4. You should have some experience with the methodological framework that you will use in the thesis. For example, if your thesis topic requires you to analyze a Bach violin sonata, you should be versed in music theory and analysis.

Put this way, these four rules seem banal. We could summarize them in this single rule: “You must write a thesis that you are able to write.” This rule may seem trivial, but it is true, and many a thesis has been dramatically aborted precisely because this rule was broken. The following chapters will provide instruction on how to write a thesis that is both manageable and feasible.

2.1 Monograph or Survey?

The first temptation of any student is to write a thesis that is too broad. For example, the first impulse of a literature student is to write a thesis titled “Literature Today.” If advised to narrow the scope, the student might choose “Italian Literature from the Postwar Period to the Sixties,” a topic with slightly more focus, but one that is still impossibly vast.

A thesis like this is dangerous. Such a topic will make a seasoned scholar tremble, and will present an impossible challenge for a young student. Presented with this challenge, a student will either write a tedious survey consisting only of author’s names and current scholarly opinions, or will try to imitate the approach of a mature critic and will inevitably be accused of unforgivable omissions. In 1957 the great contemporary Italian critic Gianfranco Contini published a survey titled Letteratura italiana. Ottocento-Novecento (Italian literature: The nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Had the survey been a thesis, it would have earned a failing grade, despite its 472 pages in length. Contini dedicated entire chapters to so-called “minor” authors, and relegated certain “major” authors to mentions in short footnotes or omitted them altogether. The committee would have attributed these choices to carelessness or ignorance. Naturally, since Contini is a scholar of recognized historical knowledge and critical acumen, readers understood that the omissions and disproportions were intentional, and that the absence of a particular author was a more eloquent expression of
Contini's disfavor than a hostile review. But if a student in his twenties plays the same trick, who guarantees that there is shrewdness behind his silence? Do the omissions replace criticism that the student has written elsewhere, or that he would be capable of writing?

Usually, with a thesis of this kind, the student later accuses the committee members of having failed to understand him. But a thesis that is too broad cannot be understood, and therefore is always an act of pride. It is not that intellectual pride in a thesis should be rejected a priori. A student can even argue that Dante was a lousy poet, but only after at least 300 pages of rigorous analysis of Dante's texts. However, the necessary breadth of a topic like "Italian Literature from the Postwar Period to the Sixties" leaves no space for these demonstrations, and this is why the student should aptly choose something more modest. Not "The Novels of Beppe Fenoglio," but "The Different Versions of Johnny the Partisan." Boring? Maybe, but the challenge it presents is ultimately more interesting.

If you think about it, specificity is also an act of shrewdness. A survey of 40 years of literature is vulnerable to all kinds of objections. How can the advisor or another committee member resist the temptation to show his knowledge of a minor author absent from the student's work? If each committee member jots down even two or three omissions in the margins of the table of contents, the thesis will end up looking like a missing persons list, and the student will become the target of a burst of charges. If instead the student works diligently on a specific topic, he will find himself mastering material unknown to most of the committee members. I am not suggesting a cheap trick. (It may be a trick, but it takes hard work, so it is certainly not cheap.) The candidate simply presents himself as "expert" in front of a less expert audience, and since he worked hard to gain his expertise, it is fair that he benefits from the situation.

Between these two extremes of a 40-year literature survey and a strict monograph on the variants of a short text, there are thesis topics of varying scope. We can find topics like "The New Literary Avant-garde of the Sixties," or "The Image of the Langhe in Pavese and Fenoglio," or even

"Similarities and Differences in Three Writers of the Fantastic: Savinio, Buzatti, and Landolfi."

As for the sciences, a little book on the same topic as ours gives advice that is valid for all subjects:

The subject "Geology," for instance, is much too broad a topic. "Vulcanology," as a branch of geology, is still too comprehensive. "Volcanoes in Mexico" might be developed into a good but superficial paper. However, a further limitation to "The History of Popocatepetl" (which one of Cortés's conquistadores probably climbed in 1519 and which erupted violently as late as 1702) would make for a more valuable study. Another limited topic, spanning fewer years, would be "The Birth and Apparent Death of Paricutin" (February 20, 1943, to March 4, 1952).''

Here, I would suggest the last topic, but only if the candidate really says all there is to say about that damned volcano.

Some time ago a student approached me with the impossibly broad topic "The Symbol in Contemporary Thought." At the very least, I did not understand what the student meant by "symbol," a term that has different meanings to different authors, meanings that are sometimes directly opposed. Consider that formal logicians and mathematicians designate with the term "symbol" certain expressions without meaning that occupy a specific place with a specific function in a given formalized calculus (such as the a and b or x and y of algebraic formulas), whereas other authors use the term to mean a form full of ambiguous meanings, such as images in dreams, in which a tree can refer to a sex organ, the desire of growth, and so on. So how can anybody write a thesis with this title? One would have to analyze all of the meanings of "symbol" in all of contemporary culture, list their similarities and differences, determine whether there is an underlying fundamental unitary concept in each author and each theory, and whether the differences nevertheless make the theories in question incompatible. Well then, no contemporary philosopher, linguist, or psychoanalyst has yet been able to complete such a work satisfactorily. How can a neophyte succeed? How can we expect such a work from a young student who, albeit precocious, has no more than
six or seven years of academic reading behind him? Even if he could intelligently write at least part of an argument, he would still face the problems of Contini's history of Italian literature. Alternatively, he could neglect the work of other authors and propose his own theory of the symbol, but we will discuss this questionable choice in section 2.2.

I spoke with the student in question. We discussed the possibility of a thesis on symbol in Freud and Jung, one that would have excluded all other definitions of the term and would have compared only the meanings given to it by these two authors. Then I learned that the student's only foreign language was English. (We will return to the question of foreign language skills in section 2.5.) We then settled on "The Concept of Symbol in Peirce," a thesis that would require only English-language skills. Naturally over the course of the thesis the student would have described how Peirce's definition of the term differed from that of authors such as Freud and Jung, but these German-speaking authors would not be central to the thesis. Nobody could object that the student had read these authors only in translation, since the thesis proposed to study only the American author fully and in the original language. In this way, we managed to limit the survey to a medium length, while not changing it into a strict monograph. This solution was acceptable to all.

I should also clarify that the term "monograph" can have a broader meaning than the one we have used here. A monograph is the study of a single topic, and as such it is opposed to a "history of," a manual, and an encyclopedia. A monograph can analyze many writers, but only from the perspective of a specific theme. For example, a monograph could appropriately be titled "The Theme of 'The World Turned Upside Down' in Medieval Writers," and it could explore the paradox in which fish can fly, birds can swim, and so on. The student could write an excellent monograph on this topic if he worked rigorously. However, this topic would include a vast amount of readings, as the student would need to familiarize himself with all the writers who treated the subject, however minor or obscure. The student might do well to narrow his scope to "The Theme of 'The World Turned Upside Down' in Carolingian Poets."

A student may consider a survey more exciting than a monograph, if only because focusing on the same author for one, two, or more years may seem boring. But the student should understand that a strict monograph also involves the author's cultural and historical context. A thesis on Beppe Fenoglio's fiction requires reading related writers such as Cesare Pavese or Elio Vittorini, reading the American writers whom Fenoglio read and translated, and examining Italian realism in general. It is only possible to understand and interpret an author within his wider cultural context. However, it is one thing for a portraitist to paint a landscape for his subject's background, and it is another thing to paint a complete, detailed landscape painting. The portrait of a gentleman might contain the countryside with a river in the background, but a landscape contains fields, valleys, and rivers, all in fine detail. The technique or, in photographic terms, the focus must change between the two. In a monograph, the landscape can even be somewhat out of focus, incomplete, or unoriginal.

Finally, remember this fundamental principle: the more you narrow the field, the better and more safely you will work. Always prefer a monograph to a survey. It is better for your thesis to resemble an essay than a complete history or an encyclopedia.

2.2 Historical or Theoretical?
This choice only applies to certain subjects. A thesis in history of mathematics, Romance philology, history of German literature, and other similar subjects can only be historical. A thesis on experimental subjects such as architectural composition, nuclear reactor physics, or comparative anatomy is usually theoretical. But there are other subjects such as theoretical philosophy, sociology, cultural anthropology, aesthetics, philosophy of law, pedagogy, or international law that allow a thesis of both kinds.

In a theoretical thesis, a student confronts an abstract problem upon which other works may or may not have already reflected: the nature of human will, the concept of freedom, the notion of social role, the existence of God, or the genetic code. Considered together, such topics may elicit
smiles, as they require the writer to compose what Antonio Gramsci called "brief notes on the universe." And yet illustrious thinkers have devoted themselves to such topics. However, they usually did so after decades of reflection.

In the hands of less experienced students, these topics can generate two outcomes. The first and less worrisome is a survey like the one defined in the previous section, on which I have already provided observations. For example, the student tackles the concept of social role as it appears in the writings of a chosen set of authors. The second outcome is more tragic, because the candidate presumes he can solve the question of God or define the concept of freedom, within only a few pages. My experience is that a thesis like this usually turns out to be short and unorganized, and resembles more a lyric poem than an academic study. Usually, when the committee objects to the candidate's argument as too personified, generic, informal, and lacking in historiographic verification and evidence, the candidate responds that he has been misunderstood, and that his thesis is more intelligent than other banal literature surveys. This may be true, but this answer usually comes from a candidate with confused ideas, one who lacks academic humility and communicative skills. I will define academic humility (which requires pride, and is not a virtue for the weak) in section 4.2.4. This candidate may indeed be a genius who has acquired a lifetime of knowledge in a mere 22 years, and let it be clear that I am presenting this hypothesis without any shade of irony. However, it takes a long time for mankind to notice that such a genius has appeared on the Earth's crust, and his work must be read and digested for a certain number of years before its greatness is grasped. How can we expect that the busy committee, responsible for so many students, should grasp at first sight the greatness of this lone runner?

Let us hypothesize that the student believes he has understood an important problem. Since nothing is born from nothing, the student must have developed his thoughts under a particular author's influence. In this case, he should transform his theoretical thesis into a historiographic thesis. In other words, he should not discuss the problem of being, the notion of freedom, or the concept of social action; but develop a topic such as "The Question of Being in Early Heidegger," "The Notion of Freedom in Kant," or "The Concept of Social Action in Parsons." His original ideas will emerge as he grapples with his author's ideas, as it is possible to say new things about freedom while studying an author's work on the concept. If he is ambitious, he can transform the theoretical thesis that he originally conceived into the final chapter of his historiographic thesis. Consequently, readers will understand his original ideas in the context of a previous thinker, and the concepts he proposes will gain support from their proper frame of reference.

Even the brightest young writer will find it difficult to work in a vacuum and establish an argument ab initio. He must find a foothold in past scholarship, especially for questions as vague as the notions of being and freedom. Even if someone is a genius, and especially if someone is a genius, he will never be diminished by starting from another author's work. Building on a previous author's work does not mean a student must fetishize, adore, or swear by that author, and in fact the student can demonstrate the author's errors and limits. Medieval writers saw themselves as "dwarves" compared to the "ancients" they revered, and yet they could see further than the ancients because they were "dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants."

Not all of these observations are valid for applied and laboratory-based subjects. In psychology for example, the alternative to "The Question of Perception in Piaget" is not "The Question of Perception," even if there were a student reckless enough to attempt such a dangerously generic topic. The alternative to the first topic's historiographic approach is rather an experimental approach, such as "The Perception of Colors in a Group of Handicapped Children." This is a different story, because the student has the right to approach a question through experimentation, provided he has a sound research method, adequate laboratory conditions, and the necessary assistance. But a good laboratory researcher will not begin an experiment without having compiled a literature review that examines the results of similar experiments. He would otherwise risk reinventing the wheel by proving something that has already been amply proven, or by applying
methods that have already failed (although the new verification of a heretofore unsuccessful method could provide the foundation for a successful thesis). Therefore an experimental thesis requires library research, laboratory work, and an established research method. Here the student should follow the examples of the medieval authors and climb onto the shoulders of a giant, at least one of modest height, or even onto another dwarf. The student will always have the chance to develop his own original ideas later in his career.

2.3 Ancient or Contemporary?
Here I am not attempting to revive the age-old quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns.

Instead I am here using the term “ancient” in the most general sense of “very old,” referring to authors whose works have survived and been studied by scholars. The choice between an ancient and a contemporary author does not apply to subjects such as the history of contemporary Italian literature, although even a thesis in Latin could involve both Horace and the state of Horatian studies in the last two decades. Nevertheless, Italian students frequently prefer contemporary authors, like Cesare Pavese, Giorgio Bassani, and Edoardo Sanguineti, to the sixteenth-century Petrarchans or the eighteenth-century Arcadian poets suggested by their advisors. Sometimes the student chooses a poet out of an authentic love for his work, and this is a choice that is difficult to challenge. Other times the student is under the false conviction that a contemporary author is easier and more fun.

Let us state from the outset that a thesis on a contemporary author is always more difficult. It may be true that scholarship on a contemporary author generally involves a smaller bibliography of easily accessible texts, and that the student can accomplish the first phase of the research by reading a good novel on the beach, rather than sitting in a library. The problem arises when the student begins to comment on the author, considering that the thesis will be flawed if he simply repeats what other critics have said. (If the student is to write a flawed thesis, he could do so more easily on a sixteenth-century Petrarcan poet.) Since opinions on most contemporary authors are still vague and divided, the student’s critical skills will be hindered by a lack of perspective, and the project will become enormously difficult. On the other hand, the texts of ancient authors are usually supported by a solid foundation of interpretation upon which the student can build. Certainly a thesis on an ancient author involves more laborious reading, and more careful bibliographical research, but the titles are more organized, and complete bibliographies are common. Moreover, if the student approaches his thesis as a chance to learn how to properly conduct research, a thesis on a past author will provide better training. And even if the student has a flair for contemporary criticism, the thesis can provide a final opportunity for him to challenge himself with literature of the past, and to exercise his taste and reading skills. He would be in good company, for many great contemporary authors, even avant-garde authors, wrote their thesis on Dante or Foscolo rather than Montale or Pound.

To be sure, there are no precise rules, and a good researcher can historically or stylistically analyze a contemporary or past author with equal philological acumen and precision. The problem also varies among disciplines: in philosophy, a thesis on Husserl might provide the student with a more challenging research experience than one on Descartes; and the fact that it is easier to read Pascal than Carnap shows that a modern author may require more laborious reading than an ancient. Therefore, I can confidently provide only this advice: work on a contemporary author as if he were ancient, and an ancient one as if he were contemporary. You will have more fun and write a better thesis.

2.4 How Long Does It Take to Write a Thesis?
Let us state from the outset: no longer than three years and no less than six months. This period includes not just the time necessary to write the final draft, which may take only a month or two weeks, depending on the student’s work habits. Instead, this period begins at the genesis of the first idea and ends at the delivery of the final work. For example, a student may only work on his thesis for a year, but he may use ideas and readings accumulated in the two preceding years, even though he initially did not know what would come from this preliminary research.
A thesis should take no more than three years because, if the student has failed to delimit his topic and find the necessary sources after this period, he has one of the following problems:

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.

A thesis should take no less than six months because, even if the student’s goal is a modest journal article of less than 60 typewritten pages, six months pass in a flash. This may not be sufficient time for the student to structure the work, research the bibliography, catalog the sources, and draft the text. Surely a more experienced scholar can compose an essay in less time, but only because he has years of reading behind him, complete with cataloged notes. The student must instead start from scratch.

Ideally the student will choose his thesis topic and thesis advisor toward the end of his sophomore year. By then the student has already become familiar with various subjects, and he even has a general understanding of disciplines he has not yet studied, their focus, and the difficulties they present. Such a timely choice is neither compromising nor irreversible. The student has an entire year to assess the choice, and if need be, to change the topic, the advisor, or even the discipline. Note that even if the student spends a year researching ancient Greek literature and later realizes that he prefers contemporary history, he has not wasted his time, as he will have learned how to create a preliminary bibliography, how to take notes on a text, and how to organize a table of contents. Remember the point we made in section 1.3: first and foremost, a thesis teaches one to coordinate ideas, and the topic is secondary.

If the student chooses his topic toward the end of his sophomore year, he will have until the spring of the fourth year to graduate well within the time frame outlined above. He will have two complete years to finish his thesis and two summers to devote to research and, if he has the resources, to research trips. During this period, he can also choose courses and readings that are appropriate for his thesis. To be sure, if the student is writing a thesis on experimental psychology, he will still be required to take Latin or other unrelated courses. However, in courses related to philosophy and sociology, the student may be able to arrange with the professor to substitute texts related to the thesis for course texts (even required ones), as long as this is done without dialectical contortions or puerile tricks. In this case, an intelligent professor will prefer a motivated student taking his course purposefully to one taking his course without passion, randomly, or out of an obligation to fulfill a requirement.

In any case, nothing forbids the student from choosing a thesis topic earlier. And nothing forbids the student from choosing it later, if he is willing to take more than the prescribed four years to graduate. But the biggest mistake he can make is to fail to allow sufficient time for his thesis.

If the student is to write a good thesis, he must discuss his work incrementally with his advisor, at least within reason. This is not to put the professor on a pedestal. Instead, because writing a thesis is like writing a book, working incrementally with the professor is a communication exercise that assumes the existence of an audience, and the advisor is the only competent audience available to the student during the course of his work. If the student completes the thesis hastily, the advisor will only have time to skim the text. Moreover, if the student presents the thesis to his advisor at the last minute, and if the advisor is dissatisfied with the results, he will challenge the candidate at the defense. This will produce unpleasant results not only for the student but also for the advisor, who should never arrive at a defense with a thesis he does not support. In this
case, the advisor shares in the defeat. Early in the process, if
the advisor notices that the candidate is having trouble, he
must immediately inform the candidate, and suggest either
that the student pursue another topic or that he postpone
his thesis until he is better prepared. If the student ignores
this advice, and if he is in a rush to graduate or if he sim-
ply believes that his advisor is wrong, he will again face a
stormy defense, but he will do so deliberately.

Considering these risks, a six-month thesis is certainly
not the optimum choice, even though it is within our range
of acceptability. But as we have implied, it may prove suc-
cessful if the topic, chosen in the last six months, builds on
research and experience gained in the years before. Also,
sometimes a student must complete a thesis in six months
because of some external necessity. In these cases, the stu-
dent must find a topic that he can research thoroughly and
that will yield a decent product in that short period of time.
Here I do not want to sound too much like a salesman, as if
I were selling an inexpensive “six-month thesis” and a pricier
“three-year thesis,” a thesis to satisfy every kind of cus-
tomer. Instead my point is that, without a doubt, a student
can produce a decent thesis in as little as six months. There
are three requirements for a six-month thesis:

1. The topic should be clearly defined.

2. The topic should be contemporary (notwithstanding
the advice given in section 2.3), eliminating the need
to explore a bibliography that goes back to the ancient
Greeks. Alternatively, it should be a marginal subject on
which little has been written.

3. The primary and secondary sources must be locally
available and easily accessible.

Let us look at some examples. If I choose the topic “The
Church of Santa Maria di Castello in Alessandria,” I can hope
to find everything I need to reconstruct its history and the
events of its restoration in the municipal library of Alessan-
dria, and also in the city’s civic archives. I use the word “hope”
because I am speaking hypothetically, and putting myself in
the shoes of a student who hopes to complete a thesis in six
months. Before I begin the project, I should test the validity
of my hypothesis. First, I should verify that I will reside in or
near Alessandria during the process; if I live 930 miles south
in Calanisseta, I have made a bad choice. Additionally, if
some of the available sources are unpublished medieval man-
uscripts, I should know something of paleography and have
the skills necessary to decipher these manuscripts. Here you
can see how a seemingly easy topic can quickly become diffi-
cult. If I determine, instead, that all of the secondary sources
have been published no earlier than the nineteenth century,
I am safe to proceed on solid ground.

Here is another example: Raffaele La Capria is a contem-
porary Italian writer who has written only three novels and
a single book of essays, all published by the Italian publisher
Bompiani. Let us imagine a thesis with the title “The Fortu-
tunes of Raffaele La Capria in Contemporary Italian Criti-
cism.” Since publishers commonly archive all of the critical
effects and articles written about their authors, I can hope to
find almost all the texts I need in a series of visits to the pub-
lisher in Milan. Since the author is living, I can write to him
or interview him in person, ask him for other bibliographic
suggestions, and probably even obtain photocopies of these
relevant texts. Surely a certain critical essay will refer us to
other authors to whom La Capria is compared or contrasted,
widening the research field a bit, but in a manageable way.
This project will pose no problem if I have chosen La Capria
out of a more general interest in Italian contemporary litera-
ture. If this is not the case, I have probably chosen cynically,
coldly, and recklessly.

Here is another example of a six-month thesis: “The
Interpretation of World War II in Middle School History
Books Published in the Last Five Years.” The student may
have some difficulty locating all of the Italian middle school
history books in circulation, but in fact there are only a few
scholastic presses. Once the student has acquired or photo-
copied the texts, he will find that the treatments of World
War II occupy a few pages in each, and that he can quickly
do good comparative work. However, in order to judge a
book’s treatment of World War II, the student must compare
it to half a dozen reputable histories of the war, and also
assess the book’s treatment of history in general. Thus he must widen his scope. Surely, without these forms of critical examination, the student could write the thesis in a week rather than in six months, but it would take the form of a newspaper article instead of a thesis. The article may even be sharp and brilliant, yet it would still be unfit to document the candidate’s research abilities.

Ultimately, if you want to write a six-month thesis but are only willing to commit an hour each day, there is no point in continuing our discussion. Please refer to the advice given in section 1.2: copy a thesis and call it quits.

2.5 Is It Necessary to Know Foreign Languages?
This section does not concern those students writing a thesis on a foreign language or on foreign literature. One would hope that these students know the language on which they write their thesis. Better still, one would hope that a student studying a French author writes his thesis in French, as many universities around the world rightfully require. Also, the observations below are no substitute for learning the language by spending time in the country in question. However, this is an expensive solution, and here I would like to advise students who do not have this option.

Let us pose the problem of an Italian student who writes his thesis in philosophy, sociology, law, political science, history, or natural sciences. Even if the thesis involves Italian history, Dante, or the Renaissance, the student will inevitably have to read a book in a foreign language, since illustrious scholars of Dante and the Renaissance have written in English, German, and other languages foreign to our Italian student. In these cases, the student generally uses the thesis as an excuse to start reading in a new language. If the student is motivated by the topic and up to the challenge, he will begin to gain understanding. Often this is how the student first learns a foreign language. Although he will not learn to speak the new language, he will learn to read it, which is better than nothing. If there is only one book in German on a specific topic, and if the student does not know German, he can ask someone to read him the most important chapters. He will have the decency not to rely on that particular book too much, but at least he will be able to legitimately include it in his bibliography.

But these are all secondary issues. The main tenet is this: we should not choose a topic that involves foreign language skills that we do not currently possess, or that we are not willing to acquire. For now, let us examine some essential requirements:

1. We cannot write a thesis on a foreign author if we do not read his texts in the original language. This seems self-evident if the author is a poet, but many students do not see this as a prerequisite for a thesis on Kant, Freud, or Marx. However, it is required for three reasons. First, not all of the author’s works may be available in translation, and sometimes neglecting even a minor work can lead to a misrepresentation of the author’s intellectual background, or his work in general. Second, most of the secondary sources on a given author are usually in the author’s original language. Even if the author is available in translation, his critics may not be. Finally, the translation does not always do justice to an author’s thought, and writing a thesis involves the act of restoring the author’s original thought from the distortions of translations, and from vulgarizations of various kinds. Writing a thesis requires going beyond the easy formulas of school textbooks, such as “Poscolo is a classicist while Leopardi is a romantic,” or “Plato is an idealist and Aristotle is a realist,” or “Pascal favors the heart and Descartes favors reason.”

2. We cannot write a thesis on a topic on which the most important secondary sources are in a language we do not know. For example, since some of the past decade’s most groundbreaking reassessments of Nietzsche’s German texts have been written in French, a student whose only foreign language was German could not write a thesis on Nietzsche. The same applies to Freud; it would be difficult to reinterpret the Viennese master without considering the American Freudian “revisionists” or the French structuralists.

3. We cannot write a thesis on an author or a topic by reading only the sources written in familiar languages. How can we know beforehand that the most influential secondary
source on our author or topic is written in a language in which we are fluent? Surely questions like this can lead to paralysis, so here we should use common sense: rules of academic rigor allow a Western student to acknowledge a secondary source written in Japanese, and to admit that he has not read it. This "license to ignore" usually extends to non-Western languages and Slavic languages, so that a student can complete a rigorous study on Marx and still admit his ignorance of Russian sources. But in these cases, the rigorous scholar will demonstrate that he has explored these sources through reviews or abstracts. For example, Soviet, Bulgarian, Czechoslovakian, and Israeli academic journals usually provide abstracts of their articles in English or French. Therefore, if the student works on a French author, he may manage with no knowledge of Russian, but he must read at least English. In any case, before the student chooses a topic, he must have the good sense to consult the existing bibliography in order to avoid considerable linguistic difficulties. In some cases, this is easy to determine: it is unthinkable to write a thesis in Greek philology without knowing German, the language in which there is a flood of important studies on the subject.

Additionally, the thesis will inevitably introduce the student to a smattering of general terminology in all Western languages. For example, even if the student does not read Russian, he must at least be able to recognize the Cyrillic alphabet enough to determine whether a quoted book speaks of art or science. It takes an evening to gain this familiarity, and after comparing a few titles the student will know that iskusstvo means "art" and nauka means "science." Do not let this terrify you. You should consider your thesis a unique chance to learn skills that will serve you for a lifetime.

Let us form a final, conciliatory hypothesis. Suppose an Italian student is interested in the problem of visual perception pertaining to the topic of art. This student does not know any foreign languages, nor does he have the time to learn them. (Or the student may have some kind of psychological block; there are people who learn Swedish in a week, and others who can barely speak French after ten years of practice.) In addition to these limitations, let us suppose that the student must write a six-month thesis for economic reasons. Although the student must graduate quickly and find employment, he is sincerely interested in his topic, and he eventually plans to study it more deeply when time permits. (We must think of this kind of student as well.)

In this case, the student may narrow his topic to "The Problems of Visual Perception in Relation to Figurative Arts in Particular Contemporary Authors." First, he must paint a picture of the psychological question, and on this topic there is a series of works translated into Italian, from Richard L. Gregory's Eye and Brain to major texts on the psychology of perception and transactional psychology. Then the student can bring the theme into focus in three authors: he can use Rudolf Arnheim for the Gestalt approach, Ernst Gombrich for the semiological-informational approach, and Erwin Panofsky for his essays on perspective from an iconological point of view. After all, from three different points of view, these three authors discuss the role of nature and culture in the perception of images. There are some works, for example the books of Gillo Dorfles, that will help the student contextualize and link these authors. Once the student has traced these three perspectives, he can also attempt to apply their criteria to a specific painting, perhaps by revising an already classic interpretation (for example drawing from Roberto Longhi’s analysis of Piero della Francesca’s paintings) and integrating it with the more "contemporary" data that he has gathered from these authors. The final product will be nothing original, and it will fall between the survey and the monograph, but the student will be able to develop it on the basis of Italian translations. The student will avoid reproach for not having read all Panofsky, including work available only in German or English, because the thesis is not on Panofsky. Panofsky is relevant only to a specific aspect of the topic, and is useful as a reference only for some questions presented by the thesis. As I said in section 2.1, this type of thesis is not the best choice, because it risks becoming incomplete and generic. To be clear, this is an example of a six-month thesis for a student who wishes to gather preliminary data on a problem about which he
truly cares. It is a makeshift solution, yet it can produce a
decent thesis.

In any case, if our Italian student does not know any for-
eign languages, and if he cannot seize this precious oppor-
tunity that the thesis provides to acquire them, the most
reasonable solution is for the student to choose a specifically
Italian topic, so that he can eliminate the need for foreign
sources completely, or at least rely on the few sources that
have been translated into Italian. Therefore, if the student
wishes to write a thesis on “The Models of the Historical
Novel in Giuseppe Garibaldi’s Prose,” he should have some
basic knowledge of Walter Scott and his role as the origina-
tor of the modern historical novel, in addition to the nine-
teenth-century Italian polemic on the same subject. He could
also find some reference works in Italian, and he could find
at least the major works of Walter Scott in translation, espe-
cially if he searched the library for the nineteenth-century
Italian translations. A topic such as “Francesco Domenico
Guerrazzi’s Influence on the Italian Culture of the Risorgi-
mento” would pose even fewer problems. Obviously, the stu-
dent should never begin his work based on such optimistic
assumptions, and he should always consult available bibili-
ographies to determine which foreign authors have written
on his topic.

2.6 “Scientific” or Political?

After the student protests in 1968, a widespread opinion
emerged that students should write a thesis that is linked
to political and social interests, rather than on “cultural” or
bookish topics. If we believe this, then the title of this section
becomes provocative and deceitful, because it suggests that a
“political” thesis is not “scientific.” Nowadays we often hear
about “science,” “being scientific,” “scientific research,” and
“the scientific value” of a thesis, and these terms can cause
unintentional misunderstandings, mystifications, as well as
unfounded suspicions of cultural conservatism.

2.6.1 What Does It Mean to Be Scientific?

Some identify science with natural sciences or quantita-
tive research. In other words, they believe research is only
scientific if it contains formulas and diagrams. From this
perspective, research on Aristotle’s ethics would not be sci-
entific, nor would a thesis on class consciousness and the
peasant revolts during the Protestant Reformation. Clearly
this is not the meaning that academia assigns to the term
“scientific.”

Let us try to understand by what reasoning we can call a
work scientific. We can still take as a model the natural sci-
ences as they have been defined since the beginning of the
modern period. In this sense, research is scientific when it
fulfills the following conditions:

1. The research deals with a specific object, defined so that
   others can identify it. The term “object” need not neces-
sarily have a physical meaning. Even the square root of a
   number is an object, though it cannot actually be seen or
touched. Social class is also an object of research, despite
   the objection that we can only know individuals or sta-
tistical means and not actual classes. In this sense, the
class of all integers above 3,725 also lacks physical real-
ity, though a mathematician could study it. Defining the
object therefore means defining the conditions by which
we can talk about it, based on rules that we establish, or
that others have established before us. If we establish the
conditions that allow anyone to discern an integer above
3,725 when he encounters it, we have established our
object’s rules of identification.

   Obviously, problems arise if we must speak, for exam-
ple, of a fictional being such as the centaur, commonly
understood to be nonexistent. At this point we have three
alternatives. First, we can decide to talk about centaurs as
they are presented in classical mythology. Here our object
becomes publicly recognizable and identifiable, because we
are dealing with the texts (verbal or visual) in which these
mythical creatures appear. We will then have to determine
the characteristics that an object being described in clas-
sical mythology must possess for it to be recognized as a
centaur. Second, we can conduct a hypothetical investi-
gation to determine which characteristics a creature living
in a possible world (that is, not the real world) should
possess in order to be a centaur. Then we would have to
define the conditions of existence of this possible world,
taking care to inform our readers that all of our discussion
is developed within this hypothesis. If we remain rigor-
ously faithful to the initial assumption, we have defined
an object appropriate for scientific investigation. Third,
we can produce sufficient evidence to prove that centaurs
are in fact real. In this case, to build a realistic object of
discussion, we should present evidence (skeletons, bone
remains, tracks petrified in lava, infrared photographs
from Greek woodlands, and whatever else might support
our case) so that others might agree that, regardless of
the correctness of our hypothesis, there is something we
can talk about. Obviously this example is paradoxical,
and I can’t believe that anyone would want to write a thesis
on centaurs, especially by way of the third alternative.
Instead, my purpose is to show how it is always possible,
given certain conditions, to constitute a publicly recogniz-
able object of research. And if it is possible with centaurs,
it will surely be possible with notions such as moral behav-
or, desires, values, or the concept of historical progress.

2. 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. A mathematically correct the-
thesis that proved the Pythagorean theorem with traditional
methods would not be a scientific work, because it would
not add anything to our knowledge. At best, it would
provide clear instruction on how to solve the theorem,
much as a manual provides instruction on how to build
a doghouse using wood, nails, a plane, a saw, and a ham-
er. As we have already said in section 1.1, a literature
review can also be scientifically useful because the author
has collected and organically linked together the opinions
expressed by others on a particular topic. Similarly, an
instruction manual on how to build a doghouse is not a
scientific work, but a work that discusses and compares
all known doghouse-building methods can make a mod-
est claim of scientific value. However, bear in mind that
a literature review has scientific value only if something
similar does not already exist in a given field. If someone
has already written a work comparing the systems used
to build a doghouse, writing a similar manual is at best
a waste of time, at worst plagiarism (see section 5.3.2).

3. The research is useful to others. An article that presents a
new finding on the behavior of the elementary particles
of physics is useful. An article that presents a transcription
of an unpublished letter by the Italian romantic poet Gia-
como Leopardi, and that recounts the circumstances of its
discovery, is useful. A work is scientific if, in addition to
fulfilling the two conditions above, it advances the knowl-
edge of the community, and if all future works on the topic
will have to take it into consideration, at least in theory.

Naturally the scientific relevance is commensurate
with the contribution’s significance. Scholars must take
certain contributions into account in order to say any-
things relevant on a particular topic, while they can leave
others behind without serious consequences. Recently,
a number of letters from James Joyce to his wife have been
published, specifically letters that deal with explicit sexual
matters. People studying the origin of Molly Bloom’s char-
acter in Joyce’s Ulysses may find it useful to know that, in
his private life, Joyce attributed to his wife a sexuality as
vivacious and developed as Molly’s. Therefore, the publi-
cation of these letters is a useful scientific contribution.
On the other hand, some superb interpretations of Ulysses
present a keen analysis of Molly’s character without this
data. Therefore this contribution is not indispensable.
We can find an example of a more important scientific
contribution in the publication of Stephen Hero, the first
version of Joyce’s novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young
Man. Stephen Hero is generally considered fundamental for
understanding the development of the Irish writer, and is
therefore a fundamental scientific contribution.

Here we should address the so-called “laundry lists”
often associated with extremely meticulous German phil-
ologists. These might include an author’s shopping list,
to-do list, and other incidental texts that are generally
of low value. Occasionally these kinds of data are useful
because they shed the light of humanity on a reclusive author, or they reveal that during a certain period he lived in extreme poverty. Other times these texts do not add anything to what we already know. They are small biographical curiosities with no scientific value, even if there are people who build reputations as indefatigable researchers by bringing these trifles to light. We should not discourage those who enjoy pursuing this type of research, but we also should understand that they are not advancing human knowledge. From a pedagogical perspective, if not from a scientific one, it would be more fruitful for them to write an entertaining popular biography that recounted the author's life and works.

4. The research provides the elements required to verify or disprove the hypotheses it presents, and therefore it provides the foundation for future research. This is a fundamental requirement. For example, to prove that centaurs live in Peloponnesus I must do the following with precision: (a) produce proof (as we have already said, at least a tail bone); (b) recount exactly how I discovered and exhumed the archaeological find; (c) instruct readers on how more evidence can be unearthed; and (d) if possible, give examples of the precise type of bone (or other archaeological find) that would disprove my hypothesis, were it to be discovered in the future. If I accomplish these four goals, I have not only provided the evidence to support my hypothesis, but I have facilitated the continuation of research that may confirm or challenge it.

The same is true for any topic. Suppose I am writing a thesis on an Italian extraparliamentary movement that took place in 1969, and that is generally believed to have been politically homogeneous. In my thesis, I wish to prove that there were in fact two factions, one Leninist and the other Trotskyist. For my thesis to be successful, I must produce documents (flyers, audio recordings of meetings, articles, etc.) that verify my hypothesis; recount the circumstances of the acquisition of this material to provide a foundation for further research; and present the criteria by which I attribute the supporting documents to the members of the 1969 movement. For example, if the group was dissolved in 1970, I must weigh the relevance of material produced by members while the group was active against that produced by former members of the group after its dissolution, considering that they may have cultivated their ideas while the group was still active. I must also define the criteria for group membership, such as actual registration, participation in meetings, and presumptions of the police. In doing this, I provide the foundation for further investigation, even if it may eventually invalidate my own conclusions. For example, let us suppose that I consider a person a member of the group based on evidence from the police, but future research exposes evidence that other members never considered the person in question a member, and therefore he should not be judged as such. In this way, I have presented not only a hypothesis and supporting evidence, but also methods for its verification or falsification.

The various examples that we have discussed demonstrate that a student can apply the methods for scientific validity to any topic. They also illustrate the artificial opposition between a "scientific" and a "political" thesis. In fact a political thesis can observe all the rules necessary for scientific validity. For example, I could write a thesis that is both scientific and political, and that would analyze my experience as an activist establishing an independent radio station in a working-class community. The thesis will be scientific to the extent to which it documents my experience in a public and verifiable manner, and allows future researchers to reproduce the experience either to obtain the same results or to discover that my results were accidental and not linked to my intervention, but to other factors I failed to consider. The beauty of a scientific approach is that it does not waste the time of future researchers. If a future researcher is working in the wake of my scientific hypothesis and discovers that it is incorrect, my initial hypothesis has still proven useful. In this example, if my thesis inspires a future researcher to also become an activist in a working-class community, my work has had a positive result, even if my original assumptions were naïve.
In these terms, there is clearly no opposition between a scientific and a political thesis, and as we have seen, one can write a "scientific" thesis without using logarithms and test tubes. On one hand, every scientific work has a positive political value in that it contributes to the development of knowledge (every action that aims at stopping the process of knowledge has a negative political value); but on the other hand, every political enterprise with a chance of success must be grounded in the scientific diligence I have described.

2.6.2 Writing about Direct Social Experience

Here our initial question returns in a new form: is it more useful to write an erudite thesis on an established, scholarly topic, or one tied to practical experiences and direct social activities? In other words, is it more useful to write a thesis that involves famous authors or ancient texts, or one that calls for a direct participation in the contemporary world, be it of a theoretical nature ("The Concept of Exploitation in Neocapitalist Ideology") or of a practical nature ("The Conditions of Slum Dwellers on the Outskirts of Rome")?

In itself the question is pointless. A student will gravitate toward his interest and experience, and if he has spent four years studying Romance philology we cannot expect him to write on Roman slum dwellers. Similarly, it would be absurd to require an act of "academic humility" from someone who has studied for four years with the Italian social activist and sociologist Danilo Dolci, by asking the student to write a thesis on the royal family of France.

But suppose the person who asks the question is a student in crisis, one who is wondering about the usefulness of his university studies, and especially about what to expect from the thesis experience. Suppose this student has strong political and social interests, and that he is afraid of betraying his calling by choosing a "bookish" topic. Now, if this student is already immersed in a political-social experience that suggests the possibility of building a conclusive argument, he should consider how he could treat his experience in a scientific manner. But if he has not yet had such an experience, then it seems to me that his fear is naive, albeit noble. As we have already said, the experience of writing a thesis is always useful for our future work (be it professional or political) not so much for the chosen topic, but instead for the training that it demands, for the experience of rigor it provides, and for the skills required to organize the material.

Paradoxically, we could then say that a student with political aspirations will not betray his ideals if he writes a thesis on the recurrence of demonstrative pronouns in the writings of an eighteenth-century botanist. Or on the theory of impietus in pre-Galilean science; or on non-Euclidean geometries; or on the dawn of ecclesiastical law; or on the mystical sect of the Hesychasts; or on medieval Arabic medicine; or on the article of criminal law on bid rigging in public auctions. A student can cultivate a political interest in unions, for example, by writing a historical thesis on workers' movements in the past century. A student can even understand the contemporary need for independent information among the subservient classes by studying the style, circulation, and modes of production of popular xylographic prints in the Renaissance period. In fact, if I wanted to be controversial, I would advise a student whose only experience was in political and social activism to choose precisely one of these topics, rather than narrate his own experience. This is because the thesis will provide his last opportunity to acquire historical, theoretical, and technical knowledge; to learn systems of documentation; and to reflect in a more dispassionate manner on the theoretical and historical assumptions of his political work.

Obviously this is just my opinion. Since I wish to respect points of view different from my own, I will now address this question of someone who is immersed in political activity, someone who wishes to orient his thesis toward his work, and to orient his political experience to the writing of his thesis. It is certainly possible to do this, and to do it well. But to make such an endeavor respectable, it is necessary to clarify a few points.

Occasionally a student will hastily prepare a hundred pages of flyers, debate recordings, activity reports, and statistics (perhaps borrowed from some previous study) and present his work as a "political" thesis. And sometimes the committee will even accept the work, out of laziness, demagogy, or incompetence. But this work is a joke, not only
because it betrays the university’s thesis criteria, but precisely because it does a disservice to the political cause. There is a serious way and an irresponsible way to participate in politics. A politician who approves a development plan without sufficient information on the community’s situation is simply a fool, if not a criminal. Similarly, one can betray his political party by writing a political thesis that lacks scientific rigor.

Once I encountered a student defending a thesis that dealt with a topic related to mass communication. He claimed that he had conducted a “survey” of the TV audience among workers in a certain region. In reality, he had tape-recorded a dozen interviews of commuters during two train trips. Naturally the resulting transcriptions of these opinions could not constitute a survey, not only because they lacked standards of verifiability, but also because of the banality of the results. (For example, it is predictable that the majority of 12 Italians will declare that they enjoy watching a live soccer game.) Consequently, a 30-page pseudo-survey that concludes with such predictable results is a joke. It also constitutes self-deception for the student, who believes he has acquired “objective” data, while he has only superficially supported his own preconceived opinions.

A political thesis in particular risks superficiality for two reasons. First, unlike a historical or philological thesis that requires traditional methods of investigation, a thesis on a specific current social phenomenon often requires the student to invent his methodology. (For this reason, the process of writing a historical thesis may seem serene compared to that of a good political thesis.) Secondly, a political thesis risks superficiality because a large segment of “American-style” social research methodology has fetishized quantitative statistical methods, producing enormous studies that are dense with data but not useful for understanding real phenomena. Consequently, many young politicized people are skeptical of this “sociometry,” and they accuse it of simply serving the system by providing ideological cover. But people who react this way often end up doing no research at all, and their thesis becomes a sequence of flyers, appeals, or purely theoretical statements.

We can avoid this risk in various ways, including consulting “serious” works on similar topics, following the practices of an experienced group of activists, mastering proven methods of gathering and analyzing data, realizing that surveys are long and expensive and cannot be conducted in just a few weeks, etc. But since the problems presented by a historical thesis vary according to different fields, different topics, and students’ skills, it is impossible to give generic advice. I will therefore limit myself to one example. I will choose a brand-new subject on which no research has previously been done; that is of great topical interest; that has unquestionable political, ideological, and practical implications; and that many traditional professors would define as “purely journalistic”: the phenomenon of “free radio” stations.³

2.6.3 Treating a “Journalistic” Topic with Scientific Accuracy

As most Italians know, scores of these stations have appeared in large Italian cities. There are a few even in centers of a hundred thousand inhabitants, and more continue to appear across Italy. They can be political or commercial in nature. They often face legal problems, but the legislation regarding these stations is ambiguous and evolving. In the period between the genesis of this book and its publication, the situation will already have changed; as it would change during the time it would take for a student to complete this hypothetical thesis.

Therefore, I first must define the exact geographical and chronological limits of my investigation. It could be as limited as "Free Radio Stations from 1975 to 1976," but within those limits the investigation must be thorough and complete. If I choose to examine only those radio stations located in Milan, I must examine all the radio stations in Milan. Otherwise I risk neglecting the most significant radio station in terms of its programs, ratings, location (suburb, neighborhood, city center), and the cultural composition of its hosts. If I decide to work on a national sample of 30 radio stations, so be it. However, I must establish the selection criteria for this sample. If nationally there are in fact three commercial stations for every five political radio stations, or one extreme right-wing station for every five left-wing stations,
my sample must reflect this reality. I cannot choose a sample of 30 stations in which 29 are left-wing or 29 are right-wing. If I do so, I will represent the phenomenon in proportion to my hopes and fears, instead of to the facts.

I could also decide to renounce the investigation of radio stations as they appear in reality and propose an ideal radio station, much as I tried to prove the existence of centaurs in a possible world. But in this case, the project must not only be organic and realistic (I cannot assume the existence of broadcasting equipment that does not exist, or that is inaccessible to a small private group), but it must also consider the trends of the actual phenomenon. Therefore, a preliminary investigation is indispensable, even in this case.

After I determine the limits of my investigation, I must define exactly what I mean by “free radio station,” so that the object of my investigation is publicly recognizable. When I use the term “free radio station,” do I mean only a left-wing radio station? Or a radio station built by a small group of people under semilegal circumstances? Or a radio station that is independent of the state monopoly, even if it happens to be well organized and has solely commercial purposes? Or should I consider territorial boundaries, and include only those stations located in the Republic of San Marino or Monte Carlo? However I choose to define the term, I must clarify my criteria and explain why I exclude certain phenomena from the field of inquiry. Obviously the criteria must be defined unequivocally; if I define a free radio station as one that expresses an extreme left-wing political position, I must consider that the term is commonly used in a broader sense. In this case, I must either clarify to my readers that I challenge the common definition of the term, and defend my exclusion of the stations it refers to; or I must choose a less generic term for the radio stations I wish to examine.

At this point, I will have to describe the structure of a free radio station from an organizational, economic, and legal point of view. If full-time professionals staff some stations, and part-time volunteers staff others, I will have to build an organizational typology. I must determine whether these types share common characteristics that can serve as an abstract model of a free radio station, or whether the term covers a series of heterogeneous experiences. Here you can see how the scientific rigor of this analysis is useful also from a practical perspective; if I wanted to open a free radio station myself, I would need to understand the optimal conditions for it to function well.

To build a reliable typology, I could draw a table that compared the possible characteristics as they appear in the stations I have examined. I could present the characteristics of a given radio station vertically, and the statistical frequency of the given characteristic horizontally. Below, I provide a simplified and purely hypothetical example with only four parameters: the presence of professional staff, the music-speech ratio, the presence of commercials, and the ideological characterization. Each is applied to seven fictional radio stations.

This table tells me that a nonprofessional, ideologically explicit group runs Radio Pop, that the station broadcasts more music than speech, and that it accepts commercials. It also tells me that the presence of commercials and the abundant music content are not necessarily in contrast with the station’s ideology, since we find two radio stations with similar characteristics, and only one ideological station that broadcasts more speech than music. On the other hand, the

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<td><strong>Radio Beta</strong></td>
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presence of commercials and abundant music characterize all nonideological stations. And so on. This table is purely hypothetical and considers only a few parameters and a few stations. Therefore it does not allow us to draw reliable statistical conclusions, and it is only a suggested starting point.

And how then do we obtain this data? We can imagine three sources: official records, managers’ statements, and listening protocols that we will establish below.

Official records: These always provide the most dependable information, but few exist for independent radio stations. I might first look for an organization’s registration documents at the local public safety authority. I might also find the organization’s constitutive act or a similar document at the local notary, although these documents may not be publicly accessible. In the future, more precise regulation may facilitate more accessible data, but for now this is the extent of what I can expect to find. However, consider that the name of the station, the broadcasting frequency, and the hours of operation are among the official data. A thesis that provided at least these three elements for each station would already be a useful contribution.

Managers’ statements: We can interview each station’s manager. Their words constitute objective data, provided that the interview transcriptions are accurate, and that we use homogeneous criteria for conducting the interviews. We must devise a single questionnaire, so that all managers respond to the questions that we deem important, and so that the refusal to answer a question becomes a matter of record. The questionnaire need not necessarily be black and white, requiring only answers of “yes” or “no.” If each station manager releases a statement of intent, these statements together could constitute a useful document. Let us clarify the notion of “objective data” in this case: If the director of a particular station states, “We have no political agenda, and we do not accept outside financing,” this may or may not be true. However, the fact that that radio station publicly presents itself in that light is an objective piece of information. Additionally, we may refute this statement based on our critical analysis of the contents of the station’s broadcasts, and this brings us to the third source of information.

Listening protocols: This aspect of the thesis will determine the difference between rigorous and amateurish work. To thoroughly investigate the activity of an independent radio station, we must listen hour after hour for a few days or a week, and devise a sort of “program guide” that indicates what content is broadcast at what time, the length of each program, and the ratio of music to talk. If there are debates, the schedule should indicate the topics, participants, and so on. You will not be able to present all of the data you have collected, but you can include meaningful examples (commentary on the music, witty debate remarks, particular styles of news delivery) that define the artistic, linguistic, and ideological profile of the station you are scrutinizing. It may help to consult the models for radio and TV listening protocols developed over some years by the ARCI Bologna, which listeners determined the duration of news presentation, the recurrence of certain terms, and so on.

Once you have completed this investigation for various radio stations, you could compare your data. For example, you could compare the manner in which two or more radio stations introduced the same song or presented a recent event. You could also compare state-owned radio shows to those of independent stations, noting differences in the ratios of music to speech, news to entertainment, programs to commercials, classical to pop music, Italian to foreign music, traditional pop music to “youth-oriented” pop music, and so on. With a tape recorder and pencil in hand, you will be able to draw many more conclusions through systematic listening than from your interviews with station managers. Sometimes even a simple comparison of commercial sponsors (the ratios between restaurants, cinemas, publishers, etc.) can clarify the obscure financing sources of a given station.

The only condition is that you must not follow impressions or make imprudent conclusions such as, “At noon a particular radio station broadcast pop music and a
Pan American commercial, so the station must be pro-American." You must also consider what the station broadcast at one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, and on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

If you are investigating many stations, your listening protocol should take one of the following two approaches. The first is to listen to all the stations simultaneously for one week. You can do this by organizing a group of researchers, each one listening to a different station simultaneously. This is the most rigorous solution because you will be able to compare the various radio stations during the same period. Your other choice is to listen to the stations sequentially, one station per week. This will require hard work, and you must proceed directly from one station to the next so that the listening period is consistent. The total listening time for all stations should not exceed six months or a year at most, since changes are fast and frequent in this sector, and since it would make no sense to compare the programs of Radio Beta in January with those of Radio Aurora in August.

When you have compiled the data from the three sources outlined above, there is still much left to do. For example, you can do the following:

Establish the size of each station's audience. Unfortunately, there are no official ratings data, and you cannot trust the station managers' figures. The only alternative is a random sample telephone survey in which you ask participants to which stations they listen. This is the method followed by RAI, Italy's national broadcasting company, but it requires an organization that is both specialized and expensive. This is a good example of the difficulty involved in a scientific treatment of a contemporary, topical phenomenon. You cannot rely on personal impressions and conclude, for example, that "the majority of listeners choose Radio Delta" simply because this station is popular among four or five of your friends. (Perhaps a thesis on a subject like Roman history might be a better choice after all, and it will certainly pose fewer research problems.)

Search newspapers and magazines for mentions of the stations you are scrutinizing. Record any opinions of the stations that you find, and describe any controversies.

Record the specific laws relevant to the stations' operations, and explain how various stations follow or violate them. Describe the legal issues that arise. Document the relevant positions of the political parties on the stations you are scrutinizing, and on free radio stations in general.

Attempt to establish comparative tables of commercial fees. The managers may not disclose these, or they may provide erroneous data, but you may be able to gather the data elsewhere. For example, if Radio Delta broadcasts advertisements for a particular restaurant, you may be able to solicit data from the restaurant owner.

Record specifically how different radio stations cover a specific event. (For example, the Italian national elections of June 1976 would have provided a perfect opportunity for this part of the project.)

Analyze the linguistic style of the broadcasters. (The ways that they imitate American DJs or public radio hosts, their use of the terminology of specific political groups, their use of dialects, etc.)

Analyze the influence that free radio programs have had on certain public radio programs. Compare the nature of the programming, the linguistic usage, etc.

Thoroughly collect and catalog the opinions that jurors, political leaders, and other public figures express about the stations you are scrutinizing. (Remember that three opinions are only enough for a newspaper article, and that a thorough investigation may require a hundred.)

Collect the existing bibliography on the subject of free radio stations. Collect everything from books and journal articles on analogous experiments in other countries to the articles in the most remote local newspapers or smallest Italian magazines, so that you assemble the most complete bibliography possible.

Let it be clear that you do not have to complete all of these things. Even one of them, if done correctly and exhaustively,
can constitute the subject of a thesis. Nor is this the only work to be done. I have only presented these examples to show how, even on a topic as “unscholarly” and devoid of critical literature as this one, a student can write a scientific work that is useful to others, that can be inserted into broader research, that is indispensable to anyone wishing to investigate the subject, and that is free of subjectivity, random observations, and imprudent conclusions.

As we have established, the dichotomy between a scientific and a political thesis is false. It is equally scientific to write a thesis on “The Doctrine of Ideas in Plato” and on “The Politics of ‘Lotta Continua’ from 1974 to 1976.” If you intend to do rigorous work, think hard before choosing the second topic, for it is undoubtedly more difficult. It will require superior research skills and scholarly maturity; if nothing else, you will not have a library on which to rely, but instead must effectively create your own.

In any case, we have seen that a student can write scientifically on a subject that others would judge as purely “journalistic,” just as a student can write a journalistic thesis on a topic that most would qualify as scientific, at least from its title.

2.7 How to Avoid Being Exploited by Your Advisor

As I’ve mentioned earlier, often a student chooses a topic based on his own interests, but other times a student wishes to work with a particular professor who suggests a topic to the student. Professors tend to follow two different criteria when suggesting a topic: a professor can recommend a familiar topic on which he can easily advise the student, or a professor can recommend an unfamiliar topic on which he would like to know more.

Contrary as it may seem, the second criterion is the more honest and generous. The professor believes that his ability to effectively judge and assist the candidate will require him to devote himself to something new, and thus the professor will expand his horizons. When the professor chooses this second path, it is because he trusts the candidate, and he usually tells the candidate explicitly that the topic is new and interesting to him. Even though universities currently require professors to advise many students, and therefore incline professors to cater to students’ interests, some professors still refuse to advise a thesis on a banal topic.

There are also specific cases in which a professor is conducting a wide-ranging research project that requires vast amounts of data, and he decides to engage graduating students as members of a team. In other words, he orients the students’ work in a specific direction for a certain number of years. He will assign topics that work together to establish a complete picture of his research question. This approach is not only legitimate but also scientifically useful, as each thesis contributes to a larger project that is more important for the collective interest. This approach is also useful from a teaching perspective, because each candidate will benefit from the advice of a professor who is well informed on the question, and each student can use as background and comparative material the theses that other students have already written on related topics. If the candidate does good work, he can hope to publish the results, at least as part of a larger collective work.

However, this approach does pose some possible risks:

1. The professor is absorbed by his own topic to such an extent that he imposes it on a candidate who has no interest in the subject. The student becomes a lackey who wearily gathers material for others to interpret. Although the student will have written a modest thesis, his risks not being credited for his work. When the professor writes the final research project, he will perhaps fish out some parts of the student’s work from the material he has gathered, but he may use them without citing the student, if only because the student’s specific contribution to the final product is difficult to delineate.

2. The professor is dishonest, requires the student to work on his project, approves the thesis, and then unscrupulously uses the work as if it were his own. Sometimes this dishonesty is almost in good faith; the professor may have followed the thesis with passion and suggested many ideas, but over time he loses the ability to distinguish his students’ ideas from his own, in the same way that, after a passionate group discussion on a certain topic, we are
unable to discern the ideas we introduced from those inspired by others.

How can you avoid these risks? Before approaching the professor, you should assess the professor’s honesty from the opinions of friends and the experiences of graduates whom the professor advised. You should read his books, and pay particular attention to citations of his collaborators. This investigation will take you so far, but you must also intuitively feel some sense of trust and respect toward the professor.

On the other hand, you should not become so paranoid that you believe you have been plagiarized every time a professor or another student addresses a topic related to your thesis. For example, if you did a thesis on the relationship of Darwinism and Lamarckism, your research would show that many scholars have treated the same topic, and have shared many common ideas. Therefore, you should not feel like a defrauded genius if the professor, one of his teaching assistants, or one of your classmates writes on the same topic. The actual theft of scientific work means something different altogether: using specific data from your experiments, appropriating your original transcriptions of rare manuscripts, using statistical data that you were the first to collect, or using your original translations of texts that were either never translated or translated differently by others. These constitute theft only if you have not been cited as a source, because once you publish your thesis, others have the right to cite it.

So, without slipping into paranoia, consider your willingness to join a collective project, and consider whether the risks are worth it.

3.1 The Availability of Primary and Secondary Sources

3.1.1 What Are the Sources of a Scientific Work?

A thesis studies an object by making use of specific instruments. Often the object is a book and the instruments are other books. For a thesis on “Adam Smith’s Economic Thought,” the object is Adam Smith’s bibliography, and the instruments are other books on Adam Smith. In this case, we can say that Adam Smith’s writings constitute the primary sources and the writings about Adam Smith are the secondary sources or the critical literature. Naturally, if the topic were “The Sources of Adam Smith’s Economic Thought,” the primary sources would then be the books or other writings that inspired Adam Smith. Certainly historical events (and particular discussions on certain concrete phenomena that Smith may have witnessed) may also have inspired Adam Smith’s work, but these events are nevertheless accessible to us in the form of written material, that is, in the form of other texts.

But there are also cases in which the object is a real phenomenon. This would be true for a thesis on the internal migrations of Italians in the twentieth century, the behavior of a group of handicapped children, or an audience’s opinion of a current TV program. In these cases, primary sources may not yet exist in an organized written form. Instead you must gather and create your primary documents, including statistical data, interview transcriptions, and sometimes photographs or even audiovisual documents. The critical