

→ **SAGE Study Skills**

Writing Your Thesis

Third Edition

Paul Oliver

 **SAGE**

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC



1

The Research Thesis

In this chapter you will learn about the different forms which a research thesis can take, and explore the criteria which help to distinguish a master's from a doctoral thesis. We look at the broad characteristics of academic writing, along with some of the features which characterize a well-written thesis. We also examine the formal university procedures and requirements for academic theses.

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?
- Examine a few sample pages of the thesis at random. Is the page layout 'easy on the eye' and is the text easy to read?

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 master's or doctoral research, collecting and analysing



Writing Your Thesis

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 very slow. The task seems 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! The book is divided into two parts. The first provides help on the broad issues of academic writing which are useful when preparing a thesis. The second part is a template for writing your thesis. It takes you through the process, step by step, from the title page to the final examination. Although there is no single way of using the book, one idea would be to read Part 1 during the early stages of your research, and to save Part 2 for when you actually start writing your thesis.

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' master's 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. This is a pity, because academic writing is a very creative activity. It is an opportunity for you 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 your understanding of 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, 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 in work 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 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 showing how current research adds incrementally to the sum of human knowledge. The process of academic writing is here not only part of the transmission of culture, but also of providing a new perspective on the world. The doctoral thesis has traditionally involved the generation of an original contribution to knowledge, but writing any thesis provides an opportunity to create fresh insights into the social world.

This book provides practical advice in the successful writing of a thesis. Although this is very important, 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 terminology. The terms ‘dissertation’ and ‘thesis’ are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday academic conversation, although there is perhaps a tendency for ‘dissertation’ to be used more frequently in relation to master’s degrees, and ‘thesis’ in connection 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 master’s 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, both the structure and content of theses are diverse, 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 master’s thesis.



Example – Empirical and Conceptual research

One thesis may involve examining the possible effects of social class on educational achievement in schools. A second thesis may be concerned with whether social class *should* have an effect upon educational achievement.

The first topic requires empirical data to examine whether class and achievement are linked in any way. The second topic requires conceptual analysis to explore whether we *ought* to try to eliminate any connection between the two.

Master's theses

Most master's degrees such as an MA or an MSc 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 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 master's degrees. Once the thesis has been approved by the examiners, a copy is usually placed in the university library or repository. This may be a traditional bound copy or an electronic copy.

A Master of Philosophy (MPhil) 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 longer thesis, typically up to about 40,000 words in length. With the MPhil degree, a *viva voce*, or 'viva', is a more frequent occurrence.

Doctoral theses

The traditional doctoral thesis such as the PhD is a much more substantial piece of work, of 80,000 words or more. There is usually a *viva* which is regarded as an integral part of the assessment process. Some PhD programmes include a course in research methods. This course may be additional to the thesis and not assessed, or it may be an integral part of the programme, formally assessed and result in a reduction in the length of 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 EdD 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 (DBA), or Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy). 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 professional 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 you, it may be difficult to decide where to make reductions in length and what to eliminate. You may reasonably feel that by reducing certain sections 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. Possible strategies for achieving this are discussed towards the end of Chapter 2.

Similarities and differences between a master's 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 master's theses. It therefore becomes increasingly important to be as clear as possible about the differences. First, it should be pointed out that individual universities 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 are largely in terms of overall structure. They 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 are written in the same fairly formal academic style, divided into appropriate chapters, and use an accepted form of academic referencing. In addition, the theses incorporate a fairly standard pattern of preliminary pages, including a list of contents and perhaps a list of abbreviations or technical terms being employed. There is thus a broad area of commonality, particularly in terms of structure, although students exert their own individuality in terms of the format of their particular thesis. However, despite these similarities, the elements of the thesis are treated differently at doctoral level compared with at master's level.

Literature

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

Methodology

The treatment of methodological issues is much more detailed in a doctoral thesis. Typically, a master's thesis places the research conducted within a particular approach, such as case study research or survey research. At doctoral level, however, the treatment goes beyond this. The overall methodological approach is carefully related to the aims of the study. If, for example, a case study approach is selected, then there is normally

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 also extends further into questions of ontology, and whether or not the researcher perceives the social world as consisting of external, observable realities. These considerations lead into a description of the data collection process, and a careful analysis of the reasons for adopting this approach. The doctoral thesis also contains a much more detailed discussion of the ethical issues implicit in the research.

Data

The scope of the data collected is inevitably much greater in a doctoral thesis. In the case of a survey, the questionnaire typically is distributed to a much larger sample of the research population. In an ethnographic study, more interviews are conducted, and in a longitudinal study the research is conducted over a greater period of time. A master's thesis has to be completed in a matter of months, which limits a longitudinal study. However, in the case of a doctoral thesis it is 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 is conducted in a more sophisticated manner. A questionnaire is more complex, collecting a wider variety of data, which are subjected to more advanced statistical analysis. Careful checks are made of potential threats to validity and reliability. Both the volume and complexity of the data collected might 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 is likely to result in the data being subjected to a much more detailed analytic procedure. As a consequence, any theories generated from the data are more sophisticated, and any hypothesis testing more rigorous. Through the influence of these and other factors, there are 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 master's thesis may well add to our level of understanding, but the findings are more dependent upon, and embedded within, existing knowledge.

However, it would be wrong to assume that there is a clear division between the master's 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 master's thesis where 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. Think of master's 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 master's degree programmes, there is often a module or course in research methods which is delivered prior to commencement of the thesis. The 'taught' element on EdD and some PhD programmes also fulfils this function of preparation for the thesis.

For most theses, however, the usual requirement is that the student prepares a research proposal. This is a synopsis of the proposed research, and is usually submitted for approval before the data collection for the research can be started. In the case of a master's 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 sets 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 explains, in a succinct manner, the key aspects of the research:

- A brief introduction explains the subject of the research, and the reasons for considering it a suitable topic to investigate.
- Enumerate briefly the aims of the research.
- An indication of some of the relevant research literature enables the reader to understand the context of the research. It is 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 must be a clear summary of the proposed research design, and of the intended means of collecting and analysing data.
- It is also helpful to discuss the ethical issues which have been taken into account in developing the design.
- The reader is also 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 concludes with a list of references.

There may be other features which it would be sensible to include, but those already mentioned provide a reasonable synopsis of the intended research. The proposal is not usually for very long; between 1,500 and 3,000 words should suffice.

The idea of submitting a research proposal has a number of advantages both for you as the research student and for the institution in which your 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 you are 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 will help you to reflect on the proposal and to adapt and improve it where necessary. This process is an important stage in your development towards becoming an experienced and autonomous researcher. Finally, the review process also helps to give you confidence, 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 you are 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 ethical issues.
- The anticipated timescale.

Quite apart from receiving feedback on the proposal, many other aspects of the research process provide learning opportunities for you. 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 your thesis. In commenting upon drafts of the thesis, supervisors are also engaged in creating learning experiences for you. 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 your training. The role of the thesis supervisor is discussed in Brown (1997, p. 50).



Example – Research aims

Consider the following aims for a thesis:

- 1 To consider the way in which employees receive instructions in an organization.
- 2 To analyse the management style adopted in an organization for the transmission of instructions.

If reviewers were asked to comment on these aims in a proposal, they might point out that the first is rather general, while the second is more precise, including, for example, the concept of ‘management style’. The second aim might therefore be more suitable for a doctoral thesis. This is the kind of advice which can be very useful in the early stages of a research project.

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. To sum up, 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 provide a rationale and framework for the remainder of the work. The thesis then sets out to explain the way in which the research meets those aims. If some aims are only met partially, then this also is explained. Finally, the conclusion reviews those aims, and discusses 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 needs 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 obscure the prose you write. You therefore need to achieve a balance between the number and length of quotations, and the main text of the thesis. Quotations and extracts should supplement the arguments of the thesis.

While these macro issues in writing are important, you should also pay careful attention to detail. Small errors can be very noticeable. Proofread the thesis carefully, to reduce typographical, punctuation and grammatical errors to a minimum. Check referencing 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.

Start the thesis with a clear and well-written abstract. 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. 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 help at this stage to have an idea of some of the broad features of a well-written thesis. A typical structure is described in Barnes (1995, p. 130).



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.

The title of the thesis

As the title of a thesis is likely to be the first aspect read by someone else, it is worth giving considerable thought to how best to phrase it. The title needs to convey quickly and succinctly the subject matter and nature of the thesis. Consider the series of potential titles in the following example box.



Example – Thesis titles

- Elderly patients.
- The care of elderly patients.
- The care of elderly patients in hospital.
- The care of elderly patients with psychological problems in hospital.
- An ethnographic study of the care of elderly patients with psychological problems in hospital.
- A comparative ethnographic study of the care of elderly patients with psychological problems in hospital and in the community.
- A comparative ethnographic study of the care of male elderly patients with psychological problems in hospital and in the community.

Each successive title has one element of detail which is omitted from the previous title. We could continue with the list, adding successively more and more information about the thesis, but the title would become increasingly cumbersome. Common sense suggests

that a point is reached at which the title contains sufficient detail to be informative, but not such an excess of information as to be off-putting to a potential reader. The choice of level of detail is to some extent a subjective matter. My personal choice from the list is the fifth option. The word 'ethnographic' tells us about the methodology; 'hospital' informs us of the location of the study; the term 'psychological' indicates the theme of the study; and, finally, the term 'elderly patients' makes clear the subjects of the research. This title includes the key elements of the research, without becoming excessively complex.

Having decided on the key concepts to include, you may wish to reflect on the structure of the title, in order to make it as elegant as possible in a literary sense. The title above could be amended to read for example 'An ethnographic study of the hospital care of elderly patients with psychological problems'.

Academic writing as a genre

There are many different genres of writing, including poetry, short-story writing, 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 you are writing about 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 first allocates numerical codes to the different alternative responses, and then inputs the raw data into a statistical analysis package. The researcher then computes certain statistical tests, and analyses the results. One process tends to follow logically from another, and this should be reflected in 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.

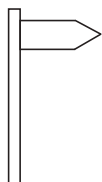
Objectivity

As a 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 an 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 a very desirable element in accounts of interpretative research. Thus, as in all genres of writing, conventions are not fixed and rigid, but are 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 refer 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, the writer makes assertions based upon the data which have 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 is 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, you 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. If a specialist term is the correct and widely accepted form of referring to a 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. We 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’ master’s 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 are usually 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 EdD, which often have a shorter thesis, a more succinct writing style is needed, which is less discursive than in a PhD.

Normally the thesis has to have an abstract which is typically placed immediately after the title page. The abstract is regarded as an important summary statement. Prior to the examination procedure, the thesis is usually temporarily bound, although this binding may be more formal for a doctoral thesis than a master's thesis. After the thesis has been assessed and approved, it is permanently bound ready for being placed in the library. Alternatively, universities are increasingly employing virtual repositories, where theses are stored electronically. If you need to have the traditional book binding, it is important that you check the sequence of procedures for temporary and then permanent binding, as institutions do have different requirements. For 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. Sometimes the quantity of material in the appendix may necessitate the thesis being divided into two volumes to be separately bound. Again, check that this is acceptable. The assessment process may involve passing the thesis subject to 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 you ensure you are familiar with them.

Quality and funding bodies

When you embark on a thesis or a research degree, you probably hope and expect that there is a certain amount of consistency between universities in the way they teach you and look after you. You hope that two different universities have similar standards, in order that their qualifications are comparable. It is clearly in the interests of universities generally that there exist systems to assure this type of comparability. In the United Kingdom (UK), the body which specifies the standards expected of postgraduate research programmes is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This organization publishes a code of practice, which details in broad terms what is expected of universities. It covers such aspects of research degree programmes as the admission of students, the supervision of research and of theses, the development of research skills and mechanisms by which your progress as a research student can be monitored (QAA, 2004). The code of practice does not try to specify the exact mechanisms by which its standards will be met, but instead concentrates on rather broad principles.

When universities receive funding to support the postgraduate research students on their courses, there is an assumption that the university concerned is meeting the

requirements of the code of practice. Universities in England receive income from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The income received by a university depends on factors such as the number of research students enrolled, and the quality of the academic research conducted at the university. The latter has been measured in the UK, through the Research Assessment Exercise; although this is to be replaced in 2014 by the Research Excellence Framework. These procedures use academics from a variety of universities to evaluate the research being conducted in a particular institution. Some students also receive financial support from one of the seven UK Research Councils (see Research Councils UK, 2012).

While you are working on your thesis, you will probably be unaware of this complex administrative system which is operating behind the scenes. However, it is there to give you confidence that you are being taught and supervised to agreed standards.

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 structure and writing of their theses. It is probably too time-consuming to read a great many from cover to cover, but it is possible to look quickly through a few for ideas on broad presentational issues.

Most theses are written to a 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 text into chapters and then into subsections. It is always interesting to see the ways in which different students have achieved this. In some, 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 can be 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 précis 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, artificial disjunctions occur between the quotations and your analysis. It is useful to examine whether other writers have been successful in achieving a coherent style.

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 further reading which may be helpful in extending your knowledge of this issue. Each subsequent chapter also has a list of relevant further reading.

Further reading

- Craswell, G. (2004) *Writing for Academic Success: A Postgraduate Guide*. London: Sage.
- Delamont, S. (1997) *Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- HEFCE (2010) *Guide to Funding: How HEFCE Allocates its Funds*. London: HEFCE.
- Punch, K. (2006) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.
- Research Excellence Framework (2012) *Submission System: Pilot User Guide* (REF 2014). London: HEFCE.
- Thody, A. (2006) *Writing and Presenting Research*. London: Sage.
- Wilkinson, D. (2005) *The Essential Guide to Postgraduate Study*. London: Sage.