

Academic writing midway: writing your thesis

These slides can be found at <https://adrianholliday.com/handouts/>

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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

Anonymised examiner reports

There are however flaws. The presentation of the ... seems **superficial** because there is insufficient explanation for how the various strategies of data collection work together to make the macro scope of the study viable.

Although ... is claimed - as would be normal for an overall ... study of this nature - the data is presented in largely summary form, as it was collected. This **starves the thesis** the rich interplay of data provided by the case study format.

The presentation of the thesis suffers from an **understatement** concerning the central ideas being developed. It is difficult for the reader to see what the overall thesis actually is.

The question therefore arises as to **whether this is** (a) a theoretical thesis, drawing on a piece of empirical data as example, or (b) a piece of empirical research for which the theoretical discussion is background. If the latter is the case, there may be **a problem with balance**.

This is **extremely dense**; and the very short conclusion is not sufficient to draw the discussion together.

The writing remains **quite abstract** and the precise points being made, with relation to the study, are not always clear.

Corrections [1]

Key statements from later in the thesis need to be used to frame it from the beginning

There needs to be a **stronger storyline** throughout the thesis that gradually anticipates the excellent conclusion in the final chapter

There should be a section in the introduction which **states clearly why** ... which will better **set the scene** for the literature chapters and the whole thesis

The literature chapters need **framing** throughout to indicate how they relate to the thesis

There should be a **clear indication** of how ... is then made use of in the specific parts of the rest of the thesis

Corrections [2]

The methodology chapter needs a summary of all the data collected and participants in one place, to provide a **quick reference map**

Re-organise the data chapters so that reference to literature **always follows** data. Where the literature is formative in setting up concepts it should be **moved** to the literature review. The remaining reference to literature should therefore **reflect** on the data.

The relationship between ..., ... and ..., and the design of figure ..., **needs to be explained more fully**. This explanation should be either moved to where ... is dealt with in the literature review, or the cross-reference to that chapter should be made explicit.

What do examiners 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?

Opening

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

Enabling [1]

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

Enabling [2]

Methodology (perhaps 2-3 chapters)

Theory and literature

- **Explains how** the methodology is relevant to the emergence of the core message

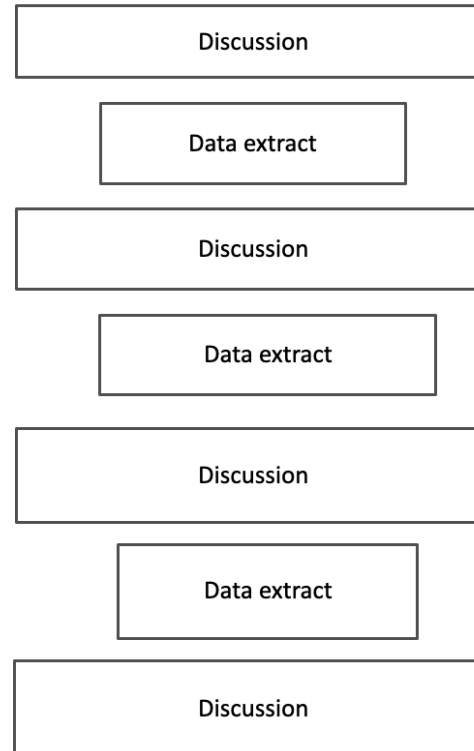
Description of what you did, choices you made, problems you solved

- **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)

The core

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
- **A developing discussion**, gradually building your argument



Organised under thematic headings ('what stands out')

50% data, 50% discussion

Perhaps connecting with literature at the end of each section

All grounded in interconnected evidence

Bringing it all together

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**
- **Returning to your research questions**

Other things

Making one Word document

The power of the introduction

Design options