
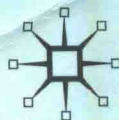


JOHN BITCHENER



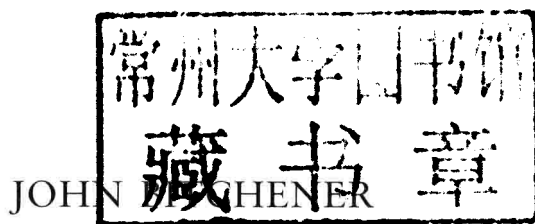
# Writing an Applied Linguistics Thesis or Dissertation

A GUIDE TO PRESENTING  
EMPIRICAL RESEARCH



# Writing an Applied Linguistics Thesis or Dissertation

A Guide to Presenting Empirical  
Research



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# Preface

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This book has been written in response to frequently asked questions by first time thesis writers about (1) the content that is relevant to different parts of a thesis, (2) how the content can be most effectively organized and (3) the extent to which the various sections of a thesis have particular language and presentational characteristics. Each of these issues is discussed in relation to the typical part-genres of an empirically based thesis: the abstract, the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the results, the discussion of results and the conclusion. The focus of the book is therefore on the writing up of the thesis rather than on the research process.

The book will be of interest to a wide audience. The main target group is first-time writers of an empirically based thesis. To varying extents, it will also have relevance to writers of other thesis types. Secondly, although the illustrative material presented in the book has been drawn from theses in Applied Linguistics, this does not mean that it is only relevant for those working within this discipline. Any student writing up a piece of empirical research, particularly but not exclusively with a social science orientation, will find the book instructive. Thirdly, the book has been written for both native and second language speakers of English. Finally, it is anticipated that the book will also be useful for thesis supervisors and for training units within tertiary institutions preparing supervisors and others for the task ahead.

The book comprises eight chapters: the background to the book, the abstract, the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the results, the discussion of results and the conclusion. After the background chapter, each of the following chapters covers the same areas of content and presents it in the same way across chapters:

- Introduction to the chapter
- Purpose/functions of the part-genre (chapter)

- Content and structure options for the part-genre (chapter)
- Linguistic and presentational characteristics of the part-genre (chapter)
- Frequently asked questions and answers
- Further activities
- Further reading

The content and structure section of each chapter considers a number of options for deciding upon the units of content that could be included and for deciding how these can be most effectively organized. Throughout, excerpts from a sample thesis are presented to illustrate the options presented. This is then followed up with a detailed commentary on what has been included by the author and on the extent to which the various options have been incorporated into her thesis.

The material in this book can be used a variety of ways. At an individual level, students can either read the whole through from cover to cover or dip into various chapters depending on where they are at in the writing process. Thus, it can be used as a reference guide. Supervisors might find this option particularly useful. The book can also be used in classes, seminars and workshops as a core text or as a resource tool to accompany other materials. Used in these ways, the further activities sections will provide teachers and presenters with ready-made tasks for student/trainee use. Those interested in the research that underpins the content will find plenty of suggestions at the end of each chapter for further reading. Other uses of the book will no doubt be identified by its users over time.

In no way is the material presented in the book intended to be prescriptive. The approach that has been taken is one that presents options that might be considered by individual thesis writers. The options included in the book are based on discourse analysis research of typical approaches that have been taken in the writing of the various part-genres and on feedback from supervisors and students about what they have found to be helpful advice. It is hoped that you, as readers of this book, will find the material equally helpful.

# Acknowledgements

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This book would not have been possible without the permission of Katherine Cao whose first class Master's thesis has been used to illustrate most of the material presented in this book. Katherine's thesis won the Applied Linguistics Association of New Zealand Best Master's thesis competition two years ago not only for the quality of the content of the thesis but also for the way in which it had been so clearly and effectively written. I am also grateful to Shawn Loewen for allowing me to refer to his Doctoral abstract so that points of comparison could be made between his and Katherine's approach to this part-genre. Much of the inspiration for writing the book came from staff and students at both my own university and other universities in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Asia. Without the insight of Madeline Banda, Director of Postgraduate Studies at AUT University and key members of her team like Annette Tiaiti, the seminar and workshop series on thesis writing that informed the focus of the book would not have been offered and the book's content may have not been field-tested. Student feedback on these seminars and workshops identified where their needs lay and so played a major role in determining the content of the book. I am grateful to all the students I have supervised over the last decade for the way in which they challenged me to articulate precisely what was required when writing the different parts of their thesis. Meeting these demands forced me to reflect upon the recurrent issues facing first time thesis writers and upon how they might be most effectively addressed. Over the years, many of my New Zealand and international colleagues had suggested that I put into print what they had heard me say at conferences and during informal conversations about effective thesis writing. In this regard, I am especially grateful to Professor Dana Ferris (University of California, Davis) and Professor Margie Berns (Purdue University) for their inspiration and insightful comments on an early draft of the book. Without the additional comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers of the book, a number of the refinements

that appear in the book would not have been included. Last, but not least, I wish to acknowledge the support and clear guidance given by Kitty van Boxel and the team at Palgrave Macmillan. They have been so pleasant and easy to work with over the past year.

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# 1 Background

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## **WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT?**

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This book has been written to introduce first-time thesis and dissertation (hereafter, ‘thesis’ rather than ‘dissertation’ will be used) writers to the process of writing up an empirically based piece of research. It has three key aims. The first is to introduce you to the type of content that is typically presented in each of the part-genres (chapters or sections) of a thesis: the abstract, the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the results, the discussion and the conclusion. The second aim is to introduce a range of options for presenting or structuring your content so that it is rhetorically and persuasively effective. The third aim is to acquaint you with some of the key linguistic and presentation features of each part-genre so that your content is presented with clarity, coherence and cohesion. Thus, the book has been written to help you with the writing-up process rather than the research process.

## **WHO IS THE BOOK FOR?**

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The book has been written to address the three key areas identified above for students writing their first thesis, usually at Masters or Honours level, but it may also be of value to Doctoral students who have not previously completed a thesis. It may also be of value to supervisors and those offering thesis-writing course-work papers/courses, seminars, workshops or other forms of preparatory training because it provides content and worked analyses of sections of each of the chapters written by a first-time thesis writer. Unlike some thesis-writing texts, this book has been written to cater to the needs of both native speakers of English as well as to those who have an ESL (English as a Second Language) or

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) background. Although the book focuses on approaches that are characteristic of theses in Applied Linguistics, students, in other disciplines, who are writing up a piece of empirically based research (irrespective of whether it is quantitative or qualitative in focus) will also find the book helpful because the book adopts an approach that trains you as reader to analyze other theses within or outside the field of Applied Linguistics.

## **WHY HAS THE BOOK BEEN WRITTEN?**

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The book has been written to meet the needs of students who say they are unsure or unaware of the specific part-genre content and organizational expectations and requirements of supervisors, institutions and examiners. Sometimes, students also mention that they want to know more about how the content should be formatted and expressed. These issues, from both supervisor and student perspectives, have been reported in a range of published articles and texts. In first presenting seminars and workshops to first-time thesis writers in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand, I was surprised to find so many students attending these non-credit-bearing sessions. However, it soon became clear that some of the sources from which supervisors and others expected their students to have gained an understanding of these requirements and expectations were not actually focusing their attention on the content and organizational detail that students were wanting. For example, as a student preparing to do a major piece of research, you are likely to have completed a research methods course but it may not have been one that focused on the specific content and organizational characteristics of different parts of the thesis. As a student, you may also have consulted some of the available guidebooks and handbooks on how to write a thesis and not found them particularly informative about the type of content that is relevant to the part-genres or about ways of effectively structuring the content. This is not so much a criticism of the available practitioner advice as a reflection of their different aims and purpose. Many are focused on aspects of the research process and on an overview of the macro-structure of a thesis rather than on the micro-elements of the part-genres.

Another reason for reading this book may be that you have not yet had any discussion with your supervisor about the various part-genres. Sometimes, students have also said that their supervisor's tacit understanding of what is required is not articulated explicitly enough with examples for their full understanding. If you are reading this book for any of these reasons, you should feel that your specific needs have been met by the time you have read the material in this book and sought to apply what has been presented. The material has been field-tested over a number of years and has been positively received internationally by students from different ethnic, language and educational backgrounds.

## **HOW DOES THE BOOK MEET THE CONTENT, STRUCTURE, LINGUISTIC AND PRESENTATIONAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS?**

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To help you understand what content and structure are appropriate for the different parts of your thesis, the book presents a range of options, illustrating them with analyses of and commentary on a range of sections from the part-genres of a well-written Masters thesis in Applied Linguistics. The approach taken in the book is drawn from genre analytic research and best practice supervisor advice. Because the content is research informed, we need to consider why the genre approach is relevant to the needs of students writing their first thesis.

Examining the discourse of a genre, like the thesis and its part-genres, enables us to understand the type of content that is typically presented and how it is presented so that the narrative or argument or case that is being presented is accomplished with rhetorical effectiveness. The starting point of this justification is an understanding of what a genre is. The term 'genre' has been defined in a variety of ways but, in each full definition, several key characteristics tend to be present. The first characteristic is that a genre is a type of discourse that occurs in a particular setting. In this case, the particular setting is an academic setting where the expectations and requirements of what constitutes a thesis are defined by the academic community of researchers, teachers, examiners, supervisors and

institutions. The second characteristic is that a genre has distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms with respect to content and structure. In other words, the type of content and structure that you observe in one thesis will be sufficiently similar to that observed in other theses. The third characteristic is that it has particular and distinctive communicative functions and these determine the nature of the content and how it is organized. Consequently, each of the chapters of your thesis will meet different requirements and expectations. So, having defined the key elements of a genre and indicated the relevance of the genre analytic approach taken in this book, we can now consider the relationship between these characteristics and how analytic research has informed our understanding of what constitutes a part-genre.

Genre theory has proposed and genre research has revealed (1) how the purpose or functions of a genre or part-genre inform the choice of content and its rhetorical staging or organization and (2) how this staging can be identified in terms of the discourse moves (separate units/sections of content) and sub-moves (also referred to in the literature as steps or strategies) that are employed. (If you are interested in reading some of the literature on this topic, a list of further reading suggestions is provided at the end of this chapter.) Because of these relationships, it is important that you understand first the various functions of each part-genre as these will determine what content and structure is relevant. Therefore, each of the chapters in this book will focus on a different part-genre and each will begin with an outline of its purpose and functions. This will be followed up with a consideration of the type of content that might be presented and, in doing so, focus on how it can be effectively presented. First, you will be introduced to a range of optional moves and sub-moves. Each move and sub-move will then be illustrated with extracts from our sample Masters thesis. Key features about the way in which the author has made use of the various options will be discussed. It will be emphasized throughout the book that the moves and sub-moves presented in each chapter are options; they are not a prescriptive list that you must use. Although you may choose to use all of the options, you do not need to feel constrained by the range presented. Depending on the topic and focus of your thesis, you may be able to add other moves or sub-moves.

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## HOW IS THE BOOK ORGANIZED?

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The book comprises eight chapters with the following seven chapters being devoted to a separate part-genre of the thesis. Although each of these chapters considers a different part-genre, authors sometimes include more than one part-genre in a single chapter. For instance, the discussion of results is sometimes combined with a presentation of the results and sometimes the discussion of results is combined with the conclusion. In contrast, the literature review part-genre is sometimes spread across more than one chapter. If you are presenting more than one part-genre in a single chapter or spreading a part-genre across more than one chapter, the approach taken in this book can easily be adapted.

Within each chapter of this book, the areas of focus are the same. After an introduction, we will consider the purpose and functions of the part-genre. This is followed by an outline of the moves and sub-moves that can be employed in the presentation of content. The extent to which these moves and sub-moves are employed and the way in which they are organized is then illustrated from our sample Masters thesis. The decisions that have been made about the content and the organizational patterns of this material are then discussed. You will note that the analyses are presented in two columns: the first presents the text and the second the move analysis. Where a move has not been presented alongside a sentence, it means that the same move employed in the previous sentence has again been used. Having read the material, there will be opportunities for you to apply it in move and sub-move analyses as you proceed through the chapter and in the further activities section presented towards the end of the chapter. Some of the linguistic features that often characterize the part-genre under consideration are then presented and illustrated. On a few occasions, presentational features are also discussed. Following this material, answers to frequently asked questions are provided. These are not intended to be necessarily definitive or exhaustive but intended rather as guidelines that you can discuss with your supervisor. A further activities section provides you with additional opportunities to apply what you have been reading. You may find it helpful to work on these activities with a fellow student or with your supervisor.

Each chapter ends with a list of references for further reading. You will find these worthwhile if you are interested in what others have said about thesis-writing and in what the published research informing this book has discovered. Finally, all the moves presented in the various chapters are given in an appendix at the end of the book.

## **WHAT IS THE SAMPLE MASTERS THESIS ABOUT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN SELECTED?**

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Throughout the book, illustrations will be drawn from one Masters thesis. For the sake of clarity, the decision was made to focus on one area of content rather than on a range of areas and to select one that was well written and that illustrated many of the features typically found in empirically based theses. Because you will be learning how to analyze extracts of discourse, you will be able to apply what you have learned to other texts and theses. Therefore, if your literature search has led you to theses in your area of investigation, you will be able to analyze what they have presented and how the content has been organized. These observations may then guide the decisions that you make about what to include in your thesis and about how to present your material in an effective manner.

The sample thesis that we will be referring to in this book was written by a very able Masters student who has since gone on to complete a Doctoral thesis in the same field of enquiry. The Masters thesis is entitled 'Willingness to communicate in a second language classroom'. The thesis investigates the willingness of second language learners of English to communicate in a second language learning classroom. It examines whether their willingness to take part in interactive activities is determined by innate trait-like factors and/or situation-specific factors, including participation in pair work, small group interactions and plenary discussions. The subject matter of the thesis is reasonably accessible for those not familiar with the area. Inevitably, a certain amount of jargon specific to the field is presented so in Chapter 2 on the thesis abstract, key terms and construct are glossed. If you are not reading the book in chapter sequence, you may need to refer to the abstract chapter in



case some of the material requires clarification. Having said this, however, the content that is presented should be easily understood even if some of the terminology in the illustrative examples is not familiar to you.

## **HOW CAN THIS BOOK BE USED?**

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The book can be used in a variety of ways. First and foremost, it was written as a reference guide for students who are about to start writing various parts of their thesis. As such, you could skim read it to get an idea of what is presented or to find out about a particular aspect of the writing process. For example, you may want to see what information has been provided on the functions of a literature review in order to check whether or not you have a clear enough understanding of its purpose and functions. Once you are about to start writing a particular chapter, you may want to read that particular part of the book more closely.

Supervisors may also find the book useful if they want to access some already prepared material about any of the part-genres of a thesis. Rather than having to reinvent the wheel, supervisors may find it a ready tool to use with their students. The further activities section may provide a good basis for dialogue between supervisors and their students.

The material in the book can also be used by seminar and workshop presenters. Already this has been the case in institutions that offer introductory, common-core programmes for their students, where generic content, that can be applied to any discipline, is presented. The material in the book could also be adapted for discipline-specific courses.

Undergraduate teachers (for example, those offering academic writing courses and research methods and presentation courses) may also find parts of the book helpful. Both the instructional and analytical material can be presented in a classroom environment and students can be given opportunities to use the further activities section of each chapter to further apply what they have learned.