

Empowering Research: An Interpretation of Umberto Eco's *How to Write a Thesis*

Dr. Syed Wahaj Mohsin

Associate Professor (Jr.)

Department of English/Languages

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Integral University

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

swahaj@iul.ac.in

Abstract

This paper delves into an erudite interpretation of Umberto Eco's acclaimed text entitled *How to Write a Thesis*. This work was originally published in Italy in 1977, and later translated into English and other languages across the globe. This literary contribution of Eco has proved to be of colossal value for students and teachers worldwide. Researchers of varying subjects can benefit from the wisdom of this book, but it is exceptionally useful for the scholars of humanities.

This book offers a spectrum of practical ideas and suggestions to guide the students who believe research to be a challenging and mammoth venture. Eco's practical suggestions, remarkable motivation and his occasionally hilarious tone make this work a literary masterpiece. With magnanimous technological advancements and ultra-modern gadgets the process of conducting research has undergone a significant transformation, but the basic guidelines and suggestions still serve as milestones. Eco amicably communicates with the

readers to create an atmosphere that promotes a love of learning in the students. He believes that passion for scholarly excellence should complement intellectual growth and well-being.

This paper aims to provide a lucid understanding of Eco's practical and theoretical wisdom for the progress of the young minds. Teachers and scholars can acquire many useful strategies and ideas from this interpretation for improving their intellectual ability and making research a memorable journey for their students.

Keywords: Research, Umberto, Practical, Humanities, Scholarly, Thesis

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

—Zora Neale Hurston

It is an undeniable fact that there are innumerable guidebooks and instructional manuals that are available for a contemporary researcher. The ever expanding market has a vast variety of ideas floating around us, giving us more information than we actually need. However, we rarely come across a book that gives us an opportunity to prepare ourselves for research even before we have actually embarked on this mammoth scholarly venture. The time that we dedicate in making up our mind for taking up a research program is the most crucial and challenging time. It is at this juncture that a researcher seeks prudent guidance and veracious empathy. Umberto Eco (1932-2016), an iconic Italian philosopher, semiotician, literary critic and novelist qualifies as a writer who understands the academic needs and apprehensions of the students and teachers in a truly commendable way. He mentors the researchers with his promising strategies, honest dedication and genuine empathy. He has authored a number of notable novels such as the *Name of the Rose* (1983), *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989), *The Island of the Day Before* (1995), *The Prague Cemetery* (2011) and *Numero Zero* (2015). These works have been originally written in Italian and later translated to many languages. He also wrote a number of non-fictional books, anthologies and books for children.

How to Write a Thesis was originally published in Italian in 1977 and has been translated into English by Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina. This book primarily deals with thesis writing in humanities, though the practical wisdom it imparts trespasses the boundaries of a subject-centred approach. The translators have anglicized certain Italian references only when necessary for the English speaking students. Eco wanted to guide and offer practical suggestions to the struggling Italian students of his era who wanted to write a thesis with the minimal resources that they possessed such as a card catalog and a library. The pre-information technology decades were difficult for students who worked tediously for a research degree. This book encourages us to introspect and seek answers that are crucial for us to seek before undertaking any research venture. A researcher needs to have a clear picture of his aims, expectations and requirements. The translators of this book hope that the contemporary researchers across the globe will empathize with the struggles and challenges of the past researchers whose requirements sowed the seeds of this book. Eco's personal experience as an academician serves as a guiding principle for his book. In the introductory section of the original 1977 edition of *How to Write a Thesis* (from here on referred to as *HWT*), Eco points out the two facts that young graduates should keep in mind regarding university thesis that:

1. One can write a decent thesis despite being in a difficult situation resulting from inequity past and present.
2. Through study, students acquire the capacity to identify problems, confront them methodically, and articulate them systematically in expository detail.

These skills will serve students for a lifetime. (*HWT* xx)

In the introduction to the 1985 edition of *HWT*, Eco precisely states that the purpose of his writing is not to present a, "prepared meal" (xxiv) for the students. It is a book to make them

understand the value of the written word and the labour that goes into it. In this regard Eco affirms that:

... research is a mysterious adventure that inspires passion and holds many surprises. Not just an individual but also an entire culture participates, as ideas sometimes travel freely, migrate, disappear, and reappear. In this sense, ideas are similar to jokes that become better as each person tells them. (xxvi)

Eco classifies this book as a “didactic book” written for the sole purpose of helping and guiding the students who aim to conduct research with limited access to resources. With the same spirit as Eco’s, this research paper aims to strengthen and empower research by allowing the young researchers to get a lucid interpretation of Eco’s extraordinary ideas and suggestions.

In the first chapter entitled “The Definition and Purpose of the Thesis” Eco mentions the Italian students who enroll for a laurea thesis that is less complex than a doctoral thesis. He informs that in other parts of the world a Ph.D. degree is a doctoral level degree that is awarded after the completion of an extensive thesis written by the researcher during a stipulated time period. This book is useful for the students irrespective of their discipline, but it primarily focuses on academic research in humanities. The writer makes it clear that this book caters to the academic need of the students who can dedicate few hours of sincere study everyday, and those who aspire to achieve a reasonable amount of, “intellectual satisfaction” (5) from what they write. Eco further suggests that, “Writing a thesis requires a student to organize ideas and data, to work methodically, and to build an “object” that in principle will serve others. In reality, the research experience matters more than the topic” (6). With this advice he wants the scholars to work in an organized fashion and create a target. The experience of conducting a research is more appealing than the process of topic selection. The training of the memory that an individual undergoes during the research venture prepares

him for further challenges. Eco encourages the scholar to write thesis even on a peripheral topic that initially appears to be less appealing. He believes that if during the process of research the scholar works sincerely then even in this case outstanding results can be achieved. This clarifies that no topic is less important than the other if hard work is put into it. He proposes four rules to be kept in mind while selecting a research topic:

1. The topic should reflect your previous studies and experience.
2. The necessary sources should be materially accessible.
3. The necessary sources should be manageable.
4. You should have some experience with the methodological framework that you will use in the thesis. (7-8)

The researcher may be well aware of these rules, but the residue of these can be easily understood in the words of Eco where he states that, “You must write a thesis that you are able to write” (8).

In the second chapter “Choosing the Topic” the writer opens the discussion by revealing the most common error made by the researchers. He says that, “The first temptation of any student is to write a thesis that is too broad” (9). If the thesis topic is extremely vast then the scholar is bound to suffer in the long run. It will be of no use to start working on a very broad topic as it will make things difficult and the committee may not be able to fully delve into the depth and width of the topic. The topic should be focused and not vague. Eco suggests that a researcher can opt for writing a monograph, or a survey to suit his requirement. He states that a monograph, “can analyze many writers, but only from the perspective of a specific theme” (12). There is nothing wrong in writing a monograph that does not have a very broad topic and can be handled by the scholar with ease. Some researchers can also write a survey if they find a monograph monotonous. Eco gives a fundamental principle at this point stating that, “the more you narrow the field, the better and

more safely you will work” (13). Thus, the writer clearly points towards the benefit of writing a monograph as compared to a survey because he feels that it is better for a thesis to be similar to an essay rather than to resemble a historical account or an encyclopedia. He also brings to focus the fact that for designing a research work a scholar cannot work in vacuum. A “foothold in past scholarship” (15) is necessary because that enables a scholar to comprehend his ideas and targets in a better way. The past scholarship will improve his views and enhance his potential to write extensively on topics that may initially seem obscure.

Eco focuses on the selection of topic between ancient authors and contemporary authors, but he does not side with any. His approach is neither biased nor confined to limit the scope of the research. He confirms that a research on a contemporary author is indeed more difficult than the one on an ancient author. The number of bibliographic sources available on a contemporary author is less in number and often easily accessible. Eco advises the researcher to avoid giving his own comments on the author in the thesis. It is according to him too early for the researcher to make critical comments on a contemporary author based on his limited perspective. The writer finally states that the most noteworthy suggestion in this regard is to, “work on a contemporary author as if he were ancient, and an ancient one as if he were contemporary” (17). He further suggests that the researcher must not take more than three years for research and not less than six months. He enumerates certain difficulties that can surface if the researcher takes more than three years to complete his research. These problems include:

1. The student has chosen an overwhelming topic that is beyond his skill level.
2. The student is one of those insatiable persons who would like to write about everything, and who will continue to work on his thesis for 20 years. (A clever scholar will instead set limits, however modest, and produce something definitive within those limits.)

3. The “thesis neurosis” has begun: the student abandons the thesis, returns to it, feels unfulfilled, loses focus, and uses his thesis as an alibi to avoid other challenges in his life that he is too cowardly to address. This student will never graduate. (18)

Eco instructs the researcher to keep a sound communication with the advisor/supervisor/guide. The advisor will serve as an audience to listen to the researcher and will also help in guiding the research work whenever required. The advisor should be satisfied with the results otherwise the thesis will not be defended by him, and this will create an awkward situation for both the advisor and the researcher. Eco’s practical wisdom scales new heights when he instructs that a researcher should not make the mistake of selecting a topic that requires foreign language skills that he does not possess and does not intend to acquire in due time. In this regard he enlists certain requirements:

1. We cannot write a thesis on a foreign author if we do not read his texts in the original language.
2. We cannot write a thesis on a topic on which the most important secondary sources are in a language we do not know.
3. We cannot write a thesis on an author or a topic by reading only the sources written in familiar languages. (23)

Umberto Eco further explains what it means to qualify a work as a scientific work. It does not necessarily require formulas and diagrams to classify a research as scientific. The academia has allocated another meaning to the term “scientific” (27). There are certain conditions that qualify a research as scientific. The first condition is that, “The research deals with a specific object, defined so that others can identify it,” the second condition states that, “The research says things that have not yet been said about this object, or it revises the things that have already been said from a different perspective.” The third condition affirms that, “the

research is useful to others” and the fourth condition is that, “the research provides the elements required to verify or disprove the hypotheses it presents, and therefore it provides the foundation for future research” (27, 28, 29, 30). These conditions put forth by Eco illuminate the fact that a researcher can use and employ, “the requirements for scientific validity to any topic” (31).

The writer further delineates with the issue of selecting an advisor under whose supervision the research needs to be conducted. The researcher chooses his advisor, and if the advisor agrees then a topic is assigned to the researcher. However, the topic may be a familiar topic for the advisor, or an unfamiliar one. In both cases the capacity of the researcher determines the topic being assigned. If the advisor knows about the potential of the researcher he can assign an unfamiliar topic so that the researcher can navigate across uncharted territory and also enrich the knowledge of the advisor about that particular area. If the advisor does not feel confident about the capacity of the scholar he will assign a familiar topic so as to make the journey of research a bit convenient for the researcher. He also suggests that before selecting an advisor one must delve into a check of the reputation of the advisor and his academic record. If one nurtures respect and trust for an advisor then he should be selected without hesitation.

Eco in the third chapter of the book entitled “Conducting Research” deals with certain key elements in conducting research. He in this regard asserts that the primary sources must be clearly demarcated from the critical literature. Critical literature may consist of quotations taken from the primary source, but this critical literature still remains an indirect source and not a primary one. As far as the direct and indirect sources are concerned Eco affirms that, “Regarding books, a direct source is an original edition or a critical edition of the work in question” (50). He further states that:

1. A translation is not a direct source.

2. An anthology is not a direct source.
3. The critical works of other authors, no matter how rich with quotations, are not direct sources. (50)

A researcher must never pretend to have read the original source if he has not actually read it. It is not only unethical, but not beneficial for the entire research venture. A library offers solutions to the question of building a bibliography. A researcher must consult a library, he must not be hesitant in taking help of the librarian and must use subject catalogs and author catalogs well. A few sections of *HWT* dealing with the use of bibliographical index card file, documentation guidelines, index cards and notes have not been discussed in this paper because this book of Eco as stated in the foreword by Francesco Erspamer was written in, “the age of typewriters, card catalogs, and writing pads” (x) and much of these techniques have been replaced by contemporary specialized research softwares and style manuals like *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *Modern Language Association (MLA) style guide* and *American Psychological Association (APA)*. Erspamer observes in this regard that, “The humanities are intrinsically creative and innovative. They are about originality and invention, not discovery. This is precisely Eco’s testimony; even more than a technical manual, this book is an invitation to ingenuity, a tribute to imagination” (x). However, the relevance of Eco’s instructions cannot be diminished by any technological feat because he believed in, “slow research, legitimized not by its results but by its procedures” (xiii). Further Eco contends that a thesis on books needs other books to develop the idea that is put forth by the researcher. It means that we need firstly the books that our thesis is based on, and secondly the books that we read to help us write about those books. To understand this in terms of Eco it must be remembered that, “the texts that are the object of the study are the primary sources, and the critical literature on those texts constitutes the secondary sources” (104).

Eco addresses the common confusion among students regarding the order in which they need to start reading their books. It must be noted that the researcher should begin by figuring out what will be the most suitable approach for him while beginning the process of reading the books. Eco suggests that the decision to select between primary sources and secondary sources is with the researcher, but he must remember that the most sensible way is to:

. . . approach two or three of the most general critical texts immediately, just to get an idea of the background against which your author moves. Then approach the original author directly, and always try to understand exactly what he says. Afterward, explore the rest of the critical literature. Finally, return to examine the author in the light of the newly acquired ideas. (104)

This approach according to him can appear to be a little vague because it depends on the temperament of the researcher who may or may not follow it precisely.

In the next chapter “The Work Plan and the Index Cards”, Eco deliberates on a few instructions regarding the work plan of the thesis which includes the title, the table of contents and the introduction. He states that one should make, “a provisional table of contents and it will function as your work plan. Better still if this table of contents is a summary, in which you attempt a short description of every chapter” (108). This appears to be a sort of a tentative plan that gives a brief description of the idea about the research. This tentative plan helps the researcher in certain ways such as: (a) it helps the researcher to clarify the idea that he plans to follow; (b) it gives a lucid framework of the research to the advisor; (c) the clarity of ideas can be tested at this stage. At this juncture the researcher needs to establish the title of the thesis in his mind, should design a proper tentative plan and write an introduction about the ideas that he intends to discuss in the chapters of the thesis. Eco also clarifies that, “it should be clear that you will continuously rewrite the introduction and the table of

contents as you proceed in your work” (111). The introduction is revised as the work progresses because the researcher knows that he has to do justice with what he proposed in the introductory segment. The introduction must be a carefully written, revised and designed section of the thesis. Eco brings to light the aspect that the introduction in a thesis also establishes “the center and periphery” (111) of the thesis. A researcher needs to be comprehensive about designating the central elements and the peripheral elements. Eco states that a researcher must underline whatever seems useful in a source, use colours, abbreviations, page markers and make notes in it. If a book belongs to a researcher it should be used well. The collection of sources in form of photocopies must be carefully managed for use and read as soon as they are acquired. A crucial lesson imparted by Eco in his book is about academic humility. He gives utmost significance to this aspect of research by discussing it in an exceptionally touching way. He gives a brief mention of how in his thesis the question he posed became a stumbling block for him for a certain period. Abbot Vallet’s book finds mention in his academic pursuit because this unknown writer helped him reach the key idea for the progress of his thesis. It is Eco’s modesty that he addresses this less known author and inspires the future researchers to find their own inspirations like Abbot during the process of their research. He finally reaches the inference that academic humility is, “the knowledge that anyone can teach us something” (143). He conveys the message that no source should be considered trivial, or undeserving in the process of research. A worthy idea can emerge from any obscure source.

In the fifth chapter entitled, “Writing the Thesis” Eco gives some important points regarding the process of writing the thesis. It is made crucial by Eco that a researcher must define the terms used in the thesis, unless the terms are “irrefutable canonical terms of the discipline” (146). The researcher must introduce the writers whether major or minor in the thesis, so that the readers can be given the information they require. The researcher must not

assume that the readers are already aware of the writers present in the thesis. On a lighter note Eco recommends that as the researcher is not Marcel Proust, French critic and novelist, he must not write lengthy sentences and restrict the use of too many pronouns and subordinate clauses. He further opines that as the researcher is not E. E. Cummings, the great American avant-garde poet, who signed his name in lower case and did everything to defy conventional writing, he must not choose unconventional writing strategies. The researcher must respect the regulations of critical discourse. The researcher must change paragraphs often and write whatever comes to his mind in the first draft of the thesis. Eco encourages the researcher to involve the advisor as an audience in the process of writing as the advisor's responses are significant. The researcher can also begin the writing of the chapter without following the chronological order and avoid using ellipses, exclamation points and explaining ironies. He also affirms that the terms that are used for the first time must be defined and the authors discussed in the thesis should be assigned a brief biographical sketch in the work. It is also important to avoid using personal pronouns like 'I' or 'we'. Instead the researcher can use impersonal expressions like, "therefore one should conclude that", "it then seems granted that," "one should say at this point," "one should presume," "therefore one infers that," "in examining this text one sees that" (155).

Eco enlists certain rules that are important while quoting in the thesis. They are:

Rule 1: Quote the object of your interpretive analysis with reasonable abundance.

Rule 2: Quote the critical literature only when its authority corroborates or confirms your statements.

Rule 3: If you don't want readers to presume that you share the opinion of the quoted author, you must include your own critical remarks before or after the passage.

Rule 4: Make sure that the author and the source (print or manuscript) of your quote are clearly identifiable.

Rule 5: Quote your primary source from the critical edition, or the most canonical edition.

Rule 6: When your primary source is foreign, quote it in the original language.

Rule 7: The reference to the author and the work must be clear.

Rule 8: When a quote does not exceed two or three lines, you can insert it into the body of the text enclosed in quotation marks.

Rule 9: Quotes must be accurate. First, transcribe the words exactly as they appear. (To this end, it is always a good idea to check the quotes against the original in your final draft, because errors or omissions may have occurred when you copied them by hand or typed them.)

Rule 10: Quotes are like testimony in a trial, and you must always be able to track down the witnesses and demonstrate their reliability. For this reason, the reference must be exact and accurate (do not quote from an author without indicating the book and page number), and it must be verifiable. (156-162)

Eco instructs the researcher to be cautious while quoting. He suggests a scholar to paraphrase, or to reword the idea of the author in an honest way. If the author's thoughts are reworded it is called paraphrasing, but if the thoughts are written without rewording and without quotation marks then it is called plagiarism. Further the utility of the footnotes is pointed by the writer. He gives some rules regarding footnotes:

1. Use a note to indicate the source of a quote.
2. Use notes to add additional supporting bibliographical references on a topic you discuss in the text.
3. Use notes for external and internal cross-references.

4. Use notes to introduce a supporting quote that would have interrupted the text.
5. Use notes to expand on statements you have made in the text.
6. Use notes to correct statements in the text.
7. Use notes to provide a translation of a quote, or to provide the quote in the original language.
8. Use notes to pay your debts. (167-169)

In the end of this didactic book Eco offers “instructions, traps and conventions” (179) that a researcher faces during the research venture. He instructs the researcher to avoid citing or ascribing impressions and concepts that are common and known to all. The researcher must not wrongly connect an idea to an author when the author has cited it as someone else's idea. Adding or deleting notes unnecessarily must be avoided. Secondary sources must be cited with academic integrity and complete source information must be given. When quoting a pre-1900 author from a foreign source great care must be taken. While quoting numbers and centuries from such foreign sources and references a researcher must exercise caution. Eco makes it clear that an acknowledgement should be an honest and an appreciative gesture to address the guidance and support of those who in some way have lent you their help. This chapter ends on a note on academic pride where Eco suggests that the researcher must not employ “unsolicited excuses” (183) in the thesis. By this he means that a researcher must not have any reservation in acknowledging his expertise over the subject of his thesis because he has spent a considerable amount of time in drafting it and holds authority to defend it. However, he suggests the researcher to be impressive and spirited if he is confident about the hard labour that he has put into his thesis. The last chapter of the book is not being discussed here because it is based on formatting strategies. Eco has typewritten this chapter of the book.

The formatting techniques have greatly evolved in the contemporary scenario and researchers across the globe follow the formatting guidelines prescribed by their respective universities.

The conclusion proposed by Umberto Eco nourishes the idea of believing in the significance of the written word as nothing from it goes to waste. Every part of the thesis is useful for the researcher. Thesis writing should be full of delight and spontaneity for the researcher. “Gusto” (221) is what a researcher should be full of and the journey of research must not be ritualistic, or mundane. Eco's contribution to the sphere of research by means of this book is indeed magnanimous. The strategies and wisdom imparted by Eco is timeless and extremely useful. This paper has a didactic approach similar to the one that dominates Eco's text. It is a humble effort to interpret the suggestions and valuable insights offered in *How to Write a Thesis* so as to empower the arena of research across the globe.

Works Cited

Eco, Umberto. *How to Write a Thesis*. 1977. Trans. Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff

Farina. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015. Print.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. NY: Harper Perennial Olive, 2017. Print.