

**A GUIDE TO THESIS—
WRITING FOR COLLEGE
GRADUATION IN ENGLISH**

英语论文写作指南

何向明 著

首都师范大学出版社

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前 言

《英语论文写作指南》(*A Guide to Thesis-Writing for College Graduation in English*) 主要是为指导大学英语专业本科生和研究生进行毕业论文写作而编写的。它既可以用作大学英语专业四年级或研究生“学术论文写作”课的教材,也可以作为工具书供那些不专门开设这门课程的英语院、系本科生或研究生在进行毕业论文写作时独立使用。由于本书所依据的技术规范体系是当今英语国家人文、社会科学研究领域最具权威、同时也为高等学校普遍采用的美国现代语言学会(MLA)和美国心理学会(APA)所颁布的学术论文写作规范最新版本(《MLA 学术论文写作手册》1988年版和《APA 出版手册》1984年版),所以本书对那些需要用英文进行学术论文写作的广大人文、社会科学研究人员以及欲赴国外大学或研究机构学习或进修的文科专业学生和研究人員也具有同样的适用性。

本书共有十七章,分别对研究课题的选择、资料检索、中心论点的确立、提纲的拟定、参考文献的标注及编目体例、论文最后的书写打印格式等一一进行了详细论述和说明,并附有详尽的参照样本。为了提高本书的实用价值,避免把它写成一部单纯的写作技术手册,作者在阐释说明论文写作过程每一个主要步骤时都配以对具体例文中相应写作步骤的评论和分析。因此,读者从这本书里不但能够得到用英文进行学术论文写作所必需的理论指导和技术依据还能够看到可供他们借鉴的大量取自中国学生样文的实例分析。本书附录中收入了英文学术性写作中常用的缩略语以及参考文献目录中常见的出版机构名称及其通用缩略写法,这些内容也会对读者起到一些帮助作用。

本书的雏型是作者六年前为其担任的“毕业论文写作”课所编写的教材。经过几年来不断的修改完善,最后脱稿成书于美国洛杉矶加州州立大学。这部著作的完成得到了该校英文系主任 Carl selkin 教授的热情关心和大力支持;美国友人 Howard Davis 夫妇也对本书的完成提供了有益的帮助,作者在此谨向他们表示衷心的感谢。

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Chapter 1 Introduction

College or university students of English in China are required by the State Program of English Education to produce a thesis as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English. This is usually done in their senior year. The purpose of writing a thesis is to demonstrate both the students' comprehensive ability of using their target language for academic purposes and their practical competence of conducting research on the elementary level. These two points are inseparably related in the said case because mastery of the target language is the essential task for a student of a foreign language, while command of the basic research skills in the student's special field is an important part of the ultimate aim of our college education.

The word *thesis* refers to a relatively long paper written on the basis of some academic research and for the purpose of obtaining a college or university degree. In other words, it is a degree-oriented research paper. That is why the B. A. thesis is sometimes called the senior research paper.

Since the curriculum of college programs of English as well as other foreign languages in China has to focus itself mainly on the training of students' competence of their target language and the teaching of corresponding literature on the introductory level, it leaves very little room to familiarize the students with knowledge and skills as required for the completion of a substantial research project. On the other hand, the general lack of library resources on foreign language and literature in most of our colleges and universities also prevents academic research

from being a common practice for our students of English. In fact, undergraduate students of English in China are rarely exposed to research practice in their course work, let alone the systems of research methods and skills. This naturally causes problems and difficulties for the students when they are finally confronted with their graduation project—the writing of the thesis in their senior year.

The purpose of the present book is to prepare the students for this seemingly difficult task with a simple description of the nature of a research paper, an illustrative introduction to the basic research methods and documentation systems commonly acknowledged in academic circles in major English-speaking cultures, and some easy-to-follow samples of the standard formats of the thesis.

Students who use this book may find that except for the first three chapters which are intended to clarify the nature of their thesis assignment, subsequent chapters of the book are deliberately arranged in an order that follows commonly-adopted steps of the research writing process, simply for the purpose that students may follow these steps in their own writing process in a likewise manner. Also for the convenience of student-users of this book, a blank time-table for the writing process is provided in Chapter Four. When filled with specific dates and months each single sub-assignment is due, this table may well serve the students as a reminder for the punctual completion of each important step of their writing progression. Furthermore, each chapter of the book is followed either by a specific sub-assignment corresponding to the step discussed in that particular chapter or by some questions or exercises provided for the students to familiarize themselves further with the relevant ideas or methods. The appendixes at the end of the book provide the students with some additional information they may find helpful in accomplishing their writing task. All these measures are meant for this

book to be a "guide" to the students' entire research writing process in every sense of the word.

It is important to note again that for the students of a foreign language, the success of their thesis-writing partly depends upon their ability of using the target language in a proper manner and partly depends upon their practical knowledge of the basic research methods and skills. After all, the prime point of thesis-writing at the undergraduate level in all university disciplines is to introduce students to methods and skills for academic research rather than to expect original ideas in their research writing practice.

However, it is equally important to note that a great number of students of a foreign language in this country tend to be rather contented with their competence of using the target language for nonacademic communication and the little superficial knowledge they have of the relevant cultural and literary background. They do not seem to be aware that as college or university students, they are also supposed to be academically prepared for future work. It is obviously not enough for a college graduate in the English language and literature to be able only to speak and write in English and to name a few English literary figures such as William Shakespeare. Reasonably, he or she is also expected to have the ability of using English for the purpose of discussing ideas and issues in the studies of the language and literature, and at the same time, to be informed of the basic approaches and rules for doing so.

The B. A. thesis in English is assigned exactly as an opportunity for the students to challenge themselves with an independent project which would force them to learn about the system of research methods and skills generally followed by professionals in their special field. The present book helps make it easier for the students to do this. They can find in this book most, if not all, of the methodological and technical

information needed for the accomplishment of their theses.

Finally, prospective users of this book are advised to work with a serious attitude toward the mechanics of the standard formats for the thesis, or for academic papers of any other type they are likely to work on in their future work. This refers to an accurate disposition of mechanical details in accordance with the standard formats. Careless errors in mechanical details such as a faulty positioning of an in-text source citation, an unblocked long quotation, or an incomplete bibliography are strongly warned against, since such errors would inevitably be regarded as a reflection of the author's attitude toward serious academic work.

It is true that writing a long research paper in their target language may be a rather difficult task for the Chinese students of English. But so long as they closely follow the instructions and advice provided here in this book, much of the difficulty will be overcome by their own patience and cautiousness.

General Requirements for the B. A. Thesis in English

Although the thesis assignment may vary in details from school to school, it is generally supposed to be a research paper of about 4,000 words or approximately 20 double-spaced typed pages on a manageable topic discussing either any aspect of the English language, ideas or issues related to any of the native English-speaking countries (cultural, social, historical, literary etc.), or problems observed in the fields of education, linguistics or English-teaching methodology. Usually, topics derived from courses the student has taken, or extended course-papers are acceptable.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Ask yourself for what a thesis is required of every B. A. candidate?

2. What are mainly expected of the B. A. thesis written by a student specialized in a foreign language and literature?
3. How do you understand the importance of mechanical details of the standard formats for a thesis? What consequence would likely result from a careless treatment of the mechanics?
4. According to the author of this book, much of the difficulty in writing the thesis can be overcome by the student's own patience and cautiousness. Do you agree with him? Why (or why not)?

Chapter 2 The Research Paper

The term *research paper* naturally derives itself from the way in which it is written. In contemporary English, research means “careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to discover or establish facts or principles.” * A research paper, therefore, refers to a piece of writing based partly on investigation and evaluation of other people’s work rather than on the author’s personal experiences and observations only.

In fact, a research paper shares many common characteristics with an ordinary essay. Like good essays of any other type, a research paper is, first of all, united around a central point (often called the “thesis”) the author wants to make. It also begins with an introduction, and ends with a conclusion. Moreover, the ways of developing a research paper are more or less the same as those used in developing an ordinary essay.

However, there are some important aspects in which a research paper differs from a standard essay.

First, in writing a research paper, you make your point by way of consulting available sources related to the topic you have chosen to discuss. The purpose of doing research on a certain topic is not simply to collect supporting evidences for your point of view. More important than that, it helps you find an appropriate position you should assume in the discussion of your chosen topic. In other words, it makes you

* See word entry of “research” in *Webster’s New World Dictionary*. 3rd College Ed. New York; Simon & Schuster, 1988.

fully and unmistakably informed of who have so far said what about this topic or problems related to it, so that you may proceed with a more mature approach to the topic and a better-informed basis for the establishment of your own point. Generally speaking, the library is the major resource for research in the fields of language and literature, especially when it is undertaken on the undergraduate level.

Another major difference between a research paper and an ordinary essay is that in writing a research paper you have to acknowledge your debt to the people who originally provided you with the facts or ideas you are using now for your purpose. This simply means that for each piece of borrowed information you are putting into your own paper, you have to make clear within it where and from whom you borrowed it. In the academic circle, this is commonly called *documentation* of the sources.

In order to write a research paper, you have to find and evaluate a considerable amount of sources. But eventually, you will use only some of the sources you think appropriate either as starting points for your arguments or as supporting evidences for your points. Even so, you still benefit from the research process as a whole. This is because in completing the entire research process, not only have you made yourself an "expert" on your particular chosen topic, but also acquainted yourself with a series of practical research skills such as using library resources, evaluating and documenting sources, and establishing view-points with the help of relevant sources. These skills will sooner or later prove to be useful when you have to write long papers in your future study or work.

Clarification of Misconceptions

Some undergraduate students treat their research paper assignment

merely as an academic game. They do not believe that they could really learn anything substantially useful in writing such a "play-game" paper. Therefore, they often take a rather passive attitude toward it. In the library, they would simply pick up anything that comes handy to them, giving no thoughts either to its relevance to their topic or to the best contextual position it deserves in the paper to be written. This will inevitably result in a lack of unity or, as is more often the case, a lack of coherence in their finished writing product. Actually, treated with a positive attitude, the writing of a research paper, even on the undergraduate level, can reward student-writers in many ways. For one thing, they will definitely become more confident of their own problem-solving potential in the academic field.

Some other students tend to believe any published views which they come across in their reading. As a result, they always find themselves in a self-contradictory state of mind about their chosen stand. It is important for these students to remember that research cannot replace their own independent thinking. In other words, they have first to construct a clear purpose for their research, then to evaluate and interpret relevant sources in an objective way, and finally, to decide which of these sources can be used to serve their purpose and in what way they should be used. The reason is that though most published views concerning a certain problem are based on mature thinking and scholastic studies, they reflect ideas and opinions gained from different perspectives, and by people with different academic concerns. For instance, in analyzing a character in a certain literary work, a psychologist would lay special emphasis on the influence of the psychological changes the character has undergone upon the development of that character. He or she may take other factors into consideration, but may also choose to overlook some of them, because the primary concern of his or her anal-

ysis is much likely to be the said character's psychological aspect only. In evaluating ideas or conclusions presented in a study like this, you have to make sure how much thought the analyst has given to factors other than the psychological (family, social, economic, political etc.) that may have an influence upon the development of that character, to what extent you could rely on these ideas and conclusions in view of the major concern of your own study, and finally, what position you should assume in presenting these ideas or conclusions if you choose to use them.

In one word, research does not mean to take for granted whatever is found in the library. It is an evaluative, interpretive and selective process. At its best, it functions as a mind-opener for student-writers and a complement to their individual thinking.

Types of the Research Paper

There are different ways of classifying the research paper. But in view of the general requirements of the B. A. thesis for the Chinese students of English, it is divided here into two distinctive types: the analytical paper and the interpretive paper.

An analytical paper refers to one which deals with a complex issue by examining its component parts in order to have a better understanding of it, or reach a general conclusion about it. The sample B. A. thesis included in the next chapter of this book, though developed technically by means of comparison and contrast, illustrates basic characteristics of analytical writing. The overall concern of that paper is to prove the contemporary Chinese writer, Wang Meng's contribution to the Chinese way of novel-writing by using the western "stream-of-consciousness" technique in one of his latest works. To do this, the author separates his subject (Wang Meng's use of the stream-of-consciousness tech-

nique) into five component parts (major characteristics of Wang Meng's treatment of the technique): subject-matter, disappearance of the author, use of lived time, treatment of the relationship between inner reality of outer world, and maintenance of a complete plot. By examining these characteristics in comparison with a stream-of-consciousness masterpiece written by one of the most influential English writers of this century, the author of the thesis pushes his discussion to a conclusion which is hinted at in the introduction of the paper.

An interpretive paper, on the other hand, serves an explanatory purpose. Though it is similar to an analytical paper in some respects, the interpretive paper works in a manner of explanatory reporting. It can be used to present applications of an idea or theory, methods and findings of an investigation, and the like. However, the significance of an interpretive paper is not only in the reporting itself, but also in the conclusion based on the author's interpretations. A paper topic such as "The art of questioning in the beginning English-classroom setting" well claims itself to be an interpretive report. The student who has chosen to work on this topic may begin her paper by introducing methodological principles concerning the use of questioning in language teaching. Then, she may report on her applicative experiments of these principles with a group of beginning students of English. During the course of her experiments, she may have felt the need to make some modifications or adaptations to those general principles to suit the special background of the students and her particular teaching objectives. So, she will naturally have to make explanations about this while reporting her experiments in the paper. And finally, she may end her paper either with a convincing conclusion that educational principles can help bring about effective teaching only when used in accordance with the specific characteristics of the students and the need of the particular teaching objec-