

University Library: Skills for Researchers

Guide to Academic Writing for Doctoral Students

A completed doctoral thesis is a lengthy and complex piece of work that needs to be well written in order to convey its contributions to the field clearly and coherently. Starting your first pieces of writing can be intimidating, but getting into the habit of writing regularly will help to develop fluency and style. In the early stages of your research your writing can be in the form of responses to articles and texts you read, or a record of initial ideas and questions. Many students find it useful to write a research log, and this can help to bridge the gap to more fully-formed chapter writing as well as capturing ideas and information for later use. When you do start drafting chapters, you might find the following suggestions helpful.

Break the thesis down

- Think about the chapters you will need to include. This will vary between disciplines, but it can be helpful to identify the major sections, topics or themes that you need to cover.
- Now divide your word count by the rough number of chapters you anticipate writing. This will give you a more manageable figure to aim for when writing your first chapter.
- Think about the chapter that you would like to begin with (this does not need to be the introduction or first chapter!). Can you break it down into further subsections?
- Start to build a detailed plan for this chapter, adding estimated word counts for each segment of the chapter if possible.
- This will help to break down your thesis (normally between 40,000-80,000 words) to much more manageable chapter lengths of around 6,000 to 10,000 words, or even subsections of 3,000-5,000 words.

Start to build your structure

- Try to develop a preliminary structure – both for the overall thesis and for each chapter as you progress – as this can help with writing, but don't be alarmed if it changes.
- Think about what each chapter needs to pick up from the previous one, and where it needs to take the discussion to next.
- Use 'echo links' across your thesis, where clusters of words or key phrases are used throughout, particularly at chapter introductions and conclusions (Rankin, 2001, p. 30).
- It is also useful to make connections between chapters very clear: *'as the Introduction noted ...'*; *'... which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four ...'*; *'building on the previous chapter by ...'*

Plan and write effective paragraphs

- Make sure each paragraph is adding something to your discussion, or advancing your argument.
- Consider what the point of the paragraph is, and try to sum this up in a word or phrase. If the paragraph doesn't successfully address or convey this key idea (or help to build to a stage where you do), it needs to be re-written.
- Ensure that the first sentence of the paragraph makes this key point clear to the reader.

- Does the content of the paragraph then do something useful or productive? Does it build on, explain or criticise the issue being discussed, raise further questions or add important contextual details? Is there anything that is unnecessary, or any details that are missing?

Writing about other people's research

- Using reporting verbs (e.g. 'suggests'; 'argues'; 'demonstrates') can be a subtle way to signal your interpretation or assessment of an idea or piece of research.
- Thinking about the differences between these words will help your writing to become more nuanced, as well as conveying your thoughts or interpretations more clearly.
- You may want to vary the verbs used to signal when something is contentious ('asserts'), is explained more clearly ('clarifies'; 'unpacks') or is proposed ('speculates'; 'suggests'). Consider how reporting verbs are used here to help illustrate the writer's evaluation of the research being discussed:

'Addison asserts [xxxxx], despite having an unsatisfactory explanation for [xxxxx], whilst Davis speculates more tentatively that [xxxxx] is rather more complex than this.'

Common writing mistakes

- Academic writing should **not** use contractions (e.g. 'don't' should be 'do not')
- Apostrophes should indicate possession or a contraction (e.g. 'it's' = 'it is')
 - Possession singular: 'the doctor's wages'
 - Possession plural: 'the doctors' strike'
 - Apostrophes are **not** used for plurals!
- Always write an abbreviation out in full the first time you use it, with the shortened version in brackets afterwards: 'The Department for Education (DfE) stated...'
- Affect/effect: 'affect' is a verb ('the weather affects my mood') whereas 'effect' is a noun ('it has an effect on ice-cream sales')
- 'There' refers to a place or idea ('There is a theory that...')
- 'Their' denotes ownership ('Their research shows...')
- 'They're' is a contraction of 'they are' (and so should **not** be used in academic writing!)

References

Rankin, E. (2001) The work of writing: insights and strategies for academics and professionals. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Further reading

Brewer, R. (2007) Your PhD thesis: How to plan, draft, revise and edit your thesis. Abergele: Study Mates

Oliver, P. (2013) Writing your thesis. 3rd edn. London: Sage Publications.



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