

CHAPTER 3

From thesis to book

The average Ph.D. thesis is nothing but a transference of bones from one graveyard to another.

– J. Frank Dobie

IF YOU ARE LOOKING TO REWORK A THESIS into a book (or, say, are the supervisor of someone in that position) then this chapter has information specific to theses that is not found elsewhere. All other readers should feel free to skip this chapter.

The pressures of junior scholarship

This volume is about getting your book published; we do not believe that a thesis in its pure form is publishable, and as a consequence we are not going to discuss the highs and lows of writing a thesis here – for that, you have your supervisor. However, theses (which by definition are required to be original contributions to scholarship) have been the basis of many great monographs, and that makes them highly relevant to this companion.

Most junior scholars will have been living off a doctoral grant that suddenly expires, so finding a new source of income is imperative. For those looking to make a career in the academic world, this is the crunch time. The available options may be a junior teaching position or a post-doctoral grant for a limited period of time, neither of which is a sinecure, and neither of which is particularly well paid – but both of which could well involve a stressful and time-consuming move to a different part of the country, or even a move abroad.

Invariably there is also the firm expectation from peers and superiors that a series of publications will be delivered, not least a monograph. Indeed, building a good list of publications is an absolute must if you are to progress in your climb towards the pinnacle of the ivory tower. The pressure is on from Day One.

So, you find yourself with very little time on your hands, with a massive pressure to publish, and with a major piece of writing recently completed. Is the solution blindingly obvious? Sadly not.

Why is a thesis not a book?

Some of the pointers in Chapter 5 on preparing the manuscript may be useful to you when writing your thesis. What we do *not* suggest, however, is that you set out to write a monograph and submit this as your thesis. At first glance, this might look like a neat way of avoiding the laborious task of reworking the thesis after its completion. The reality, however, is that such a monographic thesis would most likely be unacceptable to your supervisors and external examiners because it would lack several elements normally deemed vital in a thesis that tend to be pared down or absent in a book. In other words, do not even think of it.

Whether a thesis is submitted as photocopied and ring-bound A4 pages or as a properly printed and bound book-shaped object, its contents are fundamentally different to what we expect to find in a scholarly book. The main differences are shown opposite. Note that the thesis and monograph are both equally valid forms of scholarly communication; they simply have different forms and purposes that require quite different treatments by their authors.

Common in some countries is the requirement that PhD candidates deliver many copies of their doctoral thesis as part of their defence – handing over up to 300 copies is not unusual. In other countries, theses are ‘published’ by their authors’ university departments or faculties in book form. Of course, only a few copies are needed to conduct the defence; often the majority are used to fund the host university’s library exchange programme.

Main differences between a thesis and a book

	A typical thesis	A good scholarly book
Form	Often book-like	Book
Length	Often a lower limit, but not always an upper limit	Limited by market forces
Author	Student	Writer (with obligations to readers)
– purpose	To prove competence and academic credentials	To communicate ideas
Readership	Panel of examiners	Colleagues and anyone else interested in the subject
– purpose	To examine student	Learning
Focus on	Author	Reader
Scholarship	Exposition required	Absorbed and built on
– role	To demonstrate knowledge	To frame discourse
Approach	Defensive exposition	Open disclosure
Treatment of subject	Often highly technical and very detailed	Avoids unnecessary technical detail
Language	Often obscure, abstract and heavy on jargon	Clear with judicious use of technical terms where needed
Structure	Often progressive recitation	Organic unity, narrative thread
Narrative flow	Orderly exposition but argument not built; often excessive signposting	Builds argument, linking chapters with subtlety; has pace and momentum
Ending	Often ends quite abruptly	Wrapped by conclusions
Methodology	Detailed description required	Description only if and when relevant
Quotations	Necessary, often extensive	Limited use
Referencing	Often far more than strictly necessary	Only what is necessary
Evaluation		
– before	Feedback from supervisor; final assessment by panel of examiners	Publisher's commercial assessment, peer-review process and editorial input
– after	Formal defence	Peer reactions in journals and other external forums

Traditionally, these theses were photocopied, with great wads of A4 paper thus received by somewhat unenthusiastic exchange libraries. Increasingly, however, we see them produced in book form, often striking in appearance. University libraries are still exchanging these with other libraries, but the excess copies these days are often passed on to a book distributor to see if through sales they can wring a little profit out of the 'book'. Aesthetically it may be pleasing to have such a thesis on one's bookshelf, and it may be flattering to see it listed in a publisher's catalogue.

However, we would argue that in fact this 'book' could harm your future academic career, often quite severely. Why? As we have said, a thesis is not a book, and nor is it perceived as such by scholars, who – like libraries – have limited budgets. Rarely do you see them actually buying a copy of a thesis, should this be commercially available. Fair or not, theses do not have a high perceived value. Thus, perhaps 50 or 100 copies of your thesis are exchanged, a handful sold, and a dozen given away in connection with your defence. The depressing fact is that this could be enough to deter a publisher from taking on your study and working with you to produce a monograph that would have a perceived value and might earn you a reputation – and a job offer.

As a PhD student you may well have no say in this matter at all, but we believe this is a practice that should at least be questioned by students and their supervisors, and discussed with those within the university who do have a say. It is entirely possible that the technical ability to produce attractive 'books' cheaply has overtaken academic and collegiate concerns without an active decision ever being made, and that the powers-that-be prove willing to consider whether the small advantage to libraries is worth the potential great disadvantage to PhD graduates.

What to do with your thesis

So, given that no reputable publisher will allow you simply to slap a cover on your thesis and call it a monograph, what do you do with it? You need to consider two points in conjunction:

- What kind of book do you wish to write? Consult Chapter 2, particularly the sections discussing markets and all the hard thinking required in planning a successful book.
- What needs to be done to produce that book? Assess your material to see what is useful and what needs to be added or rewritten, and assess your schedule to determine whether you will be able to do the work within a reasonable time.

So, what options do you have, then?

Delay making a decision. This is often the result of thesis fatigue and the need to do something else for a while. Delay can be positive; not least, it allows you to stand back from your study and gain some perspective. The risk, however, is that you lose momentum and never properly return to the thesis topic. If you delay, you should set yourself a deadline to ensure that you do eventually make an active decision.

Do nothing. This is a time-honoured and very common default decision that allows you to spend your time on other projects. The trouble is that, if you did a good piece of research for your thesis and actually came up with something new and interesting, then you could be wasting a treasure-trove. Moreover, much of the research work has been done; to start a new research project and see this through to a published work could take far longer than it would take you to rework your thesis, or even to write a completely new manuscript on the basis of the thesis research.

'Mine' your thesis for articles. Certainly, it is quicker and easier to write an article than a book, and faster publication means that you can assert your 'ownership' of new ideas and research material before others have a chance to steal your glory. That said, there are many benefits that articles do *not* deliver, such as the opportunity to develop a lengthy argument, to avoid sharing the limelight with other authors, and to prove your academic mettle. Remember, however, that the book vs. article choice need not be an either-or situation; many authors shape the bulk of their thesis material into a full-length book, but also spin

off articles from material either not used in the book or sufficiently changed so that a publisher will agree that this is essentially different (and unpublished) material. In theory, it is possible to take an editorial chainsaw to your thesis, chopping it up into many article-sized logs. The reality, however, is more likely to be that only two or three of your chapters are suitable for reworking into articles; if you discount the book option, the rest of your thesis will be wasted.

Make minimal changes (or in other words, produce a ‘warmed-over’ thesis). Thesis fatigue, the pressures of new projects, or sheer laziness – there are many reasons for looking to take a short cut. If one really must publish a monograph, why not simply slap a new title on it and run a quick find/replace on the text, swapping all occurrences of ‘thesis’ or ‘dissertation’ with ‘study’ or ‘book’? You can (and people do). Just don’t expect to get the work published. Why? Because a thesis is not a book.

Do a partial makeover. This is the most common strategy, essentially to extract and build on one or more elements of the thesis, with any leftover material being reworked into articles or used to form the basis of subsequent research. The virtue of this approach is that you build on a strong base of coherent material; the downside is that reworked text is unlikely to be as good as text written from scratch for its particular purpose.

Rewrite from scratch. The most radical solution – to completely rewrite your material from the ground up – normally gives vastly superior results, but many junior scholars lack the time and mental energy to carry such a huge task through to its conclusion.

Assessing your material

It is clear that you cannot get published without at least some work, but how much work is enough? As always, that depends – not least on what you are aiming to achieve and what shape your thesis is in. For this reason, even before you start putting in all the work that

is necessary, you need to think ahead. Here, if you haven't already done so, you should (re)visit Chapter 2, especially the sections on determining what you want for yourself and your book, and what potential readers of your book will be wanting.

Apart from the considerations involved in planning any kind of book, for the specialist task of converting a thesis into a book you need to ask yourself these additional questions:

- What material do I have that is new and interesting to other scholars?
- Is there enough good material in my thesis to work into a book?
- If more material is needed, what is this? What will be involved in obtaining it?
- How can my final material be presented in a coherent and interesting way?
- How long will the revision work take?
- Will this (old) work fit in with the (new) work that I am currently engaged in?

There are some who would argue that a thesis should never be reworked into a monograph since the radically different nature of a monograph requires that it be written from scratch. Arguably, this is true of some theses, but there are also many cases where a thesis already carries within it the germ of a monograph (usually hidden somewhere in the middle chapters) that can be brought out and expanded. Be aware, though, that if you are going to make a good job of it, the process of rearranging material, polishing it and writing new links and conclusions can become almost as time-consuming as writing new text from scratch.¹

1 It is not without reason that a nameless wit has revised the Pareto Principle, observing that the first 90 per cent of an activity takes up 90 per cent of the time, while the last 10 per cent of the activity demands the other 90 per cent of the time.

Getting Published



It takes stamina to get from the rather daunting event of the PhD defence to the very much jollier occasion of the book launch.



Certainly, there are dangers in reusing material, particularly when patching together disparate pieces of text; this can jeopardize consist-

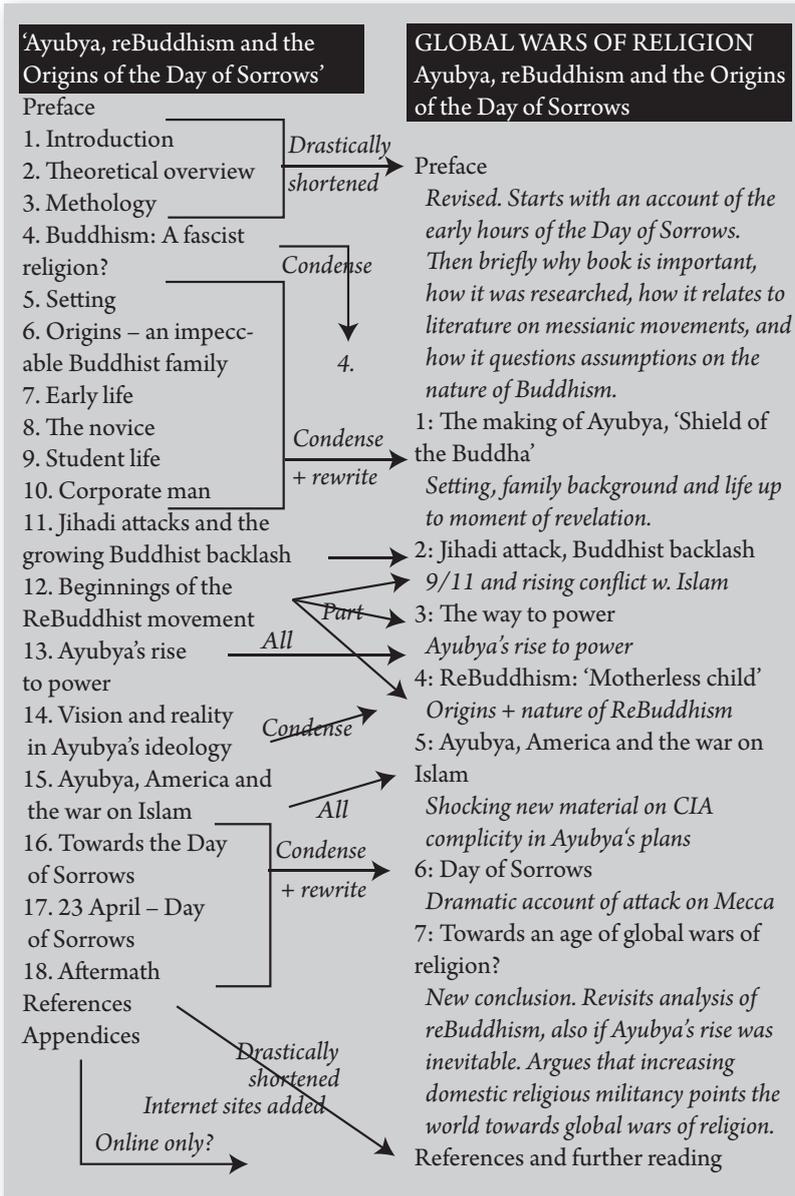
ency and fail to create a coherent voice and storyline within the work. Nonetheless, there is a very understandable temptation to reuse old text that on rereading you find really rather good. If you are very careful and critical when you read through your draft text to ensure that it really does flow and link seamlessly, there is no reason why you should not be able to produce an excellent book manuscript from reworked thesis material.

Getting started

Once you have satisfied yourself with real answers to the above questions and decided to go ahead with a book, you must plan it out in detail. Many of the points you need to consider are discussed in Chapter 2, but there are a few extra issues pertinent to theses arising from the different processes involved in revising a thesis and writing a book from scratch.

Deciding when to start. There is no one right time to begin. Start too soon and you will lack the distance and detachment from your thesis that is needed if you are to write a monograph that is fresh, lively and free of ‘thesis baggage’. Delay too long and you may lose momentum and your ready grasp of the subject in all its complexity; worse, your material may begin to show its age. In any case, soon enough your hand will probably be forced by the need to make important life and career choices.

Planning by preparing a comparative table of contents. If what you are proposing is a monograph derived from a thesis, then especially useful (not just for planning but later also for making an approach to a publisher) is to map the similarities and differences between the two works. An example is overleaf. On the basis of such an analysis, you will be able to draw up an annotated table of contents that both describes the content and indicates where the material comes from. It is this annotated table of contents – *not* the comparative map – that you will use to ‘sell’ your book proposal to a publisher (as it is the proposed book, not the original thesis, that is of interest).



A visual plan of attack for turning an imaginery thesis, 'Ayubya, reBuddhism and the Origins of the Day of Sorrows', into the book, Global Wars of Religion.

Things you will need to cut

As is clear in the thesis–book comparison above, there are many elements in a thesis that do not belong in a book. These need to be reworked, trimmed to their bare essentials or even chopped away completely. Do not look at such editing as just a butcher’s job. Your work is in fact a rough diamond that by careful cutting and polishing can be revealed in its full glory.

Literature review. Your study belongs to a specific scholarly discourse and will be framed by this. As your intended readers are already familiar with this discourse, it is sufficient that you lightly refer to this and indicate how your work adds to the debate. Certainly, it is unlikely that a 100-page review of the theoretical literature to date will be of interest.

Methodology. Likewise, readers will want to know enough about your research to help them assess the validity of your argument but no one will be interested in the minutiae of your methodology.

Quotations. Supporting an argument with the words of an authority in the field is reasonable, but do this judiciously and elegantly: paraphrasing rather than direct quotation is easier to read. If you have a lot of direct quotations in your thesis, look to eliminate most of these in your book.

Tables. Remember that every table is a distraction; it draws the reader away from the text. For each table, ask yourself: Is this one necessary? Could it be summarized and reworked into the text instead? Would it be more effective as a figure? Can it be reproduced legibly on a book-sized page?

Footnotes/endnotes. These are another distraction. The situation is worse when the note reference system is used because, with comments and citations mixed together, pertinent comments can be buried in a torrent of citations. For each note, ask yourself: Is this one necessary? Can citations be clustered or even (for multiple references to the same book) collapsed into a single citation? Can you indeed reduce the number of works cited?

References. How many people actually read bibliographies – apart from to check if their own work is listed? Cutting your reference list to only those works truly relevant to your new book will not only save time and effort for everyone; you will also save a few trees. However, academic value is (also) measured by the number of citations a work enjoys, so leave in those references that you feel have earned their place.

Appendices. Arguably, an appendix is where indigestible material is left to rot, somewhat out of sight. If you were unable to integrate such material into your thesis you need to look hard at its usefulness in your book. Consider placing such material online instead.

Excess material. Some of your thesis text may be very good but too long or too far off topic to be included in your lean, focused monograph; this excess text must be condensed, rewritten or completely discarded. The result need not be a complete loss; these ‘offcuts’ may form the basis of several good articles (see the next chapter).

Problematic material. There may be all sorts of reasons why material that was used in your thesis is problematic in your monograph (straight copies of maps from another author’s book, for instance). It might be simpler or more appropriate to have such material reworked or cut than seek permission to reproduce them unchanged. Another example is text that is potentially libellous; this may scare away every publisher you approach. Whatever the reason, have your eyes open for such material and deal with the situation before it causes problems in the publication of your monograph.

Stylistic issues. More difficult to remove from your text is not so much what you have written but the style in which you have written it. Examples are language that is obscure, abstract and heavy on jargon, explanations that are highly technical and overly detailed, and text plagued by excessive signposting. These and other stylistic issues are dealt with in Chapter 5 and in Appendix 1.

Things you will need to add

If, as is often the case, the significant contribution that your thesis makes to scholarship in your field is found in its middle chapters, then it is unlikely to be enough that you pare away everything else; something needs to be added.

Coherence. Your book will need to have organic unity, held together by a clear narrative thread. There is double value in doing this. By tracing the trajectory of your argument, you will quickly see what other material you are missing (and what more needs to be cut).

Background material. Theses often have too much background material but sometimes – because the examiners are experts in that field – assumptions are made about what readers will know. What is needed is sufficient background material to orientate readers and prepare them for the ‘meat’ of your study.

New material. Again, the usual problem with theses is too much (not too little) material. But if you have at all refocused your study from what appeared in the thesis then gaps will have appeared that must be filled. Likewise, your subject is unlikely to be static; it will need to be updated to take recent events, publications, etc. into account.

Introduction. Most thesis introductions are rather pedestrian, whereas a book can greatly benefit from a short but lively introduction that whets the reader’s appetite for the text that is to follow.

Conclusion. Many theses simply end; they fail to draw the threads of their argument together into a coherent and satisfying whole. Whether or not your thesis is like this, you will almost certainly need to rewrite your conclusions to bring them up to date and to reflect the changed character and focus of your study.

Index. An index is not required until your book is in production, but even at this early stage it is smart to start thinking about its contents. Such thinking has an added value; because all that your index will be is an alphabetical ‘mind map’ of your study, once you begin jot-

ting down the various entries and subentries to be included, you can quickly discover things that might be missing in your text.



Whole books have been written on transforming a thesis into a monograph but we believe that in this chapter we have covered the essentials and refer you to Chapter 2 for fuller advice on planning a monograph. If you now feel all planned out and ready to write, then it is time to turn to Chapter 5 with its advice on writing a book. If, however, you also have leftover material from your thesis that was impossible to include in your book, then you will find it worthwhile taking a look at Chapter 4.