

Five steps to meeting the challenges of maintaining an appropriate writing voice



*It's often said that to embark upon a PhD you must be passionate about your topic. But when it comes to writing up your thesis, being passionate can seem at odds with the need to maintain an academically cool and objective writing voice. **Daniel Beaudoin** shares five simple steps to keep the "me" in check; including firstly by recognising that your research may be driven by emotional and personal motives, using your theoretical construct to pave the way to a more impartial writing roadmap, and by submitting drafts of your writing to your supervisor and peers on a regular basis.*

Finding and maintaining an appropriate writing voice while writing up a PhD thesis can prove a Herculean challenge. For some this may very well be the most daunting part of the writing process. A potpourri of personal and emotional motivations, rich ethnographic and anthropological knowledge, first-hand involvement in the research topic, and a database which you as the writer are partly responsible for generating in the first place, can make discovering that aloof academic voice a truly daunting task. What's more, we are often reminded that to embark upon the long and convoluted journey of a PhD we must be passionate about our topic. But passion is anything but aloof.

How may one maintain an academically cool and objective writing voice, one that protects the author from these internal intrusions, when the "me" cries out in op-ed glee? What steps can be taken to create distance between your subjective experiences and the necessarily objective write-up?

Five steps to keep the "me" in check:

1. Have the courage and the prescience to recognise that your research may be driven by emotional and personal motives, and that you are seeking the answer you want to find. This may lead to selection bias and skewed findings. This can be very difficult to achieve considering that you are so embroiled in your passion; you may be deaf to the implorations of your peers to "take a step back".
2. Create and nurture a support group on how to "step back" to write detached academic narrative. This group could include fellow researchers, lecturers, supervisors, and in some cases even professional help if it becomes clear that the thesis is too much of an emotional strain, for example, in cases where the author may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. And remember to reciprocate when you are called to the flag to help a colleague in need. Sharing is indeed caring.
3. Identify, as early as possible that the PhD is not about you. No one cares how much effort is going into it, and what your glorious experiences and heroic accomplishments in the field are. They come in second to the academic exercise which demands that you write and grow science. Ask yourself: "what is my thesis question, why should anyone care to read it, what am I contributing to my field of study?"
4. Theoretical constructs, beyond their obvious necessities, also force your research to persist within the boundaries of academic discourse. And once you have identified the academic and theoretical contribution of your thesis, it will become easier to subjugate the "me" from interfering with the academic narrative. In my case, it was the social constructivist contribution to the theoretical debate between liberal and realist theory that paved the way to a more impartial writing roadmap.
5. Submit drafts of the writing to your supervisor and peers on a regular basis. Do this even if you feel that you are encroaching on their time; this is not the moment to be shy. You could agree from the start on a submission schedule which accommodates their time restraints. For example, in my case we agreed that I would submit each chapter when completed, or whatever writing I had achieved monthly; my supervisors were aware of my difficulty with finding the ideal writing voice and wanted to check in on me regularly. I failed to respect this agreement and am certain that this cost me much time and wasted effort. Had I kept to the agreement I am certain that I would have found my academic writing voice much quicker.

I am certain that the tension between the “me” of personal, ethnographic, anthropological, and emotional experiences and the rules and regulations of academic scholarship served me well in the end. So too did developing the skill to step back from the dataset which you have generated in the first place through your intensive and first-hand involvement in the subject matter. When constructively harnessed, managing tensions such as these may birth innovative and original academic insights. In any future academic projects, I will tread more carefully. In retrospect, and after having completed my PhD, I still agree with [Scott's advice that anthropological and ethnographic knowledge, is “instrumental in performing meaningful analysis of the case that one wishes to study”](#).

It took me too long, however, to understand that meaningful does not mean opinionated. The rich anthropological and ethnographic experience which formed the basis for my research turned out to be a double-edged sword. I hope that the above steps will save you time and energy, and assist in finding your coveted writing voice.

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Daniel Beaudoin (PhD, Lt. Col. ret.) is a political scientist lecturer, blogger and public speaker with special interest in the political and ethical dimensions of international humanitarian aid, on the role of humanitarian aid in conflict resolution, and on the negotiation of humanitarian space in complex humanitarian emergencies. He teaches on these subjects at the graduate level at Tel Aviv University, Israel (the Evens Program for Conflict Resolution and Mediation), and at the DiploFoundation (Humanitarian Diplomacy). Daniel is the recipient of the Excellence in Research Prize from the Dov Izraeli Center for Organizational Transparency and Ethics. He also appears as expert commentator on i24news, Haaretz.com (English) and The Forward.