Part 1

The Process of Academic Writing
Getting the most out of yourself – why do you want to write a research thesis?

This book is designed to help postgraduate students with the process of writing a thesis. For many people engaged in masters or doctoral research, collecting and analysing data is interesting and exciting. In the social sciences, the research process often involves interaction with other people, and as you begin to amass your data there is a real feeling of progress. However, the time comes when all of this data and analysis has to be converted into a thesis. Writing is a largely solitary process, and progress may seem to be very slow. The task may seem to stretch away into infinity. This book will help you with writing your thesis, from the moment you type your first word, to when you walk into the viva voce examination to defend the completed work!

Motivation

We can start by exploring one or two aspects of personal motivation in terms of academic writing. Most students write a thesis as part of an academic qualification such as a ‘taught’ masters degree, or a research degree such as a Master of Philosophy or Doctor of Philosophy. There is often a natural tendency to be thinking continually about the final qualification, and to treat the thesis writing simply as a means to that end. Unfortunately, writing can sometimes become a very burdensome task, a hurdle on the way to gaining the qualification. This is a pity, because academic writing is a very creative activity. It is an opportunity for you the student not only to describe your research, but also to reflect on your own intellectual world view. Thesis writing is not merely an instrumental activity, but an opportunity to express understandings.
about the world, in a fresh and novel way. If you can concentrate on this creative
dimension to academic writing, you will probably enjoy the process much more.

Communication

More than this, however, a thesis is also a means of communication. On the one hand,
you might see it as being written primarily for the examiners in the oral examination.
However, you should also think of the thesis as finally resting on the library shelves,
and being consulted by many future students who are struggling with their own
research. Students from overseas may study your thesis, and take ideas back with
them when they complete their course. Part-time students who are working may be
influenced by the thesis, and incorporate ideas at their workplace. In short, the act of
writing is an opportunity to convey interesting and sophisticated ideas to an untold
future audience. This can make academic writing a very exciting prospect.

Process

There is also in the process of writing, a sense of being part of the development of
human ideas. Writing a thesis involves building upon the ideas of researchers and
thinkers who have gone before, and helping to lay a foundation for future students.
A thesis usually involves reviewing and analysing the background literature to a
subject, and part of the purpose of this is to try to demonstrate the way in which cur-
rent research is adding incrementally to the sum of human knowledge. The process
of academic writing is here not only part of the transmission of human culture, but
of providing a new perspective on the world. The doctoral thesis has traditionally
involved the generation of an original contribution to knowledge, but the writing of
any thesis provides an opportunity to create fresh insights into the social world.

This book aims to provide practical advice in the successful writing of a thesis.
Although this is a very important function, I hope it will achieve more than
suggesting useful strategies to maximize success. I hope it will enthuse you with the
feeling of excitement inherent in the writing process, and its potential for conveying
fascinating and complex ideas. Above all, I hope this book helps you to gain pleasure
and enjoyment from the writing process.

The nature and varieties of a research thesis

Before we start discussing the thesis in detail, we should clarify some of our termi-
nology. The terms ‘dissertation’ and ‘thesis’ are sometimes used interchangeably in
everyday academic conversation, although there is perhaps a tendency for disserta-
tion to be used more frequently in relation to masters degrees and thesis in connec-
tion with doctorates. However, to avoid any possible confusion in relation to different
institutional practices, the word ‘thesis’ will be used throughout this book. Where there
are differences between masters and doctoral levels, these will be clearly stated.

In the briefest possible terms, a thesis is a piece of formal academic writing which
reports on a research study. However, there is much diversity in both the structure
The Research Thesis

and content of theses, and it would be helpful briefly to survey some of this variation. Theses in the social sciences generally tend to use empirical data as the basis of the research. This is data derived from sources such as questionnaires, interviews, measuring instruments or, perhaps, the analysis of documents. In philosophical terms, empirical data is often defined as data which is collected through the use of our senses. Probably a minority of theses however, employ data which is based upon the analysis of concepts. That is, the researcher explores ideas which are used in a particular subject area, subjecting those ideas to critical scrutiny and examining the meanings and understandings inherent in those ideas. Whatever the type of data used, a thesis generally extends our understanding of a subject, takes the subject further in some way or makes an additional contribution to knowledge. This will, of course, be a more significant feature of a doctoral than a masters thesis.

Masters Theses

Most masters degrees such as an M.A. or an M.Sc. consist of a taught element followed by a thesis. The thesis can vary considerably in length, depending on the type of course and institution, from say 12,000 words to around 30,000 words. Some students may find that they have to attend an oral examination, or viva voce, to answer questions on their thesis, although this is not a particularly common practice with masters degrees. Once the thesis has been approved by the examiners, it is usually permanently bound, and a copy placed in the university library. A Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) degree is classified as a research degree, rather than a ‘taught’ degree, and does not normally have a taught element of modules and assignments. This degree is awarded on the basis of a rather longer thesis, typically up to about 40,000 words in length. With the M.Phil. degree, a viva voce or ‘viva’ as it is referred to commonly, is a more frequent occurrence.

Doctoral theses

The traditional doctoral thesis such as the Ph.D. is a much more substantial piece of work, of up to 80,000 words or more. There is usually a viva which is regarded as an integral part of the assessment process. Some Ph.D. programmes include a programme of tuition in research methods. This programme may be additional to the thesis, and not assessed or it may be an integrated part of the whole programme, may be formally assessed, and result in a reduction in length in the thesis. This pattern is fairly typical of the Doctor of Education, where an assessed course in research methods, or aspects of educational research, is combined with a shorter thesis of perhaps 50,000 words. The Doctor of Education or Ed.D. is sometimes referred to as a ‘taught’ or ‘professional’ doctorate. Such taught doctorates are also available in some other subject areas, such as the Doctor of Business Administration or D.B.A. Some university regulations permit the inclusion of creative work, or journal articles which have been written and published, as part of the research for the thesis.

Whatever the variation in structure and format of a thesis, there are certain commonalities which are usually present in one form or another. The research problem or issue should be described clearly, and contextualized within the relevant
literature of that subject. There would also usually be an explanation and justification of the research design, and of the data collection and analysis methods. As part of this one might also expect an explanation of the way in which the study is located within a specific theoretical tradition or perspective. Finally, there would be a careful analysis of the data, and a summary of the conclusions drawn.

It should be added that there are other methods for obtaining a doctorate, including the method based on publications. Here the candidate submits a collection of research publications, along with a relatively short critical commentary on these articles or books. The publications and the commentary, together constitute the doctoral submission. This process is normally only relevant to fairly experienced academics, and as the critical commentary is typically much shorter than a thesis, it will not be discussed in this book. Aspects of the process of working towards a doctorate are discussed in Leonard (2001, pp. 69–71).

**Shorter doctoral theses**

The new types of doctoral structure, often known as ‘taught’ doctorates, typically have a much shorter thesis than is the norm with a PhD. Although this may be appealing to potential students it does pose a possible difficulty. In the case of a long, traditional thesis there is generally plenty of scope within the word length, to develop sophisticated arguments, and to examine all aspects of issues. This is important, since during the final oral examination or viva, the examiners will want to assure themselves that the student is thinking, analysing and writing at doctoral level. If there are constraints in terms of word length placed upon the student, then it may be difficult to decide where to make reductions in length and what to eliminate. The student may reasonably feel that by reducing certain sections in length, that the final thesis may appear too superficial.

Traditionally, one of the marks of good academic writing has been considered to be the ability to examine the different aspects of a question. In so doing one acknowledges that academic and research issues are very complex, and that in order to reveal this complexity, one has to discuss the range of perspectives which one might take on a particular question. If however, the student is constrained in terms of length, then it may not be possible to achieve this in the same degree of detail.

As the range of new types of doctorate expands, it is becoming more and more important that both students and supervisors reflect carefully on their strategies to assure the doctoral level of the thesis while adhering to the word length requirements of the thesis. Possible strategies for achieving this are discussed towards the end of Chapter 2.

**Similarities and differences between a masters and a doctoral thesis**

One of the results of the diversification in structure of postgraduate programmes, is that some doctoral theses are not very much longer than some masters theses.
It therefore becomes increasingly important to be as clear as possible about the differences. First, it should be pointed out that individual universities clearly have their own regulations in this regard, and it is essential that you read carefully the regulations for the institution at which you are studying. Nevertheless, there are general similarities and differences between the two kinds of thesis.

The similarities between the two theses, are largely in terms of overall structure. They will typically have the same overall content, consisting of a review of the literature, a discussion of methodology, an analysis of data and a conclusion, and a list of reference materials. The theses will probably be written in the same fairly formal academic style, divided into appropriate chapters, and use an accepted form of academic referencing. In addition, the theses will incorporate a fairly standard pattern of preliminary pages, including a list of contents and perhaps a list of abbreviations or technical terms to be employed. There is thus a broad area of commonality, particularly in terms of structure, although students will exert their own individuality in terms of the format of their particular thesis. However, despite these similarities, the different elements of the thesis are treated differently at doctoral level compared with masters level.

**Literature**

In the doctoral thesis, the review of the research literature is treated more thoroughly. The literature may be subdivided into sections, and treated either thematically or perhaps in chronological order within themes. Concepts from the literature which are in some way philosophically problematic may be discussed separately, and an attempt made to clarify some features of their use. In the doctoral compared with the masters thesis there is likely to be a much wider use of current research from academic journals, in order to contextualize the subject matter of the thesis. Although there will be an attempt to use as much contemporary material as possible, the thesis may also attempt to trace the historical development of ideas.

**Methodology**

The treatment of methodological issues will be much more detailed in a doctoral thesis. Perhaps typically, a masters thesis will place the research conducted within a particular approach such as case study research or survey research. At doctoral level however, the treatment will go beyond this. The overall methodological approach should be carefully related to the aims of the study. If, for example, a case study approach is selected, then there should normally be a discussion of epistemological issues, explaining the way in which the particular types of data collected are expected to reveal knowledge about the issue being investigated. The discussion may also extend further into questions of ontology, and whether or not the researcher perceives the social world as consisting of external, observable realities. These considerations will probably lead into a description of the data collection process, and a careful analysis of the reasons for adopting this approach. The doctoral thesis would also be expected to contain a much more detailed discussion of the ethical issues implicit in the research.
Writing Your Thesis

Data
The scope of the data collected would inevitably be much greater in a doctoral thesis. In the case of a survey, the questionnaire would typically be distributed to a much larger sample of the research population. In an ethnographic study, there would probably be more interviews conducted, and in a longitudinal study the research may well be conducted over a greater period of time. A masters thesis may have to be completed in a matter of months, which limits a longitudinal study. However, in the case of a doctoral thesis it might be feasible to collect data over a period of two or three years. Quite apart from the magnitude of the data collected, the actual process of data collection would likely be conducted in a more sophisticated manner. A questionnaire would typically be more complex, collecting a wider variety of data, which would be subjected to more advanced statistical analysis. There would be careful checks made of potential threats to validity and reliability. Both the volume and complexity of the data collected, might very well necessitate the use of computer packages to analyse the data, whether the latter was quantitative or qualitative. The ability of the student to use such packages, would be likely to result in the data being subjected to a much more detailed analytic procedure. As a consequence, any theories generated from the data might be expected to be more sophisticated, and any hypothesis testing to be more rigorous. Through the influence of these and other factors, one might expect there to be firmer grounds for any generalization from the sample to the research population. The normal assumption is that the doctoral thesis encapsulates an ‘original contribution to knowledge’. The masters thesis may well add to our level of understanding, but the findings may be more dependent upon, and embedded within, existing knowledge.

However, it would be wrong to assume that there is a clear division between the masters and the doctoral thesis, in the sense that a characteristic is always present in one type of thesis, and never in another. It might be perfectly possible to find one masters thesis where, say, ethical issues are much more thoroughly discussed than in a specific example of a doctoral thesis. Generally, however, the features outlined in the previous paragraphs are a reasonable guide to distinguishing the two levels of thesis. It might be best to think of masters and doctoral theses, not as two entirely separate levels of academic writing, but rather as lying on a continuum, with some measure of overlap depending upon the overall quality of the research and writing. The broad content of a thesis is discussed in Cryer (1996, pp. 178–9).

The thesis as research training
From one point of view, your thesis may be regarded as a major element on the way to achieving a particular qualification. In addition, it is a means by which you can gain an understanding of research methods and procedures in order to be able to follow the thesis with some original research which may lead to publication in an academic journal. In masters degree programmes, there will often be a module or course in research methods which is delivered prior to commencement on the thesis.
The ‘taught’ element on Ed.D. and some Ph.D. programmes also fulfils this function of preparation for the thesis.

For most theses, however, there is usually a requirement that the student prepares a research proposal. This is a synopsis of the proposed research, and has usually to be submitted for approval before the data collection for the research can be started. In the case of a masters degree, it is often the supervisor who approves the proposed research. In doctoral programmes the research proposal may have to be submitted to a committee of experienced supervisors for their comments, and may, in addition, be sent anonymously to academic referees.

Research proposal

A research proposal should set out very clearly the research which is intended, and the methods which it is anticipated will be used. There is no rigid structure for a proposal, but it should set out in a succinct manner, the key aspects of the research. There should be a brief introduction which explains the subject of the research, and the reasons for considering it a suitable topic to investigate. The aims of the research should be enumerated briefly. An indication of some of the relevant research literature will enable the reader to understand the context of the research. It is probably not necessary to do more than suggest some of the principal sources of literature, and some of the most recent and relevant research studies on related themes. There should certainly be a clear summary of the proposed research design, and of the intended means of collecting and analysing data. It will also be helpful to discuss the ethical issues which have been taken into account in developing the design. The reader will also be interested in seeing a broad plan of the projected timescale for the research. This need only be approximate at this stage, but it at least indicates that some thought has been given to this area. The proposal should conclude with a list of references. There may be other features which it would be sensible to include, but these would provide a reasonable synopsis of the intended research. It is not usually necessary for the proposal to be very long, and between 1,500 and 3,000 words should suffice.

The idea of submitting a research proposal has a number of advantages both for the student and for the institution in which the research is being carried out. Most importantly, it enables you to receive feedback and advice on the proposal. It can be viewed as a form of quality check to help ensure that the student is not embarking on an ill-advised project. Experienced researchers will provide advice on ways in which the research design can be improved. They might provide guidance on such issues as sampling or contacting possible respondents. This advice should help the student to reflect on the proposal and to adapt and improve it where necessary. This process is an important stage in the development of the research student towards becoming an experienced and autonomous researcher. Finally, the review process also helps to give confidence to the student, in the knowledge that experienced supervisors and researchers have seen and approved the research design. There is also a significant advantage for the institution in which the student is working, in that it is aware of the research which is being conducted in its name. For example, if the research is in
some way ethically sensitive, it enables special care to be taken in monitoring the research.

Summary – The research proposal

A research proposal should contain:

- A summary of the subject and aims.
- A justification for the research.
- An overview of the context and related literature.
- A summary of the anticipated research design, methodology, and inherent ethical issues.
- The anticipated timescale.

Quite apart from the receiving of feedback on the proposal, there are many other aspects of the research process which provide learning opportunities for the student. One of the major roles of the supervisory team is to integrate a process of learning and training in research methods, with the writing of the thesis. In commenting upon drafts of the thesis, supervisors are also engaged in creating learning experiences for the student. During the writing of the thesis, there may be opportunities to attend seminars by experienced researchers, training courses in research methods, and research conferences, all of which contribute to the training of the research student. The role of the thesis supervisor is discussed in Brown (1997, p. 50).

The characteristics of a good thesis

In Part 2 of this book we examine systematically the structure of the thesis, but it may be helpful here to explore some of the broad features of a well-written thesis. It is important when writing a thesis to consider those who will eventually read it. In the immediate future these may be the examiners, but later, when the thesis is bound and in a library, many future students may read it. A thesis is a long and complex work, and it is helpful if it can be written and structured in such a way that readers are able to navigate their way through it reasonably easily. It should be written in a clear style which, while doing justice to the academic requirements of the subject, does not use unnecessary jargon. It often helps if the thesis is subdivided into chapters and sections so that the reader can readily follow the developing argument. There should be an easily followed thread of argument running through the thesis, so that readers never reach a point where they are unsure how one section has led to another. We might sum this up, by saying that the thesis should be coherent. The issue of writing for a specific reader is discussed in Northedge (1990, p. 166).
The thesis should have clear aims which are enumerated near the beginning, and which in a sense, provide a rationale and framework for the remainder of the work. The thesis will then set out to explain the way in which the research meets those aims. If some of them could only be met partially, then this will also be explained. Finally, in the conclusion, there should be a review of those aims, to discuss the ways in which they have been addressed. In a sense, the aims act as an integrating link throughout a good thesis, setting out the intentions of the research at the beginning, and providing a focus for the results and conclusion at the end.

The aims are also very important in influencing the choice of theoretical perspective and methodology. The overall research design should be appropriate to the aims. For example, if the aims of a study are to examine broad trends across a number of different high schools, then the research design will need to use survey techniques, possibly using questionnaires. On the other hand, if the research intends to explore the social context of a group of teachers in a single school, then a case study, ethnographic or interactionist perspective may be more appropriate. Unstructured or semi-structured interviews may be selected as the data collection procedures.

In terms of writing the thesis, it is important to make these connections clear, and to demonstrate the way in which the research design has evolved from the need to address the aims.

Within the thesis there should be an adequate review of the relevant literature. The literature selected should be sufficiently contemporary to demonstrate the way in which the thesis is building upon recent research. While there will undoubtedly be extracts from different studies and articles, these should not be so numerous that they tend to obscure the prose written by the student. There is therefore a balance to be achieved between the number and length of quotations, and the main text of the thesis. The quotations and extracts should supplement and support the arguments of the thesis.

While these macro issues in writing the thesis are important, there should also be careful attention to detail. Small errors can tend to be very noticeable in a thesis. The thesis should be very carefully proofread, to reduce typographical, punctuation and grammatical errors to a minimum. Referencing should be checked carefully so that details of works cited match in different parts of the thesis. Consistency is very important in a thesis. In a good thesis, there will be consistency in the way the thesis is written and structured. This applies for example to the spelling of technical terms, to the use of acronyms, and to the way in which subsections are set out and numbered.

The thesis should also have a clear and well-written abstract at the beginning. Many readers in a library will read the abstract before deciding whether or not to read the whole thesis. The abstract should provide a succinct overview of the whole research project described in the thesis. It should summarize the context of the research, the aims and research design, the results and the conclusion. Finally, it is important not to forget the title of the thesis. Rather like the abstract, this encapsulates the nature of the thesis. Writing a good title is almost an art form in itself. The title should not be excessively long, but it should describe precisely the nature of the thesis, and ideally include some of the key words associated with the subject of the research. Although we will revisit many of these issues later, it does I think help at this stage to have an

### Summary – Characteristics of a well-written thesis

A well-written thesis should have:

- A clear title and abstract which accurately and succinctly reflect the nature of the research study.
- A structure and format which help the reader to absorb the subject matter.
- An intellectual coherence which starts with precise aims, from which follow the research design, and a clear conclusion.
- Accuracy in grammar and punctuation.
- Consistency in referencing, presentation and the use of terms.

### Academic writing as a genre

There are many different genres of writing, including poetry, short-story writing, and formal legal English and business writing. These different styles of writing each have their own characteristics. In much the same way, academic writing is a particular genre, with its own distinctive style, forms of expression and vocabulary. The skills of academic writing can be learned, and anyone who wants to improve their academic writing can acquire such skills. We will look in detail at academic writing skills in Chapter 5, but in the meantime we can explore some of the broad features of the genre.

Academic writing needs to be very clear and precise. In a research context the student is writing about fairly complex ideas and these have to be expressed with great precision. Moreover, in research, it is frequently the case that one idea follows from another, or that when analysing data, one procedure follows another. For example, when analysing a group of questionnaires, the researcher may first allocate numerical codes to the different alternative responses, and then input the raw data into a statistical analysis package. The researcher may then compute certain statistical tests, and then analyse the results. One process tends to follow logically from another, and this should be reflected in the writing about that process. Academic writing thus tends to proceed very logically and systematically, describing first one process, then explaining how this relates to the next issue, and then describing the second process. Good academic writing makes clear the linkages between the different aspects of the subject being described or analysed.

### Objectivity

As a very general rule, academic writing tends to avoid mentioning the personal feelings or attitudes of the researcher. The emphasis is normally upon considering
the research process in a fairly objective manner. It is for this reason, that the traditional approach to academic writing uses the third person singular rather than the first person. However, many interpretative approaches to research, typically using qualitative data, tend to take the view that the researcher almost inevitably has an effect upon other research participants during the collection of data. Hence interpretative researchers often feel that it is permissible, and even desirable, to write at least partially in the first person, in order to explain the particular orientation which they bring to the research process. Such reflexive accounts are often seen as being a very desirable element in accounts of interpretative research. Thus, as in all genres of writing, one cannot say that conventions are fixed and rigid. It is probably more accurate to see them as evolving, in parallel with developments in newer approaches to research.

**Justifying arguments**

When writing a thesis it is normal to include a variety of arguments, inferences, deductions or propositions. These may be based upon an analysis of the relevant literature, an analysis of data which has been collected or, even, upon personal experience. However, it is the norm in academic writing to provide some form of justification for these assertions. A typical justification is to point to previous research and to argue that the new assertion can be seen as reasonable in the light of that. A variant of this type of justification is to make reference to previous literature on the topic being considered. This literature may include research articles, or perhaps the writing of a noted authority in the field. However, it is perhaps not always a satisfactory justification to rely solely upon a noted authority, without ensuring that those comments or writing are clearly derived from research data. Finally, of course, the writer of a thesis will typically make assertions based upon the data which has been collected specifically for the thesis. Although the appropriate substantiation of assertions is a key feature of academic writing, a related feature is the manner in which such assertions are made.

**Signpost to success – Justification of arguments**

Check the arguments you are making, and ensure that they are soundly based on logic and evidence.

Academic writing tends to be characterized by the rather provisional manner in which assertions and claims to truth are made. Even though the evidential basis of assertions is clearly established, there is still a reluctance to be too definite in terms of claims to truth. Hence in a thesis, it would generally be regarded as more desirable to use phrases such as ‘the evidence would appear to suggest that …’ or ‘one might wish to argue that …’ in preference to more definite claims. The reason for this approach is ultimately based upon ideas from the philosophy of knowledge. It is
generally considered in the social sciences, that it is very difficult to know anything with absolute certainty. No matter how much apparently overwhelming evidence there is for something being true, one can always conceive that in the future, some contrary evidence might appear. The general approach to the writing style for a thesis thus tends to be one of caution, and using expressions which reflect this tentative position.

Using specialist vocabulary

Inevitably academic writing employs a great deal of technical vocabulary. It is quite understandable that a thesis should contain a number of specialist terms. However, it is always worth reminding ourselves, that arguably the prime purpose of writing is to communicate, and hence we should be very careful about the necessity of employing highly specialized terms. Essentially, if a specialist term is the correct and widely accepted term for a particular concept, then its use is completely justified. However, it is important not to stray into the practice of using complicated terms in the hope that they will make the thesis sound more impressive! If we do this, we are likely to be open to accusations of using jargon.

These, then, are some of the features of academic writing in a thesis. We will explore these in more detail in later chapters, but for now we can examine the ways in which some of these features are reflected in typical university requirements for a thesis.

General university requirements for a thesis

Before discussing these, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of the variation in university regulations regarding theses. There is no such thing as a ‘standard’ masters or doctoral thesis, as each university may have slightly different requirements in terms of such aspects as length, style of binding, or the formal wording to be included on the title page. In addition, on some ‘taught’ courses, there may be a recommended structure for the thesis, in terms of the names and order of the chapters. Generally however, the differences between university requirements are relatively minor, especially when compared with the large number of similarities. Universities usually make their requirements clearly available to students, and such requirements often include some of the following features.

There will usually be specifications concerning the length of the thesis, the font size for the typing and the spacing between lines. The thesis normally should be typed on only one side of the paper. The length of the thesis can have a considerable effect upon the writing style. For example, in taught doctorates such as the Ed.D. which often have a shorter thesis, there may be the need for a more succinct writing style, which is less discursive than in a Ph.D. There may be the need to avoid the kind of elaboration which may be found in a longer thesis.

There is normally the requirement that the thesis has an abstract which is typically placed immediately after the title page. The abstract is regarded as an important summary statement of the thesis. Prior to the examination procedure, it is typical for the thesis to be temporarily bound, although this binding may be rather more formal
with a doctoral thesis than a masters thesis. When the thesis has been assessed and approved, then it is permanently bound ready for being placed in the library. It is important for you to check the sequence of procedures for temporary and then permanent binding, as institutions do have different requirements. For the permanent binding, there are individual regulations governing such matters as the colour of the cloth for the binding, and for the presentation of the lettering on the front and spine of the thesis. In the case of some research studies, the quantity of material in the appendix may necessitate the thesis being divided into two volumes to be separately bound. It is again worth checking that this is acceptable. The assessment process for the thesis may involve passing the thesis subject to the making of some minor corrections. Once these have been made and officially approved, then usually the thesis may be permanently bound. The making of the award by the university may be subject to the submission of a copy of the permanently bound thesis. The precise formalities of these final stages of the process may differ between institutions, and it is important that students ensure they are familiar with them.

Consulting research theses

One of the most useful exercises when you are planning to write a thesis, is to read existing theses in the general area of your research. Quite apart from issues about content and subject matter, it is often very helpful to see the way in which other research students have approached both the structuring and writing of their theses. It is probably too time-consuming to read a great many theses from cover to cover, but it is possible to look quickly through a few theses for ideas on broad presentation issues. These are some of the areas at which you could look for ideas.

Most theses are written to a broad general pattern, of discussing the literature and methodology first, and then analysing the data. However, within this broad pattern, there are many different ways of dividing a thesis into chapters and then into subsections. It is always interesting to see the ways in which different students have achieved this. In some theses, subsections are numbered using a hierarchical numbering system, and it is often interesting to see how this is approached in different theses. Charts, diagrams, tables and illustrations are also presented in different ways, and it is often very helpful to get ideas on ways in which these may be successfully integrated into the text.

Writing style

In terms of writing style, it is always useful to read a number of different abstracts. The writing of a successful precis demands considerable skill, and reading a number of examples can help enormously when it comes to writing one yourself. When discussing the background literature to a research study, it is not always easy to integrate extracts from the literature with your own discussion. It is often necessary to write sentences which link together the quotations with your own discussion, in order to create a flowing prose style. If this is not done, then there can be rather artificial disjunctions between the quotations and your analysis. It is useful to
examine whether other writers have been successful in achieving a coherent style in this respect.

It can also be very instructive to read the conclusion to a thesis. It is here that the writer has the task of summarizing the results and findings, and it is interesting to read the way in which different writers approach this task. It is often a good idea in the conclusion to reconsider the aims which were delineated at the beginning of the thesis. This is an opportunity for the writer to assess the extent to which the aims have been achieved. It is also interesting to analyse the linguistic style used by the writer in summarizing any claims to new knowledge. Sometimes this is done using provisional expressions in order to indicate the tentative nature of the claims, and on other occasions you might find that a writer makes rather more definite claims. It is, first, a matter of academic judgement about how strongly one can make assertions and, secondly, a matter of linguistic style concerning how those assertions may be appropriately expressed.

This chapter has been an introduction to some of the main features of academic writing in the context of theses. There now follows a list of several study strategies which may help in extending the ideas of this chapter. Lists of study strategies can be found at the end of each subsequent chapter.

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**Study Strategies**

Visit a university library, and select several examples of the type of thesis you intend to write.

- Read the titles. Do they give an unambiguous indication of the nature of the thesis?
- Read the abstracts. Do they provide a clear summary of the thesis?
- Locate the aims of the thesis. (You may find these near the end of the first chapter.) Are they precise and clearly worded?
- Look at the contents pages and overall structure of the thesis. Is it easy to find your way around the thesis?

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**Further Reading**


