

# GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A THESIS OR DISSERTATION



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# Guidelines for Writing a Thesis or Dissertation

Linda Childers Hon

## Getting Started

1. Most research begins with a question. Think about which topics and theories you are interested in and what you would like to know more about. Think about the topics and theories you have studied in your program. Is there some question you feel the body of knowledge in your field does not answer adequately?
2. Once you have a question in mind, begin looking for information relevant to the topic and its theoretical framework. Read everything you can--academic research, trade literature, and information in the popular press and on the Internet.
3. As you become well-informed about your topic and prior research on the topic, your knowledge should suggest a purpose for your thesis/dissertation. When you can articulate this purpose clearly, you are ready to write your prospectus/proposal. This document specifies the purpose of the study, significance of the study, a tentative review of the literature on the topic and its theoretical framework (a working bibliography should be attached), your research questions and/or hypotheses, and how you will collect and analyze your data (your proposed instrumentation should be attached).
4. At this point, master's students need to recruit committee members (if they haven't done so already) and hold a preliminary meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to refine your plans if needed and to make explicit expectations for completion of the thesis. Doctoral students discuss their dissertation proposal as part of their qualifying exam. At the completion of this meeting, the student should submit a memo to committee members summarizing what was agreed upon during the meeting.
5. Once your instrumentation is developed, you need to clear it and your informed consent protocol with the Institutional Review Board before you begin collecting data. Leave adequate time to do so. The process can take several days or weeks.
6. Obviously, the next steps are collecting and analyzing data, writing up the findings, and composing the final chapter. You also should make sure Chapters 1 and 2 are now fully developed. Your chair and committee members provide guidance as needed at this point but expect you to work as independently as possible.
7. You should be prepared to hire assistance with coding and data entry and analysis if needed.
8. Get a copy of the graduate school's guidelines for writing theses and dissertations and follow these guidelines exactly.

## Writing

9. Each thesis or dissertation is unique but all share several common elements. The following is not an exact guide but rather a general outline.

### Chapter 1: Purpose and Significance of the Study

In the first chapter, clearly state what the purpose of the study is and explain the study's significance. The significance is addressed by discussing how the study adds to the theoretical body of knowledge in the field and the study's practical significance for communication professionals in the field being examined.

Ph.D. students also must explain how their research makes an **original** contribution to the body of knowledge in their discipline. They also should address the significance of the study for mass communication education.

It is especially critical that this chapter be well developed. Without a clearly defined purpose and strong theoretical grounding, the thesis or dissertation is fundamentally flawed from the outset.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The purpose of the study should suggest some theoretical framework to be explained further in this chapter. The literature review thus describes and analyzes previous research on the topic.

This chapter, however, should not merely string together what other researchers have found. Rather, you should discuss and analyze the body of knowledge with the ultimate goal of determining what is known and is not known about the topic. This determination leads to your research questions and/or hypotheses. In some cases, of course, you may determine that replicating previous research is needed.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes and justifies the data gathering method used. This chapter also outlines how you analyzed your data.

Begin by describing the method you chose and why this method was the most appropriate. In doing so, you should cite reference literature about the method.

Next, detail every step of the data gathering and analysis process. Although this section varies depending on method and analysis technique chosen, many of the following areas typically are addressed:

### --description of research design

internal validity

external validity

### --description of population and description of and justification for type of sample used or method for selecting units of observation

### --development of instrument or method for making observations (e.g., question guide, categories for content analysis)

pre-test

reliability and validity of instrument or method

### --administration of instrument or method for making observations (e.g., interviews, observation, content analysis)

### --coding of data

### --description of data analysis

statistical analysis and tests performed

identification of themes/categories (qualitative or historical research)

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter addresses the results from your data analysis only. This chapter does not include discussing other research literature or the implications of your findings.

Usually you begin by outlining any descriptive or exploratory/confirmatory analyses (e.g., reliability tests, factor analysis) that were conducted. You next address the results of the tests of hypotheses. You then discuss any ex post facto analysis. Tables and/or figures should be used to illustrate and summarize all numeric information.

For qualitative and historical research, this chapter usually is organized by the themes or categories uncovered in your research. If you have conducted focus groups or interviews, it is often appropriate to provide a brief descriptive (e.g., demographic) profile of the participants first. Direct quotation and paraphrasing of data from focus groups, interviews, or historical artifacts then are used to support the generalizations made. In some cases, this analysis also includes information from field notes or other interpretative data (e.g., life history information).

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is not just to reiterate what you found but rather to discuss what your findings mean in relation to the theoretical body of knowledge on the topic and your profession. Typically, students skip on this chapter even though it may be the most important one because it answers the "So what?" question.

Begin by discussing your findings in relation to the theoretical framework introduced in the literature review. In some cases, you may need to introduce new literature (particularly with qualitative research).

This chapter also should address what your findings mean for communication professionals in the field being examined. In other words, what are the study's practical implications?

Doctoral students also should discuss the pedagogical implications of the study. What does the study suggest for mass communication education?

This chapter next outlines the limitations of the study. Areas for future research then are proposed. Obviously, the thesis or dissertation ends with a brief conclusion that provides closure. A strong final sentence should be written.

## Finishing

10. Do not expect to begin and finish your thesis in the same semester. You need to make significant progress (which usually means you are already collecting data) the semester before you want to graduate.

The defense is scheduled when the thesis has been completed successfully--**not** when it is convenient for the student to graduate. Even if nothing goes wrong (and things often do), a quality thesis takes about six to nine months to complete (from inception to graduate school clearance).

Obviously, the same principles apply for dissertations as well but doctoral students must allot even more time. A quality dissertation usually takes about a year to complete (best case scenario).

11. Do not expect your chair or committee members to copy edit your thesis or dissertation. Before turning in any drafts, you should carefully edit and spell check your work.

Editing occurs at two different levels at least. **Micro** editing involves correcting spelling and grammatical errors. It also involves checking for proper paragraph and sentence structure, consistent use of terms, and variety in word choice.

**Macro** editing assesses the overall structure of the thesis. This includes making sure each chapter flows logically from the previous chapter, headings and subheadings are used properly and consistently, and transitions are included between major topics. Macro editing also determines whether any parts of the thesis need to be streamlined or expanded.

In some cases, it may be necessary for you to hire a professional editor.

12. Leave time for the chair to read your completed thesis or dissertation at least twice before giving it to your committee members. Don't expect to submit the completed thesis or dissertation for the first time to the chair and defend in the same or following week. Also, it is customary to give the thesis or dissertation to committee members at least a week before the defense.

13. It is the student's responsibility to reserve a room for the defense and to bring the signature page and the examination form to the defense.

14. Be prepared for revisions after the defense. You can expedite clearance by the graduate school by letting the staff examine a draft of the thesis or dissertation before you defend.

15. It is customary to provide your chair and committee members with a bound copy of the final version of the thesis or dissertation.

## Outline for Empirical Master's Theses

**PROPOSAL.** The following topics usually will be included. In addition to definitions in II.B., define other terms where first used. Do use subheads throughout.

### Chapter I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Broad introduction to thesis topic and method. Page or two. Write after remainder of proposal is completed.
- B. Research problem. State broadly, in question form. Give sub-questions. Explain carefully. In one sense, usually the problem is to expand the body of knowledge examined in the literature review.
- C. Need for the research. Who will benefit? Discuss applied and scientific contributions.
- D. Nominal definitions. Define central terms.
- E. Context. Add further info to clarify the research problem.

### Chapter II. THEORY. Literature review. Organize by idea; avoid stringing together abstracts of articles.

- A. Overview. Theoretical foundations.
- B. Literature. Group articles by ideas. For a given idea, first discuss common strands in the literature, then departures.
- C. Model. Of a process, usually. Based on the lit reviewed.
- D. Hypotheses (in broad sense of the term; also called Propositions). For each, give brief restatement of justification tied to earlier sections; explain derivation and implications. Include assumptions. Explicitly state plausible rival hypotheses (explanations of process) of a substantive nature.
- E. Scope of the study. Theoretical assumptions; discuss limitations they impose.

### Chapter III. METHODS. Outline in a few pages.

- A. Introduction. General description of method and design.
- B. Design. Experiment, quasi-experiment, survey, and so forth. Detailed description.
- C. Sample. Universe, population, element, sample design, tolerance, probability.
- D. Measurement. Operational definitions. Include, as applicable, detailed discussion of indexes/scales. Specify methods used to assess validity and reliability.
- E. Analysis. Techniques to be used; justification. Nature of relationships expected (e.g., asymmetrical, symmetrical, reciprocal; linear, monotonic, other curvilinear; necessary, sufficient, necessary and sufficient). Include dummy tables and worked examples of statistics.
- F. Validity. Design: Internal and external, with relevant subtypes.
- G. Methodological assumptions. Discuss limitations they impose.

### APPENDICES.

- A. Schedule. In Gantt Chart form.
- B. Facilities. Faculty and staff expertise, library and computer resources, other special facilities contributing to a successful study.
- C. Budget.
- D. Bibliographic essay. Sources searched (indexes, abstracts, bibliographies, etc.). Strengths and weaknesses of literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Works cited in proposal, plus other relevant documents.

## **THESIS.**

Chapters I-III. As in proposal, re-written and most likely expanded.

Chapter IV. FINDINGS.

- A. Brief overview.
- B. Results of application of method; any unusual situations encountered. Nature of sample.
- C. Descriptive analysis. One-way frequency distributions on central variables.
- D. Validity/reliability analysis.
- E. Tests of hypotheses. ANOVAs, crosstabulations, correlations, and such, depending on techniques used; give in same order as hypotheses.

Chapter V. DISCUSSION. When discussing implications, deal with both the theoretical and the practical. Present only interpretations of the findings, not opinion.

- A. Brief overview.
- B. Discussion of results of application of method. Implications.
- C. Discussion of descriptive analysis. Implications.
- D. Discussion of tests of hypothesis. Implications.
- E. Post-hoc analysis. Implications.

Chapter VI. CONCLUSION. May include writer's opinion.

- A. Summary of entire thesis in a few pages.
- B. Conclusions. Refer to lit review.
- C. Implications. Speculate about broadest possible consequences, both theoretical and practical. Label speculation clearly.
- D. Limitations. Theory, method.
- E. Suggestions for future research.

APPENDICES. Bibliographic essay. Questionnaire and coding manual, if any. Raw data.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Include all relevant sources examined, whether cited or not.

# How To Actually Complete a Thesis: Segmenting, Scheduling, and Rewarding

by Kurt Kent

First, pick something that interests you deeply. Your interest is what carries you through the long days and nights of concentrated effort.

So you've picked an interesting topic. What can you do now to improve your chances of finishing the thesis in a timely fashion?

Find a special place to write. Make it a place where you can spread out papers and get messy. Get everybody to agree that you don't have to clean it up until the thesis is done.

Then, use three techniques that have helped generations of students: segmenting, scheduling, and rewarding.

Segment the whole thesis into small chunks. Tackle just one at a time. Avoid fixating on doing the entire thesis all at once. Instead, focus clearly on just one small piece at a time.

One way to begin to segment is to write a detailed subject outline of the thesis. Get right down to the subsection level – the part that takes only a page or two. First make a topic outline for the entire work. Then make a thesis outline; tell what your thesis (argument) will be for each subsection. Don't worry now about being totally and perfectly accurate in the outline. Certainly the structure will change a bit as you move along through the thesis. But having the detailed outline will prove a great help to finishing the thesis – especially when combined with scheduling and rewarding.

Schedule your thesis writing for three days a week. (The days don't have to be consecutive.) Plan on completing one small subsection each day. After finishing the writing each day, research those nagging minor points that cropped up while you were writing – find the exact spelling of a name, for example, when it's been cited differently by your sources, or check out the correct pages numbers for an article.

On the fourth day of the week, rewrite the three sections you finished most recently. Make sure that you have polished each chapter to a shimmering brilliance before copying it for supervisory committee members.

On the fifth day, deliver thesis chapters to committee members, make appointments for consultation with experts whose help you need, and take care of all those other time-consuming chores.

Now comes the crucial technique. To many thesis writers, the actual writing looms as the hardest part. Such students may be able to breeze through a newspaper article or TV script with no problem, but a hundred-page manuscript blocks them like a ten-foot granite wall across the path. You can make that wall crumble in front of your eyes – by rewarding yourself.

Find something that gives you pleasure. Make it small, easy, inexpensive. Then, at the end of each day's writing, treat yourself! Tell yourself that you've done well! Acknowledge your progress to yourself! Feel good about it all!

Some treats: M&M candies. Soaking in the tub. A phone chat with a friend. A donut. A five-mile run.

Find something you enjoy. It'll help.

# How To Make a Thesis Less Painful and More Satisfying

by Mickie Edwardson  
Distinguished Professor of Telecommunication, Emeritus  
*ca.1975*

First, a thesis is supposed to demonstrate that you can take a project and bring it to a genuine conclusion – very different from the usual undergraduate term paper that is not revised after the teacher sees it and that is usually done during the last week before it is due. A thesis provides, then, a new kind of work and frequently a new kind of skill.

Pick a topic that will help you professionally. Employers will sometimes ask about your thesis or even want to see it – especially if you go into some branch of education. Your choice of thesis can help you get a job or hold one.

Pick a topic that you are happy to talk about at a cocktail party. People will often ask you, in making conversation, “What is your thesis about?” A good test of your wisdom in picking a topic is the amount of pleasure you get in answering. Here’s why: A thesis project involves some frustrating times; your personal interest in your topic is your best help in getting through that frustration.

A thesis should be useful. You’ll be happier about doing a thesis if you feel that somebody will use it. And you’ll want to do a better job if you feel that somebody will read and use your thesis. It is even better if the thesis is useful not just at the moment of completion, but also later. It should not be a snapshot of information that immediately becomes dated; the thesis should ideally be something with information you can talk about and that people can use for years.

If you are going into any branch of education, try to make your thesis something that can become a journal article; such articles look very good on resumes.

## A FEW TIPS

You can find out what is expected of you by reading theses – especially those chaired by the person who will chair your thesis. And you get ideas for procedures to follow both from theses and from other research projects.

In checking abstracts (Journalism Abstracts and Dissertation Abstracts) go back at least to 1965, and look under several key terms – and not just in the “Mass Communication” section. You’ll find lots of television references, for instance, under “Education” and “Psychology.”

Do your thesis carefully; you never know when a prospective employer will see it. And certainly, you are finding out how critical future graduate students can be of theses that have been done before. You are also finding out how much these future students will depend on your thesis.

These are the “big six” journals that should not be omitted from your literature research: *Journal of Broadcasting*, *Journal of Communication*, *Journalism Quarterly*, *Human Communication Research*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Communication Research*. There are many others, of course, that may – for an individual thesis – be even more important.

You will find many opportunities to help your fellow graduate students. I hope you will do so. You will need help at some point.