

# Review of Change and Stability in Thesis and Dissertation Writing: The Evolution of an Academic Genre

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**Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2024). *Change and Stability in Thesis and Dissertation Writing: The Evolution of an Academic Genre*. Bloomsbury Publishing. ISBN 9781350146587.**

Dissertation writing—a high-stakes academic genre in doctoral education—is often seen as “the final obstacle for most apprentice scholars” (Paré, 2017, p. 407). The term ‘dissertation’ is varied across regions. In North America, we use the term ‘dissertation’ to refer to the writing capstone for doctoral students; while in the United Kingdom, dissertations are known as ‘theses’ (Thompson, 2025). In this review, we adopt the North American tradition by using the term dissertation to refer to doctoral manuscripts, in line with Paltridge & Starfield (2024).

The dissertation serves two key functions: opening pathways to professional careers (Freeman, 2018) and demonstrating students’ research competence, disciplinary knowledge, and scholarly engagement (Anderson & Okuda, 2021). Despite its significance, the genre remains under-researched and under-theorized. *Change and Stability in Thesis and Dissertation Writing* by Paltridge and Starfield offers a valuable contribution by tracing the history, development, and evolving practices of dissertation writing across the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia. The book provides rich insights for graduate students, supervisors, and higher education policymakers seeking to understand, support, and shape this critical academic genre, especially given the increasing number (Paltridge & Starfield, 2024) and the growing diversity of disciplines influencing its writing, while published guidelines do not always reflect this variety and distinctiveness. Additionally, the shrinking academic job market is pushing doctoral programs to prepare students for a broader range of careers (Freeman, 2018). Highlighting dissertation writing as an evolving genre is a particularly valuable insight for readers.

The book is organized into ten chapters, which can be grouped into six sections: an introduction (Chapter 1), theoretical foundations (Chapter 2), research approaches (Chapter 3), dissertation macrostructures (Chapter 4), doctorate types (Chapters 6–9), and a conclusion (Chapter 10). This structure guides readers from historical context to contemporary practices, illustrating how dissertation writing has developed and varied across disciplines, national contexts, and institutions.

Chapter 1 provides a general overview, framing the book within the concept of genre change driven by shifts in disciplinary writing and changes in the job market, which is further developed in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 is foundational, tracing the history of the PhD in the four aforementioned countries and outlining three forms of doctorates—practice-based, professional, and by publication. These three forms shape dissertation types ranging from traditional academic writing to arts exhibitions. By showcasing the high variety of dissertation types, Paltridge and Starfield underscore the need for researchers and higher education practitioners to reconsider how doctoral work is evaluated when forms vary.

Chapter 2 also introduces three key genre features (emergence, change, and evolution) and three concepts of genre: prototype (a typical example), inheritance (features that signal genre membership), and intertextuality (connections among texts). These support the discussion of typology and taxonomy in dissertation writing. *Typology*, a conceptual category, informs judgments of quality (e.g., what makes a ‘good’ dissertation), while *taxonomy*, an empirical category derived from the structural features of dissertations (i.e., the IMRD format), underpins their analysis of macrostructure types. Based on structural features, the authors describe four common macrostructures—traditional simple, traditional complex, topic-based, and article compilation—alongside newer types identified in recent studies, such as hybrid styles. These theoretical foundations are valuable for readers who are new to the genre, as well as for researchers exploring dissertation writing in depth.

Chapter 3 focuses on common research methods in studies on dissertations, including text-based approaches and *textography*—an ethnographic method adapted for genre research, particularly to reveal social practices (Tardy, 2024). It explains how *textography* blends text analysis with interviews and document analysis to examine both texts and their production contexts. The chapter offers useful insight into a methodological approach to studying dissertation writing by linking text and context. However, it might be more useful if the chapter outlined clearer steps for textual analysis.

Additionally, since the term *corpus* appears throughout, it would be helpful to clarify whether *corpus* refers to data or method. This matters because a corpus as study data is more than just a collection of texts. It should demonstrate representativeness principles, or the extent to which a corpus allows for accurate generalization (Egbert et al., 2020). Yet, most analyses in the book rely on small samples (e.g., 20 PhD dissertations in Sociology and History from Starfield and Ravelli’s (2006) study), raising concerns about representativeness, especially when linguistic features are part of the analysis. Clarifying the meaning of *corpus* could strengthen understanding of its role in textual analysis within genre studies and corpus research.

Chapter 4 discusses dissertation macrostructures, outlining four established types: traditional simple (reporting on a single study), traditional complex (reporting on more than one study), topic-based (reporting on a number of sub-topics), and PhD by publication or manuscript style (consisting of published or publishable articles). It also introduces two new types from Anderson et al. (2022): hybrid simple/manuscript (a combination of traditional simple and manuscript/article style) and hybrid topic/manuscript (a combination of topic-based and manuscript/article style). The chapter highlights diverse dissertation formats, helping graduate students and supervisors across disciplines recognize structural options often overlooked in published guidelines. However, distinctions between types would benefit from an operational definition of what constitutes a single study versus multiple studies, especially since dissertations often share one overarching title despite including multiple manuscripts.

The chapter further expands through an in-depth comparison of early and recent dissertations from the first PhD-granting universities in four countries, exploring genre stability and change. The authors discuss this stability and change in, for instance, the fact that the humanities show continuity with topic-based structures, while the sciences shift toward manuscript formats. The authors encourage readers to rethink what the genre is doing, for what purpose, and what it might look like in the future. They also note that including more diverse disciplinary groups, beyond the social sciences, humanities, and education, and expanding the data would enrich the discussion.

In Chapter 5, Paltridge and Starfield revisit Starfield and Ravelli’s (2006) study on sociology and history fields, expanding it with more recent data. Comparative analyses show that topic-based dissertations, common over a decade ago, still appear in today’s new humanities. However, internal structures and language are found to vary. For instance, sociology includes personal narratives, while history emphasizes reflexivity. The authors present this as evidence of the genre’s stability, possibly shaped by supervisors’ expectations and peer examples.

In Chapter 6, the authors review the professional doctorate, a type of doctoral degree that emphasizes links to professional practice (Paltridge & Starfield, 2024). They focus on the Education doctorate (EdD) across four countries, outlining history and key features. A defining characteristic is its integration of coursework with professional practice. While still requiring a dissertation, the EdD typically involves a shorter text and mostly applies a traditional macrostructure rather than those in other doctoral types. Paltridge and Starfield note that the professional doctorates exhibit greater macrostructural variation, as evidenced by recent Canadian studies in the faculty of Education that identified two hybrid formats not found in earlier research. The chapter emphasizes the genre stability of the professional doctorate.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on practice-based doctorates in different fields: visual arts and music arts. In Chapter 7, the authors define a practice-based doctorate as one that connects creative work with a written dissertation. In visual arts, this type of doctorate often resembles the default doctorate, featuring three macrostructures: simple traditional, complex traditional, and topic based. A notable finding is how the creative component influences authorial voice in the writing. Chapter 8 revisits practice-based doctorates in the field of music, where dissertations show greater variation and are influenced by multimodality. These dissertations also exhibit a high degree of individualization and lack standardization. Together, the chapters highlight how arts disciplines differ due to the unique nature of their creative components—an insight that may extend to other fields as well.

Chapter 9 focuses on the manuscript-style dissertation, whose growing popularity warrants a dedicated discussion. The authors outline various terms for this format (e.g., thesis by publication, manuscript style, compilation style), which is helpful for readers from different geographical contexts. They also discuss variation within manuscript-style (e.g., retrospective vs. prospective; sandwich vs. two-part models). Retrospective dissertations consist of previously published manuscripts, while prospective ones include publishable papers prepared during the PhD. Meanwhile, *sandwich model* dissertations consist of substantial individual introduction and conclusion chapters, with individual articles in between, and a *two-part model* comprises several different chapters followed by articles. This nuanced overview is rarely discussed elsewhere, making it particularly valuable. The authors find this format in all four countries studied, though practices differ: US dissertations are all prospective, using either the sandwich or two-part model, while UK ones are mostly retrospective. The chapter also discusses common student challenges. Overall, it provides a comprehensive look at manuscript-style dissertations, covering structural variation and drawbacks. It concludes by calling for more research on adapting this format in fields where it remains uncommon.

In Chapter 10, Paltridge and Starfield revisit several theoretical concepts (e.g., typology, taxonomy, prototype, and family resemblance) while highlighting both continuity and change in dissertation practices. They identify factors driving these changes, including reduced higher education funding, fewer academic jobs, and declining tenure-track positions, all of which make publishing a strategic move for PhD students. The chapter also explores the evolving concept of authorship in dissertations, followed by a discussion on authorial voice. Looking ahead, the authors discuss how multimodality and new dissertation formats may shape future practices. Drawing on examples from education, visual arts, and music, they encourage readers to reconsider how dissertations are approached across disciplines.

Overall, this book offers a comprehensive exploration of the dissertation as an academic genre. While the dissertation is commonly regarded as the capstone of a PhD journey, the authors approach it from multiple perspectives rather than viewing it solely as a written text. As the title *The Evolution of an Academic Genre* suggests, the two leading experts examine how dissertation practices have developed over time and invite readers to reflect on how they might continue to change. They consider how shifts in higher education, disciplinary practices, professional expectations, and broader contextual factors may influence the ways dissertations are produced and evaluated in the future. Across all chapters, the discussions are cohesively structured to illustrate the complexity and evolving nature of this academic genre.

The theoretical underpinnings discussed in Chapter 2 are clearly applied in the analysis of each sample study throughout the book. For example, Paltridge and Starfield advocate for

*textographic* analysis—an approach that combines textual analysis with interviews with former PhD students and/or supervisors. This is particularly helpful for researchers interested in using this method, as the authors do not just discuss the theory abstractly; they actively demonstrate how it can be applied in practice.

By presenting a range of sample studies, the authors effectively address the need for dissertation guidelines grounded in research. Several scholars have noted that many existing guidelines are not research-based (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014), often fail to reflect actual practices (Paltridge, 2002) and tend to promote overly rigid models (Kamler & Thompson, 2008) without accounting for variation grounded in disciplinary or other contextual factors. This book counters such limitations by including studies with clearly presented data analyses and findings that reflect real-world dissertation writing experiences.

However, there remain some minor areas for improvement. Including examples of other genre-based studies (e.g., moves and steps analysis) that focus on specific dissertation sections (e.g., introduction and literature review section across macrostructure types) and integrating corpus-based research on linguistic features would offer valuable complementary perspectives to the *textography* approach discussed in Chapter 3. Regarding macrostructures, more fine-grained operational definitions would help researchers better understand the distinctive characteristics of each macrostructure and further explore this research area. For example, clearer criteria for distinguishing a single study from multiple studies within one dissertation sharing an overarching title could enrich future research, especially given the inherently fuzzy nature of the genre.

Yet, the limitations do not detract from the overall quality of the book, particularly the detailed and comprehensive information presented throughout. Instead, these limitations point to directions for further inquiry. We strongly recommend this book to readers, especially PhD students across disciplines, their supervisors, and those involved in shaping university policies related to dissertations.

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