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# ACADEMIC DISORIENTATION: CONFESSIONS OF A FRANTIC ADVISOR

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

First, a disclaimer: this is a personal text. The inspiration came from the book *The Real Life Guide to Accounting Research* (Humphrey & Lee, 2004), which portrays the real-life experience of academic research, issues not addressed in methodology books and which, in many cases, make it impossible to apply the most appropriate research technique to the most relevant topic. Therefore, this text reflects my opinion and experience, and not the result of a pure academic study.

When reading an academic paper, we usually find the following structure: abstract, introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, data presentation and analysis, and conclusion. Once the work is complete, it looks as though it was written exactly in that sequence.

However, anyone who has experienced academic writing knows that things rarely happen in that order, and often, there is no order at all during the writing process. But order is mandatory in the final version of the text. This article is aimed at those who have not yet realized this, especially young researchers. The goal is, as we say informally, to give them a “reality check” as they begin to write.

After years of experience, I have seen brilliant students “fail at the finish line”, both my advisees and those of other colleagues. Some, confident in their intelligence and abilities, chose topics that proved to be beyond their capacity. As the book *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (1979) suggests, we all eventually reach our level of incompetence. These students forgot, or never knew, that the success of a dissertation or thesis is directly linked to hard work. I have also seen less brilliant students produce outstanding research, achieving results far beyond what one might expect from their academic profile.

In these two cases, what was the role of academic advising?

Brilliant professors who had little time to devote to their students, and also not-so-brilliant professors who, with effort and dedication, led their advisees to good (and sometimes excellent) results.

That's what I want to talk about, or rather, share. I will try to organize this text to address these aspects and how they intertwine. Although “try” is not a typical word for academic publications, that is exactly what I intend to do. In fact, I am still trying to get it right.

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## **2 LITERARY INSPIRATIONS – INSTEAD OF A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this text, I will discuss some books that have inspired me as an advisor and researcher and have supported me throughout my career, not necessarily scientific books.

In addition to the one already mentioned in the introduction, another book that inspired me was *How to Write a Thesis* by Umberto Eco (1977). Extremely simple, I don't often see it cited in academic works, but I believe it offers important lessons, and I always recommend it to my students. The examples it gives on how to choose a thesis topic (and also how to choose an advisor) are excellent, and I will talk about that next.

## **3 ABOUT THE ADVISOR**

An academic project usually begins with the choice of a topic. But choosing an advisor is just as important and can be crucial to the success of the undertaking. It is common for students to be inspired by a professor, even idolize them, and decide to develop their project under their guidance. However, the advisor-advisee relationship is not based solely on admiration, although that helps a lot; empathy is fundamental.

This can be a difficult relationship, and both students and professors rarely reflect on it.

In *The Real Life Guide to Accounting Research*, Naoko Komori (see chapter 7 in Humphrey and Lee, 2004) describes her experience as an international student. A Japanese native, she pursued her PhD in England and faced major cultural shock. This can happen to students from anywhere. Hearing her advisor say that her work was “crap” left her stunned. First, because in Japan the student-professor relationship is respectful and distant, entirely different from the English culture. Second, because of the impact this relationship would have on her life, the advisor's influence on her way of thinking and writing. The critical vision he expected from her specifically. In short, this chapter offers a rich testimony of how such a relationship unfolds.

The advisor selection process varies by graduate program. In some, the coordinator or a committee assigns the advisor based on the student's chosen topic and the professor's line of research. In others, the student chooses. However, programs must respect limits on the number of advisees per professor. This can result in a student being assigned an advisor who was not their first choice, sometimes not even second or third.

Situations like this are not necessarily bad. They can even turn out to be surprisingly good. But they are not ideal.

The first advisor-advisee meeting is crucial. The student should have, at the very least, a clear idea of what they want to research and how much time they have to complete the project. Defining the time frame helps to narrow the topic. In addition, the advisor will get a sense of the level of involvement expected.

Sometimes, however, the student believes the thesis is already “ready” and only seeks the advisor’s endorsement. That’s not a good start.

The advisors’ role is not always well understood. They’re not groupmates, and they won’t write or do the work together with the students. Their role is precisely to guide, to point the way, correct deviations, offer suggestions, and, in the end, validate the final work.

Some students prefer to work independently. They like to submit complete chapters or sections and discuss them afterward, and they prefer fewer meetings. Others need closer supervision, with frequent meetings to brainstorm and revise.

Some professors like receiving finished chapters to review and comment on, and they prefer fewer meetings. Others favor regular meetings, first to discuss what will be written, and then to discuss what was written. Understanding these preferences and agreeing on the process helps a lot.

Returning to Eco (1977), he mentions the possibility of students being exploited by their professors. Some professors impose the topic to be developed, either because they already know it well and won’t need to put in much work, or because it is a subject they would like to research themselves and will do so along with the student. Of course, there are cases in which the topic suggested by the student is accepted by the advisor. But this initial conversation must be honest to define the thesis topic and assess, in advance, the potential limitations of the project.

It is common for the initial meeting to focus more on the timeline and less on the challenges that will arise.

As mentioned earlier in Humphrey and Lee (2004), one example addresses the cultural differences between a Japanese student and her English advisor. In my case, I had a student from the countryside of Minas Gerais, from a small institution where faculty, staff, and students had close, almost familial ties. Upon arriving in Rio de Janeiro, he struggled with a more distant academic environment. I took too long to notice this, and he almost dropped out. Fortunately, that didn’t happen (he earned his master’s degree with excellent performance), but the beginning was, let’s say, rough. So, personal issues have a significant impact on the outcome, even if they’re not reflected in the written work.

Still in the same book, there is a testimony from a student who chose an advisor with a well-defined research line and preset topics and objectives, waiting for interested students. In this case, the student admitted that the choice was pragmatic (he was working and didn’t have much time to commit to deep research. In the end, he acknowledged that his work wasn’t very good) just enough to be approved.

## **4 ABOUT CHOOSING A TOPIC**

Eco (1977) provides an excellent example. He mentions a student who wants to research Geology, a very broad topic. Then he narrows it down to Volcanology, more specific, but still broad. He further limits it to volcanoes in Mexico. Then, to the history of Popocatepetl, which had only one violent eruption.

And finally, to the apparent birth and death of Parícutin (from February 20 to March 4, 1952). According to Eco (1977), the last option would be the most suitable thesis topic, offering the possibility to exhaust everything that could be said about that volcano.

Instead of thinking about solving the world's problems, a task that's impossible, solving a small problem, even if it doesn't help the entire world, might help a lot of people. And in my experience, it greatly helps the candidate pursuing their degree.

Just as I receive students who want to solve the world's problems, I also wanted to do the same. In my particular case, when discussing the topic of environmental costs with my advisor, he was quite receptive. However, when I handed in the first draft, in which I had solutions for all environmental problems, duly justified, he simply looked at me and asked, "What do you want to get your PhD in?" I found the question strange, but answered, "In Accounting!" Then he handed all the material back and said, "With this text, you might want to try the Environmental Sciences program; to get a PhD in Accounting, you need a thesis in Accounting. Where is the company? Where are the results?" That meeting was decisive for finding my path, but I admit it was quite impactful. Still, his steady guidance helped me see it through to the end. I will never have enough words to thank Professor Armando Catelli.

I went through a similar situation during my master's. In a meeting with my advisor, he asked me, "So, what exactly are you researching?" I had gone in so many directions, with so many interesting ideas I wanted to study and include, that the originally defined objective got lost both in the text and in my mind. And he told me, "Go read your project!" I obeyed—and had a happy ending. Another steady hand guiding me. I'm also forever grateful to Professor Josir Simeone Gomes.

In both situations, the firm hand of my advisors helped narrow my focus, organize my time, and refine my ideas, giving me the possibility to complete the work and present a consistent text.

Meetings like those are not uncommon, but they can lead to not-so-happy endings. Empathy between these two actors is fundamental. Mutual admiration, as already mentioned, also helps.

Choosing a topic should consider: how much the student knows about the subject, how curious they are about it, how much time they have available to develop it, and how much energy they are willing to invest.

## **5 ON ADVISING – WHEN THINGS GO WRONG**

At the beginning of my career, I wanted to be demanding, a "tough" advisor with my students, and I ended up crossing a line that I later regretted. One of them, wisely, sought out a different advisor and had a happy ending.

In another case, having already gone through that previous experience, I decided not to be as tough. I thought we could move forward with a project I didn't truly believe in. Despite some issues throughout the process, the student

insisted on continuing with me. Perhaps because of an exaggerated admiration for my work. In this case, the dissertation defense was a failure. The committee found so many problems that the work couldn't be approved. Eventually, the student reapplied to the same program, chose a more suitable advisor, and successfully defended the new dissertation. But that experience was traumatic for me—I felt awful, and to this day, the discomfort lingers.

The way we critique the texts submitted to us can influence the outcome. Our challenge as advisors is to ensure that our criticism is received as encouragement, not the opposite.

Brilliant students have dropped out. Not because the topic itself was too complex, but because they lacked the motivation of an audience to listen and applaud their ideas, as happened in class. Others gave up because they couldn't handle the solitary nature of the work. In these cases, I couldn't see them through to the end.

Writing a dissertation or thesis is, above all, a solitary task and requires strict discipline. It is the hardest part. There's no teammate to share the burden or to immediately discuss ideas with. Your advisor is not your peer.

As mentioned earlier, some students who weren't particularly brilliant during group work (who didn't stand out) found themselves in this solitary process, showing strong discipline, mature writing, and even hidden brilliance.

A brilliant idea alone isn't enough. You have to prove that it is brilliant. You need to follow a method, a process that allows others to assess what was done and, if necessary, replicate it to confirm the findings.

## **6 THE TEXT**

In terms of the evolution of ideas, Picasso's *The Bull* series illustrates the process well. The first version shows a drawing that merely reproduces the figure of the animal, with grotesque lines and no creativity. With each new version, the artist refines the lines, moves away from the literal image, and expresses his creativity. The final version is far from the real animal, yet still unmistakably a bull, unique in its essence. With just a few strokes, he reveals his full genius.

Similarly, students must understand that many versions will be necessary. I do not allow my advisees to send me a file titled "final version." To me, that concept does not exist. What exists are v1, v2, v3, and so on. And even after the defense, the writing still needs refinement.

But before writing, it is essential to read. It is essential to read. It is essential to read. One must study and gain a deep understanding of the subject they intend to research. It is important to realize that writing begins during reading. I insist with my advisees that they begin writing their dissertation or thesis from the moment they start reading, not when they start typing. The structure of the work takes form through reading.

After extensive reading, one must overcome inertia and begin to write. From what we read, we extract the foundations of our work. These references are not

just citations, but also models to be followed. On this point, Rodríguez (2012, p. 45) presents a very insightful discussion in his book *Essay as Thesis*.

In my view, choosing the right topic is fundamental to achieving success in this journey. This choice is what will provide the motivation to see the process through with less suffering. As Freire (1990) suggests in the title of his book *No Passion, No Solution*, even though the book is not about accounting or academic research, it carries the message that we need to be passionate about something that brings us pleasure, beauty, and joy. So, fall in love with your topic. Do not choose it out of obligation or formality. Think of research as a romantic relationship. In the beginning, there is intense passion. Over time, routine can make it lose its appeal. The key to success lies in transforming passion into love, which involves patience, acceptance of limitations, the ability to overcome challenges, and the understanding that the rewards come in due time. You will spend months or even years studying the same subject and writing about the same topic. Even if you like it, it will be hard. If you do not like it, it will be even harder.

Write for the reader. Involve them, help them understand what you want to say, make them feel like they want to continue the conversation. Keep in mind that the reader has not read everything you have, not even the members of the defense committee. The text must demonstrate sufficient knowledge to convince others of your analyses and conclusions. Writing styles vary. Some people are too verbose. Others are excessively concise. That is why it is important to ask yourself: will the reader understand this? As I have heard from experienced researchers, write and let the text rest. Then, read it again as if you were the reader and see if it makes sense. Goldberg (2008), in *Writing Down the Bones*, suggests that time provides distance and objectivity to evaluate your own work. The idea must be clear in the text, not just in your mind. I would say it is like the decanting of wine. You have to let it settle so that its best qualities can emerge. Or not.

Enjoying the writing process, rather than focusing solely on the day of the defense, helps make that day less stressful. I still have not learned how to teach this to my advisees. I believe they only discover it once the work is defended.

Another important point is that research develops its own momentum. Research creates its own path. We may begin with a specific destination in mind, but along the way we encounter more interesting or more difficult places. It is necessary to remain open to deciding what is worthwhile. There are many cases in which the data we expected to find is simply not available. Companies that seemed willing to share data or give interviews may later impose restrictions. What should we do? Insist or change course? This decision must be made together, between advisor and advisee. The objectives can be revised, the company or the sector can be changed, or even the entire topic. As people often say, a good thesis is one that is defended. So make the adjustments needed to reach the finish line. Be humble.

A helpful article for understanding this stage of the writing process is by Pagliarussi (2022). Citing Zinsser (2006), who explores the idea of the definitiveness complex, the perceived need to have the final word, and Murray (1986), the article reminds us that we are not the owners of the truth. Even so, we do have something to contribute. Something, but not everything.

Among the many myths surrounding academic writing, one of the most persistent is the belief that some authors write with ease, that their texts flow effortlessly from their fingertips. Pagliarussi (2022), referencing Sword (2017), discusses this belief. In reality, writing a good academic text is a craft. It requires a great deal of effort over dozens of rounds of revision. In practice, producing a single high-quality academic text may take two or three years, or even more.

In Brazil, and likely in other countries as well, academic writing is often more a reflection of the need to publish frequently and earn points than a genuine process of producing new knowledge. This is our reality. I resist it, but I do not see how to change it.

## 7 MOTIVATION

At some point in the text, I mentioned suffering.

In my case, I always say that writing is painful. I can only remember one article that I wrote in a fluid, direct way and in a single version. For all the others, writing was a struggle. As I mentioned earlier, the relationship with the text should be passionate. In many situations, I would describe my connection to writing as one of love and hate, something that is especially common with long academic works.

Why does it hurt? Because we do not wake up every day inspired, sit at the computer, and have the words flow effortlessly in an organized way, with connected ideas. Honestly, I have never met anyone who says that happens regularly. It does happen, but it is rare.

Still, every day I remind myself that I need to write, and yet the inspiration does not come. It is common to sit in front of the screen, stare at it, and nothing happens. This brings anxiety and discouragement.

So where can we find motivation?

Beyond the obvious desire to earn an academic degree, we can look for motivation in other elements. The first, in my view, is choosing a topic that truly interests us, something that represents a challenge but is still manageable. At this point, an advisor can be very helpful, and I believe should be, by pointing out the potential difficulties and discussing with the student how much energy and time they can dedicate. Another important factor is the support of family, partners, and friends. You must be prepared to respond when someone says, "Oh, you are not working, you are just reading. Why can't you go to the store?" Or, "It is such a beautiful day, let's go to the barbecue. Just one day off won't hurt, you can catch up later."

If it happens to be one of those rare days when inspiration appears, my advice is to hold on to it with strength and focus. On the other hand, if it is a day when the screen remains blank, maybe it is best to take a break and let your mind rest.

Let me share something that happened to me. I was doing my master's degree at Fundação Getúlio Vargas. At the point when I was writing my

dissertation, my class decided to organize a barbecue. Everyone went, including the professors, except for me and another colleague. We criticized the barbecue, thinking that the others were not taking the course seriously and that the right thing to do was to stay focused on our work. The result of that decision was that I was among the last to defend my dissertation, and my colleague never defended his. I still wonder how much that decision affected the timing of my defense.

I should have gone!

## 8 HAPPY ENDINGS

Like every academic text, this one also needs to come to an end. And here, it is no different. Deadlines help us put the final period on the page. It is the deadline that finishes the text, not the author. Believe me, a text is never truly finished. It can always be improved. But as I have said before, be humble. Accept that the work will never be perfect.

For some years now, I have been asking my students to include a chapter in their final papers titled "The Research Journey." In that chapter, I ask them to describe how the research began, what their initial objectives were, what they achieved, and what had to be changed. They also describe the difficulties they encountered along the way. Of course, they do not talk about problems with the advising process in that chapter, but they share the rest. It is an interesting read for anyone who is about to start writing.

I ask for this chapter because it is only after the work is finished that we truly understand that the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Analysis, and Conclusion do not happen in that order. The Introduction is always like the movie trailer. It is the last part to be written. It must contain the best scenes, the ones that capture the reader's interest, but without revealing the ending. And no methodology chapter ever talks about what can go wrong or what difficulties might arise.

Thanks to dedication and, I would say, passion, the vast majority of the advising experiences I have had ended successfully. But empathy with my students made a big difference in that process. Each one of them brought a different challenge, a different kind of worry, and also a sense of joy and fulfillment. Throughout this process, I had to learn how to listen, which is not always easy.

The greatest happy ending is this: after so many advising experiences, I have become a more intelligent person, with sharper thinking, and admittedly, with more convictions too, which is not always a good thing.

Writing is painful, but it is worth it. Starting to write is difficult, but it must be done. Finishing in a coherent way is a challenge, but it is a challenge we must overcome.

Good luck to everyone!



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