Writing a paper in the humanities

Thomas Basbøll

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Arts and Sciences

The liberal arts are not social sciences. While the social sciences attempt to *know* about social life, the humanities are trying to *understand* the human condition. The difference may appear subtle but it is quite obvious when we look at the consequences for research practices. In social science, research is shaped by theories and methods, i.e., by perspectives that guide the attention of researchers toward particular objects and approaches that structure their activities in particular ways. The social sciences gain access to their objects by generating data, which they then subject to analysis. In the humanities, by contrast, research (or what is much more accurately called "scholarship") is guided by a comprehensive style, i.e., a way of reading and writing, as well as thinking and feeling, about what it means to be human. They do not really have an object. Where a science tries to overcome our ignorance, an art seeks to improve our ability to imagine. The only relevant "data set" here is the imagery that is made available by our literature. And the only relevant form of analysis is to think on it seriously in the light of experience.

The Humanities

I'm grateful to Gareth Hughes, who has helped me to define a project for the month of July with his comments (as "Garzo") to one of older my posts about the "standard issue" social science paper. As readers of this blog know, I have a pretty detailed proposal for how to structure garden-variety paper in the social sciences, paragraph by paragraph. What about the humanities, Wells asks? Well, I have actually tried to apply my approach to this problem before. But, unlike the social sciences, I don't have a lot of experience to base my suggestions on, neither in my own case, nor in the case of the authors I work with. I write and coach mainly in a social science tradition.

So that's what I'm going to change this summer, at least for a month. I'm going to work on an old idea of mine (which I'll keep to myself) but try to form the essay into roughly 40 paragraphs, with a tightly structured introduction and conclusion, and well-defined sections that correspond roughly to background, theory, method, analysis and implications. The whole trick will be to find a way of presenting an argument without resorting to those two hallmarks of social scientific writing, "theory" and "method". In general, these two notions must be subsumed under the broader and more mysterious notion of "style".

We'll see how it goes. I'll be working on my paper in the early mornings, and then I'll keep you, ahem, posted on my blog about what I'm learning. I wrote the introduction this morning, and I'll write the conclusion tomorrow. I'll write a post about those five paragraphs (one eighth of the paper) sometime tomorrow. - Correction: An earlier version of this post incorrectly identified Garzo as John Wells.

Form in the Humanities (1)

My posts about introduction, conclusion and body of a paper provide an outline for a standard *social science* paper. But what about the humanities? To answer this question I want to explore the possibility of writing a publishable paper without an explicit statement of your "theory" and your "method". I'm doing this both because I want to be of use also to scholars working the humanities and because of the growing interest in a "liberal arts" approach to business studies.

Papers in the humanities will still need an introduction, a conclusion and a substantial analysis. They also do well to have a section devoted to the implications of their results. And there is no immediate reason that these sections cannot be written according to my ideal form. Also, it is often legitimate to provide some background information about, e.g., the author(s) that the paper is about. But instead of telling the reader explicitly how the writer sees the world (theory) and what the writer has done to get a better look at it (method), the paper will try to give the reader an indication of the writer's *style*. In fact, the possibility I would like to explore here is that the humanities differ from the social sciences precisely in their reliance on style over theory and method to build rapport with the reader. (I'm sure a historian of the social sciences can tell us the importance of the late nineteenth century for the rising fortunes of theory and method against the baseline of style.)

When writing about your theory and method what you are doing is activating the reader's expectations and standards. You're describing the reader's mind and getting the reader to trust you long enough to let you try to change it. A style, meanwhile, is a way of talking about the world and also a way of looking at it; it is the perfect immanence of theory and method,

their seamless integration. The fifteen paragraphs that are devoted to background, theory and method in a social science paper must work up to the twenty paragraphs of its analysis and implications. In a humanities paper, you do well to think in similar terms. After the introduction you're going to have to prepare the reader's mind to be changed.

"Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires," said Kenneth Burke. I often say that in scholarship it is the art of disappointing our peers' expectations—a paper artfully evokes and then artfully disappoints the reader's expectations. So you can see the arc of a piece of scholarship in the humanities as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Arousal
3. Fulfilment
4. Conclusion

And we can further divide the tasks of "arousal" and "fulfilment" into sub-tasks. There's a kind of general, underlying, "human" arousal and a more specialized, scholarly arousal. That is, we can talk about the broad cultural assumptions about, say, Shakespeare, that no piece of scholarship, no matter how well researched, can proceed without taking stock of, and we can talk about the more focused expectations that a community of specialists have of a reading of any one of its members.

When evoking the expectations of scholars, a writer does well also to give some indication of the sort of reading he or she has done, both its extent and its intensity. A popular audience, or "general reader", will generally be impressed with the scholar's ability simply to summarize the basic plot points of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, and saying something half-way interesting about the sixteenth century. But a fellow scholar will want to see an understanding of the *issues* of interpretation that arise around these works and that period. So the writer must carefully drop names and problems into the first fifteen paragraphs of the paper in order to give the reader a recognizable frame of reference. Also, the reader does well to demonstrate familiarity with the works of Shakespeare, especially those under scrutiny. The writer is here always *reminding*, not telling, the reader what is going on on the page.

I'll continue this theme on Thursday, getting into greater detail about the passage from "arousal" to "fulfillment" of scholarly desire.

Form in the Humanities (2)

Where social science seeks knowledge, the humanities seek understanding. While the social sciences stake their credibility on their theories and methods, the humanities stake their credibility on their style. Pure forms are hard to find, of course. Many social scientists have humanistic ambitions—roughly speaking, literary ambitions—while many humanists have grown envious of, especially, the theoretical sophistication of their peers in the sciences. For the past fifty years, the language of the social sciences (the appeal to theory and method) has been actively supported by a network of opinion leaders and funding bodies. This year, a central institution in that network, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, proposed a reorientation in a more humanistic direction. My concern, as always, is with the effect of such reorientations on the way we write the results of our research down.

(An aside: Fabio Rojas recently posted a link to Clifford Geertz's interesting first-hand account of an academic career as it develops its initial literary ambition into a pursuit of a

"common language for the social sciences" [PDF].)

If the central conceit of the social sciences is that they have a shared "program of perception" (a theory) and a proven set of procedures (a method), it is the central conceit of the humanities that a good style makes such things unnecessary. The humanistic conceit is sometimes promoted within the social sciences; John Van Maanen's "Style as Theory" is probably the best example. But it's important to keep in mind that the style is here proposed precisely *as* a theory, and Barbara Czarniawska has, rightly, taken this proposal to have important "methodological" implications*. Here the boundaries between the social sciences and liberal arts are certainly blurred, but I think it is safe to say that this kind of rhetoric is intended to allow (Czarniawska uses the word "permit") us to use a notion of "style" to underpin both our methodological and theoretical discussions. That is, we are still dealing in theory and method, we're just using style to sell them.

The more radical proposal is to do away with theory and method, replacing both, simultaneously, with style. This, I want to suggest, means writing not as one knower to another (one social scientist to another) but as one thinker to another (one humanist to another). What is presented in the writing is not *knowledge* but *understanding*. The presentation will still consist of a series of claims, and many of these claims will be expressions of "justified, true belief" in coherent paragraphs. So, yes, there will be lots of knowledge in the text, and a humanist remains a very a knowledgeable person. But the style of the writing, not formed by theory and method, is very different. The reader is not expected to *believe*, but to *think*.

What I am making explicit here is in many ways the standard defense of a now-familiar kind of work in the social sciences. When I challenge the epistemic foundations of sensemaking research for example, I am often told that it was never meant to be "true". But it must be stressed that sensemaking research—like the kind of journalism that Malcolm Gladwell practices—depends on a reader who will will take the style of the writing as a sign of its *credibility* (to use James March's word), i.e., as an implicit theory and method, and who will then essentially *believe*, or "trust" (Czarniawska's word)*, the text. It presents the results of reading as though it were the results of data-collection, i.e., as though the reader does not have access to the sources. If the reader were being addressed not as a social scientist but as a humanist, a more careful kind of scholarship would be required. Sensemaking research is written in the voice of a humanist addressing a social scientist, the voice of someone who claims to understand something reaching out to someone who knows something (else).

I think that if we're truly going to take a turn towards "liberal learning" in business scholarship, we need to begin to write as humanists to one another. What would that mean? Well, it would mean discussing what happens in the books we read as though our readers read those books too. We would not read a novel or a work of popular non-fiction *on behalf* of our peers in the social sciences; we would read *along with* our peers in the humanities. We might say that we should address the reader as someone who has the time to read; the social scientist, by contrast, is presumably too busy (engaged in "empirical research") to read books. I can see that I'm going to have to write another post to make good on my promise to offer some practical advice for writers. More on Tuesday.

Writing a Humanities Paper (1): Introduction and Conclusion

Suppose you have discovered a hitherto unknown precursor of Franz Kafka. You have come into possession of a personal letter from Kafka to one of his friends, perhaps, in which Kafka

raves about the work of this Mr. X. Examining X's oeuvre, you can identify a distinct influence, both in the style of the sentences and the themes dealt with. Such a discovery, I think we can agree, would warrant a paper. As I said yesterday, this month I want to see if I can provide a general structure for such a paper—one that would be as useful as my 40-paragraph outline of a social science paper, but suitable for research in the humanities.

Today, I want to propose a three-paragraph introduction and a two-paragraph conclusion, using our imagined paper about Kafka as an example. Like a social science paper, I propose you begin with a paragraph about the "world" in which the discovery you have made is salient, then go on to a paragraph about the current state of scholarship, one that introduces the central analytical concept you will be using. Finally, I would write a paragraph that begins, "I will here show that…" It will provide an overview of your sources, a summary of your analysis, and a synopsis of the implications of your discovery. The key sentences for the paragraphs, for example, could be as follows [some notes for the content of the paragraph in square brackets]:

> ¶1. Franz Kafka is widely regarded as one of the most original writers in the canon. [Remember that there is a very specific tradition behind talk of Kafka's originality, namely, Borges' suggestion that, like other great writers, he "creates his own precursors", which reverses the conventional direction of "influence". Since your discovery suggests a very conventional influence indeed, you must demonstrate awareness of this way of assessing Kafka's "greatness", which, paradoxically, is probably the "conventional" view today. However you do it, make sure that this paragraph describes a world that is intensely aware of Kafka's originality.]
>
> ¶2. Harold Bloom has argued that originality is the result of a prolonged struggle with the "anxiety of influence". [Strong poets, says Bloom, "overwhelm and subsume" the tradition that came before them. They struggle with the tradition through strategic acts of "misprision", and it is those acts that define them. Bloom's "theory" of misreading offers a rich apparatus for the study of influence. But it's not without critics, and "misreaders" of its own; Bloom himself identifies the Foucauldian "school of resentment". This paragraph would position your reading somewhere in this body of critical scholarship, which should of course be a body of *Kafka* scholarship. One might begin with Bloom's reading of Kafka, for example. But one should ultimately cite prominent Kafka specialists, whether Foucauldian archaeologists of "the author function" or Bloomian cartographers of misreading.]
>
> ¶3. I will here show that Mr. X has had a strong influence on Kafka's writing. [Begin with your "method"—what have you read? Obviously the letter to his friend will be important here, perhaps a sentence or two on that. Then go on to cite the key works of Mr. X, the influence of which you have observed. Now, summarize your "analysis", i.e., your interpretation both of the letter and the correspondences between Mr. X and Kafka. Finally, make a bold statement of the "implications" you think this discovery should have for Kafka scholarship. The strongest would be: "In light of this discovery we have to revise our assessment of Kafka's originality and poetic strength."]

What about the conclusion? Well, it could consist of two paragraphs. My standard advice of simply lopping off the "I will here show" to give you the key sentence of the first paragraph of the conclusion (§39) applies also to a humanities paper. And the second paragraph can,

likewise, be constructed by cashing out the implications, by re-describing the world of paragraph one or the scholarship of paragraph two. For example:

> ¶39. Mr. X has had a strong and undeniable influence on Kafka's writing. [This paragraph should stick to adducing the strongest evidence for that influence, summarizing the strongest parts of your analysis.]
>
> ¶40. Kafka is not as original a writer as we generally assume. [Remember that this will be shocking news to Kafka scholars. As you describe this "new world" to them, remember to make it an exciting place, full of new research opportunities. What other beliefs about Kafka now need revising? How should we teach Kafka in the classroom? Do our anthologies need to be rethought? Might this have consequences for Borges' capsule study of Kafka's "precursors"? Etc.]

Well, I hope that can help scholars in the humanities get started drafting their papers. I always recommend writing these five paragraphs in exactly 2.5 hours (27 minutes each, with three-minute breaks), ideally spreading the work over two or three days. That's what I've done with my paper. Tomorrow morning, I'll move on to the body of the paper, writing some paragraphs towards a five-paragraph "background" section. It will be fleshing out the world of §1. I'll keep you posted.

Writing a Humanities Paper (2): Background

If you're writing a paper about Kafka's influences you are obligated to do so against a background presumption about his originality. In my last post, I made this point by saying that you have to demonstrate your own awareness of a world that is intensely aware of how original an author Kafka was. There are many ways of doing it, and your efforts do not actually have to be confined to any particular parts of the paper, but the simple solution to the writing problem is to imagine a section of the paper in which you acknowledge the *common* knowledge that frames your papers contribution.

Let me emphasize the word "common". It's not just Kafka scholars who think Kafka was an original writer. (On the contrary, ordinary members of the educated classes are probably more likely to exaggerate Kafka's originality than the scholars who have a vested interest in it. Consider Jonathan Mayhew's efforts to put Lorca appreciation in proper perspective.) *Everybody* knows Kafka is a great author and it's this knowledge that you have demonstrate that you share. When I talk to social scientists, I tell them they have to know stuff like "The Internet has changed the way we do business" and, more specifically, "Steve Jobs was an asshole". But they have know this in a particularly interesting, detailed way. The same goes for the fame of famous authors. Your expertise overlaps with lay knowledge, but it also makes you a much more interesting expositor of "what everyone knows".

Your paper has to demonstrate this knowledge. To put it terms that will be familiar to readers of this blog, there have to be parts of your paper that demonstrate this competence. As a rough gesture, let's say you should devote six paragraphs to problem, namely, the first paragraph of the introduction and five paragraphs in the first section that follows the introduction. These paragraphs should not be based on "close reading" of the author you have studied, nor should they engage critically with the opinions of your peers. They should merely bring together widely available, representative statements about the author or issue in question.

I normally say that the background section should be "informative", i.e., it should tell the reader something the reader presumably does not know (about the industry, or region, or organization under study) but will find useful to know in the course of the investigation. Something similar applies here. You should adduce facts that the reader does not necessarily know simply because he or she is your peer. In our imagined paper about Mr. X's influence on Kafka, you probably need to be informative about Mr. X. And you should put this in the context of what is generally known about Kafka and his reading habits. This, i.e., the absence of Mr. X from our background presumptions about Kafka's originality, is a good thing to write a section on.

Writing a Humanities Paper (3): Style

The distinction between "scientist" and "scholar" has been increasingly blurred, especially in the social sciences (owing no doubt to a certain blurriness around the notion of "science") by the image of a "researcher". Heidegger was to my knowledge the first to point out that "modern" science really meant the disappearance of "the scholar" and the emergence of the "researcher". (See this post.) For the purpose of the comparison I want to make in this post, i.e., of the social sciences to the humanities, I will need to reconstruct this distinction. While it has become common, especially in the administrative sciences to talk about oneself as a "scholar" and one's work as "scholarship", this general sense is not my meaning here. Following Heidegger, I will mean by "scholar" someone whose "learning" is rooted in erudition, while a "scientist" is one who is engaged in developing a "theory of the real".

The scholar, unlike the scientist, has no method and no theory, only a style. While scientists can claim to have *done* something very specific (method) and *seen* the world from a particular perspective (theory), scholars working in the traditional humanistic disciplines can only claim to *approach* their material with a sort of "attitude". We might say that in so far as the scholar has a "theory" and a "method" it is only in the rhetorical senses that I encourage social scientists to adopt when writing. A theory is just a system of expectations; a method is just a source of credibility. Scholars working in the humanities can make specific efforts in their writing to arouse the reader's expectations and to win the reader's trust, but this will not happen by appeal to some shared set of "categories of observation" (concepts) or to some procedure by which to establish the "given in experience" (data). (All "data" is of course relative to method, i.e, data is a "methodological" issue, just as all concepts are "theoretical".) Rather, the scholar must cultivate a distinct, yet somehow recognizably "academic" style.

While such a style does not have to reach the level of high literature, Proust's famous definition* can help us to understand what is at stake:

> What we call reality is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surround us at the same time, the only true relationship, which the writer must recapture so that he may for ever link together in his phrase its two distinct elements. One may list in an interminable description the objects that figured in the place described, but truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, establishes their relationship, and encloses them in the necessary rings of his style (art)...

What the scientist calls "reality" is of course something a bit different, or is at least a relation between sensation and memory somewhat differently construed. Memory is brought to bear upon the scientist's experience through the intermediary of theoretically formed

concepts, which summarize the result of past observations and experiments. Sensation is allowed only in the form of carefully collected *data*, derived from the flux of experience by a set of increasingly refined operations that allow them to make observations that are not colored by memories; or at least not colored in a way that is not controlled by the concepts that the theory makes explicit. We might say that where scientists take great pains to establish their objectivity with respect to their object, scholars cultivate a studied subjectivity about their subject. This may be what Norman Mailer meant when he thanked Diana Trilling for reading him—indeed, *mis*reading him—with her "full and specific sympathy".

It's always my aim to be practical. So I can't leave this post at a mere theoretical distinction between "scholarly" and "scientific" writing. How, then, we may ask, do scholars "enclose [things] in the necessary rings of [their] style" if not, like scientists, by framing them with theory and probing them with method? The sense in which style can do double-duty for theory and method should become clear once we realize that the only thing that informs writing of scholars, the only thing that shapes their specifically scholarly sympathies, is their *reading*. Scholarly inquiry is simply reading enclosed by rings of reading. (This is not true of novelists, mind you. Ideally, their work is about life enclosed by living.) But we can distinguish between different kinds of reading, and we can distinguish between different reading materials.

In our writing as scholars we are telling our reader *what* we have read and *how* we have read it. Since the first is likely to arouse particular expectations in a reader that shares our frame of reference, the "what" of our reading serves a purpose similar to theory in social science. The "how" of our reading, meanwhile, goes along way toward establishing our credibility, so there is a direct analogy to the methods section of a social science paper. Now, it can be useful t o distinguish between our primary and our secondary sources, between, for example, works *by* Kafka and works *about* Kafka, but it's important to keep in mind that in both cases the readers's expectations of our analysis will be aroused by *what* we've read, whether by or about Kafka, and the reader's trust will be won by *how* we have read these works, again regardless of whether they are by or about the author under study.

For every paragraph you write in a humanities paper, then, ask yourself whether it tells the reader primarily (1) what you have read by the author your have studied; or (2) what you have read about the author you have studied; or (3) how you have read the author you have studied; or (4) how you have read the work of your scholarly peers. This will tell you what "ring" of your style you are at this moment, i.e., during the 27 minutes you have devoted to writing this paragraph, trying to enclose your subject in.

I hope that helps. I have a feeling I need to say more about this.

*Update: It occurs to me that this isn't really a definition of "style" but of "reality". I would argue, however, that he's saying precisely that reality is a stylistic construction, and that style is simply a bringing together of sensation and memory.