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Publishing from your thesis – Top Tips – Dr Clare Wilkinson

PCST Doctoral Summer School, July 2015

Please note these Top Tips are based on my own personal experience and may vary from the experience of other researchers and academics. I would also advise speaking to your supervisor/s at an early stage about any publication plans. You can find out more about my publications here:

<http://people.uwe.ac.uk/Pages/person.aspx?accountname=campus%5ccl-wilkinson>

Portioning

When writing up your thesis start to think about sections or chapters that could easily be carved into articles publishing original research, content that might be suitable for commentaries or research reviews, and/or whether there might be a market for your thesis as a standalone book (often the case if you are exploring highly niche areas or subjects that have a lot of relevance to application/teaching). Don't lose sight of the importance of your thesis having a strong narrative for your examiners, but have in mind ways that you could portion content relatively easily for other publication options. If you can publish some of your work in the process of the PhD that helps, but don't spread yourself too thinly or become distracted from the ultimate goal of achieving your PhD.

Utilise your professional relationships

Ask senior colleagues for advice on publishing, particularly any who have strong publication records. Indicate to your supervisor if you would like them to recommend you as a reviewer to publications that might approach them for reviewing, book reviews or submissions. Take up any opportunities for peers to review and comment on your work, circulating drafts for comment before submission. Think about colleagues you work well with and maximise opportunities to publish with them. Consider opportunities to collaborate with others, perhaps if you don't have quite enough data to publish around a particular aspect of your work, but could join it up with others working on relevant ideas.

Build a 'thick skin'

Trying to get your work published can be brutal. You may get comments from peer reviewers that you strongly disagree with and when it is work you have been very closely associated to (like a PhD) this can sometimes feel personal. Try to stay cool and objective when considering feedback from peer reviewers and editors, and leave feedback for a few days before you start to address suggestions. The majority of publications improve on the basis of revision; focus on any constructive comments that reviewers or editors have provided. There is something of an 'etiquette' to responding to reviewers comments. Clearly address how and where you have made

changes on the basis of their comments, and explain any changes you haven't made and justify why. Even if reviewers' comments have been very harshly phrased or rude do not adopt that approach in your response.

Learn how to structure your writing

Writing your thesis should help with this aspect, but for any publications think about the key aspects you want to convey and remember this could differ from your original PhD. For example you might decide to focus on only one of your research questions, or reshape one of your objectives to have a slightly different direction or tone. Try to map out a publication before you make a start on it, bullet points under each heading or some kind of visual representation can help you to consider the overall structure of a piece. Don't forget the importance of discussion, conclusions and the reader being clear on the key messages they will take away from a publication. Key messages should frame the abstract or synopsis and so act as a key incentive to attract readers in. Often people don't leave enough time, or do not carry out as many drafts of a final discussion/conclusion, and/or they always start their time writing on reviewing initial sections, meaning they have lost energy or enthusiasm by the later chapters. Avoid a piece of writing starting strongly and then dying out by the final pages by allocating specific time to different sections.

Influence

Re-examine the articles, books, or online materials that you have found particularly influential or useful in the process of your PhD. Make a note of where they have been published, these might be journals, websites, magazines or publishers you could approach. Deconstruct the examples regarding how they work well for readers and consider if there are writing styles or elements you could utilise in conveying your own work.

Strategy

Investigate whether you might be eligible for future research assessment processes in the country you are based in, perhaps as an early career researcher. Find out about the types, number and standard of publications you would need. Think about how best to ensure quality in your publications, not just quantity. Speak to more experienced colleagues about how the process of selection works at your organisation. Explore the types of data it is useful to record alongside your publications, such as your role as a contributor, any funding the publication was linked to and where the publication is now being cited. Visit relevant websites and look at the submissions for subject areas/units of assessment you might be relevant to from previous years. Use this to start to build your own publication strategy, set out goals for how many publications you want to achieve, how and where.

Have the confidence to take the lead

Getting a journal article, popular or internet based piece of writing, or book of the ground normally requires someone to take the lead. For your PhD that person is most likely to be YOU, don't assume supervisors will do this for you, but on other projects there might be multiple people involved. If publishing is something you are keen to do volunteer ideas, set out plans and timelines

for a publication, make approaches to journals or publishers, and be prepared to drive the writing process forwards. This may sometimes mean you feel that you are doing more than your share of the work, but discuss authorships with colleagues and/or plan to do a number of publications with different leads allocated accordingly.

Impact

For your research to have impact on other students, researchers or stakeholders they need to know about it. Talk about any publications on social media, flag them up at conferences, announce them on professional networks, or directly send copies to key individuals. Take care not to share information online which would then rule out its novelty/originality for a future academic publication. Investigate what you can share as an author and keep any institutional research repositories up-to-date. Explore if your university has funding for open access publications; keep one eye on the publications with the highest academic impact in your area, as well as publications which might offer broader impact and reach with different audiences.

kNow the importance of presentation

Presentation isn't a deal breaker – if you have a strong publication, with good data and insightful perspectives you won't be rejected on the odd spelling mistake but remember that presentation is important to some reviewers, editors and publishers. They will offer detailed guidance on their presentation expectations in terms of writing style, formatting, referencing, use of figures and titles, number of words, the list is extensive and tends to differ amongst each journal or publisher! Presentational errors can irritate reviewers, and in some cases lead to an immediate request to re-submit before a publication is even sent to review. Even if a publication is accepted you will be asked to deal with any presentational issues before publication (the publisher is unlikely to do this for you), so it is better to follow the guidance in advance and proof read carefully before submission.

Get on with it!!

It's very easy around the end of a PhD, as you are writing up and/or preparing for the viva to want to lock away your thesis and never look at it again. Plus you'll probably have lots of odd jobs, friends to catch up with and generally life to get back to that you have been delaying for the last three to four years but now is probably the best time to get those publications out, or at least, make a start on them. Firstly, you may soon forget the minutia of your area of research and PhD data especially if you are moving into a series of contracts, or a permanent academic post where your time will be taken up with new research projects and/or lots of teaching. Secondly, research data can really quickly date so it is important to get it published whilst it is still relevant. Thirdly, a PhD generally comes with supervisors. They will want you to be working on publications and will likely offer support in the publication process for a short time after a PhD has completed to help you achieve that. However, perhaps most importantly, a PhD thesis is likely to be the one piece of research in your career that most feels like it is yours, your ideas, your data, your interpretation, so publishing from your thesis is a great first opportunity to start to make your mark on the academic community.