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Dealing with Historical Material and Guidelines for Preparing Research Plans and Graduation Theses

التعامل مع المادة التاريخية وضوابط إعداد الخطة في البحوث ومذكرات التخرج

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Abstract:

The stage of preparing the graduation thesis is one of the most important academic milestones for university students. It is considered the culmination of specific years of university education, during which the student has received various scientific and methodological knowledge. Through this process, the student aims to conclude their educational journey with a scientific product that meets the required level both in terms of knowledge and methodology.

At this academic stage, both students and researchers face numerous difficulties and obstacles in completing this step (preparing a graduation thesis) in the desired manner and within the specified timeframe. Perhaps the most prominent concern for students, after choosing their topic and selecting a supervising professor, is the challenge of gathering scientific material related to the title and dealing with it, culminating in establishing an appropriate plan for the researched topic.

Keywords: Sources, References, Plan, Methodology, Thesis

الملخص:

تعد مرحلة إعداد مذكرة التخرج من أهم المحطات الدراسية بالنسبة للطلبة الجامعيين، إذ تُعتبر تنويجا لسنوات محددة من التعليم الجامعي، الذي تلقى فيه الطالب مختلف المعارف العلمية والمنهجية، ويسعى من خلالها إلى ختام هذا المسار التعليمي بمولود علمي يرقى إلى المستوى المطلوب معرفيا ومنهجيا. وفي هذه المحطة العلمية يواجه الطلبة والباحثين على حد سواء صعوبات وعراقيل جمة في إتمام هذه الخطوة (إعداد مذكرة تخرج) على النحو الذي يرجونه، وفي الوقت المحدد لهم، ولعل أبرزها جس للطلبة بعد اختيارهم للموضوع و للأستاذ المشرف على أعمالهم هو هاجس جمع المادة العلمية المتعلقة بالعنوان والتعامل معها، وصولا إلى ضبط خطة ملائمة للموضوع المبحوث عنه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المصادر، المراجع، الخطة، المنهجية، المذكرة

1. INTRODUCTION

The graduation thesis prepared by academic students to obtain a university degree, whether a Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctorate, is an important stage and milestone in the academic journey of any diligent student. It represents the culmination of many years of study and knowledge acquisition through research or academic study, in which the student combines both scientific and methodological aspects. In the thesis, the student demonstrates the scientific and methodological skills and knowledge he has acquired throughout the study period, from the first year until graduation, and is directly related to the topic of their research or thesis.

At this stage, both the student and the researcher face numerous obstacles and difficulties. Perhaps the most significant of these challenges is dealing with scientific material in its various forms and types, including gathering, classifying, organizing, and critiquing it, all the way to formulating an appropriate and suitable plan for their thesis topic.

Through this study, we will attempt to clarify the method of handling different types of scientific material for students of the humanities in general, and history students in particular. We will also highlight the essential methodological guidelines necessary for preparing a comprehensive and appropriate research plan that covers the various aspects of the studied topic.

The topic is of great importance as it addresses the major challenges faced by graduating students after choosing their thesis topic and identifying their supervising

professor. Through this, we aim to clarify some foundational principles and methodological steps to help them overcome these obstacles and facilitate their collection and handling of scientific material from various sources. This includes crafting a plan that illuminates the path they will take to successfully complete their graduation thesis, relying on key references specializing in historical research methodology. Our choice of this topic stems from what we have observed over many years: a significant number of students struggling to gather and critique scientific material and then formulate a plan, based on our previous experiences supervising graduation theses.

2. Dealing with Historical Material

The study of history is characterized by unique aspects compared to many other humanities disciplines, and these characteristics can make the research process somewhat challenging. It is a discipline that investigates human events in the past, and it is among the most essential sciences that humanity lacks. Contrary to common belief, history is not merely a narrative of past events and facts without analysis or scrutiny. Rather, it involves recounting these events while assigning times and explaining their causes. Through history, we understand the reasons for human progress and decline, as well as the causes of happiness and misery¹, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, in his introduction, described the study of history as follows: "... It is, in its outward appearance (referring to history), no more than information about days and states ... Yet, at its core, it involves observation, investigation ... and knowledge of the circumstances of events ... Therefore, it is deeply rooted in wisdom."².

Many researchers and thinkers consider history as a vessel of human experience, specialized in human efforts across different periods and multiple geographical locations. It is an attempt to answer questions related to collective human endeavors in the past, and to extrapolate from them insights into future efforts. Historian Rous sees history as a science that investigates human society, documenting the lives of human communities and the changes they undergo, as well as the ideas that guide human activity³, And some define it as "the knowledge of human history from its inception until the present time," primarily known as humanities according to Marc Bloch's expression, as he comprehensively surrounds human life in all its temporal dimensions, including the present and the future. This makes this science a fundamental reason for awareness of our existence according to our requirements and needs as it suits our capabilities⁴, This science also represents the intellectual and cultural image of any society, a true indicator of human thought activity throughout its history, specifically since it began to express its existence. Its aim is to reenact human life as it is, and to depict the aspects of intellectual activity with its developments and stages. It thus serves as a reflective mirror of individual, collective, and national life, from which valuable experiences for existence can be drawn⁵.

Generally, history is the description of past events and facts, written with a spirit of critical inquiry and the search for underlying truths. It is a broad and multidimensional field that encompasses the comprehensive scope of human history.

Based on the above, we can understand and derive the significant

importance of this science. Based on this foundation, history is a discipline that is written based on the scientific material available to us. Without it, historical research cannot be accomplished. This is why this science is defined as the "interpretation of texts and deriving from them." If texts are absent, historical writing is absent and loses its credibility⁶.

Moreover, this material is diverse and varied. It may consist of documents, whether published or unpublished, in addition to manuscripts, personal memoirs, and various references related to the researched topic.

Without a doubt, sources are considered the foundation of research due to their scholarly content. Through them, researchers can control the elements of their study and guide it according to the content of these sources. However, students should not rely solely on primary sources. They should also utilize various general and specific references, journals, and previous studies on their research topic⁷.

Therefore, the material derived from references provides a general and foundational idea about the topic, the era under study, and the geographical context. Thus, it is essential for the student to refer to what previous scholars have written and to rely on the references they have used. Directly returning to primary sources is not possible until the student has a clear understanding of their topic and the general plan they are following. These aspects can only be achieved through referring to previous studies, general and specific references, articles, and studies published in scientific journals and academic circles⁸.

In the second stage, the student should consult the writings of travelers and

geographers who visited the country, exploring the geographical and historical information they recorded and more. Then, they should delve into primary sources and documents. Once they have a good understanding of their topic, they move on to gathering scientific material from various sources. It's important to note that this scientific material comes in many diverse forms, varying depending on the temporal and geographical context of the subject under study.

3. Its types

3.1 The Documents

Documents refer to official papers such as letters, records, reports, judgments, and treaties⁹. These documents are indispensable in historical research as they lend credibility to the study, illustrating various dealings including political, military, economic, and social aspects of the studied period. However, the information contained in these documents alone is insufficient for writing history. Therefore, students must broaden their research scope and gather additional scholarly material¹⁰

3.2 Artifacts

Artifacts also constitute a significant source in historiography for historical events. They are no less important than official documents, as they represent the living past that still exists among us. By artifacts, we mean all remnants of the past including architecture, coins, utensils, and tools used by people in their daily lives. Through artifacts, it is possible to understand the level of civilization achieved by a society or state in a particular era. Therefore, it is essential for the researcher to personally observe and study the artifacts of the era

under investigation¹¹.

Moreover, The fact that artifacts are not subject to forgery and tampering, as documents often are, increases their importance. For example, mosques whose artifacts still exist in Spain and Portugal, like the Mosque of Cordoba or Granada, serve as living evidence of the advanced architectural, artistic, and creative achievements of Muslims in that region. The same can be said for Roman artifacts such as theaters and remnants of cities, which still exist in several provinces in Algeria.

3.3 Books

Books can be considered the most sophisticated types of recorded sources of information. These books can either be primary sources or references, where the source is the original, and anything else is a reference. There are two types:

General books: contain diverse information that can benefit us in a specific aspect of the research.

Specialized books contain information directly relevant to our topic¹².

Additionally, students or researchers can rely on published articles and anything else that can assist them, whether directly or indirectly, in completing their research.

However, there are those who categorize scholarly material in a different manner than the classification we mentioned earlier, dividing it into two categories or sections:

Original documents:

It refers to the documents that contain direct information without using intermediary documents, generally referred

to as primary sources. These hold significant value in dissertations and graduation theses, as their increased use and utility enhance the document's worth, especially when they provide sources that have not been previously accessed or utilized¹³.

Non-original documents

They are also called as "Indirect documents" or "secondary documents," which refer to references that transmit facts and information from other original or direct sources. These may include books, articles, or theses and dissertations¹⁴.

Generally, this step or phase can be considered highly important. Therefore, it should be given proper attention and adequate time. The student should gather a substantial amount of academic material in its various forms. It is advisable for them to compile a list or index of sources and references, noting their locations and numbers, to facilitate timely access. It is also essential to rely on the same edition of the source or reference throughout all sections of their research or study. They can also use a card system to organize academic material, ensuring information is not mixed up¹⁵.

Here we must point out an important issue, unfortunately, many students overlook it, which is haste and impulsiveness. The student must allocate sufficient time to gather primary academic material, through which they can approach and thoroughly understand their topic. This allows them to outline the main ideas to follow, control their topic, and adjust their plan. It's also crucial to note not to merely recount events or narratives from academic material, as many historical texts may not be accepted by the mind or might be subject to a specific ideology. Here, it is necessary to exercise

critical thinking, which is commonly referred to as criticism.

4. Critique of scientific material

Criticism of scientific material means that historical writing is not limited to collecting scientific material in its various forms and types. Rather, historians and researchers must critically engage with this scientific material and subject it to rational scrutiny. This process is one of the most challenging aspects of historical research, requiring meticulous analysis through the use of all types of evidence to verify the accuracy of the information presented in the text¹⁶. Therefore, critical work is considered fundamental to any historically valuable research¹⁷.

Therefore, it is necessary for us to critically examine the document in our hands to determine what can be accepted and what cannot¹⁸. At this stage, the researcher must be familiar with various scientific research methodologies in order to critique both its apparent and underlying aspects.

4.1 Superficial criticism

Superficial criticism is considered a fundamental step in historical research, through which one can verify the authenticity of the document in hand and its accuracy¹⁹. Additionally, it involves understanding the context, time period, and the author's identity, as historical texts often face additions, tampering, or forgery, whether intentional or unintentional by scribes²⁰. Therefore, the critical researcher must be familiar with the language of the text, knowledgeable about script types, and aware of commonly recognized errors in each language²¹. These aspects provide an

initial idea of the document's accuracy. It's worth noting here that while this step is crucial, it often remains insufficient to judge the text and the document, serving as a preliminary stage to a more important and precise phase known as internal or deeper criticism.

4.2 Hidden criticism

The process of internal criticism is often necessary due to the lack of trust in many of the news and narratives provided by narrators and journalists without scrutiny or critique²². This step involves analyzing the historical text, attempting to verify its authenticity, assessing the writer's integrity, the accuracy of the information presented, understanding the writer's bias, direction, nationality, and ideology, and how clearly these aspects appear in the text²³.

Hidden criticism has two types: **Positive hidden criticism**: It relies on understanding the text and explaining it to the reader, revealing the true and intended meaning²⁴, and uncovering hidden meanings, reading between the lines, and there is the **negative internal criticism** in which the researcher aims to understand how the document's author witnessed the event, and whether they were accurate or not, here, the researcher may doubt the authenticity and integrity of the document's author, as we cannot accept all the information simply because its author witnessed the event. Therefore, we must pay attention to the circumstances under which it was written and the various conditions surrounding the event. Gathering as much information as possible about the author, and consulting documents and narratives found on the same studied event and comparing them with each other, becomes essential²⁵.

Additionally, it's important to note that handling historical material or texts is exceptionally challenging due to their multifaceted nature. They can appear as treaties, political correspondences, diverse instructions, orders, legal texts, and even physical structures like buildings, coins, or inscriptions—each representing various methods humans have utilized. On the other hand, historical incidents are individual and possess unique characteristics, occurring within specific periods and reflecting the behaviors of particular individuals. This specificity complicates generalization, necessitating their examination as singular events with their own distinctive attributes²⁶

On this basis, and due to this diversity in historical material, it is essential for a historian and researcher in history to have certain qualifications and attributes. These qualifications are indispensable for a historian to be able to evaluate and judge events accurately, ensuring objectivity in their writings. Among these qualifications are:

- Psychological readiness, patience, and perseverance to understand the document or text at hand.

- Possessing a critical spirit to avoid believing all statements and positions without examination and scrutiny is essential. A historian who does not adopt a critical approach to events becomes merely a recorder and storyteller of news. Critical work is the foundation of any historical research of scientific value, and without it, it becomes difficult for a historian to discover the mistakes of others²⁷.

In addition to all this, a historian must be knowledgeable about research methodologies, adhere to the steps of each

adopted method, and follow the rules and techniques of scientific research. They should also possess broad culture and knowledge to handle various documents and historical texts with a degree of objectivity²⁸.

In general, whether it is gathering scientific material or critiquing it, this step remains important and fundamental in historical research. Students and researchers must give it the necessary time and attention, and they should not rush in preparing their plan.

5. Guidelines for Preparing a Research Plan:

After the researcher or student has gathered sufficient and diverse scientific material on their topic, they move on to a new step: drafting a suitable research plan for the subject. It is no exaggeration to say that this step is the most difficult part of the research or thesis. If done correctly, it significantly contributes to the overall quality of the research. However, if mistakes are made, the research will likely deviate from its intended course. For this reason, the research plan has always been a major concern for many students and researchers. Unfortunately, many of them find themselves unable and confused about how to draft and structure it in an acceptable and appropriate manner for the studied topic, encompassing all its aspects and details without deviating from the subject.

A research plan involves dividing the study into sections (chapters, parts, sub-sections, articles, branches, etc.) to facilitate the study on one hand and to control it on the other. It serves as the design or framework upon which any academic scientific research is built. The initial plan is

not prepared until after gathering sufficient scientific material and critiquing it, as previously mentioned. The student conducts brief surveys of this material to form a general picture of the topic, determining its temporal and spatial dimensions as well as its qualitative and human characteristics²⁹. It is a mistake to draft the research plan before gathering the scientific material, which is a common issue that we observed among many students. They often create an imaginary plan without consulting specialized sources and references. As a result, they are confronted during the writing process with titles and elements that do not exist or are not covered by any scientific material, leading to significant embarrassment and a considerable waste of time and effort.

The research plan also serves as a future vision for the way the research will be conducted from several angles (collecting material, processing and analyzing it, and presenting the results). In other words, it outlines the detailed steps that the researcher will adhere to during the research period.

On this basis, the research plan holds great importance, akin to the previous and subsequent methodological steps involved in preparing a graduation thesis. It enables the student and researcher to have firm control over the topic, helping them organize and connect their ideas. It also reflects the student's thinking and mindset, showcasing their scientific qualifications³⁰. Through the research plan, one can judge the seriousness of the student, their understanding, mastery of the studied topic, and their comprehensive grasp of its various aspects.

Initially, this plan can be preliminary, either concise or detailed. However, practically speaking, the student cannot

detail their research plan and specify its elements accurately until later³¹. Therefore, this plan remains preliminary and not final; it is subject to change and modification, whether by deletion or addition, based on the scientific material gathered later on. Access to new books and relevant publications directly related to the topic may necessitate changes to the plan, such as deleting a chapter or element, or adding new sections and titles accordingly³². As for the results obtained, the researcher does not confine themselves strictly to the initial plan they drafted. It is impractical to adhere strictly and absolutely to a plan that may not be feasible or executable based on the available scientific material³³.

The research plan has several conditions to be acceptable in terms of form:

- It should be divided into consistent unified and binary sections or more.

Unified: The plan must be divided into consistent sections, which may include: chapters, sections, subsections, topics, branches, etc. These divisions must be uniform throughout the thesis. For instance, a student cannot use topics and branches in Chapter 1 and only use sections in Chapter 2 without including topics. Therefore, they must adhere to the same divisions consistently across all chapters without exception.

Binary:

It means that all divisions mentioned earlier and present in the thesis—whether sections, chapters, subsections, topics, or articles—should be binary or more. A plan that includes only one section, chapter, or subsection in a chapter, or one topic with a single element, is not acceptable.

It is important to ensure coherence between main and subheadings on one hand, and between main headings and the thesis title on the other, while avoiding repetition. Headings should be precise, clear in meaning, and concise yet thorough in formulation and expression³⁴. It is unacceptable to have subheadings unrelated to the chapter title or chapter headings unrelated to the thesis title.

For example, if the chapter title is:

“Economic Conditions in Algeria During the Ottoman Era”

The sections could be organized as follows:

1. Agriculture

2. Industry

3. Trade

Thus, titles should be concise and well-crafted without repetitive phrases such as "Agriculture in Algeria during the Ottoman Era," "Industry in Algeria during the Ottoman Era," and "Trade in Algeria during the Ottoman Era." Instead, simply using "Agriculture," "Industry," and "Trade" makes the titles brief, precise, well-structured, and clear in their meanings. Here, it is also important to point out a crucial aspect that many students and even researchers often overlook when crafting titles. Frequently, the intended conclusion can be inferred from the chapter or section title, which is a mistake. The reader should be left curious and eager to read the content, without understanding the outcome just from the title alone.

To clarify further: if a chapter discusses the flourishing cultural conditions

of a country or city, it would be better for the title to be something like "Cultural Conditions in [Country]" or "Intellectual Movement in [City]." We should avoid titles like "The Flourishing of Cultural Life" or "The Development of the Intellectual Movement." If we use words like "flourishing" or "development" in the title, the reader will understand the outcome in advance and might not read the main text. However, if we use the first form we mentioned, the reader will not know the nature of the intellectual or cultural movement until they read the entire content.

- **Chapter:** The chapter addresses a central idea that can be divided into subsections.

- **Section:** This is the part into which the chapter is divided. As previously mentioned, a chapter can be divided into two or more sections.

- **Subsection:** In turn, it is a part of the section, where a section can be divided into two or more subsections.

Then comes the demand or the branch³⁵.

The research plan must include a title, introduction, main body, conclusion, and a list of sources and references. Each of these elements has specific conditions and methodological guidelines, as discussed earlier.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, If the student or researcher succeeds in the two mentioned stages (gathering scientific material and setting the plan), by taking their time and not rushing in gathering scientific material, searching for information from various

sources and references, and following a specific method such as the card system, for example, it will be easier for them to prepare a suitable, comprehensive, and well-informed plan on the subject. Based on the scientific material obtained, they will be able to complete their topic efficiently and acceptably in a remarkably short time.

As for the students who rush to gather scientific material without giving it proper time and research, they will find themselves hesitant in their plan. It will be difficult for them to structure it effectively, leading to wasting a lot of time and effort. Undoubtedly, this can result in confusion that may lead to undesirable outcomes.

The purpose of writing history is not to stir emotions or admiration, nor is it to provide descriptions of human behavior or to provoke issues of the past and its problems. Simply put, its purpose lies in transmitting previous knowledge through available scientific material, critically examining and scrutinizing it, and extracting conclusions or insights about the development of societies. In doing so, we establish a scientific history using a specific and precise methodology.

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²³Al-Wafi, pp. 131

²⁴Yazbek, p. 110, Al-Wafi, pp. 139-142

²⁵Al-Huwayri, p. 269, Othman, pp. 124-130

²⁶Saidouni, p. 29.

²⁷Yazbek, pp. 45-47

²⁸Yazbek, p. 43; Othman, pp. 18-20

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