

**Review of *Detox Your Writing: Strategies for doctoral researchers*  
by Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler (2016) Routledge. Taylor and  
Francis Group, London and New York.\***

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In a book that includes as a thesis structuring strategy the notion of writing abstracts, it is hardly surprising that *Detox Your Writing. Strategies for doctoral researchers* by Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler begins with what they might describe as ‘not a summary [but] ... an argument, writ small’ (139). In their opening statement, not identified as a foreword, preamble or an abstract *per se*, the authors present ‘*all* of the moves that are in the larger text’ (emphasis in original, 139). Thus, they begin as they mean to continue in a book which models good practice and where the medium contributes as much to the message as the collaboratively constructed key learning points. Equally, their succinct situational declaration echoes the form and function of the book, an idea in itself on which they expand throughout the work, while it also identifies the purpose, audience, genre and stance of the text. In this prologue, while acknowledging that there are a number of books which address their topic, the authors suggest that their offering is something different which is captured in the title of the work - ‘a scholarly detox’.

In many respects, these contextualising opening lines are themselves an accurate overview. Hence, rather, than rework their ‘tiny version of the bigger whole’ (139) our review will outline, albeit briefly, the content of the book as well as providing a reader response from two of the targeted audiences’ perspectives, namely that of provider of ‘university doctoral training and composition and writing courses’, and that of doctoral researcher, an actor that Thomson and Kamler refer to throughout as ‘DR’. In the interest of authenticity of reader response, the perspective of the ‘doctoral writing support provider’ is presented as a reaction to the text as a whole. Whereas, given the reality of a DR’s life, and the overwhelming amount of reading with which such a character is faced, we deemed that a more realistic approach to Thomson and Kamler’s text would be for a DR to dip in and out using just-in-time reading/learning strategies. With this in mind, the DR perspective presented here focuses on one specific chapter, which was judged timely for this DR’s writing stage. One can assume that the DR would have also read the preamble and the introduction.

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\* URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[288\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[288])

## Overview of the text

Thomson and Kamler's work is divided into ten chapters many of which address predictable topics of concern to doctoral researchers including, dealing with literature, learning to argue, structure, revising, finding one's voice and moving from emergent scholar to expert. In the introduction the authors explain why they are employing the eponymous idea of 'detox' as the thread of the book. Immediately they set the tone through the authorial voice which speaks directly to the doctoral researcher and which they describe as 'more casual, conversational (7)'. This is a voice which is 'more like [they] sound in ... actual writing workshops' (7), this text being perhaps the written equivalent of said sessions but being named by them as 'a companionable workbook'. They note with the reader the consolidated principles which underpin the book i.e. to write pedagogically, to promote a conversation about good academic writing, and to ground their work in experience and scholarship. And the authors make good on their commitment to these principles throughout.

With reference to writing pedagogically, the authors achieve this in the first instance by ensuring that each idea they explore is accessible to the reader. In this manner, they provide thesis writing scaffolding which is research informed and presented to facilitate where a DR might be in the writing process. This awareness of writing as a process, which has many challenging phases and stages, is also reflected in the organisation of the book. Each chapter begins with a common doctoral writing conundrum reflecting the intention that the book will 'address a number of common problems that get in the way of writing a compelling thesis' (13). In response to the identified difficulties they offer suggestions around reframing – 'reframing idea(s)' – which are part of the 'detox' approach.

One way in which the authors illustrate their second principle, the desire to encourage conversations about good academic writing, is through the accommodation of multiple voices besides their own throughout the work. This is done conventionally by drawing on and integrating the extant literature, but also through the inclusion of themed text boxes which fall under the four headings of experience, writing samples, advice and commentary. In these conjured and miniature Burkean parlors, the reader can consider if there are conversations going on about writing of which they would like to hear more or to which they might like to contribute.

This idea connects with the authors' third underpinning principle that they ground their work in experience and scholarship. This assertion is played out throughout the text where the authors' familiarity with the literature is expansive but carried lightly and with no sense of trying to bamboozle or flummox the reader. There is a welcome mix of writing advice which is sourced from various media and built on research from a range of traditions, jurisdictions and writing worlds. This is certainly a strength and a defining characteristic of the book. In addition, each chapter concludes with a concise summary, 'In sum', which provides a tidy finish and a reinforcement of the main points.

### Reader 1 – from the perspective of those supporting doctoral writers

From the perspective of the reader who is supporting doctoral writers Thomson and Kamler's text is most useful in terms of the range of strategies that it suggests which could be offered to DRs. These approaches are described in straightforward terms, all are backed up with worked examples and several with a range of writing samples. The aforementioned welcome emphasis on writing processes is complemented with illustrations of how academic writing is performed. Practical suggestions around scanning, note-taking, engaging with the literature, learning to argue, finding one's place, structuring the thesis etc. are all important topics which feature in the text. These ideas are unpacked and translated into sensible advice with worked examples. This step-by-step staging of various approaches with clear explanations provides a tangible guide to working under these various headings. There is also beneficial guidance about the 'moves' that contribute to the production of academic writing. This is complemented with a comprehensive picture of how the writing of the thesis *is* the research process and therefore intrinsically connected with other aspects of becoming an expert in one's field. One key element, around which many of the ideas and chapters revolve, is that of developing one's scholarly identity and how writing is an essential part of this process. The authors talk of text work and identity work being 'inseparable' (21); they remark to the DR reader: 'When you write the doctorate, you also produce yourself as a scholar' (21). As a result, many of the chapters combine the focus on writing with the necessity to address other important areas such as finding one's place, learning to argue, performing one's research, negotiating the sense of being an imposter, finding and articulating one's voice with some authenticity and passion, embracing the need to revise, redraft, edit and craft, managing the difficult final yards to project completion, stepping into one's role as expert scholar and trying to remember the joy and enthusiasm with which one began the project and which goes hand-in-hand with the privilege of being in a position to contribute.

### Reader 2 – from the perspective of a doctoral researcher

In keeping with the overall ethos of Thomson and Kamler's book, the recommendations put forward in 'Chapter 7 - Structuring the Thesis' are designed to advocate an organic, non-directive approach to planning and producing a finished text. As the authors quite rightly point out, the more traditional IMRAD structure can prove restrictive for DRs, as their thesis may not require a literature review chapter as such and, perhaps more importantly, because the IMRAD approach frequently produces a prosaic and disjointed body of work which presents a series of smaller arguments without fully developing the central argument as a whole. Crucially, however, Thomson and Kamler are not recommending that the DR should refrain from adopting any specific organisational arrangement, including the more traditional IMRAD structure; they simply advocate that one should attend to the 'content before finally deciding on the form in which it should be organised and presented' (130). In this way, it is very much a case of cutting your cloth to suit your measure.

There are many benefits to adopting such a research-focused approach to the construction of a thesis, and it is in the four structural strategies set out by Thomson and Kamler that these advantages make themselves most apparent. To begin, the authors suggest that the DR should focus on 'writing chunks instead of chapters' with a view 'to sorting out ideas and developing the "readerly" stance (Barthes, 1975) you will take in the final text' (134). This approach might also accelerate the drafting process as the DR is far more likely to submit work for evaluation by their supervisor if it is made clear in advance

that it is a very preliminary draft of initial findings on a particular topic. As its title would suggest, the 'storyboarding to create the moves' strategy is recommended as a means to locate the broader ideas surrounding the research that comprise the chunks of writing. Here, the authors' commitment to a non-directive approach makes itself most forcefully felt as they suggest the DR might begin the process from the 'top-down' or the 'bottom-up', depending on whether they have begun with the overarching idea or are seeking to discover the idea using the writings chunks completed at the preceding developmental stage. What is most impressive about the process recommended at this juncture, however, is that it is both inclusive and forward-thinking inasmuch as it seems particularly attractive to visual learners and encourages the adoption of technology when useful to the DR. The merits of the remaining strategies in this four-step process, 'writing thesis abstracts' and 'writing the introduction and chapter abstracts', may be considered in tandem, as both are clearly intended to ensure that the DR has a solid grasp of the argument presented in each chapter and how exactly each of these arguments function within the overarching argument presented by the thesis as a whole. Of course, the construction of a crisp argument should be the final goal of any thesis regardless of the discipline, but what is striking about the final two strategies recommended here by Thomson and Kamler is the extent to which they emphasise the importance of the preceding phases in reaching this optimum level of clarity.

In addition to the fact that the method outlined in this chapter promotes the idea that the writing process is an integral part of the research process, the procedure recommended also affords DRs the opportunity to have individual chapters of their work published as stand-alone journal articles prior to the completion of the finished thesis. In a world in which it has become increasingly important to have publications on your CV prior to finding work in academia, this advantage cannot be overestimated. It also seems there would ultimately be less editing required in order to make the thesis amenable to publication as a book or as a monograph if the research has not been shoehorned to fit the IMRAD structure.

### **'In sum'**

Insofar as Thomson and Kamler's publication is aimed at the DR who can dip into its workbook format, for those charged with supporting DRs it will prove an excellent resource for one-off writing workshops on specific topics, or could well be used as a guiding text for a doctoral academic writing module. Its tone of co-enquiry with its reader reflects the overall intention of the book, that is, to provide a moderate approach which will 'gently interrupt old ways of doing things and establish new habits and orientations to writing the PhD'.