

Writing your thesis

Part 1: Designing the document

Part 2 will look in more detail at the actual process of writing the document.

Basic purpose

To communicate to two examiners what you have done to demonstrate that you are a sufficiently competent researcher to meet the requirements of the degree

To do this in the clearest possible terms

I tend to just skim through until I find key statements indicating what the researcher wants to say

How many pages am I expected to read before I can work out what's going on?

Imagining what an examiner might think and want

What is it like to receive a new thesis, with little prior knowledge of the writer?

What do examiners want to be able to do?

I want to find the evidence that I need to pass the candidate

Look at the separate document - anonymised examiner reports

What do they often ask about?

How you carried out the research

How you solved research problems

What you did to show that you are the type of researcher required by the degree

Common examiner conversation before the viva:

Well I can see that there are a lot of good things in the thesis, but I wasn't quite sure what the main message was

They didn't really explain how they arrived at ...

So this is what we have to ask about in the viva

Then, in the viva:

Can you explain to us ...

Where have you talked about this in the thesis?

How is the thesis therefore different to a novel or scholarly book or article?

Getting across the basic message

Making clear points on every page

Not allowing examiners to interpret for themselves and draw their own conclusions

What each part has to say

Taken from Holliday (2016: 45)

This represents a standard format in the social sciences and can be changed - remembering that changing standard formats requires even more skilful writing

What therefore would the equivalent be if you come from a different discipline?

Abstract

- Introduces the core message
- Summary of your basic argument and findings

Introduction

- Says enough about the core message to explain what the research is about and why it is important, and to explain why the study is carried out in the way it is
- Your statement of topic and focus, including who the people are and where the setting is located, and your basic argument about them
- Your vision and motivation for the research and how you locate it within broader work, your research questions and where they come from
- Your rationale for the choice of research setting and overall data collection strategy
- How you therefore plan to proceed within the rest of the written study

Saying just enough about what will be looked at in detail later - and saying where it will be found

Literature review (also applies to the theoretical part of the methodology chapter)

- Explains how the literature contributes to the core message
- Your conceptual framework – based on what you have learnt from and how you position yourself in relation to current and past discussions within which (a) your topic and (b) your research methodology are located
- Evidence that you are well-informed and have read widely

I would personally not read a literature review without being told why I should and what I will learn from it about the researcher and the thesis

Methodology (perhaps 2-3 chapters)

- Explains how the methodology is relevant to the emergence of the core message
- Where possible, explain how the research procedures anticipated the eventual emergence of the core message
- How you chose your core setting and relevant peripheral data sources
- A description of what we need to know about the setting

- How you developed a research strategy that relates appropriately to the setting, and the decisions you made about approaching the people there
- How you proceeded in gaining access and collecting data
- A catalogue of research activities and data collected
- How you structured your analysis and arrived at your choice of the themes and headings
- Your system for presenting data (e.g. coding, referencing, anonymising)

Data chapters (perhaps 3-4)

- Demonstrates how the core message gradually emerges from the data, section by section, theme by theme
- Structured with the themes and headings described above
- What you have learnt from the data and how this relates back to issues arising from the literature
- How the data provides evidence for what you have found

Implications

- Reveals the core message in full, related to what has been found through analysis of the data and in dialogue with the literature
- A summary of what you have found throughout the written study

Remembering that your reader will not have instant recall

It would be really good to have just a couple of phrases at the end of each point that remind us of key parts of the data

- What you think it all means – perhaps with reference to the original research questions

Conclusion

- Your final comment on all the basic points in your argument - The final word about the significance of the core message

Making one Word document

The power of the introduction

Design options

Reference

Holliday, A. R. (2016). Doing and writing qualitative research (3rd ed.). Sage.