TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING AND PRESENTATION OF THESIS: A COMPANION GUIDE TO POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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Abstract

The paper discusses the place of research in national development. It shows that research is central to university education and students are required to produce research results in form of dissertation or thesis. Lamenting the difficulties students experience in writing and presenting thesis or dissertation despite undertaking and passing research methodology course, the paper provides a companion guide for successful and effective writing and presenting thesis

KEYWORDS: Postgraduate Education, Postgraduate Research, Thesis, University Education

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research is indeed regarded as the bedrock of development. And because since inception, most researches are carried out in universities or centers and institutes, which are either residing in the universities or affiliated to them, makes them as focal points for national development Researches and breakthrough are recorded by students either at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. Additionally and more importantly, university staff, as central part of their job conducts researches, as individuals and as groups.

From the above discussion, it can be seen clearly that research is very important. It is because of its importance that research methodology as course is taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Even for those programs that are by research work, students are required to take this course.

However, despite the fact that students not only studied research methodology at the undergraduate level and produce research project, and repeat the course at postgraduate level, writing and presentation of thesis still remain a Herculean task to most students. This paper therefore seeks to enumerate and discuss those techniques students need to master dearly in order to effectively write and present thesis without tears and sweat.

2.0 Nigerian University System

University according to Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus is an educational institution with an undergraduate college which confers bachelor's degrees and graduate and professional schools each of which may confer master's degrees and doctorates, the physical plant of a university. The University is metaphorically referred to as an "Ivory

tower" because, apart from being universal and apex of all the educational system, it also represents the intellectual height of scholars

In Nigeria, University education could be traced to the Elliot Commission of 1947 and Eric Ashby Commission. The reports of these commissions resulted in the establishment of the first generation universities, notable among them the University of Ibadan. The number of University in Nigeria increased steadily by the decades to such an extent that as of today, according to Abdulkadir (2010) there are 27 Federal, 36 state and 40 private universities in the country, making a total of 104.

The purpose of university education as contained in the Nigeria Education Act is to, among others: develop intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment; promote the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills to enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community; and promote and encourage scholarship and research

University education has three cardinal points; teaching, learning and research. Researches are carried out at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Researches may also be carried at these levels as term papers and course requirements. In addition to all these, university may designate certain centers and institutes, with the sole mandate of carrying out researches in particular areas, such as agriculture, health, energy, etc.

3.0 Postgraduate Education in Nigerian University System

Postgraduate, synonymous to graduate education is the type of higher degree that is pursued for which a Bachelor's degree or its equivalent is required. The organization and structure of postgraduate education varies in different countries, and also in different institutions within countries.

Generally there are two pathways to postgraduate education in Nigeria as in most others countries of the world. These pathways are postgraduate program by course work or by research. The course pathway involves students registering and passing some designated course before embarking on the research work. While the pathway of research

work means students choosing a topic and immediately starting thesis writing without undertaking course work

3.1 Type of Postgraduate Programs in Nigerian University System

In most Nigerian University System, the hierarchy of post-graduate degrees is as follows:

- PhD or Doctorate Program. This is regarded as terminal degree in all the Nigerian Universities. Before a candidate is admitted into this program, the candidate must have obtained first and second degrees in the same or related fields. It is called doctor of philosophy because at this level, the candidate is expected to contribute to knowledge buy discovering or inventing new things, or by theorizing or debunking existing ones, or even designing and proposing new models These are often further divided into academic and professional doctorates.
- Master's Program. The master's program requires that the candidate has first degree in that field or related areas. The master's program is sometimes placed in a further hierarchy, starting with degrees such as the Master of Arts and Master of Science, then Master of Philosophy. Master's degrees may also be taught or by research: taught Master's include the MSc and MA degrees which last for a minimum of two years. The Master's by research degrees also last for a minimum of two years, and the MPhil (Master of Philosophy) degree is also two years, and is often granted to failed doctorates.
- Other types of Postgraduate Program available in Nigerian University System include the Professional Postgraduate Program and Postgraduate Diploma. These are not normally academics. Therefore, their duration is shorter and in most cases, their content less. Graduate of these programs cannot in most universities in Nigeria be admitted for doctorate program

4.0 Requirement for Graduation

Requirements for the successful completion of a taught master's program are that the student passes all the required core and elective courses, which normally last for one-year plus a thesis, which will also take another year. Requirements for research-based programs vary among universities. Generally, however, a student is not required to take taught courses as part of their candidacy.

5.0 Thesis Writing

Upon completion of at least two years' research and course work as a postgraduate student, a candidate must demonstrate truthful and original contributions to his or her specific field of knowledge within a frame of academic excellence. The Master and Doctoral candidate's work should be presented in a dissertation or thesis prepared under the supervision of a tutor or director, and reviewed by a postgraduate Committee. This Committee should be composed of examiners external to the program, and at least one of them should also be external to the institution.

A dissertation or thesis is therefore, according to Wikipedia (2010) the result of research findings submitted in support of candidature for a degree or professional qualification. It declares what you believe and what you intend to prove. A good thesis statement makes the difference between a thoughtful research project and a simple retelling of facts.

This is why John (2010) averred that thesis writing involve two process; the scientific method, which is a process of separating truths from error and fact from judgments, of complicity and selecting evidence to support a credible conclusion, and art method, which has to do with the process of organizing the results on paper so that they will instruct and even intrigue a reader. Watt further observes that in first-rate research the “two culture meet”. He concludes that any research work should be the product of both critical thinking and creative writing and that research should reflect the enthusiasm of an alert mind not the methodological digging of a reluctant mole

5.1 Attributes of a good thesis:

- It should be contestable, proposing an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree. A strong thesis is provocative; it takes a stand and justifies the discussion you will present.
- It is specific and focused.
- It clearly asserts your own conclusion based on evidence
- It anticipates and refutes the counter-arguments
- It avoids vague language (like "it seems").
- It avoids the first person. ("I believe," "In my opinion")
- It should pass the so what? Or who cares? Test (Would your most honest friend ask why he should care or respond with "but everyone knows that"?) For instance, "people should avoid driving under the influence of alcohol," would be unlikely to evoke any opposition.

Simple equations for a thesis might look something like this: What you plan to argue + How you plan to argue it = Thesis

6.0 Thesis Presentation, Style and Structure

The structure and style of presentation of thesis differs from discipline to discipline (arts, humanities, social sciences, technology, etc.). In some discipline thesis contains five chapters, while in some may exceed five. However, a typical thesis is made up of what Easterbrook (2010) called thesis skeleton consisting of preliminary pages normally in Roman figures and has a *title page*, an *abstract,* a *table of contents,* etc. Chapter one provides background of the study, Statement of the problem, research questions/hypothesis, etc.

Related literature is reviewed in chapter two and methodology, consisting of population and sample of the study, instrument for data collection, etc is located at chapter three Data collected for the study is presented, analyzed and discussed in chapter four. While chapter five presents summaries of the study and findings, conclusion is

drawn and recommendation put forward. Other components of this chapter include bibliography and appendixes.

However, degree-awarding institutions often define their own house style that candidates have to follow when preparing a thesis document. In addition to institution-specific house styles, there exist a number of field-specific, national, and international standards and recommendations for the presentation of theses,

Presentation of thesis also requires that the candidate organizes the results on paper so that the art method will come out clearly and beautifully. This means that pagination, layout, type and color of paper, paper size, order of components, and citation style, will be well presented. Additionally, font size justification of typing, placement of tables and charts, etc will be maintained.

7.0 Thesis Examination or Defense

One of the requirements for thesis defense is often an oral examination. This examination normally occurs after the thesis is finished but before it is submitted to the university, and may comprise a presentation by the student and questions posed by an examining committee or jury. This exercise is often called Thesis defense or a *viva voce*. Levine (2010) regards thesis defense as a terrible name, because according to him the name seems to suggest some sort of war that you're trying to win. And, of course, with four or five of them and only one of you it sounds like they may have won the war before the first battle is held. I wish they had called it a dissertation seminar or professional symposium.

The oral defense is two fold; the internal defense and the external. In all the defenses try to remember that the purpose of the defense is for you to show everyone how well you have done in the conducting of your research study and the preparation of your dissertation. In addition there should be a seminar atmosphere where the exchange of ideas is valued. You are clearly the most knowledgeable person at this meeting when it comes to your subject. And, the members of your committee are there to hear from you

and to help you better understand the very research that you have invested so much of yourself in for the past weeks. Their purpose is to help you finish your degree requirements.

Levine (2010) suggests the following as guide to make thesis presentation a success

- Try to **attend one or more defenses prior to yours.** Find out which other students are defending their research and sit in on their defense. In many departments this is expected of all graduate students..

  At the defense try and keep your focus on the interactions that occur. Does the student seem relaxed? What strategies does the student use to keep relaxed? How does the student interact with the faculty? Does the student seem to be able to answer questions well? What would make the situation appear better? What things should you avoid? You can learn a lot from sitting in on such a meeting.

- Find opportunities to **discuss your research with your friends and colleagues.** Listen carefully to their questions. See if you are able to present your research in a clear and coherent manner. Are there aspects of your research that are particularly confusing and need further explanation? Are there things that you forgot to say? Could you change the order of the information presented and have it become more understandable?

- Find time to rehearse your presentation a number of times. You can do it in front of your collogues, mates and supervisory committee

- It's important that you have the feeling when entering your defense that you **aren't doing it alone.** As was mentioned earlier, your major supervisor should be seen as an ally to you and "in your corner" at the defense. Don't forget, if you embarrass yourself at the defense you will also be embarrassing your supervisors. So, give both of you a chance to guarantee there is no embarrassment.

- **Don't be defensive at your defense** (this sounds confusing!). This is easy to say but sometimes hard to fulfill. You've just spent a considerable amount of time on your

research and there is a strong tendency for YOU to want to defend everything you've done.

- **Organize the defense as an educational presentation.** This can be done by preparing a 20-25 minute presentation that reviews the entire study. This is done through the help of a series of 10-12 large pieces of paper, wall charts that have been posted sequentially around the walls of the room. By preparing these wall charts ahead of time the student is able to relax during the presentation and use the pieces of paper as if they were a road map toward the goal. No matter how nervous you are you can always let the wall charts guide YOU through your presentation

- Consider **tape recording your defense.**, You can record your entire presentation and also the questions and comments of the committee members using a small portable recorder. This helps in two ways. First, the student has documentation to assist in making suggested changes and corrections in the dissertation. The student can relax more and listen to what is being said by the committee members. The tape recorder is taking notes! Second, the student has a permanent record of his/her presentation of the study. By keeping the paper charts and the tape together, they can be most useful for reviewing the research in future years when a request is made for a presentation. (Bring out the tape and the pieces of paper the night before your presentation and you can listen to *you* make the presentation. What a good way to review.)

- Oh, I almost forgot, noted, Levine. There's one last thing, he cautions!. Get busy and **prepare an article or paper that shares the outcomes of your research.** There will be no better time to do this than now. Directly after your defense is when you know your study the best and you will be in the best position to put your thinking on paper. If you put this writing task off it will probably never get done. Capitalize on all of the investment you have made in your research and reap some additional benefit - start writing.

7.1 Examination results

The result of the examination may be given immediately following deliberation by the examiners or at a later date, in which case the examiners may prepare a defense report that is forwarded to Postgraduate School, which then officially recommends the candidate for the degree. The defense report consists of the scoring of the thesis and written examiners' reports. The examiner's report is made up of 15 items and one of the most important items is that which request that the major contribution to knowledge of the candidate be specified. According to Easterbrook "A thesis for the PhD must form a distinctive contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality shown by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power."

7.2 Potential decisions (or "verdicts")

- Accepted / pass with no corrections: The thesis is accepted as presented. A grade may be awarded,
- Accepted/ pass with minor correction: The thesis is accepted subject to correction of numerous grammatical or spelling errors; clarification of concepts or methodology; addition of sections. In this case one or more members of the jury and/or the thesis supervisor will make the decision on the acceptability of revisions and provide written confirmation that they have been satisfactorily completed. If, as is often the case, the needed corrections are relatively modest the examiners may all sign the thesis with the verbal understanding that the candidate will effect the corrections with his or her supervisor before submitting the completed dissertation.

- Accepted/ pass after major corrections: Extensive corrections are required here. Problems may include theoretical or methodological issues, faulty questionnaire, wrong population and sampling techniques, etc. This may lead to going back to the field. After all corrections are effected, the thesis must undergo the evaluation and defense process again from the beginning with the same examiners.

- A candidate who is not recommended for the degree after the second defense must normally withdraw from the program.

- Rejected and withdrawn: The thesis is unacceptable and the candidate must withdraw from the program. This verdict is given when it is crystal clear that the candidate is incapable of make it.

7.3 The role of Supervisory Committee in Writing and Presentation of Thesis

A thesis or dissertation committee is a committee that supervises a student's dissertation. This committee, consisting of a major supervisor and one more in case of thesis and two or more in case of dissertation committee members, supervises the progress of the thesis or dissertation and may also act as the examining committee at the oral examination of the thesis.

The committee is assigned to the student by the postgraduate committee, usually after completion of the course work examinations. The committee members have the task of reading the thesis or dissertation, making suggestions for changes and improvements, and sitting in on the defense.

You must work closely with your Supervisory Committee. It is the committee that you must please. Develop a strategy with the Supervisory Committee regarding how and when your writing should be shared. Meet together ahead of time and discuss the strategy you should use at the defense. Identify any possible problems that may occur and discuss ways that they should be dealt with.

Only after your Supervisory Committee approves of what you have done should you think of internal and external defense. The defense meeting allows the concerns of committee members to surface in a dialogical atmosphere where opposing views can be discussed and resolved.

8.0 Conclusion

From the above foregoing it is clear that writing and presenting thesis require a lot of painstaking steps. It is hope that by following the above enumerated guide students will be able to overcome their difficulties so that it will be possible for them to finish their graduate degree program in a most timely and enjoyable manner. Levine also hopes that by looking ahead to the different aspects of this final part of your graduate study it becomes clear that you can do a number of things to insure your success. God bless and Good luck!

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