

Writing with metaphor

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Question:

How can I structure my thesis to retain its complexity but at the same time make it accessible to a reader?

Answer:

Some thesis writers have no trouble with structure, but designing the overall structure can be a struggle for those from disciplines in which there is no pre-determined form that a thesis should take. The thesis needs to be coherent and convincing in its argument, while at the same time demonstrating familiarity with a wide range of source material. *Metaphor* can be a useful device when working out a structure that balances these elements.

Why use metaphor? The term *metaphor* comes from the Greek “carrying from one place to another”; it is a rhetorical device in which one thing is described in terms of another. With metaphor, a concrete ‘vehicle’ conveys an abstract meaning. Metaphor is conceptual: it provides an image of the thesis that enables writers to conceptualise the abstract thesis as a ‘thing’, whole and complete. Metaphor is also an interesting and creative way of presenting the thesis that aids the reader not only in making sense of it, but also in enjoying the experience of reading.

On a structural level, metaphor can enable writers to bring together elements that are otherwise difficult to juxtapose, providing a means of imposing an order and unity on an unruly text. Metaphor enables a thesis writer to establish a structuring strategy for the thesis that can also give emphasis to its meaning. A metaphor can be introduced at the outset of the thesis and carried through the structural framework to give cohesion and logic to the thesis. In the contents page, chapter titles produce this kind of extended, structuring metaphor that links together the various parts of the thesis into a whole text.

Music has provided the concrete ‘vehicle’ of the structuring metaphors for two thesis writers. Van Shalkwyk (2002) explains how she found structural cohesion for a doctoral thesis written in music psychology through the metaphor of the concerto. Like the concerto, van Shalkwyk argues, the thesis also has a high degree of organisation, a rhythm in the alternation of new and supporting arguments, melody in the flow of language, and a soloist amidst the shared music in the form of the researcher. In the thesis *Globalisation and Pluri-scalar Orchestrations in Higher Education* (2005) Josta Van Rij-Heyligers employs a “musical/opera theme to structure the thesis” (p. 310), which is apparent in the contents page. For instance, the prologue comprises three parts:

- Overture to the study
- Composing a theoretical foundation
- Arrangement of the thesis
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Overture, composing and arrangement are terms from musical composition that continue the metaphor of orchestration. What is true of music—that it is more than a sum of its parts—is implied in this study in education.

Metaphor can also transgress the boundaries of disciplinary convention, or carry meaning from beyond the academic context into the academic field. Structural metaphors of doctoral theses can draw on knowledge that lies beyond formal academic research practices, for instance reflecting thesis writers' ways of thinking that indicate cultural conceptions of how knowledge is produced. Metaphor can frame academic content in a way that is appropriate to the author's identity or sense of self. In the abstract to her thesis *Identity journeys of New Zealand born Samoans* (1998) completed in Anthropology at the University of Auckland, Melani Anae employs a metaphor of the *'ie toga* or finely woven mat to describe the thesis.

This thesis represents an *'ie toga*, because it is like a fine mat being woven.... It is thus presented with respect, gratitude, deference, recognition and obligation, a tangible symbol of an alliance and an exchange with all Samoans and others. As the wellspring of my Samoan identity, in its creativity in design and firmness of weave, I hope that this *'ie toga* will be received as a source of identity, history and wealth (Anae, 1998, p. i)

By figuring the thesis in this way, the author makes what is non-traditional in Samoan culture (a thesis) into a traditional and valuable object (the *'ie toga*). This enables her to present it as an offering acceptable simultaneously in an academic context (as a contribution to scholarship) and in a traditional sense.

As these thesis writers have demonstrated, metaphor is not limited to 'literary' texts alone but can be productively used in many genres of writing. Metaphor is integral to language, as Richardson (1997) has argued, and can be consciously and productively employed in academic research writing: "Rhetorical devices are not ornamental but instrumental in the 'persuasive discourse' of science" (p. 40).

A survey of 85 students established that some thesis writers do not find it beneficial to think of their research, or the presentation of their research, in metaphorical terms. However, others did find it productive to reflect on metaphors they could use or had *already used* to conceptualise their work. When current thesis writers were asked if they use metaphors to talk or think about their structure, 21 of the 85 surveyed responded that they did. The *journey* was mentioned most often (seven times), and *building* was a recurring metaphor with comments including "a house I am building, with strong foundation", and "yes, I think of a building and of how the entire structure changes with the moving of even one brick." Another responded "at the moment the word that springs to mind is lop-sided." There were *fabrication* metaphors: "patchwork", and "interweaving", and "knitting" (Kelly and Carter, 2009).

If you were asked whether you use metaphor to conceptualise your work, what would your answer be? If you do think of your thesis in metaphorical terms, could you harness this image constructively in the writing of the thesis?

Readers of any text will try to make sense of, to impose coherence on, what they are reading. The job of writers is to provide textual features such as signposting, titles, and thesis statements that will help readers construct a coherent impression. We suggest to thesis writers that a well-chosen metaphor can also assist in the creation of a coherent and readable thesis text.

Note on methodology:

Kelly and Carter (2009) reported on a survey conducted by Carter of 85 thesis writers (primarily doctoral) from a range of disciplines. Students filled in a short questionnaire immediately after a taught workshop on structuring the thesis. The participants came from universities in New Zealand (The University of Auckland, Victoria University), Australia

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(Universities of Melbourne and Sydney), Scotland (University of Edinburgh) and Canada (University of Toronto, University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus).

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