
A REVIEW OF JORGE OF BURGOS *HOW TO WRITE A THESIS.*

[English trans. (2014) William Weevil. London: Baskerville Press.]

This book was first published in 1327, shortly before its author's tragic death. He was working with an amanuensis in the monastery library – where he himself had earlier been chief librarian – when fire broke out and destroyed the whole building. Burgos, who was then blind, was trapped in his study on the top floor and perished. Luckily copies of his book had already been made and survived in other libraries. The original version, in medieval Latin, has never been out of print, and has long been available in several translations, most notably in Italian as *Como si fa una thesa di laurea: le materie umanistiche*, but has only now been translated into English¹.

Some of Burgos's advice might seem irrelevant to modern students, for example, where to obtain the best vellum or the best poison to kill the mice which chew up codices. However, his repeated insistence on the importance of such practical details have clear modern analogies which will always be of value. Don't try to save money on a cheap printer cartridge from a dubious manufacturer, and make sure you have back-ups to save the day when your disk-drive chews up your files.

Burgos writes as a former librarian, and sometimes his enthusiasm here takes him into topics which might seem of only limited relevance to students writing their theses. He became rightly famous for his innovative architectural library design, and proposes here a series of quadrangular and hexagonal rooms situated around an octagonal centre. Individual letters designate each of the sixty or so rooms and spell out, in sequence, names of countries of the known world. Books are stored in the rooms corresponding to their origins. The ingenuity of this design is impressive, but it places aesthetics above utility.

His proposals for the design of library catalogues also mitigate against easy book retrieval, and can cause particular difficulties when a librarian, who is the only person who knows where books are shelved, is murdered (not uncommon at the time). Here he writes:

“Books are registered in order of their acquisition or donation. It is enough for the librarian to know these details by heart. The other library users can rely on his memory. The librarian has the right to move through the labyrinth of the books. He alone knows where to find them and where to replace them.”

The important message for students is that they must understand how their own library is set out, however idiosyncratic its design.

Elsewhere, Burgos is surprisingly modern. He takes a generally clear line on the importance of plain language: “to mention fish it is enough to say *fish*”. To a post-Fregean logician, this betrays perhaps a naively denotational view of language, but Burgos is clear about the confusion which can arise from different cultural understandings of words, and students are advised to write as clearly and simply as possible:

“The psalms are works of divine inspiration and use metaphors to claim the truth. The works of the pagan poets are for purposes of mere pleasure and use metaphors to convey falsehood.”

Finally we must admire the clarity of Burgos’s two main principles – on the authority and the preservation of knowledge – even if, from a modern perspective, we might question his over-rigid formulations.

- On authority he writes:

“When in doubt, you must turn to an authority, to the words of a father or of a doctor [of the Church]. Then all reason for doubt ceases. Who decides on the proper interpretation? It is authority, the most reliable commentator of all. How else can we interpret the multiple signs that the world sets before our sinner’s eyes, or avoid the misunderstandings into which the Devil lures us?”

It might be thought that this insistence on authority is too strict. But surveys tell us that many postgraduates would value clearer direction from their supervisors, especially in early stages of their research.

- On the preservation of knowledge he writes:

“Our work is the preservation of knowledge. Preservation, not search for. There is no progress in the history of knowledge, but only a continuous, sublime recapitulation. Knowledge is nothing but the awed comment on established truths. All we can do is to clarify these truths, to gloss and preserve. Nothing else.”

Similarly, it might be thought that this conservative scepticism of empirical knowledge, with its corresponding emphasis on universal ideas, is out of line with modern views of innovative research.

But remember that Burgos is talking of studies in the humanities, and is merely stating the traditional – entirely circular – view of text analysis as practised by literary critics. An author takes themes and leitmotifs from the cultural system and re-arranges them in a unique text. The literary critic identifies these units in the

text and places them back in the general system. Differences between critics arise only at a meta-theoretical level. A structuralist thinks that this leads to a stable interpretation of the text. A post-structuralist thinks that there is an infinite regress since every interpretation is interpreted in its turn.

So, do not be put off by the superficially medieval tone of some of the advice – and by the continued emphasis on sharp quills and clear calligraphy (but recognise the importance of a good printer and a readable font: preferably Times New Roman).

All work is rooted in its socio-historical context: this is itself a major principle of the humanities.

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1. An odd coincidence: shortly before this review of Burgos's book was published, Robert Eaglestone reviewed in the *Times Higher Education* (19 March 2015) the English translation of Eco's book *How to Write a Thesis* (MIT Press, 2015) which had long been available in Italian as *Como si fa una thesa di laurea*.