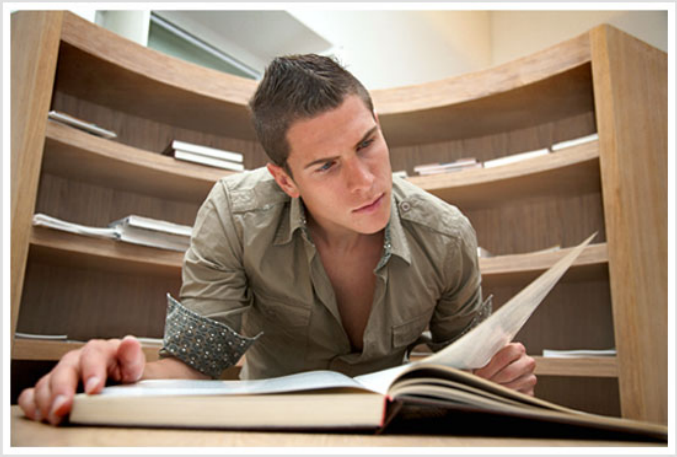
Thesis and Dissertation Writing Course

A Complete Guide to the Thesis and Dissertation Writing Process



Contents

Chapter 1: The Writing Process

Introduction

Writing is one of the most challenging tasks any person will undertake. It requires thoughtfulness, logic, strong organizational skills, a facility with the language, and a sharp focus. Fortunately, these are all things that can be introduced into one's writing without too much difficulty. With that in mind, the following paper will list three things – preparatory research, a clear focus, and thinking "meta-cognitively" – that will each help you overcome the difficulties associated with the thesis writing process.

Do the Research First

Preparation is the foundation for success – be it in school or in the workplace. Simply put, you need to do plenty of reading before you even start your thesis; after all, if you take the time to read extensively on your subject, you will have a pretty good idea – after a few months, at any rate – of what areas of a subject have been dealt with at length by the scholarly material and what areas have not been dealt with sufficiently. Armed with this information, you can find topic areas that are interesting at the same time as you uncover questions that no one else has thought to answer. With professors constantly on the look-out for graduate papers that are fresh and insightful, taking the road less-traveled is a terrific way of making your thesis stand out from everybody else's.

Have a Clear Focus from the Start

When you write a thesis, you are basically trying to explicate something for your readers. Needless to say, if your thesis is clearly-defined and narrow, the task of explaining anything becomes much easier. Not least of all, you have the luxury of leaving out items that fall outside the specific focus of your thesis sentence. As one can well-imagine, over the course of researching a thesis, being able to leave redundant or superfluous things out of your note-taking is critical to making the entire writing process easier and even more enjoyable. Beyond that, if your thesis is narrowly-focused, it allows you to explore in greater depth particular concepts or phenomena that are relevant to your topic – and that is critical because depth and detail are two of the things that separate upper-level theses or dissertations from poor or mediocre ones. With the preceding in mind, here are some exercises that can be undertaken to help a writer narrow and/or clarify his or her focus.

Write about what interests you

As much as anything else, you need to write about something that actually engages your interest; if the subject holds out no intrigue for you, then your research will be half-hearted, your writing will not be engaging and, most significantly of all, you won't (likely) take the time to come up with a thoughtful thesis that really strikes at the heart of a topic or addresses important questions. A good question to ask yourself right at the start of the thesis writing process is this one: "Why am I bothering to take the time to earn a graduate degree in this field?" In a related vein, you'll do well to also ask yourself this question: "What big questions attracted me to this field in the first place? What are the things I want to learn about?" Investing your research with personal meaning is the first step towards writing about the things that matter to you.

Prioritize your questions

Every bit as important as writing about things that matter, you need to make an effort to prioritize the questions you want answered. The reason for this is simple: if you prioritize questions and lines of inquiry, you will be sure to address the most important things in the greatest detail at the same time as the most pressing items up for debate become the core of your thesis. All in all, prioritization is a major part of making your research and writing experiences smooth and untroubled.

When You Write, Ask Yourself: "Why Am I Taking the Time to Write This Stuff Down?"

When are asked about it, many graduate students who encountered difficulties writing their theses have said that the biggest problem they faced was the fact that they forgot about carefully assessing the validity and importance of everything they were writing down. To put it another way, a lot of first-time thesis writers get so caught up in writing about one thing or another that they start going on tangents which distract them from their basic thesis sentence while leading them down dimly-lit pathways that muddy the focus of their paper, frustrate their readers, and suggest that they do not have a strong grasp on the subject matter. Given how destructive all of this can be to a final grade, every student who is trying to craft a smart and well-polished thesis owes it to him or herself to write each sentence with this simple question in mind: "Why am I taking my time writing about this item?" Put another way, "What am I trying to accomplish by including this sentence or this paragraph or this section in the paper?" If you approach a part of your thesis critically and cannot answer questions like the two posed above, then there is a good chance that the section in question is redundant or a waste of time. Asking questions all the time is crucial to good thesis writing and is all part of thinking "meta-cognitively"; in other words, you need to think about your own thinking and writing if you want your thinking and writing to be at their best. To close, if you can follow these simple instructions, you can make the thesis writing process a fun and successful endeavor that will help you achieve your ultimate scholastic goals.

Points to Remember:

- Do the research (the lit review) first before you come up with a thesis
- Have a clear focus from the start
- Write about things that interest you

Notes:

Exercise Corner

Actually, this exercise is quite similar to the one highlighted above. The big difference, as it turns out, is with regards to the focus of your paper. Try writing a small research paper in which you simply start writing about a topic without a clear objective in mind. In another paper, list the things you want to find out about the topic – and place them in priority sequence. You should discover that having a focus and a list of priorities will make the thesis writing process a whole lot easier.

? ***Did you know*** *that after earning an advanced degree, a student will spend 12% of his or her monthly income paying off debts? (Nellie Mae)*

Chapter 2: *An Easy-to-Follow Guide to the Structure of Your Dissertation or Thesis*

Doctoral Dissertation

Below you will find a summary and description of the elements of a doctoral dissertation. While these are the commonly required elements, your institution may require slightly different elements in your dissertation. Be sure to provide your school's specific requirements if you place an order with us..

I. Contents of a Dissertation Proposal

1. Title
2. Abstract
3. Table of Contents (if required)
4. Introduction and Statement of Problem
5. Literature Review and Research Questions
7. Methodology and Expected Conclusions
8. References
9. Appendices (if necessary)

II. Contents of a Doctoral Dissertation

A. Front Matter

Signature Page

Title Page

Copyright

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Illustrations

B. Dissertation Body

Chapter 1: Introduction or Problem Statement

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 5: Discussion

References

Appendices

III. Description of a Dissertation Proposal's Elements

1. Title

The title for your proposal should reflect the content of your proposed dissertation and should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relate to the content of your study.

2. Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your proposal in around 200 words, including the problem being investigated, conclusions drawn from a review of the literature, the research question to answer, and proposed methods and expected conclusions.

3. Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your proposal and provide the page numbers for where those elements appear.

4. Introduction and Statement of Problem

The introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your dissertation. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology.

5. Literature Review and Research Questions

The literature review places your dissertation in the context of academic research into your topic. The literature review should examine past work on your topic and related topics. The review should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of previous work and indicate why your dissertation is needed. The research question(s) should explain the hypothesis of your dissertation and the specific questions to be answered. These questions and the hypothesis should clearly relate to the information presented in the problem statement and the literature review.

6 Methodology and Expected Conclusions

The methodology section describes the methods by which you will conduct your research. Depending on the type of research to be conducted, this section can include subsections detailing participants, testing or measurement procedures, and methods of analysis. This section should also indicate the conclusions you expect to draw based on the literature review.

9 References

The reference list should include all of the sources cited in the proposal.

10. Appendices (if necessary)

The appendices section should include documents necessary for conducting your research including human subjects, review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys. The appendices section should begin with an "Appendices" cover page and a table of contents for its documents.

IV. Description of a Doctoral Dissertation's Contents

A. Front Matter

These elements appear before the body of the dissertation in this order:

Signature Page

Each signature page should follow the student's institution's required format. This frequently includes the title of the dissertation, the names of the dissertation committee members, and lines for dates and signatures when the committee approves the dissertation.

Title Page

The title for your dissertation usually is the same as the title of your proposal and should reflect the content of your dissertation. It should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relate to the content of your study.

Copyright

A statement of copyright is traditionally included following the title page.

Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements section offers thanks to individuals who assisted you in the process of completing the dissertation. Many acknowledgements include thanks to the review committee, dissertation advisor, and any persons or institutions who allowed the use of restricted or copyrighted material in the dissertation. An optional dedication may dedicate the dissertation to a person or persons who made a significant impact on your life.

Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your dissertation in no more than 350 words, including the problem being investigated, the research question and its answer, methods used, results drawn, and conclusions obtained.

Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your dissertation and provide the numbers of the pages on which those elements appear.

List of Tables

A separate list of tables should give the number and title of each table in the order it is presented in the dissertation, along with the number of the page on which it appears. Exclude this element if no tables are used.

List of Figures

A separate list of figures should give the number and title of each figure in the order it is presented in the dissertation, along with the corresponding page number. Exclude this element if no figures are used.

List of Illustrations

A separate list of illustrations should give the number and title of each illustration in the order it is presented in the dissertation, along with the corresponding page number. Exclude this element if no illustrations are used.

List of Symbols, Abbreviations, etc.

An optional list of symbols, abbreviations, etc. may present each element and explain what it symbolizes or stands for. It is especially useful if the dissertation contains numerous symbols, abbreviations, etc.

B. Dissertation Body

These elements comprise the body of the dissertation itself.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As in the proposal, the introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your dissertation. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology. It should clearly explain previous research findings, the current status of the research problem, and the significance of the dissertation's research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions

The literature review places your dissertation in the context of academic research into your topic. The literature review should examine past work on your topic and related topics. The review should evaluate the

strengths and weaknesses of previous work and indicate why your dissertation is needed. The research question(s) should explain the specific hypothesis of your dissertation and the specific questions to be answered. These questions and the hypothesis should clearly relate to the information presented in the problem statement and the literature review.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology section describes the methods by which you conducted your research, and this section should build upon the methodology section of your proposal. Depending on the type of research conducted, this section should include labeled subsections detailing participants, testing or measurement procedures, and the limitations of the methodology. Analysis should be reserved for the results chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

The results section describes the findings of your research, including a presentation of data collected and a description of the analysis of that data. Data should be included in sufficient detail to support conclusions drawn from your analysis, though full raw data sets may be reserved for the appendices.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The discussion section should evaluate and analyze the results obtained in Chapter 4 in light of the research questions and original problem statement. This section should draw conclusions and interpret the results. This section should also discuss the applications and consequences of the research findings, as well as any limitations affecting the validity of the conclusions. Suggestions for future research may also be included.

References and/or Bibliography

The reference list should include all of the sources cited in the dissertation

Appendices

The appendices section should include materials too long or awkward to include in the text of the dissertation, including human subjects, review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys, raw data, and so on. The appendices section should begin with an “Appendices” cover page and a table of contents for its documents.

Master's Thesis (Manuscript-Based)

Below, you will find a summary and description of the elements of a manuscript-based Master's thesis, frequently used to present material that the student has published separately elsewhere and which together has a cohesive character. While these are the commonly required elements, your institution may require slightly different elements in your thesis. Be sure to provide your school's specific requirements when you place your order.

I. Contents of a Thesis Proposal

1. Title
2. Abstract
3. Table of Contents (if required)
4. Introduction and Statement of Problem
5. Literature Review
6. Research Question
7. Methodology and Expected Conclusions
8. References
9. Appendices (if necessary)

II. Contents of a Manuscript Thesis

A. Front Matter

Mandatory Elements

1. Signature Page
2. Title Page
3. Abstract
4. Table of Contents

Included if Elements Are Used in Thesis

5. List of Tables
6. List of Figures
7. List of Illustrations
8. List of Symbols, Abbreviations, etc.

Included at the Student's Discretion

9. Preface
10. Acknowledgements
11. Dedication

Mandatory if Sections Co-Authored

12. Co-Authorship Statement

B. Thesis Body (In Three or More Chapters)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapters 2 and Following: Manuscripts

Last Chapter: Conclusion

Appendices

III. Description of a Thesis Proposal's Elements

1. Title

The title for your proposal should reflect the content of your proposed thesis and should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relate to the content of your study.

2. Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your proposal in approximately 200 words, including the problem being investigated, conclusions drawn from a review of the literature, the research question to answer, and proposed methods and expected conclusions.

3. Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your proposal and provide the page numbers for the pages on which those elements appear.

4. Introduction and Statement of Problem

The introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your thesis. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology.

5. Literature Review

The literature review places your thesis in the context of academic research into your topic. The literature review should examine past work on your topic and related topics. The review should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of previous work and indicate why your thesis is needed.

6. Research Question

The research question(s) should explain the hypothesis of your thesis and the specific questions to be answered. These questions and the hypothesis should clearly relate to the information presented in the problem statement and the literature review.

7. Methodology and Expected Conclusions

The methodology section describes the methods by which you will conduct your research. Depending on the type of research to be conducted, this section can include subsections detailing participants, testing or measurement procedures, and methods of analysis. This section should also indicate the conclusions you expect to draw based on the literature review. Depending on the number of manuscripts to be included, you may review methodologies used in these documents, or you may describe how you will integrate prior research to explore your topic.

8. References

The reference list should include all of the sources cited in the proposal.

9. Appendices (if necessary)

The appendices section should include documents necessary for conducting your research including human subjects, review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys. You may also include copies of the published articles you are integrating into your thesis. The appendices section should begin with an "Appendices" cover page and a table of contents for its documents.

IV. Description of a Manuscript-Based Master's Thesis's Contents

A. Front Matter

These elements appear before the body of the thesis.

The following elements are part of every Master's thesis:

1. Signature Page

Each signature page should follow the student's institution's required format. This frequently includes the title of the thesis, the names of the thesis committee members, and lines for dates and signatures when the committee approves the thesis.

2. Title Page

The title for your thesis usually is the same as the title of your proposal and should reflect the content of your thesis. It should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relay the content of your study.

3. Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your thesis in no more than 350 words, including the problem being investigated, the research question and its answer, methods used, results drawn, and conclusions obtained.

4. Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your thesis and provide the appropriate page numbers for each of the elements.

The following elements are included in the front matter if their corresponding elements are used in the thesis:

5. List of Tables

A separate list of tables should give the number and title of each table in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the corresponding page number.

6. List of Figures

A separate list of figures should give the number and title of each figure in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the number of the page upon which it appears.

7. List of Illustrations

A separate list of illustrations should give the number and title of each illustration in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the page number upon which each appears.

8. List of Symbols, Abbreviations, etc.

A list of symbols, abbreviations, etc. will present each element and explain what it symbolizes or stands for.

The following elements may be included at the student's discretion:

9. Preface

A preface may take many forms. Some prefaces allow the student to explain his or her interest in a topic or to describe the student's path to the research being conducted. Generally, the preface is the only part of the thesis where personal information is presented.

10. Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements section offers thanks to individuals who assisted the student in the process of completing the thesis. Many acknowledgements include thanks to the review committee, thesis advisor, and any persons or institutions who allowed the use of restricted or copyrighted material in the thesis.

11. Dedication

An optional dedication may dedicate the thesis to a person or persons who made a significant impact on the student's life.

The following element is mandatory if a coauthored paper is used in the thesis:

12. Coauthor Statement

The coauthor statement should state clearly which authors were responsible for which aspects of composing the coauthored work(s) included in the thesis. For example, the student should explain whether he or she was the primary author, conducted research, advanced the conclusions, and so on. Written permission is required from all coauthors to use a coauthored work in a thesis.

B. Thesis Body

These elements comprise the body of the thesis itself. Note: Each chapter must have its own bibliography/reference list.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As in the proposal, the introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your thesis. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology. This section should include the literature review and a description of the methodology used, including the hypothesis and the research questions. This chapter must make clear the theme of the manuscripts to follow so that the reader can understand the concept unifying the material presented.

Chapter 2 and Following: Manuscripts

Each of these chapters is an individual paper, whether it be a published, in-press, accepted, or a submitted journal article. Since these papers are appearing as chapters, they do not need abstracts. The first page of each chapter, however, should include a footnote identifying that a version of the chapter appeared in/will appear in/or has been submitted to a journal. Where possible, provide full citation information for the journal articles.

Last Chapter: Conclusion

The conclusion should explicitly link together the ideas expressed in the preceding chapters and draw conclusions from them. It should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis research, propose ideas for future research on the topic, and discuss the significance of the thesis to the field as well as any potential applications of the thesis findings.

Appendices

The appendices section should include materials too long or awkward to include in the text of the thesis, including human subjects review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys, raw data, and so on. The appendices section should begin with an "Appendices" cover page and a table of contents for its documents. There should only be one Appendices section for the entire thesis.

Master's Thesis (Traditional)

Below you will find a summary and description of the elements of a traditional Master's thesis. While these are the commonly required elements, your institution may require slightly different elements in your thesis. Be sure to provide your school's specific requirements when you place your order.

I. Contents of a Thesis Proposal

1. Title
2. Abstract
3. Table of Contents (if required)
4. Introduction and Statement of Problem
5. Literature Review
6. Research Question
7. Methodology and Expected Conclusions
8. References
9. Appendices (if necessary)

II. Contents of a Traditional Thesis

A. Front Matter

Mandatory Elements:

1. Signature Page
2. Title Page
3. Abstract
4. Table of Contents

Included if Elements Are Used in Thesis:

5. List of Tables
6. List of Figures
7. List of Illustrations
8. List of Symbols, Abbreviations, etc.

Included at the Student's Discretion:

9. Preface
10. Acknowledgements
11. Dedication

B. Thesis Body

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Notes
4. References and/or Bibliography
5. Appendices
6. Index (if required)

III. Description of a Thesis Proposal's Elements

1. Title

The title for your proposal should reflect the content of your proposed thesis and should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relay the content of your study.

2. Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your proposal in around 200 words, including the problem being investigated, conclusions drawn from a review of the literature, the research question to answer, and proposed methods and expected conclusions.

3. Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your proposal and provide the numbers for the pages on which those elements appear.

4. Introduction and Statement of Problem

The introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your thesis. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology.

5. Literature Review

The literature review places your thesis in the context of academic research into your topic. The literature review should examine past work on your topic and related topics. The review should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of previous work and indicate why your thesis is needed.

6. Research Question

The research question(s) should explain the specific hypothesis of your thesis and the specific questions to be answered. These questions and the hypothesis should clearly relate to the information presented in the problem statement and the literature review.

7. Methodology and Expected Conclusions

The methodology section describes the methods by which you will conduct your research. Depending on the type of research to be conducted, this section can include subsections detailing participants, testing or measurement procedures, and methods of analysis. This section should also indicate the conclusions you expect to draw based on the literature review.

8. References

The reference list should include all of the sources cited in the proposal.

9. Appendices (if necessary)

The appendices section should include documents necessary for conducting your research including human subjects, review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys. The appendices section should begin with an "Appendices" cover page and a table of contents for its documents.

IV. Description of a Traditional Master's Thesis's Contents

A. Front Matter

These elements appear before the body of the thesis.

The following elements are part of every Master's thesis:

1. Signature Page

Each signature page should follow the student's institution's required format. This frequently includes the title of the thesis, the names of the thesis committee members, and lines for dates and signatures when the committee approves the thesis.

2. Title Page

The title for your thesis usually is the same as the title of your proposal and should reflect the content of your thesis. It should be both specific and succinct. Most titles should be limited to 15 words and clearly relate the content of your study.

3. Abstract

The abstract should briefly summarize your thesis in no more than 350 words, including the problem being investigated, the research question and its answer, methods used, results drawn, and conclusions obtained.

4. Table of Contents

The table of contents should list the elements of your thesis and provide the numbers for the pages on which those elements appear.

The following elements are included in the front matter if their corresponding elements are used in the thesis:

5. List of Tables

A separate list of tables should give the number and title of each table in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the number of the page on which it appears.

6. List of Figures

A separate list of figures should give the number and title of each figure in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the number of the page upon which it appears.

7. List of Illustrations

A separate list of illustrations should give the number and title of each illustration in the order it is presented in the thesis, along with the number of the page upon which it appears.

8. List of Symbols, Abbreviations, etc.

A list of symbols, abbreviations, etc. will present each element and explain what it symbolizes or stands for.

The following elements may be included at the student's discretion:

9. Preface

A preface may take many forms. Some prefaces allow the student to explain his or her interest in a topic or to describe the student's path to the research being

conducted. Generally, the preface is the only part of the thesis where personal information is presented.

10. Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements section offers thanks to individuals who assisted the student in the process of completing the thesis. Many acknowledgements include thanks to the review committee, thesis advisor, and any persons or institutions who allowed the use of restricted or copyrighted material in the thesis.

11. Dedication

An optional dedication may dedicate the thesis to a person or persons who made a significant impact on the student's life.

B. Thesis Body

These elements comprise the body of the thesis itself.

1. Introduction

As in the proposal, the introduction provides the reader with a description of the problem to be addressed in your thesis. It should describe the nature of your study and its purpose as well as define any necessary terminology. This section can include the literature review and a description of the methodology used.

2. Body

The body is the heart of your thesis, in which you describe the research you conducted, explain your analysis of the research, and draw conclusions from your findings. This section is frequently broken down into a number of sub-sections which vary depending on the topic you are researching. Types of sub-sections often include data collection, data analysis, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

3. Notes

If necessary, explanatory notes offering information not directly affecting the main text may be placed following the body. Such notes frequently discuss conflicting interpretations in the literature, further explanation of a point made in the text, or an explanation of a particular source or piece of information cited.

4. References and/or Bibliography

The reference list should include all of the sources cited in the proposal.

5. Appendices

The appendices section should include materials too long or awkward to include in the text of the thesis, including human subjects, review board applications, consent forms, questionnaires or surveys, and raw data, etc. The appendices section should begin with an "Appendices" cover page and a table of contents for its documents.

6. Index (if required)

If required, the thesis may conclude with an index listing names, key words, terms, and topics discussed in the essay along with the numbers of the pages upon which they appear for ease of reference.

Points to Remember:

- Know the general components of a dissertation; it will help you plot your schedule and will give you an idea of what is/is not important.
- Know the general components of a Thesis; it will help you plot your schedule and will give you an idea of what is/is not important.
- Keep a template of your instructor's guidelines with you so that you don't leave anything out.

Notes:

Exercise Corner

Again, a simple comparative exercise should bring home why knowing the components of a thesis or dissertation are important. For instance, write a small research paper lacking any kind of an outline; then, write another small paper that incorporates the components of a thesis or dissertation paper (introductory chapter, methodology, findings, et cetera, et cetera). You should soon discover that having an explicit outline in place actually makes the process faster – and saves you from overlooking important things.

? **Did you know** that earning and advanced degree adds an average of $13,600 to the graduate's annual income? (US Census)

Chapter 3: How to Select a Proper Topic

Introduction

One of the more under-appreciated things about thesis writing is the importance of coming up with an appropriate thesis topic. Consequently, the next few pages will look at three things – picking a topic that interests you, picking a topic that is new and relatively un-addressed by scholarly literature, and picking a topic that features a problem currently confronting scholars in your field – which should all be borne in mind if you want to make your work appealing and memorable to your audience. Ultimately, if you follow just a few simple steps, you can isolate a topic that will yield handsome results when your final evaluations come in.

Write About the Things You Care About or Are Interested In

Many talented would-be academics falter because they write about what other people are interested in, not what they themselves are interested in. Suffice it to say, when that happens the unhappy outcome is a thesis that is dry, plodding, and uninspired. For your sake, as much as for anyone else's, you need to devote yourself to writing about things that matter to you. Invariably, this means asking yourself what things about your field of study excite you; it is also a good idea to ask yourself why you chose to work with a particular professor or instructor in the first place. Going further, if you write about topics you find appealing, your research will *automatically* be that much more focused – chiefly because you already have a pretty good idea what it is that you are after. In a related vein, students who write about things that interest them are students who will devote that much more time to exploring subtle items in greater detail – and they will also be students committed to making the additional sacrifices necessary to see to it that a subject area has been thoroughly investigated.

Pick a Topic that Is Novel – Or at Least a Topic that Has Not Been Done Too Many Times Before

Writing about something you find interesting is a critical component of any thesis, but another important ingredient of successful thesis writing is picking a topic that is off the beaten-path. To put it mildly, most professors quickly grow tired of generic theses that look at topics in which most – if not all – of the "big" questions have been conclusively answered. For instance, a history thesis focusing on the Civil War is not likely to be well-received if its focuses upon the failings of Lincoln's generals as a prime explanation for why the Union Army struggled to subdue the Confederate forces between 1861 and1865. However, a thesis that explores some peculiarity of Southern or Northern culture (e.g.: latent racism in Northern cities or excessive "cosmopolitanism" that prevented everyone from sharing precisely the same views on the importance of the war effort) with the aim of detailing how that peculiarity explains why the vastly more-populated and resource-rich south struggled as it did is likely to grab the attention of readers. Naturally enough, the object is to write about something novel that holds meaning for *you* as well. With that in mind, it is an excellent idea to research a subject area well in advance of having to submit a thesis topic to your supervisor. This preparatory research will give you a pretty good idea of the limitations of the conventional scholarship while

simultaneously exposing you to topics that are interesting or surprising.

Pick a Topic that Is Befuddling Contemporary Scholars in Your Field

Like any other group of individuals, academics want questions answered; indeed, their careers are devoted to finding answers to pressing questions. A skillful student who is able to offer something to an ongoing debate – or who can shed new light on a topic that many scholars find baffling – is a student who immediately catapults him or herself into the spotlight and makes whatever work he or she has produced relevant and engaging. Besides the fact that your supervisor will love you for it, picking and researching a topic in which there is an unresolved issue bodes well for one's professional future; in fact, it may even secure it to the extent that students who appear capable of answering difficult questions in their research create a demand for their services when they go out into the workforce in search of employment. When one takes a step back and looks at the so-called "Big Picture," it is evident that writing about something that is interesting, novel and that presents a problem of concern to scholars is the fast-track to producing a thesis that will earn top marks from evaluators. For that reason, students owe it to themselves to begin preparing for a thesis months (if not a full year or even two) in advance of when they have to begin the actual writing process. By doing so, they can find over-looked areas of inquiry that interest them and that also present questions scholars need to find answers for.

As a final point, when you are picking a topic for your thesis, try to pick an unresolved issue or question that has bedeviled the academic community the longest: for one thing, if you do so, you will immediately earn the appreciation of experts in the field who are looking for new ideas and for new conceptual tools; just as significantly, even if you fail to come up with any definitive answers that might put a particular topic of debate "to rest," you will at least gain the respect of evaluators for having the intellectual courage and ambition to tackle subject matter that other students try to avoid

Points to Remember:

- Write about the things that interest you
- Try to write about something that few other people have tackled
- Try to pick a topic that contemporary scholars find intriguing or problematic?

Notes:

Exercise Corner

This exercise really comes down to this: finding out what it is you really want to write about and why that counts. Simply put, name 10 different subjects you like – and then try to name things about each of those topics that you would like to know more about. After this has been done, try and see if any of the questions you have in mind have been answered by someone else. It's a simple exercise, but it is a good one for finding out the things that interest you – and how off the beaten path they really are.

? **Did you know** that up to 80% of doctoral candidates are funded by their universities? (Beta Gamma Sigma International)

Chapter 4: *How to Write a Proper Introduction and Statement of Problem*

Part I: Writing the thesis introduction

Provide some Context

To begin with, your thesis introduction must give your readers some background information on the selected topic. Specifically, it should arm the reader with the sort of information he or she will subsequently require in order to have a good understanding of the concepts and themes you will introduce in the paper. For example, if you are writing a thesis on African-Americans in the Union Army during the American Civil War, you will want to (briefly) start your thesis introduction off by discussing the historical magnitude of the Civil War, the number of African-Americans in the war effort, the contributions of African-Americans to the war effort, and what their involvement in the war effort meant for future black-white relations in America. Giving this kind of information does more than merely familiarize the reader with the subject material: it also provides a subtle justification for reading about – and caring about – the topic in the first place, a justification which actually segues nicely into the next part of the introduction.

The Thesis Introduction Should Give the Research Topic Relevance

When you are writing a thesis, you want to make your thesis appear important and meaningful for whoever is reading it. With that in mind, you need to have a section in your introduction that outlines why you have chosen this topic and why a resolution of the problems it presents is significant. For example, if you are writing about the importance of using sound in computer/user interfaces, you will undoubtedly want to mention how sound can indicate things taking place within the software (like items being saved to a hard-drive) that the user cannot see. As well, you will want to note how sound can communicate problems in a clear, un-technical manner to users in a way that an un-clear or highly technical status report might not. To put it another way, someone who cannot interpret a written status report appearing on his or her screen can nonetheless quickly discern from the noises emanating from the computer that something is not right and that a visit from a technician is in order. In any case, the thesis introduction needs to give the topic relevance if it is to be properly done.

Use the Thesis Introduction to Present Your Main Questions for Inquiry

This is a critical function of the thesis introduction. As much as anything else, you want your intro to outline the general direction in which your thesis will go; suffice it to say, this can only be done well if the reader is exposed to the critical questions you will be asking. More than that, by listing the key questions in the introduction, you give yourself a template with which to guide your own research.

Provide Definitions in the Thesis Introduction

In psychology papers, science papers and engineering papers – to name just a few – definitions will be critical because of the multitude of technical terms that will pop up. But even in history papers or in English papers, having a list of definitions in the opening pages will ensure that the reader does not become confused or distracted. The process of writing this

section, by the way, can actually help you, the writer, because it forces you to think about the validity and pertinence of the concepts and terms you will introduce into the paper – and that will most likely lead to a tighter and more focused paper in the end.

Outlining Thesis Aims is a Must in the Introduction

We mentioned earlier how important it is to give people a reason to read your report; it is appropriate to return to that issue again. By giving a list of the aims of the report at the very start, you give the reader a checklist of all the things you wish to resolve in the paper; this obviously serves evaluators well, but it also compels you to focus on specific areas of inquiry when amassing your data – a critical step towards coming up with a paper that is tightly-written, focused, and substantial. All told, by having your aims laid out at the start, you introduce an element of accountability into your work that will benefit you during the writing process as much as it will benefit anyone else reading the paper.

Part II: How to Produce a Good Statement of the Problem

Be Clear.

So many theses collapse because the problem being explored is not sufficiently defined; as a result, scope of the paper becomes too big and the thesis becomes unwieldy and vague. If you want a good thesis, you must first have a narrowly-defined and clear statement of the problem under discussion.

If You Want a Good Statement of the Problem, You Need to Do Your Research Early

All theses start out with some broad aims or interests on the part of the researcher and then gradually narrow down into something discrete and meaningful as time passes. Clearly, the best way to write a good statement of the problem is to give yourself plenty of time to actually refine and reduce the scope of your paper so that the problem is manageable and relevant.

Remember that You Are Writing for Somebody Other than Yourself

The statement of the problem is one of the ways in which you build up good will between yourself and your audience. In short, it is here wherein you define the focus of the paper in a way that is understandable, succinct, and engaging. By avoiding tangents, you can use the statement of the problem to provide the reader with a "comfort zone" inasmuch as he or she knows exactly what is coming in the pages ahead because he or she knows exactly what issue the paper is trying to resolve.

Points to Remember:

- Make sure your thesis introduction has some context
- Make sure your thesis introduction makes the topic relevant
- Make sure your thesis introduction presents your main questions for inquiry

Notes:

Exercise Corner

A simple exercise: look at the introductions to various scholarly works. When you have looked at several, ask yourself: Which ones did I like? Which ones did I not like? Which introductions bored me and which ones engaged my interest and made me want to read more? What you should find is that introductions that do not make the material seem relevant – or which do not provide context – are usually the worst ones, and the most boring ones, to boot.

? **Did you know** that graduate students earn their degrees with an average $24,500 of debt? (Nellie Mae)

Chapter 5: How to Write a Proper Literature Review

Introduction

Writing the literature review may seem easy at first glance, but it can be a mine-field if things are not done correctly from the start. With that as the backdrop, the following paper will look at a few key things that should be kept in mind whenever a graduate student is trying to summarize and synthesize the scholarly literature that deals with his or her topic of inquiry. Specifically, three things – tying together the past, present, and future; conducting your literature review with your thesis and key questions in mind; and examining as many different perspectives as possible – will enable you to write an optimal literature review that bolsters and deepens your overall thesis.

Tying together the Past, Present, and Future

Writing a literature review fundamentally entails bringing together (in one chapter of your thesis) all of the most pertinent material on a topic. Additionally, because scholarship does change over time, and because intellectual fashions change over time, the literature review is also about capturing the evolution of the literature on a particular subject. Unsurprisingly then, a good literature review will discuss the past, the present and the future of scholarship on a topic; in fact, where possible, a good literature review will identify basic themes and trends that have animated, continue to animate, and will most likely animate far into the future, the research on a topic. The reason that including past and present research together is vital for any literature review is because identifying broad debates and unanswered questions that have persisted over time – and which will be discussed in your own paper – gives your thesis added cachet; at the same time, by noting what progress has been made in some areas and what remains to be done, the process of writing the literature review can actually focus the rest of your research. Finally, a literature review that ties together past, present, and future is one that will show to anyone reading your thesis that you have a holistic, well-rounded understanding of your topic.

Keep the Thesis at the Heart of Your Paper and Your Key Questions in Mind – Always

The best way to conduct research for a graduate paper is to start your research well in advance of any initial deadlines; after a while, you will find the areas of inquiry that are important to you and you will have a pretty good idea about what the literature says about a specific topic. Once this step has been completed, you can formalize the thesis that will serve as the basis for the paper still to come. At this point, the "formal" literature review, based upon the "informal" literature review you have already completed, will follow. Here, the focus will be upon exploring in greater detail the critical questions or concerns about your chosen topic that arose in your earlier research. During this process, the most important thing will be to keep in mind your thesis and what it is that you want your eventual paper to accomplish; you must keep these things in mind constantly because a direction-less and sprawling literature review will just mean more work and more frustration in the end. As a last point, you should also prioritize all of your questions before engaging in the final or formal literature review. The reason for this is that some questions are always going to be more

important than other questions and devoting your energies in the most productive way possible will cut down on time-wasting and help you when the time comes to put everything together.

When You Do the Literature Review, Look at as Many Different Perspectives as Possible

One of the traps graduate students fall into is that they review a few seminal texts on their topic and the conclusions of those texts become the conclusions that guide them as they seek out other scholarly works. This is a bad thing in the end because many valuable monographs and journal articles are forgotten about or marginalized when the time comes to produce the final lit review. Given this reality, students should self-consciously seek out books offering as many different perspectives on a particular subject as possible; they should do this right from the start, too, when they are conducting their informal literature review. Naturally, it may not always be possible to know exactly what books one should look for when trying to examine new perspectives on a topic. Consequently, you should talk to your thesis advisor, to professors who specialize in the area that you are working in, and to library reference staff so as to identify books and studies that present unconventional "takes" on a topic. If you do that, you will have a broad-based knowledge, will be better able to assess the validity of the claims made by "mainstream" academics, and you will be able to critically evaluate your own assumptions about the subject matter. In the end, drawing upon a diverse array of materials will help you refine your thesis, the questions you ask, and will give you the subtle understanding of the topic that not every graduate student has when he or she sets about to write his or her final paper.

Points to Remember:

- Discuss the past as well as the present and future of the scholarly literature
- Always keep the thesis in mind when conducting the literature review
- Look at as many different perspectives as possible when conducting the literature review

Notes:

Exercise Corner

This exercise is just like the one above. Take a series of literature reviews and examine them. Which ones did you find boring? Which ones left you with many questions unanswered? Which ones seemed to lack balance or perspective? Which lit reviews seemed to be poorly focused? This exercise should make it abundantly clear that lit reviews lacking a historical perspective and a range of perspectives are usually not worth the paper they are printed on.

? **Did you know** that one-fourth of bachelor's degree recipients will earn an advanced degree within ten years? (National Center for Education Statistics)

Chapter 6: How to Write a Proper Research Question Section

Introduction

Many students become confused when asked to produce a research question section – probably because they confuse it with the statement of the problem. Certainly, there are many similarities between the two – not least of all the fact that each one highlights the issue that will be investigated in the thesis paper – but the key difference is that, whereas the statement of the problem primarily identifies the problem and why it deserves our attention, the research question identifies the question that will lead to the answer or answers that will resolve the underlying problem. Using this distinction as a guide, the following few pages will look at three things – the need to keep in mind the type of answers a research question should yield, the need to keep in mind the methodology that will answer the research question, and the need to keep the research question as well-defined as possible – that will enable you to write a research question section that will add depth and focus to your paper.

Know the Types of Answers that a Research Question Should Yield

A research question should be something that yields hard facts that serve to solve a hard problem; a research question that only yields opinions can be interesting, but it is not, in truth, a research question. To put it another way, a research question must deal with phenomena in the "real world" that are identifiable and which can be measured and assessed; in short, your research question has to be one that allows you to draw qualitative or, better yet, quantitative conclusions about a problem you are investigating. Ultimately, a good research question will provide answers that explain, describe, identify, substantiate, predict, or qualify. More than that, the research question should have a practical application; to wit, how will answering the research question help us to better understand a particular topic or problem and, just as importantly, how will it help us to make strides in doing away with that problem – in the "real world?" For instance, a research question that examines the cultural factors resulting in the Holocaust is basically meaningless if it makes value judgments about particular groups of people – or a particular generation – without providing answers that can be used to overcome intolerance and bigotry in our own age. As much as anything, a good thesis will furnish readers with practical steps for eliminating troublesome dilemmas and problems; if it cannot do that, then it is simply not a strong thesis. Hence, a research question that yields answers which identify, explain, substantiate – and prescribe – should be the chief objective of every writer.

The Research Question Section of any Paper Should Be Very Clear about the Methodology which Will Be Used to Answer the Research Question

One of the important things about the research question section is that it forces the writer to think carefully about his or her methodology; after all, if you do not have the right methodology in place, you cannot answer the question as you would like to. In psychology papers, controlling all of the variables is critical to success; as a result, hierarchical linear modeling or regression analysis needs to be a part of your methodological framework. At the same time, if you are focusing on a particular group, you need to have a subject group drawn from that group as well as a control

group drawn from the aforementioned group. If you are comparing one group to another group, then you obviously need to have subject groups drawn from each – as well as, most likely, control groups coming from each that will allow you to measure the impact of different variables. In other disciplines – like history – things like regression analysis and random sampling may not be needed. However, you will still need to come up with a methodology that will answer your research question and that means that you will probably need to illustrate what specific historical documents, individuals, events and trends you will focus on in your research and why you will do so. As an addendum, your research question will probably dictate that you outline whether your work will be organized chronologically or thematically and why you chose one over the other. In the final analysis, the research question section operates best if part of it is given over to outlining how you plan on answering your research question.

Keep the Research Question Well-Defined!

The research question section is like any other part of your thesis: it must be clear, tightly-focused, and lucid. Because your research question will shape the paper, you need to define it in such a way that you – and the reader – do not become confused about what it is your paper is trying to accomplish. For all intents and purposes, that means the research question should only endeavor to answer one particular question; if you wish to answer other questions, then those must be subordinate to the main question and must only be answered because resolving them will resolve the main question that lies at the heart of your paper. If you can keep things simple within your research question section, you can produce a work that is ultimately far more comprehensive and informative than a paper that is sprawling and talks about a hundred different things half-well.

Points to Remember:

- Make sure your questions yield quantitative and qualitative answers – not value judgments or just opinions
- Be clear about the methodology you will use to answer the research question
- Make sure the research question is well-defined

Notes:

Exercise Corner

Again, try to locate articles that seem to engage in value judgments instead of in "hard facts." Specifically, go to websites or blogs that make generalizations; at the same time, go to scholarly articles that make quantifiable or qualitative, evidence-based, conclusions. What is the difference between the sorts of questions that opinion-driven blogs ask and the sorts of questions scholarly works ask? Is there a difference in how well-defined the questions are? For that matter, do opinion-based blogs even ask questions – except for rhetorical ones? What you will see is that your research questions need to be well-defined, they need to be clear, and they need to be questions that will yield a quantitative or qualitative answer; if they only yield value judgments or opinions, they are not fit to be placed inside a research question section.

? **Did you know** that the largest number of master's degrees are awarded in education (167,000 per year) and business (143,000 per year)?

Chapter 7: How to Write a Proper Research Methodology and Expected Conclusions

Introduction

Writing a proper research methodology and constructing an effective "expected conclusions" section are two key elements in any strong thesis. Therefore, the next few pages will look at three things you can do to make your research methodology more effective – tying your methodology to your thesis aims, starting big and working small, and acknowledging your limitations – and also at how your expected conclusions section can be bolstered if you use the findings of conventional literature as a starting-point. In the end, this under-appreciated part of the thesis writing process can help streamline your work while convincing others of your mastery of the topic.

The Research Methodology

Tie Your Methodology to Your Thesis Aims

As much as anything else, a strong research methodology section will explicitly link the aims of your thesis with the methodology you employ; in short, you will explicate why a particular investigative approach is best for the research question you are trying to answer. In the process of explaining why you chose one option and not others, it is vital to outline the specific measurements you are seeking (if you are doing a quantitative study) and the variables you are taking into account when doing your research. The reason why this process is so important is because it forces the writer to justify the use of every tool found in the paper – be it regression analysis of one kind or another or the decision to include or exclude different types of ethnographic data – at the same time as it gives the audience (most especially the evaluator) an insight into the thinking processes of the writer. With

regards to the last item, a strong and well-argued research methodology section can be a wonderful tool for convincing a dubious instructor of the validity of a specific approach. Hence, the research methodology section might be just the thing needed to turn what would otherwise be a undistinguished thesis in the eyes of a supervisor into a paper that deserves his or her high regard. In the end, if you can tie your methodology to your thesis aims and explain why your methodology "works," you can actually begin the important process of defending your thesis in front of others.

Start Big and Work to Small

In producing a research methodology, one of the most important things you can bear in mind is that you begin with the most generic things and then go to the most specific sub-items comprising your methodological framework. For example, if you are doing a quantitative research project, you will undoubtedly start with the population group(s) you will be studying, you will highlight the subject group and the control group, and you will then outline how you selected your respondents (e.g.: did you use simple random sampling or stratified random sampling?). After this has been done, you will proceed into the "nitty-gritty" of highlighting the type of analysis you used. Specifically, you will discuss why you chose bivariate analysis or multivariate analysis or hierarchical linear modeling. Following that, most thoughtful research methodology sections will include –

although it is certainly not mandatory – some examples of the particular equations employed in order to quantify your accumulated findings. The key point here is that the methodology section of any paper should be written in the form of an inverted pyramid, with the broadest contours discussed first and the most technical and subtle things discussed last.

Acknowledge Your Limitations

An effective research methodology component will be as comprehensive as possible and will try to resolve as many outstanding questions as possible; indeed, it is not a bad idea to have a "laundry list" at the ready containing all of the things you feel you should discuss and explore in the paper as you try to resolve your fundamental problem. That being said, no paper is perfect and no research methodology is absolutely perfect. Consequently, you should acknowledge – albeit briefly – in this section where you feel your methodology may not yield all of the insight (or be as accurate) you might wish for. Such an admission is important because it communicates to evaluators that you are, indeed, aware of the shortcomings of your work and are aware of the practical difficulties presented by a problem. Beyond that, inasmuch as your thesis will probably undergo many revisions, a research methodology section (or sub-section, if you will) that admits shortcomings can help you to further streamline and refine your paper so that no unanticipated problems arise.

Expected Conclusions: Draw on What is Known

Briefly, the secret to a strong "expected conclusions" section in any thesis is to point out what the conventional literature suggests will happen when a particular type of study is undertaken – or, if the paper is not primarily a quantitative study, what previous research similar to your own has concluded about a topic. This is important for a couple of reasons. Firstly, if the "expected conclusions" part of your thesis shows a familiarity with the scholarly literature, you will further convince the reader of your broad-based understanding of the topic in question. Secondly, if the preliminary expectations of your paper prove wrong, then your paper will stand out all that much more from the prevailing literature because it effectively squashes the assumptions of others. In short, base your expected conclusions on what the literature suggests should happen, and you will benefit in more than one way.

Points to Remember:

- Why should you tie your methodology to your thesis aims?
- Why should you "start big and work to small?"
- Why is it important to acknowledge the limitations of your research methodology?

Notes:

Exercise Corner

For really grasping this chapter, just ask yourself if you can recall any papers in your experiences that had methodologies that did not address the thesis of the paper. There are probably a few – and you may have written some of them yourself. With that in mind, look at a series of scholarly works to determine which ones have methodologies which really seem to work, and which ones have methodologies that do not work; write an analysis of why you feel this way for each one. Afterwards, you will have a sure understanding of how important methodology is to a clear-headed paper.

? **Did you know** that more than 500,000 master's degrees are awarded each year, but just 46,000 PhDs? (National Center for Education Statistics)

Chapter 8: The Right Type of Sources to Use For Your Thesis or Dissertation

Introduction

The arduous task of writing a thesis is made all the worse if one chooses to use the wrong sources. As time and space permit, the next few pages will discuss some things graduate students need to bear in mind when it comes to selecting appropriate sources for their work. Specifically, the following paper will look at the importance of using authoritative sources from leading experts, the importance of using writers who have been cited in course textbooks in a particular subject, the importance of using authoritative texts to find other commendable sources, and the importance of constantly keeping in mind what it is you want your sources to do for you as you prepare your thesis.

Make Sure Your Thesis is Sprinkled with Authoritative Sources from Leading Experts

In one of our earlier papers, it was noted that students should actively seek out sources that offer divergent or unconventional perspectives on topics. That being said, it must not be forgotten that some authors, some experts, and some books are simply better than others. As a result, a strong thesis will recognize those texts and scholarly articles that are widely-perceived by the academic community as being superior works of scholarship. If you are uncertain what these sources are or what they might look like, it is a good idea to approach those within your department who are well-versed in the subject matter and, more importantly, have published works of their own on the topic. As well, there is certainly no harm in approaching other graduate students who have written on similar subjects or who may be teaching in the area you find especially interesting. The key point here is that part of exhibiting strong knowledge of a subject area is proving to others that you know – or at least can discern – which sources are more commendable and trustworthy than others. Additionally, authoritative works are excellent "starting-points" for research inasmuch as they go a great deal further than lesser works in explicating critical concepts or in illuminating important areas of debate. If you can find a place for the "classics" in your work, you are a long way towards doing just that.

Use the Writers You Find in Course Textbooks

One of the most over-looked "tricks" that graduate students can employ – but often do not – is to use sources that pop up in survey textbooks on a subject area. As a rule, if you are truly committed to writing a memorable thesis, you should keep track of your under-graduate texts so that you can thumb through them for bibliographic information on monographs or journal articles that offer insight into a topic you are interested in doing further research in. To put it as simply as possible, if a book or article keeps appearing in undergraduate course books, it is probably a good idea to consider that work to be an authoritative text on the subject area and one you should include in your own literature review. For what it is worth, locating those sources may be just what you need to turn a difficult thesis into one that is fairly easy to write – even a thesis that is fun to write.

Use Authoritative Texts as Sources for Finding Other Texts and Articles

Once you have located books and articles in course textbooks that appear to hold out some promise, it is well worth it to thumb through those sources looking for additional ones that may aid your research efforts; doing so can spare you a great deal of time and energy that would otherwise be devoted to trying to find the "right" sources to answer the questions you may have. Put bluntly, if authoritative texts think enough of certain researchers to quote them at length or to cite them more than once, then a student about to embark on writing a graduate thesis probably stands to benefit by using them as well.

Think Meta-Cognitively the Entire Time You Are Looking for Sources. In Other Words, Ask Yourself What Kinds of Questions You Want Answered

It bears repeating: the best theses are tightly-focused and narrowly-defined, with a clear problem that needs to be addressed. When you look for sources for any graduate paper, you need to be constantly mindful of what you are trying to accomplish and what things you want those sources to do for you. If you can bear these things in mind, you stand a very good chance of locating materials that actually answer the important questions – or at least consider them – as opposed to finding resources that do nothing more than add useless "filler." As a final point, having a list of sub-questions with you will certainly aid in the organizational process. To put it another way, if you can fit books and articles into a framework in which specific sources are set aside to answer specific questions, you can go a long way towards producing a final thesis that is detailed, comprehensive, cuts to the core of the issue, and can even advance the general understanding on a difficult topic.

Points to Remember:

- Sprinkle your thesis with materials from leading scholars in the field
- Use writers cited in your course textbooks
- Use authoritative sources to find other sources

Notes:

Exercise Corner

Here is a good exercise: go through about five or six course textbooks on a particular subject (they can be undergraduate ones, if you wish; it doesn't matter). Which sources keep appearing in the bibliographies and which ones do not? If they keep appearing, why are they appearing? Then, look at the course book you found most enjoyable. Does it cite some authors more than once? Does it recommend some authors or sources? By answering these questions, you should start seeing that some research materials will aid your paper far more than other research materials.

? **Did you know** that the largest number of PhDs are awarded in education (7,700 per year) and engineering (6,500 per year), followed by health science, biomedical science, and psychology (between 5,000 and 6,000 per year)? (National Center for Education Statistics)

Chapter 9: How to Introduce Statistical Information

Introduction

At some point, most theses and dissertations will demand the use of statistics. How you introduce statistical information into your paper, though, will turn a mundane paper into an informative and even engrossing one and might be the difference between success and failure. For all students writing that critical graduate paper, three things must be borne in mind at all times: never lose sight of the fact that your data must help you resolve (or at least illuminate) your main problem; you should clearly define and explain the statistics you present (this can be done in a separate glossary section of the paper but should still be re-capitulated – briefly – in your methodology and conclusions section so that the reader is at no point confused); and you should be as transparent as possible when introducing statistics, both contextualizing the data (where it came from, how it was compiled) and acknowledging instances where the data may be imperfect. If you can follow these three basic criteria for injecting numbers into your research paper, you will gain the good will of your evaluator at precisely the same time as you render your paper more pertinent and persuasive.

Use only Data that Actually Proves a Point – Or at Least Illuminates an Issue

Thesis supervisors are busy professionals; they do not have a lot of time to wade through meaningless statistics that do not furnish them with further insight into a problem. Because of this, students who insert statistical information into their work must only inject information that is going to bolster their own argument or is going to at least make clear the practical and/or theoretical difficulties of a topic. To give one example of how valuable it is to have valid statistics – and valid statistics only – in a thesis, consider a paper devoted to highlighting the correlation between drugs and adolescent gang activity. If the paper chooses to cite numbers that pertain to something else – the correlation between family violence and gang activity, for example – that paper will be seriously compromised unless the additional numbers reinforce the significance of drug abuse in predicting juvenile delinquency. Put bluntly, "tangential" numbers distract the reader's focus from the core problem the paper is trying to resolve (and the argument being constructed) and the time and effort required to track down those statistics could have been better put towards proof-reading, re-writing certain sections, or re-assessing the methodology used in the paper. Like anything else in a thesis or dissertation, numbers must have some valence if they are to be welcome additions.

Clearly Define and Explain Statistics

Even skilled and experienced professionals can become easily confused when reading a paper in which statistics have not been explained. For example, it is surprisingly common for students to write that the relationship between a cause and an effect is 0.3 – without indicating whether or not the aforementioned 0.3 represents a significant correlation or a comparatively weak correlation. Therefore, students need to be very clear about what they consider "strong" and "weak" numbers when it comes to assessing the validity of different relationships; if they are uncertain as to whether or not a value is strong or weak, it is a good idea to look at similar studies done in the past for an idea of what values other scholars consider meaningful.

In a related vein, don't consider it foolish to define and explain certain statistical concepts – even if their meaning appears obvious. As much as anything else, instructors want the papers in front of them to be lucid and precise, and careful explanations go a long way towards achieving just that.

Be Transparent about Where Statistics Come From and How They Were Compiled – And Admit When the Stats "Don't Add Up"

To start with, if you are dealing with things like multivariate analysis, it should not be assumed that your audience is well-versed in this type of quantitative work; even veteran professors may become puzzled if there is no explanation given in the text for why something is there or if there is no definition provided for a mode of analysis that appears to combine quantitative and qualitative elements. As well, you have an obligation to contextualize any data appearing in your paper. Ultimately, that means indicating what sources the data came from, how the data was compiled, and under what conditions it was compiled (in other words, if the data was taken from a population that was acted upon by a number of variables and if the original researchers were plagued by various problems, such things need to be pointed out to readers). In the end, by considering (and ultimately including) information like the kind of information highlighted above, you accomplish two things: 1) you give the reader confidence in your judgment; and 2) you actually force yourself to evaluate the statistics you are interested in with an eye towards removing stats that clearly are compromised by their own internal shortcomings. As a last point, by admitting in your paper that the statistics you use – be they your own or someone else's – are not perfect (even if they are the best you could come up with), you add to your credibility and communicate to the reader that you are cognizant of where further research needs to be done. Follow these simple steps, and you should have no problem introducing statistics into your work in a fashion that will bolster your thesis.

Points to Remember:

- Use statistics that bolster your thesis argument
- Define and explain your statistics
- Be honest with your reader and acknowledge it when your data doesn't add up

Notes:

Exercise Corner

Well, there is no hard-and-fast "exercise" that can really, in and of itself, aid a student who is trying to figure out how to introduce stats into a thesis or dissertation. Nonetheless, there is a frame of mind you should adopt. Specifically, you should ask: Do these stats really help my paper? Do they actually answer my research questions? If I was reading this paper, would I see the connection between the statistics and what the writer is trying to resolve? If you don't like the answers you are getting back, then the stats simply aren't the right ones. Incidentally, it's a good exercise to show your stats to someone who is familiar with the subject area to see if he or she shares the enthusiasm you do for the statistics you are using; a lot of the time, you may realize that the data set you have in mind really doesn't answer anything.

? **Did you know** that 26% of students pay for at least part of their tuition with credit cards? (Nellie Mae)

Chapter 10: How to Defend Your Thesis or Dissertation

Introduction

The most nerve-wracking part of the thesis process is the final oral defense. However, it does not have to be an unhappy experience. Particularly, you can achieve success by doing three simple things: 1) Asking questions about the evaluation committee in advance so you have an understanding of what they want and how they conduct themselves; 2) Focusing your efforts in advance of the presentation on the things in your thesis that you have the most difficulty with or that you anticipate will bring the most questions from the committee; 3) Having an awareness of the structure of the presentation, how much time you have for each part of your defense presentation and having in place a format that gives most of the attention to your work and not to someone else's. If these things are done, the thesis defense can be a happy and memorable experience.

Ask Questions about the Evaluation Committee and Get a "Feel" for What They Are After

When you go in front of any committee for a thesis defense, you need to know who you are dealing with. As a rule, it is considered good form to talk to your department chair and colleagues about the composition of the committee and who might be a problem; you should especially consult with your chair about how to minimize tensions between yourself and those on the committee you feel possess personalities (or views) at odds with your own. One other good idea is to request a final meeting with the committee members just prior to the defense so that you have a strong idea of what their questions are most likely to be or what their perspectives are on the research you have done thus far. Be sure to communicate with them frequently and be receptive to their suggestions. Lastly, too many students fail to appreciate the importance of reviewing the feedback you have already received from committee members about your initial "rough" work. While it is not a "hard and fast" rule, questions raised during the feedback and consultation process are likely to be questions raised during the defense.

Focus Your Attention on the Areas of Your Research that Give You the Most Trouble

As you prepare for the big day, it is easy to devote plenty of attention to the things in your research you feel you have "nailed"; it is also easy to spend a lot of time preparing for your presentation by going over the more significant or revelatory aspects of your findings. However, evaluation committees are far less likely to quiz you on the things they suspect you know best of all than on the things they suspect give you trouble. As a result, you need to go over the sections of your thesis that you found most difficult – or at least the concepts with which you most struggled. Know the weakest parts best, and you will give yourself an excellent chance at success heading into the presentation. As an addendum, you owe it to yourself, certainly in the months leading up to the defense, to list all of the questions which have caused you difficulties during the course of tackling your thesis' main problem; you can probably expect those questions to surface at some point in the oral defense and you must be prepared for them. Lastly, request colleagues and those who are familiar with your research to "quiz" you on the most challenging parts of the thesis in the weeks preceding the presentation – and ask them to ask tough questions and to conduct

themselves as it is expected the committee members will conduct themselves. In the end, the more you shore up your weak points, and the more "dry runs" you go through on the eve of the defense, the better off you will be.

Go Into the Defense Presentation Aware of How Much Time You Have and What Format the Committee Wants

For the most part, dissertation defenses will last about 90 minutes to 2 hours; you should also plan a defense presentation of 10-15 minutes for the 2-hour presentation – mostly because the defense will chiefly consist of a dialogue between yourself and the committee members about the validity of your findings. Well before you enter the room to start your defense, you should include your department chair in the defense preparation process, specifically asking him or her if he/she has any preferences for the presentation format – or if his or her colleagues, collectively, have any preferences. As a rule, you should present to your chair the presentation outline in advance so that he or she will be aware of the basic flow of your presentation; they may even offer you some much-needed advice on what needs to change. For instance, most dissertation defenses will expect power-point presentations – not overheads. As well, the results, conclusion (or discussion) sections of your paper must make up the bulk of your presentation: evaluation committees are not particularly interested in somebody else's findings or in literature reviews, so avoid them. In closing, you must keep your points succinct, you must quickly present your chief argument or conclusion, you must anticipate (and acknowledge) the areas of your paper you expect the committee to disagree with (or at least have some reservations about) and you must take into account their sensibilities when crafting the format of your presentation.

Points to Remember:

- Ask questions about your evaluation committee before the defense takes place
- Focus your attention before the defense on the areas of your research that have caused you – or are causing you – the most difficulty
- Know beforehand how much time you will have when you defend and what the format of the defense will be

Notes:

Exercise Corner

To get the "gist" of this chapter, you can do a lot worse than to have your own mock defense. That is to say, prepare for your defense in accordance with the aforementioned rules and suggestions laid down in chapter 10. Then, after you've done so, have a group of friends (or, better yet, people you know in the department who have some expertise in this area) come by and present your thesis to them. This exercise will give you an appreciation for the contents of the chapter – and impress upon you how beneficial proper preparation really can be.

? **Did you know** that women earn 59% of all master's degrees? (National Center for Education Statistics)

Chapter 11: How To Cut Down on the Time Your Thesis or Dissertation Will Take to Complete

Introduction

Students who are in graduate school work on tight schedules: writing a thesis is often only one of the many things they have to find time to do. Because of this, "tricks" or tactics that will cut down on the amount of time a thesis takes to write are invaluable. With that in mind, the next few paragraphs will discuss four things that students can do to make writing a thesis faster and easier. In no particular order, they are: starting with the literature review first (and doing so early on) and developing the problem to be explored from that; talking to people about what sources are especially good and which ones seem to do a good job of highlighting controversies in the subject area; Using an idea tree or concept tree to map out visually how everything will fit in your paper; and making it a point to do at least some work on your thesis every day so that you do not become overwhelmed and stressed out at the last minute – something which always slows things down at the worst possible time. Follow these simple steps, and writing a thesis suddenly becomes a less daunting task.

Start with Your Literature Review First and Then Proceed to Develop a Specific Thesis and Problem Statement

Put simply, too many students begin first with a thesis and then try to find information that supports that thesis. The end result of this is that students spend frustrating periods of time trying to find narrow bits of information instead of looking for broad patterns and trends in the literature that can *then* be put towards crafting a thesis or problem to be explored. Perhaps the best way to put it is that the literature – both its failings and its strengths – should lead you instead of you trying to "lead" the literature. Naturally enough, many students who successfully complete the journey of writing a thesis already have in mind (in some cases, far in advance) a problem statement or thesis they want to explore – but they have those things in mind because they have explored the literature already and have seen topics or issues they want to explore in detail. In the end, becoming familiar with the literature as an undergraduate will make writing the final thesis that much easier.

Talk to People about the Sources You Should Be Using

Students who are interested in writing a thesis need to talk to professors and graduate students (especially teaching assistants) about the topics/issues that interest them. At the top of the list of things to discuss is what sources they should be looking at if they want an overview of the subject matter. More importantly, students should be asking people – preferably by their last year as an undergraduate – what source materials are most effective at bringing to light the controversies raging over certain topics. For example, if you are a history student interested in writing about the factor - or group of factors - leading to the Holocaust, you need to consult texts and journal articles that do a good job of presenting dueling interpretations of a specific item (like the peculiar features of German anti-Semitism and its role in facilitating the genocide). The more you can find authoritative sources that acknowledge debates in the subject area that interests you, the more you can save time and energy by looking

in the places that will yield the most rewards in the shortest amount of time.

Before You Start Writing, Use an "Idea Tree" or "Concept Tree"

Just listing the important concepts/ideas/questions you want to discuss is not enough: you need to have a clear idea of what sub-concepts, smaller ideas, and sub-questions you want to look at as part of the process of answering the problem at the core of your paper. An "idea tree" that visually displays your main ideas and the smaller ideas emanating from those main ideas is excellent for giving you a sense of where certain things "fit" in the broad scheme of things. After you have come up with the aforementioned "tree," it is not a bad idea to then arrange the concepts/ideas/questions comprising your tree into the form of a "family tree" in which you have at the top the most important things you want to discuss, then the lesser items arranged in descending order. Some graduate students will go directly to the second type of tree when they are plotting their paper, but – because the brain-storming process can be haphazard – it is really better to start with the conventional idea tree (with "big" branches and smaller ones or large bubbles and smaller bubbles extending from them). In any case, when you plot out your thesis before-hand, the process of writing it becomes much faster and easier.

Do a Little Bit Each Day

Whether it's doing research or writing a single page, having a disciplined work schedule is the key to success when it comes to making the thesis writing process go that much faster. Because stress tends to debilitate and actually diminishes productivity, doing a little here and a little there spares you the last-minute press that makes difficult tasks almost insurmountable. The other thing about a disciplined work schedule is that it allows time for frequent review – review that can allow you to cut out wasteful ideas or tangents that needlessly take up time and energy and therefore slow the completion of the thesis. All told, discipline can speed up the entire process in a number of ways.

Points to Remember:

- Start with your literature review first
- Talk to people with expertise beforehand about the sources you should be using
- Keep a strict regimen and do something on your paper every day

Notes:

Exercise Corner

As an exercise, start writing a research paper in which you start by introducing the thesis first. At the same time, start writing a research paper in which you begin first with the literature review. For the first paper, don't follow a rigid schedule for writing things, but simply give yourself an objective of doing so much each week as opposed to each day; for the second paper, make it a rule to do something on it each day. Finally, for the first paper, don't ask for assistance from anyone; for the second paper, be sure to get someone's feedback about the sources you are using. If you follow this simple exercise, you will soon realize why the tips in chapter 11 are important.

? **Did you know** that 56% of doctoral students earn their degree with less than $10,000 in debt? (Beta Gamma Sigma International)

A Timeline Calendar *For How Long Each Chapter of the Thesis/Dissertation Should Take*

The Initial Proposal (March-September) With the exception of the literature review, this really should take longer than any other part of the thesis/dissertation inasmuch as you are introducing your statement of the problem, your thesis, your methodology and your expected conclusions; in short, you are providing the template for your paper. Consequently, you should ideally set aside 4-6 months for doing this part of your dissertation or thesis; after all, your proposal will be the guide-post for your later research and will be the guide your instructor uses to evaluate your progress. In the end, if you are expected to present a proposal for your professor's perusal in the fall, starting in the spring-time is a good idea.

The Dissertation/Thesis body (September 1 to September 15): the Introduction. If the proposal has been done properly, the introductory chapter should not take more than a couple weeks to do – if that. After all, your proposal will have already outlined the statement of the problem, will have already defined the purpose of your study as well as your expected conclusions, and will have provided a rationale for conducting your research in the first place (in other words, it will make clear why your study matters). Further, given as your literature review will precede everything else, you will have a good idea of the previous research, the current status of the problem, and of the terminology to be defined. Again, no more than a couple weeks should be devoted to this introductory part.

Chapter 2: the Literature Review with research question section (actual writing should take 2-4 weeks, or from September 16 to, max, October 16) This will take more time than any other section; in truth, for a graduate-level paper, the entire process – from initial research to actually writing the review itself – can easily run into several years. For the writing of the literature review alone, excluding any research, the process should really take no longer than the introductory paragraph – about a couple weeks to, at max, a month. Overall, if you start writing your dissertation or thesis on September 1, by the middle of October you should have these two chapters completed. All of this, of course, assumes that your research has gone well and you are well-positioned to simply start writing as opposed to having to do more research.

Chapter 3: Methodology (October 17 to November 17) This chapter should build upon the methodology section of your proposal; ergo, it should be fairly simple to write – as long as you gave some thought to your methodology when writing the initial proposal. As a rule, labeled sub-sections outlining participants, testing or measurement procedures, and the limitations of the

methodology should all make up this part of the paper. Given as some limitations may not emerge until after the study is complete, it is sometimes a good idea to leave this section until after the results of the study have been tabulated. As with the previous two chapters, the actual writing process – allowing for revisions – should take between 2 to 4 weeks. The point here is that the hard part, finding the literature and giving your paper a focus and structure, is done at the start when you do your initial research and construct your proposal; by the time you start writing your methodology chapter, most of your serious problems should be resolved.

Chapter 4: *Results (November 18 to December 18)* If you started writing your dissertation/thesis by the first week in September, then the end of October is when you should start preparing to write the results chapter. The results section describes your findings, the data collected, and offers an analysis of what you have uncovered; any conclusions you arrive at should be supported by what is stated in your results section. This chapter is easy to write as the data sets are already available; you simply have to elaborate on what has been found.

Chapter 5: Discussion (December 19 to January 19) The discussion chapter should evaluate and analyze the results obtained in the results section or chapter; the analysis should be done in light of the research questions and original problem statement. This is the section in which you draw final conclusions and interpret the final results; it is also here where you discuss practical applications, the consequences of your findings, and any limitations that challenge the validity of your work. This is the "fun" part of your paper and should not take up more than a month of your time – though, ideally, you should have it written in less time than that.

The 10 Questions *That Every Graduate Student Should Ask Themselves:*

Questionnaire. Here are a series of questions every serious student should ask him or herself about his or her thesis or dissertation:

1. Why does this paper matter to you? Why are you doing it?
2. What is your ultimate objective for this paper?
3. If I include this in the paper, will it help the paper or hurt the paper?
4. Have I included all of the necessary sections for this paper? In other words, have I included every section and chapter my supervisor has requested?
5. Have I made a list of all of the perspectives I want to examine in the paper? Have I addressed all of these perspectives?
6. Do I see any problems emerging with my methodology?
7. Have I made an effort to really understand everything I am putting into my paper?
8. Am I making a list of terms (a glossary) that I can use to familiarize myself with new concepts?
9. Am I anticipating questions that my evaluator or the committee might ask of me?
10. Am I following my own calendar timeline for each section?

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