

Demystifying Research 8

Quantity and Quality in Thesis and Research Articles

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Thought seed:

There are many occasions in our lives when we would have been invited as guests for a wedding; similarly we would have hosted some of our friends and family members over for lunch or dinner at home for some festival, Deepavali for example. We would also have had guests stay over with us for short or long periods of time. We too may have been stay-at-home-guests sometimes in a friend or relative's house. Is there any difference in the roles we play as guests and hosts? What are the issues of quantity and quality that we would have handled? Let us think of this in the context of cooking/making/ordering food for our guests. What would have gone through our minds? Would we have ordered or made more than what our commonsense tells us? What if our guests are foodies? Would our decisions have changed? What about the quality of food? Do we go the extra kilometre to buy the best ingredients, and look for the best quality, at least as much as we can afford? In most Indian cultures, we as hosts, force the guests to eat well and more than their usual quantity; we make/order the best quality that we can afford as a mark of respect to our guests. Many of us would also expect such care and treatment when we go as guests to someone's house. Let us contrast this with the decisions we make about the quantity of food that needs to be prepared/ordered at home, our regular meals? What about the variety and the choice of menu? What/who determines that? Is the food made/ordered for guests

different from what we routinely make for a family lunch/dinner? How will it be different and why? What about the chefs at home, do they change the way they eat and act around guests? Why/why not? Think deeply about the quantity and quality of food in such a context. How do we strike a balance?



There is always a mystery in any author's mind related to the quantity and quality of text that needs to be written for an academic publication. This often gets determined by the stipulations, decided by the university if it is a thesis, and the editor if it is a journal article/book chapter. In the case of a dissertation, the page numbers and the number of chapters written are suggested

and probably even decided by the supervisor based on the area of research. In a similar manner, the names of chapters, headings and subheadings within a chapter are also the result of similar collaborative work based on the topic/area of research. A thesis is written, evaluated and graded by a set of external examiners. These examiners pass a judgement on the efficacy of information flow and the quality and quantity of rationalisation, nature of analysis etc. A thesis usually takes anywhere between six months to 12 months to arrive at its final draft. We call it the final draft because no matter how careful we are, there will still be some scope and possibility of improvement in the thesis. Newer references will become available, newer findings may crop up as a lightbulb glow or our clarity will improve and we might want to include these before the submission. The truth is, many of us submit when we are tired of reading the same thesis multiple times and when our supervisor is also tired and we together say, 'enough of this now, let's get rid of it!' Nobody will make such a confession, but this is generally the case. Things largely remain the same while we write research articles and try to publish them in reputed journals, but the 'bigger' or more 'reputed' the journal, the more care we take. There are fundamental differences, however, between the two platforms. A thesis is sent up for grading and the award of a degree, while a research article is sent up for publication. Both carry our research perspectives and findings but they differ in terms of the quantity and quality of words used to capture the same research. We also need to remember that who we write for differs. A thesis is written primarily for the external examiners who are going to read the thesis and hopefully pass it rather than ask for a revision, or worst scenario, reject it. It is only after it is passed that other academicians, usually hopeful doctorates, or those interested in the same area, will get to

read the thesis. In contrast, while articles in journals or book chapters are initially written for the editor/peer reviewers, they are meant for a wider audience. Editorial suggestions are made based on the editor's knowledge of potential readership. The quantity of writing, and sometimes the quality, in terms of style, also differs between the two. In this context, quantity and quality should not be confused with quantitative and qualitative analyses. It is purely in terms of the number of words, the quantity and the choice of diction and style, the mode and tenor of writing, to use a Hallidayan phrase, the quality that is used in theses and in research articles.

Many 'research articles' that come for review read like a mini-thesis or a PhD proposal. This is because we do not pay attention to the manuscript guidelines that are fundamental to a research article. Authors currently/recently working on their theses attempt to duplicate their thesis and write a precis of it and call it a research article. Very often such 'articles' stand rejected because a summary or a precis of a PhD thesis is NOT a research article. We can hear a forlorn voice here: *"It is my research! Why can't I take a chapter and send it as an article?"* Yes, it is your research, but the purpose of a research article is different from the purpose of a thesis and the readers are also different. A thesis is evaluated and marked, while a research article is reviewed to be read. There is a huge difference. Think about it! Judgements and acceptance is common for both, just like how food is common for the hosts and the guests. But the quantity and quality differ. A thesis is like a full complete meal that we plan for a wedding or a very big function in our family. A research article is like a simple meal or a snack that we serve to guests. The care we take is the same for both, but the quantum of preparation, the style of cooking and the presentation differs.

We can hear you asking a question in your mind: “*How do I know what to do when?*” A simple awareness and some reflective exercises will help you determine what can or ought to be done. A thesis is almost always very important, but usually a one-time event while research articles are expected to be our second nature as academics. Research articles, like our everyday food, must be healthier, more carefully planned and spaced out throughout our career. The quality and quantity will affect our academic health and well-being. Writing and reading research articles critically builds our academic muscle and character and we need to pay close attention and spend enough effort on them to sustain our academic credibility. “*How do I do that?*” you ask? Simple, if you are already writing your thesis, break up your research into smaller chunks and glean a couple of presentations and research articles and present/ publish them. This is as far as data, analyses, interpretation and findings are concerned. The real danger is in the historical or the theoretical background section where we tend to go overboard whether it is a presentation or a research article.

In a thesis, the historical background, theoretical framework and the literature review occupy one or two whole chapters where a very robust set of critical readings are often just summarised or as it ought to be, criticised. This is usually followed by the declaration of the research gap and/or hypotheses and research questions. This is done to establish or rather ‘declare’ to the examiners: “*See I have read all these fellows, and none of them have spoken about what I am about to research, so, accept what I have done, and give me my degree.*” This also has to be done in a research article, the finding of a research gap, but we cannot afford to wax loud and long on what we have read or found, using

search engines like Google Scholar, to show off our scholarship. This has to be done in a very subtle way for the number of words available to do the same thing is far less. Can we say that a ‘diet-version’ or a ‘mini-meal version’ of the chapters in a thesis is the theoretical section of a research article? In a sense yes: the quality being the same, the quantity of words is far less but very accurate, clear and terse. This is the most challenging part for any author. “*How do I do that?*”-you ask? Careful planning, quick execution and absolute clarity in your methodology, data, findings etc will slowly ease you into this section of the research article. Do not attempt to do a precis of your thesis or try to put in too many irrelevant references just to show that you have read them. Do not just paraphrase study after study after study. The quantity must just be right, any overburdening text will act like empty calories. Add nutritious studies that link directly with your findings. The most difficult step is to find out which studies add nutrition to your research and which ones are junk references. For this you need to develop absolute clarity in your specific contribution through the research article that makes it a unique contribution to academia. Be ruthless and discard references that are junk to your study. Yes, we will feel bad about having to reject a few ‘good-old’ references, but isn’t that better than our article getting rejected? Yes, we come from a clean-plate culture where we do not waste good food, but we also come from a reuse culture, where for example we have plastic bags full of plastic bags that we routinely guard. Let us keep these unnecessary non-nutritious references in a folder tucked away somewhere with the hope of using them somewhere else. The two of us believe that such padding is not needed even in a thesis, but sometimes it is unavoidable in that context. In our research articles, every word

must be carefully chosen to add nutrition to our study and stay balanced and help our reader grow through the new research we are showcasing. We do not need to pack empty calories into a research article, regardless of the section. We need to pay conscious attention to the quality and quantity of words in the research article, and make every word count. A mini-thesis is NOT a research article. A good idea is to begin looking at the call-for-papers and manuscript guidelines of the target publication before you begin writing and plan your article accordingly. Good articles are like well planned, carefully chosen snacks,

or mini meals, or a well planned nutritious balanced home cooked meal. A thesis is like a wedding feast.

Happy writing!

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