

Structure of a Thesis

Guidelines for Students on Structuring a Dissertation/Thesis (Social Science)

Introduction:

- ◆ Provide a rationale for the research
- ◆ Introduce yourself
- ◆ State the main research questions
- ◆ Explain and justify contribution to knowledge
- ◆ Provide an overview of the thesis
- ◆ State content and purpose of each chapter
- ◆ Show links between them

Critique of the Literature:

In addition to points already made:

- ◆ Establish how sources were gathered
- ◆ Assess status and validity of sources
- ◆ Discuss distinctiveness of own findings in the light of other sources
- ◆ Apply theory to practice creatively
- ◆ Assess contribution of sources to development of arguments/insights etc.
- ◆ Clarify/show how assumptions held are confirmed/disconfirmed

Methodology:

- ◆ The next chapter is concerned with methodology:
- ◆ Highlight key research aim(s) and related questions
- ◆ In the light of these, JUSTIFY choice of methodology
- ◆ Debate qualitative versus quantitative
- ◆ Discuss data gathering methods, the alternatives considered, decisions made and why
- ◆ Use literature to do this
- ◆ What has been done to enhance validity/reliability?
- ◆ Discuss HOW data was gathered and analysed: cyclically? Why?
- ◆ What decisions were made about the methods of analysis: which were chosen and why?
- ◆ Highlight ethical issues and how they were managed
- ◆ Prioritise ethical aspects/debate critical issues/locate within an ethical framework
- ◆ State how data is analysed; consider alternatives; JUSTIFY choice
- ◆ Define validity, reliability etc. and APPLY to own research
- ◆ Piloting: what are the specifics: which guidelines were used and how were they applied?
- ◆ What specific changes were made in the light of findings from piloting?

In the Analysis:

- ◆ Integrate findings and literature: tease out the distinctiveness of own research
- ◆ Where will originality be established?
- ◆ Triangulate: this is very important, otherwise analysis will not be as rigorous
- ◆ Identify themes/sub-themes
- ◆ Organise these into chapters
- ◆ Test and evaluate assumptions/hypotheses
- ◆ Answer the research questions and overall aim (do not leave these behind)
- ◆ Allow data to speak for itself; don't over-interpret
- ◆ If there are variables, ensure that these are considered
- ◆ Compare the two perspectives of (a) how things are (as found) with (b) how they ought to be
- ◆ Substantiate all claims made (this is fundamental)

In your Conclusion

- ◆ Remind the reader what you had set out to achieve/what has been achieved
- ◆ Emphasise the implications of your analysis: define readership, target groups
- ◆ Summarise your main arguments and findings, establishing the importance of the latter in terms of contributions made to existing knowledge/understanding of practice
- ◆ Emphasise the distinctive nature and importance of your findings
- ◆ Present and justify your recommendations; organise these under headings and address them to particular interest groups; say how the recommendations could/should be implemented; note challenges/constraints and opportunities/provide time scales
- ◆ A good conclusion reminds the reader of the purpose of the study and its importance
- ◆ It highlights key findings and how validly they were reached
- ◆ Nothing new should be introduced at this point
- ◆ It re-establishes the methodological strengths of the thesis while drawing attention to limitations
- ◆ Suggest how the research might be continued/the shortcomings it contains
- ◆ Confirms the contribution to knowledge
- ◆ Reports on how the study might be taken further
- ◆ Refers to the worth of the study for the writer and her immediate/wider audience of readers
- ◆ A Conclusion may be structured into the themes occurring in the main body
- ◆ Recommendations may be similarly organised.
- ◆ Your recommendations should be:
 - ◆ Achievable/logical/valid recommendations are essential
 - ◆ They should also be interesting and creative
 - ◆ Avoid an 'Is that it?' reaction by readers
 - ◆ Should also be clearly defined with timescales and metrics (as appropriate), as well as
 - ◆ Sensitive and empathetic/your readership again
 - ◆ Should be clear for whom intended
 - ◆ How they will be achieved
 - ◆ Costed if necessary
 - ◆ Consequences are referred to/hypothesised
- ◆ Overall, a most important part of the thesis, the part which makes its relevance apparent and contribution to knowledge clear
- ◆ Essential to keep this to the fore

Presentation:

- ◆ Punctuation, grammar and spelling should be flawless
- ◆ Writing should be fluent
- ◆ Keep readership in mind
- ◆ Keep sentences short (25 words): helps retain focus, minimise digression
- ◆ They are much:
 - (i) easier to write
 - (ii) easier to follow and
 - (iii) easier to read
- ◆ Use the active voice rather than the passive:
 - (i) John opened the door (Active)
 - (ii) The door was opened by John (Passive)
- ◆ Avoid emphasis words such as 'very, extremely, highly' unless there are good reasons for doing so
- ◆ Do not use 'significant' unless referring to statistical significance, otherwise you may confuse/mislead
- ◆ Don't exaggerate
- ◆ Content should be logically sequenced
- ◆ Referencing should employ Harvard system
- ◆ Referencing should be meticulous/consistent

Self-assess check:

- ◆ Accuracy of title
- ◆ Suitability of headings
- ◆ Logical sequencing: is anything missing?
- ◆ Bridging... 'Having done X, Y follows (with reasons)
- ◆ Signposting: for example, chapter overviews
- ◆ Fluency: does any part become tedious/dense (use of appendices)?
- ◆ Is it all relevant?
- ◆ Editing and presentation (see over)
- ◆ Validity of conclusions reached: are these clear? evidenced? logical?
- ◆ Ethical soundness and objectivity, sensitivity