily a resource for getting writing done even under deadlines and mid-way through projects. Its usability is one of its primary strengths, enabling the reader to dip in at any chapter according to the specific demands of the project or needs of the individual writer. The first section (chapters 1-6) give the essential tools which the 'recipes' of all the following chapters build on in more detail, namely, free writing and sharing. For Elbow, '*the essential human act at the heart of*

writing is the act of giving' (46; ital mine). Section 2 expands on free writing techniques, providing 'more ways of getting words on paper' and Section 3 expands on the tool of sharing with 'more ways to revise'. Sections 4 and 5 concern matters of Audience and Feedback. The final section 6, 'Power in Writing', is the fullest exposition of the theory informing the techniques offered.

Note: I used his 'Direct Writing Process for Getting Words on Paper' and the 'Quick Revising' process outlined in chapters 4 and 5 for writing a Newsletter report. I don't think it made the process any quicker, but it really did move my writing from what was a rather blasé report into articulating something that I cared about, my '*je ne se quoi*'. I'll certainly return to this method in the future. Elbow felt like a writing companion guiding me through very concrete steps.

Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers

Elbow wrote this book eight years before *Writing With Power* with second editions of both books published in 1998. The principles and philosophy of *Writing with Power* are all here with less development of the revision stages.

I love this book because it is kind of like therapy for academics with writer's block. This was indeed its origin. In his introduction to the second edition, Elbow recounts the personal experiences (xii-xvii) and intellectual influences (xviii-xxxi) that funded the book's (at least then?) revolutionary insights and methods. He recounts how he was climbing the academic ladder, heading to Harvard for his PhD after completing a degree at Oxford. Trouble began to brew whilst an undergraduate in Oxford. He began experiencing writer's block, not handing in essays for tutors, and passed only on account of exams as the sole basis for granting the degree. The problems encountered in Oxford increased whilst at Harvard, and he eventually dropped out of the doctoral program. He began teaching at MIT on a great books course (I guess when it was possible to do this without a PhD!), fell in love with teaching and was nourished by conversations with colleagues. Several years later, he returned to do his PhD at Brandeis. **Fear**ful of writing for teachers again, he a) set personal deadlines (completing assignments a week or so before the deadline), thus forcing him to 'find ways to write no matter what'; and b) began to keep notes on his process which became the basis for this book. He finished his PhD in three years so apparently was doing something right!

Elbow's analysis boils down to the conviction that the **traditional or default method of teaching writing** in academia makes writing hard and often induces blocks and/or makes the writing wooden or dead. He summarises this method as: first think meaning, outline it, then write it. The writing phase in this method, dubbed 'careful writing', is problematic for its collapsing of the drafting and editing stages. He sees the amount of energy that this takes and the inadequacy one often encounters when writing this way. Inevitable discouragement typically results in either stopping writing or polishing something that isn't yet ready to be polished. This process, with its emphasis on argument and logic, makes people freeze up and doesn't nurse the good that might be trying to come out amidst all the muddle or 'junk'. Elbow emphasises that in the midst of that muddle is probably where the truth lies, yet we haven't developed enough skills or tools for nurturing the

emergence of truth at this stage so that it can find articulation and clarification; instead, we only cut!

Elbow's essential tools (also briefly summarised in the first section of his *Writing with Power*) instead argue for embracing writing earlier in the process and sharing your writing with others. **Free writing** breaks the 'habit of premature editing [that] makes writing hard. It also makes writing dead' (6). A major theme, as in *Writing with Power*, is that to create good writing, one must first 'invite badness', to stop being so squeamish about it and instead learn to use it because one is likely to be producing loads of it anyway! Sharing one's work on a regular basis with the same group of people at all stages of writing restores sociability, enjoyment, and the listening aspects of the writing process. The heart of his efforts are summed up best when he says he is trying to shift, shake up or 'change the notion of what it means to *try* or *attempt* to *work* on a piece of writing' (20). His methods seek to work more in harmony with the way we actually express ourselves in everyday life — fumbling or partially, and *with* others.

He is not dismissing the traditional academic emphases on rigour of argument or logic but argues it needs to be supplemented with a recovery of skills such as affirming, **listening**, and waiting or patience. He suggests that this is actually in reality more true to how many great intellectuals themselves work but that the creative, generating stages of their process often gets left out of official accounts. He summarises this contrast in terms of the 'doubting game' vs. the 'believing game'.

> "Doubting" is my shorthand for criticising, debating, arguing, and trying to extricate oneself from any personal involvement with ideas through using logic. "Believing" is my shorthand for **listening**, affirming, entering in, trying to experience more fully, and restating—understanding ideas from the inside.'

His work is 'an argument for the believing game because it is so undervalued and underused—and because the doubting game is so overvalued and overused' (xxii).

The alternative paradigm is best exemplified in an attitude toward mistakes. When drafting, one encounters mistakes in one's thinking or senses the badness of the writing and this leads one to either a) stopping, or b) going into editing, criticising mode which *may* produce something but a lot energy is expended in turning bad

into good at this stage. Instead, when ones sees mistakes and senses 'badness', one might try attending to it - not by editing it out or deleting it, but by giving it enough space and time to see how it might be right, how there might be a kernel there that is actually what you really want to say but isn't ready yet. One technique for creating this space is simply to try writing it several times, imperfectly.

'Growing' and 'Cooking' are the headings for the two main sections of the book and are Elbow's guiding metaphors for understanding the process of writing. On the principle of 'Growing', he writes:

> I advise you to treat words as though they are potentially able to grow. Learn to stand out of the way and provide the energy or force the words need to find their growth process. The words cannot go against entropy and end up more highly organised than when they started unless fuelled by energy you provide. You must send that energy or electricity through the words in order, as it were, to charge them or ionise them or give them juice or whatever so that they have the life to go through the growing process. (24)

Underlying the growth metaphor is a trust that words (meaning? meaningful speech/writing? language?) want to unfold, and that they have their own way of unfolding. One needs to go through these different stages to nurture or allow this process to happen. He suggests that growth isn't just or primarily putting things in, absorbing things, but actually letting things go. What wants saying is already there, waiting, and needs to be given the space and time to emerge.

If growth signifies 'the overall larger process, the evolution of whole organisms', 'cooking is the smaller process. It drives the engine that makes growing happen.' (48). Cooking is about not avoiding conflict but investing in it, whether the conflict is located between readers (potential or real), between ideas, between words and ideas, between genres and modes, or between you (the writer) and symbols on the page. Cooking, he writes, is

> the smallest unit of generative action, the smallest piece of anti-entropy whereby a person spends his energy to buy new perceptions and insights from himself. […] [I]t consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the

> guts of another, being reoriented or reorganised in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other (49).

He commends cultivating **attention** to the dialectic between different pieces, suggesting that 'each time you switch modes, you get a new view and more leverage' (53). His detailed accounts of different ways to expend energy in writing (67-69) are particularly keen and (in my experience) accurate.

[Note I haven't included his instructions and principles for 'teacherless writing groups' which apparently became widely used.]

Stephen King, On Writing: Memoir of the Craft

Stephen King's *On Writing: Memoir of the Craft* is divided into two main parts. The first is titled, 'C.V.', which gives advice to the aspiring writer indirectly by way of a memoir-style account of key moments and people contributing to King's own formation. The second part, 'On Writing', offers this advice in explicit form and directly addresses the reader. The two parts are joined with a small hinge-like section at the centre, titled, 'Toolbox', which addresses matters of vocabulary, grammar, and style - essential tools which the writer should take with her every time for every job, no matter how big or small. His postscript, '**On Living**', returns to the memoir form, recounting a major life-threatening accident in which he was hit by a van and his slow and difficult recovery afterwards. It was during this recovery that he wrote the majority of this book, thus concluding with a poignant, authenticating stamp of the wisdom garnered from experience that he seeks to share throughout.

He is addressing writers of fiction though most of the book's content is more generally applicable. King communicates through vivid imagery and story-telling that refreshes and enlivens the imagination and potentially also one's own commitment to writing, something that is perhaps particularly of value within the academic context. This book is characterised by candour, wit and a no-nonsense approach which makes it deeply enjoyable, even fun, to read (drawing many audible laughs from me in the reading room of the UL!).

King states that what overrode his reluctance to write a book on the craft of writing is his fundamental belief that writers are not made, they are formed (4). He believes that some natural gifts or talents are required at the outset, but these are not rare commodities and all such gifts and talents 'can be strengthened and sharpened' (4). He summarises the account of his own formation as 'a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, and a little talent all played a part' (4). There is a particularly heartening section in which he recounts how he received so many rejection letters when he first began submitting for publication that he eventually had to replace a nail pinning them on his wall with a massive spike. He also wishes to communicate the fundamental belief that the common trait among writers (which, he complains, people never ask about it), namely, that writers 'care about the language, in our **humble** way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper' (xi). This love and sheer pleasure in 'the language' is very much evidenced throughout the book and the memoir section in particular.

In 'The Toolbox' section, King urges all aspiring writers to have a copy of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*. This is the only guide to writing he is willing to recommend (presumably other than his own!). Advice in this section is pragmatic and his emphases intentionally idiosyncratic. He insists that it is not quantity that matters in regards to vocabulary, but 'how you use it' and that a larger vocabulary will naturally build through reading. He also suggests one should 'use the first word that comes to your mind if its appropriate and colourful' because it is probably closest to what you mean (130). The paragraph, not the sentence, he suggests, is best thought of as the most basic unit of meaning. If this is the section most focussed on *techne* of writing, he concludes it with a note about '**magic**', by which he means how 'sometimes the most basic skills can create things far beyond out expectations' (155).

The 'man with **magic**', or the character of 'the muse' makes several key appearances throughout the book, imagined as a rather grumpy, cigar-smoking man who just sits around you while you do all the grunt work. Its worth passing on this portrait in King's words:

> There is a muse, but he's not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He's a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you. Do you think this is fair? *I* think this it's fair. He may not be much to look at, that muse-guy, and he may not be much of a conversationalist (what I get out of mine is mostly surly grunts, unless he's on duty), but he's got the inspiration. It's right that you should do all the work and burn all the midnight oil, because the guy with the cigar and the little wings has got a bag of **magic**. There's stuff in there that can change your life. / Believe me, I know. (163-4)

The muse appears again when King is discussing the stage of writing one's first draft. He insists that this first stage is to be solitary, minimising input from outside readers other than the 'Ideal Reader' in one's own mind. King's 'Ideal Reader' is his wife, 'the one I write for, the one I want to wow' (261). Whomever he or she is, they '[help] you get outside yourself a little, to actually read your work in progress

as an audience would while you're still working' (262). After completion of the first draft, it is time to celebrate and rest, and he recommends a long period of distance before returning to revise so as to rediscover the work with fresh eyes. This second draft is oriented by the question of 'what it means' and clarifying this or drawing this to the fore throughout. Then it is time to share the book with a handful of trusted and willing readers. But in the first draft stage, he urges:

> You need the room, you need the door, and you need the determination to shut the door. You need a concrete goal, as well, The longer you keep to these basics, the easier the act of writing will become. Don't wait for the muse. As I've said, he's a hardheaded guy who's not susceptible to a lot of creative fluttering. This isn't the Ouija board or the spirit-world we're talking about here, but just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon or seven 'til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he'll start showing up, chomping his cigar and making his **magic**. (180)

He boils all his advice down to this 'Great Commandment': 'read a lot, write a lot'. Reading, he states, 'is the creative centre of a writer's life'. One can do it anywhere and the trick is to learn 'small sips as well as long swallows' (167). What 'write a lot' means will be different for different people, but he himself follows a routine of writing 2000 words every day and encourages the reader to set their own limit ('starting low at first') and not stopping until it's met. The emphasis is on *constancy*. King reflects, 'if I don't write every day, the characters begin to stale off in my mind — they begin to *seem* like characters instead of real people. … The work starts to *feel* like work, and for most writers that is the smooch of death' (174).

Some miscellaneous quotes:

'Put your desk in the corner and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. **Life** isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around' (112).

'Imitation precedes creation' (16).

'If you write, someone will try to make you feel lousy about it, that's all. I'm not editorializing, just trying to give you the facts as I see them" (46).

'Good writing is often about letting go of **fear** and affectation' (142).

'In truth, I've found that any day's routine interruptions and distractions don't much hurt a work in progress and may actually help it in some ways. It is, after all, the dab of grit that seeps into an oyster's shell that makes the pearl, not pearl-making seminars with other oysters. And the larger the work looms in my day—the more it seems like an *I hafta* instead of an *I wanna*—the more problematic it can become' (279).

'The scariest moment is always just before you start. / After that, things can only get better' (325).

Concluding paragraph: 'Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own **life**, as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting **happy**. Some of this book—perhaps too much—has been about how I learned to do it. Much of it has been about how you can do it better. The rest of it—and perhaps the best of it—is a permission slip: you can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, *you will*. Writing is **magic**, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. / Drink and be filled up' (326-7).

Verlyn Klinkenborg, Several Short Sentences About Writing

Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Several Short Sentences About Writing* is aimed at the writer of works in any genre or of any length. His philosophy of writing undercuts these distinctions. Thinking unfolds through language and this occurs at the level of the sentence. Attending to language at the sentence level attunes one both to what one's words are *actually* saying and to what they do not, cannot or need not say. What one actually says is determined by the 'material structure, the concrete details, the rhythm of sentences' (62) and well-crafted sentences are '**listening** for the silence around them. / **Listening** for their own pulse' (5).

Clarity is the diamond jewel to be sought for by all writers. For her to shine, all other gods must either bow before her or be banished from the kingdom. Style, order, and authority will flourish where she reigns. But to win her, one must slay the dragon of '**the school model of writing**' (22). This dragon's talons are trained to extract meaning when reading and deposit it when writing, thus violating the embodied form. The meaning-devouring monster spawns a number of insidious offspring such as 'The Anxiety of Sequence' (i.e., research, outline, then deposit one's meaning in the conclusion) and the bisected 'creative consciousness' vs 'critical consciousness'. 'All writing is revision' (87), Klinkenborg insists, and 'flow' does not mean the 'writing is going well'. The allure of 'volunteer sentences' must be resisted as they are more likely fillers or clichés.

The path to the diamond jewel of clarity can only be hewn sentence by sentence. The arduousness of writing is lightened by opening one's eyes along the way to what is actually before one - by noticing or paying **attention**. The skill of honing one's perception walks hand in hand with **authority**.

The staccato rhythm of Klinkenborg's form, sustained over the length of a whole book, starts to feel dictatorial in tone, but it is radiantly clear. Crafting a work sentence by sentence produces some radiant prose but it might also drive one to drinking. Both **Elbow** and Klinkenborg vehemently reject the outline + draft model with 'thinking largely done up front' (94) as both are committed to the principle that thinking happens with the writing. Both also are committed to patience and to waiting. But Elbow's techniques encourage the embrace of free writing whereas Klinkenborg encourages the writer to instead proceed one sentence at a time. If Elbow seeks to conjure excellent writing by isolating drafting and revising, Klinkenborg insists the **magic** comes by collapsing the two. Maybe

the median way is golden? The provisos each give to these techniques would suggest so. Elbow insists that when free writing one can also pause and reflect, and Klinkenborg tells his writers, 'Don't look too hard. / Just try out some sentences. / Lots of them. / See how they sound. / … You're holding an audition. / Many sentences will try out. / One gets the part' (100). But again, Klinkenborg's method is a little frightening when he suggests that you might be trying the first sentence of your work for two days or so and that you should 'Be casual about this' (101).

Some key extracts:

'Sometimes you know just what you want to say,
And you find the words to say exactly that.
But just as often what you want to say emerges as the sentence takes shape.
The thought isn't primary or absolute.
The thought is only a hint.
Language offers guidance and resistance both.
The sentence *becomes* the thought by bringing it fully into being.
We assume that thought shapes the sentence,
But thought and sentence are always a collaboration,
The sum of what can be said and what you're trying to say.' (92)

'There's always an urge among writers
To turn fleeting observations and momentary glimpses
Into metaphors and "material" as quickly as possible,
As if every perception ended in a trope,
As if the writer were a dynamo
Turning the world into words.
The goal is the opposite:
To get your words, your phrases,
As close as you can to the solidity,
The materiality of the world you're noticing.

Rushing to notice never works,
Nor does trying to notice.
Attention requires a cunning passivity.' (40)

'Your labour isn't a sign of defeat.
It's a sign of engagement.
The difference is all in your mind, but *what* a difference.

The **difficulty** of writing isn't a sign of failure.
It's simply the nature of the work itself.' (68)

'Rejoicing and despair aren't very good tools for revising.
Curiosity, patience, and the ability to improvise are.
So is the ability to remain open to the work and let it remain open to you.' (116)

'What if the reader believed, somehow, in you?
Listened for your voice, not the voices of others?
Watched for your perceptions?
What if the reader felt your **authority**
And thought about quoting *you*?' (126)
'One purpose of writing—its central purpose—is to offer your testimony
About the character of existence at this moment.
It will be part of your job to say how things are,
To attest to life as it is.
It will feel strange at first,
You'll wonder whether you're allowed to say things that sound
Not merely observant but true,
And not only true in carefully framed, limited circumstances,
But true for all of us and, perhaps, for all time.
Who asked you to say how things are?
Where do you get the **authority** to do any of this?
The answer is yours to find.' (133)

Helen Sword, Stylish Academic Writing

I include this only to flag a body of literature on 'style' in academic writing. Some quotes below to give the flavour:

> There is a massive gap between what most readers consider to be good writing and what academics typically produce and publish. (3)
>
> Three main arguments: 'that elegant ideas deserve elegant expression; that intellectual creativity thrives best in an atmosphere of experimentation rather than conformity; and that, even within the constraints of disciplinary norms, most academics enjoy a far wider range of stylistic choices than they realise' (vii).
>
> Aims to 'encourage [its] readers to adopt whatever stylistics strategies best suit their own skin. Stylish academic writing can be serious, entertaining, straightforward, poetic, unpretentious, ornate, intimate, impersonal, and much in between. What the diverse authors profiled here have in common is a commitment to the ideals of *communication*, *craft*, and *creativity*' (viii).

Some other cited authors on style in academia:

Lanham, Richard A. *Style: An Anti-Textbook*. Paul Dry Books, 2007.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Zinsser, Williams. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Harper Collins, 1976. [I'll take a look at this and pass on anything that looks essential!]

Joan Bolker, How to Write Your Thesis in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis

Joan Bolker's guide to dissertation writing draws on the wealth of her experience and training as a psychologist, cofounder of the Harvard Writing Centre, creative writer (poetry), and supervisor of graduate students for many decades. She herself dropped out of her first doctoral program in medieval literature after four or five years of work, returning four years later to complete a dissertation within several months in 'the study of the intersection of individual psychological development, curriculum development, and writing competence' (xiii). Though she tailors her advice for specific fields throughout the text where appropriate, the guide is intended to be used by students in any field, whether in the humanities or the sciences as she argues that the main principles for writing a dissertation cross even these disciplinary boundaries.

The book is divided into ten chapters that trace the chronological progression of the dissertation process, from choosing a topic and advisor, to doing research, producing drafts and revising, submitting, and publishing. Very practical strategies and remarkably detailed advice are offered for each stage, integrated with valuable insights on the 'psychology of *x*', whether the psychology of doing research, dealing with internal or external interruptions, or the 'costs of growth' in finally submitting. But the entirety of the process is broken down into two main parts: "making-a-mess' part; and a second, compulsive, 'clean-up-the-mess part" (34).

Heavily influenced by Peter **Elbow**, the tool of freewriting is central to her approach, showing how it can be employed to different ends at *every* stage of the dissertation process. Behaviourist principles also inform this approach as she aims to foster habits that develop a positive addiction to writing. One cannot finish a dissertation by writing only fifteen minutes a day, as her title suggests, but she insists it is at least a place to begin and to begin again.

She addresses this integral relation between writing and research in the introduction: 'you might ask, "Why focus on the writing of a dissertation when the major problem is doing the research?" Because <u>to do research is to inquire, to dig one's way into a problem, and writing is one of the best tools available for such work</u>' (xiv). Bolker chooses not to provide specifics on the process of conducting research on the grounds that this will differ significantly across disciplines, and so limits her remarks in this regard to some general considerations on the psychology

of conducting research. [Eco is an invaluable supplement in this respect in his thorough account of research methods that transcend disciplines at least within the humanities.]

The school model of the writing process (i.e., choose a topic, research accumulating lots of index cards, think about the topic, then outline with topic sentences, write, rest, proofread [32]) is critiqued for reasons akin to those of **Elbow** and **Klinkenborg**. Bolker writes:

> I don't think this model worked. Much of the time it led to neat, clean boring papers, often to empty ones with good form. It very rarely produced papers that were deeply thoughtful, that had strong and distinctive voices and styles, that raised as many questions as they answered, that made you read, and reread, and then dream about the topic. I want to teach you to write using a method that does all these things. (33)

Bolker teaches this alternative method not only because she thinks it is more often true to how excellent pieces of writing actually are produced, but because by means of it the process itself may become a more satisfying, even *enjoyable* one: 'Some writers really do **enjoy** writing their dissertations. This book is meant to help you become one of those writers' (xix).

Free writing one's way *into* the project as well as *through* thorny problems of any/every kind, especially at the slower, more painstaking 'clean-up-the-mess' stage, is the singular point of diversion from 'traditional' approaches. Chapter four, 'From Zero Draft to First Draft', is particularly helpful for seeing how this method can be employed within the academic context. Freewriting may produce a 'Zero Draft' (a concept drawn from the writer and writing teacher, Lois Bouchard), defined as 'a rich soup..…the name you give your accumulated pages the first time they begin to have any shape at all' or 'the point where it becomes possible to imagine, or discern, a shape to your material, to see the method to your madness' (50). This 'rich soup' may then yield a first draft through 'analytic and critical scrutiny' and through patiently and persistently asking questions such as "'Is there an argument in this mess?" Or "What point do I want to make?" She recommends continuing to use free writing at this stage, perhaps in 5-10 minute bursts, as a means of working with these questions (52). She summarises the process of revising the first draft as 'the search for closer and clear approximations of the

truth you seek'. This search can be a challenging one as clarity involves vulnerability, allowing oneself to be seen by others.

Bolker provides an overall guide to the dissertation writing process in the manner of a good coach, helping the student identify and confront specific blocks at different stages and providing specific strategies for handling these. Its usefulness, like dissertation writing itself, will depend on the readers level of engagement with and ownership of the tools and exercises provided.

Umberto Eco, How To Write A Thesis

This work is the academic equivalent to Stephen **King**'s *On Writing*. Not only are both King and Eco life-long practitioners and masters of their respective crafts, but their guides bear this distinctive character of an apprenticeship into *a way of life*. For King, the craft of creative writing is inalienable from 'love for the language' and all advice offered is tailored to and oriented by this love. For Eco, research is inalienable from love for a 'training of the memory' (7). Despite the technological revolution of the past forty plus years, Eco's guide remains as relevant as the first edition published in 1977 and now translated into seventeen languages. Indeed, Eco's advice feels even more relevant in the 'information age' as his principles serve to remind the contemporary researcher what work the new tools of laptops, search engines, writing software, etc. are meant to facilitate!

Written when the university in Italy was democratised, Eco presupposes a student in the humanities (particularly literature and philosophy) with no prior training, preparing to write a thesis within six months to three years. As he recounts in his introduction to the 1985 edition, its use has become much broader than anticipated across disciplines and even by middle school students. Its 'staying power' described by Francesco Erspamer's Foreword, 'has to do with the very essence of the humanities' (ix): '*Pastness*', that is, 'the preservation and appropriation' of 'texts, objects, and information that we inherited from the past'; and the teaching of a *craft*, that is, '*making something out of one's education in a personal and independent way*' (x). Espramer continues:

> Written in the age of typewriters, card catalog, and writing pads, *How to Write a Thesis* is less about the final outcome than about the path and method of arriving there. For Aristotle, knowledge was pursued for its own sake, and such a pursuit could be justified only by an instinctive drive and the intellectual **pleasure** generated by the fulfilment of the instinct. For Kant, aesthetics and judgment were based on disinterestedness: they could not be programmed, only experienced. The humanities are intrinsically creative and innovative. They are about originality and invention, not discovery. This is precisely Eco's testimony; even more than a technical manual, this book is an invitation to ingenuity, a tribute to the imagination. (x)

Eco defines the purpose of thesis writing in his first chapter as a 'training in the memory' which is more important than the topic one chooses (7). He writes the book for those who have 'even a few hours a day' and seek 'intellectual satisfaction' (5). The guidance for choice of topic is pragmatic (availability of sources; fit with previous training and experience) and summarised by the rule, '"You must write a thesis that you are able to write." This rule may seem trivial, but it is true, and many a thesis has been dramatically aborted precisely because this rule was broken' (7).

His second chapter gives guidance for choosing a topic that is both 'manageable and feasible' (8) first through offering a series of helpful questions to ask in order to define the kind of thesis one is writing, i.e., survey or monograph; historical or theoretical; ancient or contemporary. Regarding the last distinction he offers the additional advice: 'work on a contemporary author as if he were ancient, and an ancient one as if he were contemporary. You will have more **fun** and write a better thesis' (16). As a provocation, he argues that research in the humanities must be 'scientific' in the following four ways: 1) it 'deals with a specific object, defined so others can identify it'; 'says things that have not yet been said about this object, or it revises things which have been said from a different perspective'; 'is useful to others'; and 'provides the elements required to verify or disprove the hypothesis is presence and therefore provides the foundation for future research' (see pp. 27-31)

The third chapter, 'Conducting Research', approaches the matter of primary and critical sources also by way of analogy with the sciences: 'a thesis studies an *object* by making use of specific *instruments*' (45). For most theses, the object is a book and the instruments used are other books. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is summarised thus: 'A thesis on books usually employs two kinds: the books it talks about, and the books that help it talk' (104). Using a system of various sets of index cards, the first rule of thumb is to keep a straightforward bibliographical index file and a separate reading file with notes only on books/articles one has *actually* read. Proper documentation of sources (to be returned to in pretty extensive detail in chapter five) is introduced here as a matter of 'erudite etiquette' (62).

'Reading Index Cards' are central to the research process and should contain precise bibliographical information as well as a summary in one's own words of the main point or import of the book and possibly quotes, ideas spurred by the work, preliminary judgements or insights and so forth. Other possible kinds of index

cards are idea, thematic, author, connection, question, recommendation cards. 'The nature of the thesis suggests the nature of the index cards' (118). Whatever sets of cards one develops, the advice is to make sure each set is 'complete and unified' so that 'you will know at a glance what you have read and what remains to be read' (119). The cards can also be marked up by highlighting in different colours and abbreviations used in corners that correspond to different elements of the table of contents.

The physical, tangible index card sets for tracking one's reading are a form of resistance to a 'sort of vertigo of accumulation, a neocapitalism of information' which 'happens to the many' (125). His vignette of a student who has spent hours in front of the photocopy machine and is thereby duped into thinking that he now owns or possesses the reproduced knowledge though he hasn't turned a page, perceptively foreshadows the 21st century student for whom this temptation is magnified by the plethora of material available online and for immediate download, multiple devices and personal printers, and cheap Amazon purchases.

On the question of how to order one's reading, he emphasises that 'there is nothing wrong with consuming texts in a disorderly way'. One may 'meander, alternating objectives, provided that a thick web of personal notes…keeps track of these "adventurous" wanderings' (104). The 'psychological structure' of the researcher should be allowed to shape the approach here, characterising readers under two broad umbrellas, 'monochromatic' and 'polychromic'. The former are characterised as 'more methodical' but 'little imagination' and the latter as 'more creative' if 'more messy and fickle' (105). The polychrons may 'cultivate many interests at once' while the monochrons tend to undertake 'one endeavour at a time' (105).

Eco situates the bulk of the writing process *after* the research, though he advises that 'it is a bad idea to postpone the writing process until the last minute' but rather to begin 'as soon as possible' (109). The order of 'The Work Plan' for writing the thesis begins at the end, that is, with the title, table of contents and introduction, providing a clear path and objectives for each element (107-9). These elements will morph throughout the other stages of composition but are essential for disciplining the process they initiate. He also emphasises that only once one has a 'solid table of contents' and this 'fictitious' introduction should you allow yourself to begin writing the other parts. (109). From here though there is an emphasis on freedom, i.e., to not feel bound to begin with the first chapter (115).

Eco's advice on writing itself is direct and simple: do not write long sentences (147); begin new paragraphs often (150); define one's terms (154); a preference for the pronoun 'we' rather than 'I' 'because he assumes his readers can share what he is saying (155); and, finally, to 'write everything that comes into your head but only in the first draft' (151).

Memorable quotes:

'A person who asks for help makes the librarian happy' (57).

'If you cannot write the introduction, it is because you do not yet have clear ideas on how to begin. If you do in fact have clear ideas on how to begin, it is because you at least suspect where you will arrive. And it is precisely on the basis of this suspicion that you must write your introduction, as if it were a review of already completed work. Also, do not be afraid to go too far with your introduction, as there will always be time to step back" (110-111).

'Academic **humility** concert the research method and the interpretation of texts'; 'academic pride concerns confidence in writing' (183).

'On your specific topic you are humanity's functionary who speaks in the collective voice. Be **humble** and prudent before opening your mouth, but once you open it, be dignified and proud' (183).

'First, writing a thesis should be **fun**. Second, writing a thesis is like cooking a pig; nothing goes to waste' (221)

'What really matters is that you write your thesis with gusto' (221).

'Your thesis is like your first love. It will be difficult to forget' (223).

Wellington, Jerry, Ann-Mari Bathmaker, Cheryl Hunt, Gary McCulloch and Pat Skies, eds. *Succeeding with Your Doctorate*. SAGE Study Skills 2005.

I've included this guide to note their chapter on 'Writing and the Writing Process' emphasises, akin to **Bolker**, that 'writing is part of the thinking process'. They strongly critique **the traditional model** that separates thinking from writing, citing numerous scholars (with **Elbow** as a key voice) to back up the growing consensus in educational models of learning that writing 'goes in tandem with' thinking. It is remarkable how persistent the 'classical model' remains given this body of literature has existed for some time now!

They agree that writing is '**hard**, even painful' but suggest many creative forms for dealing with this, including 'lying fallow'. They also advise that 'there is no one right way to write; start writing from day one; draft and redraft; and "don't get it right, get it written"'. On the question of when to stop reading and start writing, they acknowledge that at different stages of the process the balance will be tipped more in one direction than another.

Some other authors cited who critique the "'think and then write'" paradigm:

Moxley, J., & Taylor, T., eds.. *Writing and Publishing for Academic Authors*. 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

Becker, Howard A. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. University of Chicago 1986.

Richardson, Laurel. *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences.* Sage Publications, 1990.

Hopko, Joel, Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison, The Religion and Theology Student's Writer's Manual and Rader's Guide

This guide is primarily for students on introductory courses in Theology and Religion, though it includes with some advice on how to transition into theological/religious scholarship including book reviews and literature reviews. The authors take on the task of teaching 'the basics of writing 'to theology and religion students so that their professors can focus on teaching the content of theology and religion. Though introductory, it is a refreshing find as it puts the practice of writing at the heart of the craft of scholarship.

They boldly claim at the outset that the skill of writing underlies all the other skills involved in studying theology and religion. Under the heading, 'Read and Write Effectively', the emphasis is placed upon writing as a tool of discovery and as inseparable from meaning-making: 'We make meaning as we write, jolting ourselves by little, surprising discoveries into a larger and more interesting universe.'

Some other extracts on writing and thinking:

'Much in the way a funnel directs liquid to its container, writing refines and directs your thoughts into **clear**, capable, and professional literary "vessels" through which you communicate with communities of scholars.' Furthermore, they seek to help students 'appreciate and make use of the fact that *writing is the best method of learning*. […] The most effective way of gaining ownership is to write your own version of what you have read.'

'Writing is a way of ordering your experience […] This is one of the reasons why writing is so **hard**. From the infinite welter of data that your mind continually processes and locks in your memory, you are selecting only certain items significant to the task at hand, relating them to other items, and phrasing them with a new coherence. You are mapping a part of your universe that has hitherto been unknown territory. You are gaining a little more control over the processes by which you interact with the world around you. / This is why the act of writing, no matter what its result, is never insignificant. It is always *communication*—if not with

another human being, then with yourself. It is a way of making a fresh connection with your world.'

Michael Kibbe, From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research

Although this book is aimed at seminary students writing theological essays on assigned topics rather than the advanced graduate student, the basic steps it suggests for moving from 'topic' ('set of information') to 'thesis' ('specific claim or argument') are standard protocol in the guild and the training which many postgraduate students taking on longer, independently defined research projects have received.

Kibbe considers what is and is not distinctive about theological research in his introduction. On the grounds of a theology of creation, he argues that *as research* theology is not any more sacred or **spiritual** than any other kind of research. It is distinctive in that its subject matter/purpose, i.e., 'knowledge of God', 'true beliefs about God', is its own end, a good in itself. All good research, he reflects, involves 'getting your hands dirty', that is, 'closeness, involvement, and vulnerability' with one's subject matter. When the subject matter is God, this means that theological research is 'an act of confession', that is, of **humility**, one's own limitations. The research occurs in partnership with or accompanied by the Holy Spirit, not as a replacement for this very human process. It is also research which acknowledges its dependence on revelation for knowledge of its subject matter. Its purpose is to serve the church, not one's career or in competition with others. Some of its sources like Scripture hold different kinds or levels of **authority** from other sources, so for instance one can learn to listen to Nietzsche but doesn't have to finally agree with him. Finally, he states that in theology '**the whole of one's life**' is involved, though this is not expanded upon. Neither, significantly, does this claim exercise any influence on the shape or character of the research process/methods the rest of the book outlines.

The guide is offered as an 'instruction manual' for how to assemble theological research with the finished product of a paper: 'take certain steps involving *these* pieces and not *those* pieces, in *this* order and not *that* order, and when you're done you'll have a product you can be proud of' (13). The three skills research requires are 'finding, processing, communicating' (12), and the five steps are 'Find direction. Gather sources. Understand issues. Enter discussion. Establish position' (91). A chapter is devoted to each step and each chapter concludes with 'key points'

relating to that step. The author has selected two of his own graduate research papers, one in biblical theology and one in systematics, used as models at the end of each chapter, showing how the research step worked itself out practically in each instance. The papers themselves are not included, only these summaries, thus omitting considerations of form or style. Though the students is encouraged to work through these five steps in order, the need to move back and forth between them at times is noted, especially between steps 2 and 3, gathering sources and understanding issues.

Significantly, the phase of writing one's first draft is identified as the final stage: 'The final step, establishing position, is a simple one (I don't mean *easy*): write your paper!' (87). That this stage not be embarked upon earlier is emphasised: 'don't start writing your paper too soon. You may want to take notes, construct individual arguments or draw diagrams and charts. Remember, though, that if you write your paper before you have a thesis, you'll have to rewrite it. And if you write your thesis before you do your research, you won't be able to support it. The best way for you to end up with a paper that revolves around a well-supported thesis is to (1) 'let your research mould your thesis' and (2) 'let your thesis mould your paper' (88).

The transition into the final stage from stage 4 is characterised as the move from '**listening**' to 'talking'. There is a lot of weight put on this transition and a lot of requirements to check off in one's head before deeming oneself really ready to join the conversation as an active participant: 'you need to have something to contribute to the discussion'; 'you must recognise the appropriate time to enter the discussion'; and 'perhaps most importantly, you've done enough research when you can picture yourself seated at a table with the four or five most significant scholars in your area of study and know that you can understand and contribute to the discussion' [yikes, a scene many a student might really struggle to imagine themselves into]; and fourth, 'you have a deadline' and 'you still need time to write your paper' (78-9).

Appendex F, 'A Suggested Timeline for Theological Research Papers', situates writing one's first draft or 'Entering Discussion' in week 15 of a 15-week semester:

> Write a rough draft and use that draft to identify weaknesses in your *research*. Go back to steps two through four as necessary. Once you feel that your research is complete, edit your paper for organisation, grammar and so on.

> The sequence here is important: there's nothing more frustrating than spending hours on a section of your paper, honing each word until it sparkles with linguistic precision and rhetorical flourish, only to realise that further research reveals major shortcoming in its argument. Get the research done first, then hone the style. (148)

The late stage of writing one's first draft is so set apart and protected as to be almost hermetically sealed from the others. The major proviso given here that one may need to go back through all four steps at this stage is an alarming and worrying one. If one is struggling, the advice given at the end of this chapter is to aim to hand in an early draft for feedback, get help from the teaching assistant and/or librarian, or, finally, as a last ditch lifeline 'if you feel overwhelmed by the task I front of you' to get in touch with the writing centre at one's school if there is one (89).

Clearly, this method is the target of **Elbow's** alternative approach with his emphasis on writing at every stage of the process and never letting writing up be the last thing one does or saving writing for the last stage when one already has a clearly defined understanding of what one wants to say. However, there are some similarities with **Elbow's** 'Growth as Developmental Process', i.e., that ideas/words need to time to grow and one can't skip a stage in the process of their growth. What produces a lot of bad writing in Elbow's opinion is precisely not letting things simmer or 'cook 'enough - not nurturing the thing that wants saying - but he encourages engaging writing drafts at every stage in order to facilitate this growth.

John Allan Knight and Ian S Markham, The Craft of Innovative Theology: Argument and Process

This recently published reader is proposed for use as a textbook for a higher level (MA/PhD) course in 'Innovative Theology' teaching both 'the art of research writing' and the practice of '"creative theology"'.[2] The editors outline 'basic elements of publishable academic writing' in the introduction and the main body is composed of sixteen sample essays by contemporary theologians. The selected essays are organised thematically into six sections: 'God and the Incarnation'; 'God and the Church'; 'God and the World'; 'God and Ethics'; 'The End of the World'; and 'Method in Theology'. The editors state that the 'ultimate goal of great innovative academic writing' is 'an act of participation in a pre-existing conversation' which these essays are shown to exemplify (13).

Within the main body, the editors briefly introduce each essay, summarising the author's main argument and their rationale for its selection as a model for theological writing. For example, the introduction to the essay by Tinu Ruparell begins: 'Good academic writing is **clear** and elegant. This opening essays meets both of those conditions. It is a provocative thesis: All serious theology must be shaped by religious pluralism' (25). Each individual essay is also given a ranking between 1 and 4 'from the very accessible to the very difficult', according to the editors own 'research level' classification system:

> Level 1 means that the article is accessible and teaches basic research skills. Level 2 means that the article has certain concepts that will require explanation, but a good student can grasp the issues. Level 3 means that the article assumes some knowledge of the field and, without such literacy, the argument will be difficult to grasp. […] Level 4 means that there is a level of technical understanding and background knowledge that is essential for understanding the article. (13)

In light of the critiques lodged by **Elbow** and **Sword** of writing styles typically found in academic journal articles, this rating system might pejoratively be read as a guide on how to decipher and emulate jargon-filled, abstruse discourse, or in Helen **Sword**'s analysis, to practice 'a compulsive proclivity for discursive obscurantism

[2] I will return to this book in the literature review on theological practice and focus here on their formal guidance for dissertation writing.

and circumambulatory diction (translation: an addiction to big words and soggy syntax)' (**Sword**, 3).
Additionally, editorial boxes inserted throughout each essay highlight specific moves made by the author that demonstrate the character of a well-crafted research essay. For example, Box 1.2: 'Footnote 3 is a lovely note. The author is anticipating an objection: […]. He uses the footnote to answer this objection. He is writing alert to potential criticisms to his arguments' (26). Finally, to expand the user's theological vocabulary, technical terminology in the essays are underlined and bolded (eg., 'theodical'; 'transcendence'; 'apophatic'; 'polysemy'; 'scylla'; 'correspondence theory of truth') and definitions are provided in a glossary at the back of the book.

Of the book's total 436 pages, the editors devote only seven to their summary of 'the basic elements of publishable academic writing' and the process for producing it. Knight and Markham begin their introduction with the claim that 'most professors are better at imparting content than they are at imparting research skills', that is, 'how to *think* about a new way to interpret this thinker or *defend* an unfashionable position' (10). The book aims to fill a lacuna in theological education by explaining '*how* to write in such a way that you advance a discipline; there is a need for a book that explains *why* this article is great and that it should be a model of great research writing' (10). The editors are concerned to help students learn 'how to move the discipline on to a new set of questions or a new approach or a potential solution to an old problem' (10). They also claim that whilst there are many books on research methods available in Theology, 'none do the work of providing research method techniques for the student who is going to start writing at the level of a Ph.D. or a research Master's degree' (12) (Yaghjian overlooked here?).

Trademarks of good academic writing in theology are conveyed in one of their concluding remarks:

> Learning to write at the highest level of the academy is **hard**. But we are committed to the view that stating complex and technical arguments with stylistic clarity can be learned through examples. We chose models of writing that reinforce certain basic principles—a good piece of academic writing has a signpost, it is fair to the opponents, it illustrates a grasp of the literature, and it always goes back to the primary sources. (23)

'Writing' and 'Research' are used interchangeably throughout the introduction, though this ambiguity is not addressed. In my assessment, 'research methods' (11) and formulation/demonstration of a good argument rather than 'excellent *writing*' is the central focus. Clarity and elegance are singled out in the first sample essay as characteristics of good form, but the essay classification system (and quality of sample essays marked at level 4), suggest that formal concerns to do with writing style are subsumed by certain ideals of argumentation. Insofar as this is a guide on 'writing' in academia, it epitomises **Elbow**'s 'Doubting game', i.e., 'criticising, debating, arguing, and trying to extricate oneself from any personal involvement with ideas through using logic' (*Writing without Teachers*, xxii).

The two basic elements of 'good writing' are identified by the subheadings, 'Every Good Piece of Writing is an Answer to a Question' (14-15) and 'Every Good Piece of Writing Has a Beginning, a Middle, and an End' (15-17). Characteristics of a good question include: authenticity or originality, that is, 'a question that can yield an original contribution to scholarship in theology' (15); answerable through citable evidence and within the space constraints of a journal article (15); and, finally, consequential or 'will open up new ways thinking about some particular question' (15).
Specific guidance for the three sections of 'every good piece of writing' are also provided. The Introduction should be clear and concise and can be communicated to your average joe at the bus stop in a minute. It should state the precise question/thesis and contextualise this by describing previous work and showing how it fills a lacuna. Finally, it should include a 'roadmap' of the explanation/argument and gesture toward broader implications (16). The conclusion will have three elements: summary and restatement of thesis; what you didn't do/try to do; and possibilities for future work that has been made possible thanks to the work of this article (17). The Argument or main body engages with evidence for one's thesis and in most instances will proceed by way of textual evidence. After restating the author's point, one should clarify ambiguities and 'specify which meaning is most supportive of your argument' (16). Their guidance continues:

> show how, in the context of the entire text, this meaning is the best one. You can do this by noting a contradiction or an adverse logical ramification to the alternate meanings. Finally, explain exactly how the text in question supports your argument.

> On the other hand, if you are criticising a text, state the various meanings that the text might have, then specify which meaning is most resistant to your critique. Then you have two alternatives. First, you can show this is the only meaning that can withstand your critique. Second, you can show that even this most resistant meaning cannot withstand your critique.
>
> You will also need to consider and refute counterarguments. […] [Y]ou will need to find them and argue against them and/or raise possible ones to refute. (16-17)

The process for producing 'a good piece of writing' is broken down into the following steps/stages: 'Read, Read, Read!'; 'Decide on a Journal'; 'Formulate a Good Question'; 'Outline'; 'Write'; 'Revise'; 'Proofread'; 'Submit!'; 'Revise and Resubmit!'; 'Celebrate!' (17-21). The editors note that 'we find it helpful to write the introduction first, to make explicit how we want to proceed. But most often it will need to be rewritten after the essay is substantially completed, as arguments regularly change a bit during writing' (15). They also gesture to the ambiguous issue of when to outline/begin writing: 'We like to have an outline in mind before we start writing. Others like to start writing and get inspiration and ideas before they start writing. However you begin, a good essay will follow a well-structured outline' (20).

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, Quality Research Papers: For Students in Theology and Religion

Vyhmeister teaches at the Seventh Day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University (USA). Her guide was originally published (1980) in Spanish for South American graduate students and later editions in English incorporate her experience teaching seminary students for whom English is a second language and whilst abroad in Africa, and to address issues specific to changes in internet technology. It is thus oriented toward the beginner in theology but includes some advice concerning elements of a doctoral dissertation.

The advice offered is 'not original', as the author states at the outset, but gleaned from academic guides in the humanities. Part 2, 'Kinds of Theological Educational Research', is the only section tailored specifically to 'Theology and Religion' graduate students. Notably, she does not include philosophical theology as a form of theological education. Theology is either 'Biblical Exegesis'; 'Biblical Theology'; 'Historical Theology'; 'Pastoral Theology'; or 'Human Subject' oriented, i.e., ethnographic. A few statements indicate a theological perspective on the nature of research. For instance, the concluding 'charge' mixes metaphors of battle and creation with a light gesture toward the hidden workings of grace:

> May this have been a battle fought well, a victory with honour. / […] To organize words and ideas—**life** in general—is a **difficult** task. It also implies a Master's touch. If your paper is well done, beauty and order have come out of chaos, and we [i.e., the supervisors] are satisfied. (334)

She defines 'doing research' as 'the grounded, intentional, and savvy analysis of an object in conversation with peers and experts for the purpose of creating knowledge' (14) to which she appends this theological commentary:

> Research is the quest for truth, for reality—for God is the Creator of reality—whether it be scientific, historical, or religious. Growing in knowledge is a biblical requirement, as elaborated on by Andreas Kostenberger. This makes doing research a worshipful activity for believers. Yet because God is ultimate reality, and human beings are limited and finite, our journey toward truth and our discoveries along the way must not be considered as having arrived. [..] For this reason, even a careful researcher must be **humble**. (16))

Humility is not only an academic virtue for Vyhmeister, but a Christian one, listing some helpful biblical references:

> Humility is a basic Christian virtue. Christ presented himself as humble (Mt 11:29) and indicated that those who humbled themselves would be exalted (Mt 23:12). Paul and Peter appealed for humility in the dealings of one Christian with another (Philippians 2:3; 1 Peter 3:8, 5:5). James tied research and humility together by stating that "humility […] comes from wisdom" (Jas 3:13 NIV). […] [W]rite in such a way that is humble, tentative, willing to learn. This kind of writing makes room for dialogue, for reaching solutions (137).

Whilst she incorporates a greater breadth of scholarship on research skills, like **Kibbe**, she is loyal to the **school model of writing** and her characterisation of the writing process is fairly wooden. For example, 'Follow the steps of research described in this book. Once you have completed the research, you will write the article — following the publisher's rules' (128-9). As with all other guides to theology and religion students (with the exception of **Hopko** et al), writing is characterised as **hard** and happens only after the research is complete: 'Your research is now complete. […] The time to write has come. [..] For many, this last third [of the total time needed to complete the paper] is the **hardest**. That's one reason why you will meet a lot of ABDs — 'all but dissertation' doctoral students' (208). The only specific advice concerning the writing process itself defers to this extract from Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing* as the model to emulate: "'I rework every sentence a few times before going on to the next, and revise the whole chapter two or three times before I show it to anyone. Then, with feedback in hand, I revise each chapter twice more before circling back and giving the entire book two complete passes of polishing'" (76)

Note: her summary of the findings of Angela Brew, *The Nature of Research: Inquiry in Academic Contexts* (New York: NY: Routledge Falmer 2001) on the different ways research is experienced, gleaned through interviews with academics, was perhaps the most valuable find and could be worth looking at further:

(1) The *domino* variation: finding the answer to each distinct research question inspires, points to, or helps with a new research question;
(2) The *trading* variation: research is creating a product for others to use. It assumes being part of a community that learns from one another;

(3) The *layer* variation: research is looking beneath the surface, ever digging deeper;
(4) The *journey* variation: research is transformative, leading to growth in knowledge and understanding. (16)

Lucretia B Yaghjian, Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric of Theological and Biblical Writers

Lucretia B Yaghjian's *Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric of Theological and Biblical Writers* is remarkable for the thoroughness with which it attempts to map the rhetorics of the discipline of theology. Yanghjian seeks to illumine the nature of the discipline more broadly by viewing it through the lens of writing. Its audience is primarily theology students (including biblical theologians) but also 'all those who desire to write theology well, or better than they do at the moment' (xix).

In the Preface, she states that this book 'imagines writing, research, and the theological questions that engender them as elements of an ongoing process of inquiry, reflection, and practice', taking its lead from an epigraph by Thomas Merton:

> It is extremely **difficult** to write theology well. The main reason I can't write it is that … I don't know precisely what I want to say, and therefore when I start to write. I find that I am working out a theology as I go. (xix)

In addition to this presupposition that theology is learned in the process of writing it, Yaghjian adds the following presuppositions: 'writing theology well can be taught as well as learned'; that it is both 'a rhetorical and a theological practice'; and finally, that theological writing is a practice of 'witness[ing] to transcendence' by 'enlarging' the communal discourse and by 'witnessing to the One who inspires and authorises our theology' (xxi). In these presuppositions, Yaghjian aligns with many commitments of the 'Phenomenology of Theological Writing' project, not least in treating 'finding' and 'making' as intertwined elements.

A wide range of theologians across historical periods and the contemporary field are referenced throughout. Yaghjian also draws on a number of creative and academic writing guides (such as Strunk & White, Peter Elbow, Annie Dillard and Natalie Goldberg). Acknowledgements identify the author's professional affiliations as primarily the Episcopal Divinity School (New York) and Weston Jesuit School of Theology (Boston). Her orientations within the contemporary theological scene are not stated explicitly but become evident through the course of the book by the theologians to whom she repeatedly returns, such as Tillich, Kaufman, Tracy, Johnson, and Fiorenza. This book would be stronger (and more consistent with itself) if the author located herself explicitly within the discipline as

this inevitably shapes its account of good theological writing. It seems Yaghjian would herself consider the book successful if it trained its readers to be certain *kinds* of theologians or to do theology in a particular vein This is not a bad thing, and the implied ideal theologian here isn't particularly narrow or problematic. But by not situating herself, she carries the pretence (and burden?) of providing a kind of 'eagle's eye' point of view or presumably objective or generic guide to the practice of theology.

In any case, 'to write theology well', according to Yaghjian, is best summarised by the bullet points with which she concludes: to know your audience and your relation to it; to respect writing conventions and identify writing forms within the profession; to read exemplary writers and to 'write for publication as the opportunity presents itself'; to 'write clearly and purposefully with your mind, heart, and imagination' as well as to 'write **prayerfully** for the love of God and neighbour in whatever context'; and to 'write for yourself in order to do all of the above more effectively' (304).

Her working definition of theology is drawn from Rowan Williams's *On Christian Theology*, namely, that 'theology is a language used by a specific group of people to make sense of their world' (3), a definition which accommodates her emphasis throughout on the contextual aspects of theological writing. When discussing the distinctiveness of *theological* writing, Yaghjian first helpfully considers biblical instances in which God is imagined as a 'writer' (Ex 31:18; Jeremiah 31:33; Habakkuk 2:2). She also suggests that 'faith' is essential to writing theology well: faith in oneself, the subject matter, the audience, the purposes to which it is ultimately put, and the origin from which the desire to write it springs, identified as the Spirit of God (17). When asking 'what distinguishes contemporary theological writing from other writing', she identifies three elements: 1) its subject matter as '"discourse about God in the Christianity community"'; 2) that it is written 'from below', 'not by the finger of God'; and 3) it takes its character from the communities to whom it is addressed, whether that audience is 'society at large the theological academy, the church, the transcendent God, or ourselves' (15). These elements do not progress the question of the distinctiveness of theological writing, however, as surely most writers understand their work in relation to the communities it addresses as well as not to be written 'by the finger of God'.

The book is organised in three main sections: Writing Theological Rhetorics Well; Writing Theological and Biblical Research Well; and Toward a Theological Style

and Voice of Your Own. The first two sections are built on a primary distinction between 'rhetorics' and 'research'. In Part One, she defines writing theological reflection as engaging 'in a creative *process* characterised by cognitive *problem solving* whose rhetorical end is *proclamation*, or more simply, having something to say, hence to write, and writing it for a particular "public" or audience' (20). The genres of theological writing explored are reflection papers, argument or 'systematic reflection' papers, and the theological essay which is subdivided into 'critica;' and 'constructive' essays. In Part Two, she summarises theological research as writing 'that is engendered from your own questions, engages an answering conversation, carves your own research niche in the unraveling of that question, and moves diligently and with patience in your own way from a preliminary research claim to coherent theological research essay' (144). She tracks in detail distinct research stages from formulating a question, reviewing literature, carving one's own niche and formulating a research claim, and also discusses different ways of organising one's research and integrating it into a final essay, recommending a three-draft writing process, one driven by research, one by the writer, and the last by the audience. She concludes with notes on how to avoid plagiarism and principles for good footnoting/bibliographical form.

The final third section on Theological Style and Voice begins with a discussion of the essential role of theological imagination defined as 'a way of knowing, seeing, reflecting, and connecting' and 'as a rhetorical process employing analogy, metaphor, and symbol […] to connect the concrete with the conceptual, the particular with the universal, and the immanent with the transcendent in our writing' (204). She identifies three theological styles, namely, the pastoral, the systematic, and the constructive, aligning Augustine, Aquinas, and Julian of Norwich with each respectively (241-2). The latter is said to 'integrate' the first two, 'weaving' them into 'a vibrant constructive theological essay' (242). The discussion of 'voice' draws upon an insight from Thomas Merton who 'laments the writing of many who "love God and serve [Him] […] I am not talking about grammar and syntax, but about having something to say and saying it in sentences that are not half dead"' (244). Yaghjian outlines a suggested default style, adapted from Strunk & White's *Elements of Style* (249), dubbed 'theological plain style' (249).

The 'theological memos' interspersed throughout the chapters are exercises designed to help the reader reflect on and practice their own theological writing in relation to the content being discussed. For example, the second 'theological memo' asks the reader to reflect on one's own purposes when they sit down to

write and which of the purposes discussed previously is most akin to their own understanding (5). This seems a particularly useful aspect of the book and yet, many of these prompts involve major writing assignments in their own right which would demand enormous amounts of time in themselves.

This specific criticism applies, in my opinion, to the book as a whole. Rather than a guide accompanying the beleaguered scholar, this book constitutes more an entire *course* on theological writing. The Table of Contents alone is ten pages long. Its fastidious mapping and enumeration of genres and stages of theological writing throughout is likely to be off-putting to all but the most earnest of dissertation writers (or a very torturous form of procrastination!). Though its aims and content are admirable and the author's voice encouraging and pastoral throughout, its intensely detailed mapping of the mechanics or *techne* of theological writing risks giving the impression that to write theology well is to follow an algorithm. There is a danger that one will have only potentially learned a lot of things *about* writing theology well according to this author, rather than been enabled to actually find out how to write theology well oneself.