

# Writing a PhD by papers

## Writing a PhD as (published) papers

*Katherine Gough*

Having no choice in the UK in the late 1980s, I wrote my PhD as a monograph. I found it quite disheartening, and time consuming, to subsequently carve the thesis up into a number of papers for publication having gone to such an effort in the first place to weave the disparate data into a single narrative. At the time, I bemoaned the fact that it had not been possible to write the PhD as papers in the first place. Today, PhD students in some geography departments have the choice of either writing their thesis as a monograph or presenting it as a series of papers. Having supervised and examined a number of theses written in both styles, I can now see their relative pros and cons and for PhD students with the option it is far from an easy choice.

In the UK, it is rare for geographers, unless they are an established member of academic staff, to be allowed to submit a PhD as a series of papers. In other countries, such as Denmark, PhD students are not only permitted but are actively encouraged to write their PhD as papers rather than a monograph. There are a number of reasons for electing to write a PhD as papers. At the end of the process, you will have a series of published papers which will strengthen your CV when subsequently applying for research grants or academic posts. The experience gained through publishing in journals will also stand you in good stead for future research. Furthermore, your work will reach a far wider audience than a monograph sitting on a university library shelf gathering dust. However, as Thilde Langevang and Sofia Thorsson reveal below, opting to write a PhD as papers is far from an easy option. Carving up a major piece of research, which a PhD is, into a series of short papers is difficult and the vagaries of the journal world can give you a rough ride. Despite the trend in geography in Denmark to write a PhD as papers, there are still some who choose to write a monograph; especially those who have conducted ethnographic type research find that their material is more suited to a monograph than a series of articles.

Once a PhD student has decided to write their thesis as a series of papers, there are a number of issues that have to be addressed. One decision is the number and content of the papers. To some extent this will be dictated by university regulations. For example, the current requirement for geographers at the University of Copenhagen is that the thesis should consist of 3-6 papers of which the candidate must be the lead author on at least 3. While some PhD students opt to outline the papers which will make up their thesis from the start, it is important to remain flexible and allow new ideas for papers to arise as the thesis progresses. Sometimes unexpected findings make the most interesting papers.

The question of authorship of the papers is an issue that has to be addressed by both PhD student and supervisor. A supervisor naturally contributes to a PhD thesis as it evolves through ongoing discussions with the PhD candidate. But how much does a supervisor have to contribute to merit his/her name appearing as co-author? Here a difference emerges between the traditions in the differing parts of the discipline with a tendency for physical geographers to be named as co-authors more frequently than human geographers. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to raise the issue of authorship with a supervisor at an early stage and be prepared to constantly review it as the papers develop (also see 5.1 in Publishing and getting read).

The selection of which journals to publish in is another important process (see 2.1 in Publishing and getting read). As well as being aware of the subject area and prestige of journals, it can also be a good idea to find out about the publication time lag. The time delays of the peer-review process can be especially frustrating for a PhD student whose money and time is quickly running out. To prevent this being a major obstacle in Copenhagen, however, there is no requirement that papers are published but they must be of the standard required for submission. The word limit imposed by journals, which can be frustrating for PhD students brimming with ideas and data, is another important factor in selecting where to publish with many students searching out journals which have slightly higher word limits.

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When submitting a PhD thesis as papers, it is usual to have to write a synopsis, which pulls together the various strands of the work which have appeared in the papers. This can be a challenging task especially when the papers have been pulled in different directions by the reviewers' comments. The synopsis provides the space to develop some methodological and conceptual/theoretical issues, which it was not possible to expand upon in the papers. There is the unavoidable issue, though, of keeping to a minimum repetition in the synopsis of the content of the papers.

So, whilst those who have the option of writing a PhD as either a monograph or a series of papers are in some ways privileged, there are many issues which have to be addressed along the way. It is far from an easy option and maybe I'm glad after all I didn't face the choice.

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# Writing a PhD by papers

## Writing a PhD in human geography by publication

*Thilde Langevang*

I completed my PhD at the University of Copenhagen in 2007. My thesis was a collection of papers focusing on young people's life strategies in Accra, Ghana. The decision to write my PhD thesis as a collection of papers was not an easy one. At first I had planned to write what I considered to be a 'real' PhD thesis, i.e. a monograph. But after considering writing a paper collection instead, and having weighed the pros and cons of the two different forms, I opted for the paper collection form. The choice was first and foremost motivated by a desire to make my research available to a wider range of readers. I assessed that my chances of actually publishing a monograph style PhD as a book afterwards, or alternatively rewriting it into publishable papers, were rather slim. Instead of writing a monograph, which would most likely be hidden away in the departmental library in Copenhagen, the prospects of publishing articles in journals and thereby getting the research 'out there' right away appealed to me. This choice was also strongly encouraged by my department.

The most obvious implication of my choice was that instead of writing one long narrative, the work was split into five pieces: four individual papers and a synopsis. This meant that I worked with relatively smaller and more manageable pieces compared with a long monograph. It was a struggle, however, to make sure that there were sufficient connections between the different papers and not too many overlaps so that the thesis would also appear as a whole. The synopsis helped to make these connections explicit as it tied the individual papers together in terms of context, methodology, theory and overall conclusions.

Although it is not a requirement at my department to actually publish the papers, this was an ambition of mine. Initially I had hoped to submit all the papers to journals before submitting the thesis but I came to realise that writing publishable papers is a very time consuming affair. At the time of submitting the thesis, only two papers were accepted for publication in international peer-reviewed journals. Both of these papers had been through long and time-consuming review processes, with many delays beyond my control, which was rather discouraging. It also proved to be a challenge to keep an eye on journal requirements, referee criticism and thesis expectations simultaneously. At times I felt that I was spending too much time pushing my material into article formats, cutting the material down to suit word limits, and responding to referee and editor comments at the expense of developing the theoretical lines of the thesis and providing empirical depth and detail. The ethnographic character of my work perhaps exacerbated this issue, and might have been better suited to a monograph. In many places I felt that I did not do justice to my material because of the limited space to unfold it within the word limit of a journal article.

Throughout the writing process I have been careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that 'if only I had chosen the other form it would have been much easier', which I am sure would not have been the case. I am pleased that I already have some papers published. However, it is important to recognise that writing a PhD in a paper collection form poses particular challenges and the choice has a major impact on both the working process and the product.

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# Writing a PhD by papers

## Writing a PhD in physical geography by publication

Sofia Thorsson

Today, writing a PhD by publications is the currency of physical geography in Sweden. In general a thesis by publications comprises a series of papers and a preface, which should include a review of the literature, place the papers in context and present and discuss the results in a broader perspective.

The first physical geography PhD by publication at the University of Göteborg, Sweden was presented in 1990. Since then more than 30 theses have been presented in this way. Typically these include a preface of about 40 pages and five or six papers. About three papers are accepted or published in different peer-reviewed journals at the time of the defence whereas others are submitted or manuscripts. Two years after the defence about 80% of the papers have been published. The PhD student is usually the single author of one paper and the first author of three or four papers included in the thesis. The number of co-authors varies greatly between the papers, but the number has increased throughout the years. In the early 1990s the average number of co-authors was less than one. Today it averages about two and can sometimes be as many as eight in large research projects. During the last decade, papers with national and international collaboration have become common, and today a thesis usually includes one or two papers with co-authors outside the student's department.

I received my PhD by publications in physical geography – urban climatology – in 2003. My thesis included five papers, of which four were accepted or published in different peer-reviewed journals at the time of the defence. The review process took between four and nine months for each paper and two to seven months later the papers were published online. My experience is that it is important to select journals carefully and that several factors need to be taken into account in this choice. First, the paper should fit the scope of journal, since choosing the wrong journal may cost you several months. Further, the journal should have the right readership and a good status in the intellectual field in question.

Today, publication in peer-reviewed journals is the currency of science. A thesis by publication thus has some major advantages over the traditional thesis (monograph/book). For example the work is much more likely to be read by others and the work is quickly and widely disseminated through electronic journals. Furthermore, the structure of a paper is well defined, established and universal, which makes the work easy to plan and in turn increases the chances of finishing the thesis in time. However, a PhD by publications may require more and continuous supervision. One problem with this form of thesis is that the student might be tempted to publish parts of their work prematurely, before the whole picture is clear since the review process can be rather slow.

During the last decades, research, particularly in physical geography, has developed from primarily individual into teamwork often involving researchers from different departments and disciplines. Large research groups often mean enhanced support and possibilities for the PhD student. A thesis should primarily include the student's contribution to his/her research field and discipline. However, it might be difficult for a student within large research projects/teams to develop and advance their own ideas. Further, the student's contribution could be difficult to separate from the contributions of others.

In some institutions it is a requirement for students, particularly those within large research groups/teams, to be the single author of at least one paper that will be included in the thesis. Doing so enables the student to gain experience of the whole publication process, i.e. planning the study, measuring/modelling, analysing the research findings and writing the paper. This paper is usually completed during the later stages of the PhD. Despite different challenges that students face in writing a PhD by publication, completing their thesis in this way will make the candidate well-prepared and competitive for postdoctoral fellowships and lectureships at the time of graduation.

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