

Putting the Thesis Together: Structure and Coherence

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By the end of this session some key takeaways include:

- typical PhD structures
- ideas on planning structure and organising the whole beast!
- where to prioritise time, effort, and word count.
- key signposts for coherence.
- how to maintain focus and how to signal focus for the reader.
- patterns for structuring chapters.
- checklists for coherent and logical structure.

You will also have the opportunity to consider your own thesis structure plan in light of this presentation.

Learning Outcomes

Many of these suggestions are merely that. Percentages and word limit noted here are ‘rules of thumb’ or approximations only.



Please consult your supervisors for full and discipline-specific advice.

Waiver

- Gives authority to you ‘writer’s voice’/work.
- Your examiners want it!
- Forces you to focus and clarify your argument to yourself and your readers.

Why is structure and coherence important?

Because it gives authority to your thesis.

Because your readers (that is, your examiners and supervisors) want a clear sense of structure and coherence.

Because attention to structure and coherence forces you to be crystal clear about your own argument every step of the way thus enabling you to explain yourself very clearly to your readers.

Start planning at the beginning and keep developing this throughout.



When should you have a clear idea of structure?

But don't be anxious if you do not have a clear plan at the end of the first year (or even the second for many). This should be a moveable feast for some time. It is good if you constantly reconsider your structure. This means you are responding to the data rather than trying to force the data around some preconceived structure.

- In groups, write as many possible chapters/parts of a PhD that you can think of.
- Your group may come up with a few varieties of thesis structures – what are they? Which disciplines do the members of your group come from?

Basic structures

- Title page
- Abstract
- Preface and/or acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations, tables, etc.
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Materials and methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Appendices
- Index

Massey Library Thesis Presentation Guide ('order')

Go to Proquest for thesis examples in your discipline/field and then check with your supervisors. Go for Austrolasian examples.

Lead-in

- Title page
- Abstract
- Preface and/or acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations, tables, etc.
- **Introduction** (Overall)

Body (each chapter contains the following)

- Methodology
- Results
- Discussions
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- **Conclusion** (overall)
- Appendix
- Biographical Sketch of Author

Thesis 'by publication'



What is your core thesis question/hypothesis?

The thesis question/hypothesis

This guides structure and cohesion. Keep referring to it.

- Make a list of discrete sets of data/areas/themes/concepts you have been writing about.
- Are these looking like chapters or sections of chapters?
- How many words/pages do you plan to dedicate to each?
- How do you trace changes in the way you conceptualise your structure as the thesis progresses?
- How do each of these parts strengthen your response/s to your guiding question/hypothesis?

Audit what you have

- Ask your supervisors for ‘model theses’ in your discipline and look at the structures employed.
- Length (max of 100,000 words). How will you structure these? 10 chapters @ 10,000 words each/5 chapters @ 20,000 words each?
- Introduction, Methodology, LitReview, Data, Discussion, Conclusion chapters?
- Thesis by publication?

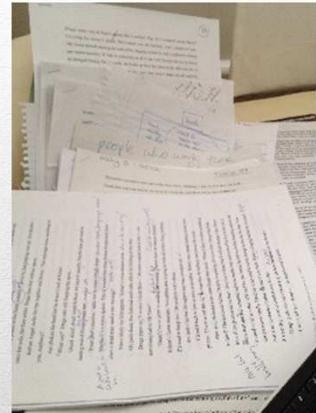
Organisation of the Whole

Thesis by publication: Linking and coherence is imperative (see doctoral handbook page 63).

Overwrite and be prepared to edit to bits?

or

Seriously constrain yourself to the word limit from the start?



Overwriting

Remember: It can take weeks or months of carefully considered editing at the end to make big cuts in a complex text. 100,000 words includes all footnotes, endnotes, tables, figures and diagrams (not bibliography and appendices)

Abstract: 350 words.

- Subdivide reasonably easily into chapters
- Why 10,000 words?
- Minimum of 6,000 words per chapter. Why?
- Content chapters: 7 is a magic number
- Two-tier structure or simply indicate links between chapters in titles.

Main text (~80,000 words)

Main text (~80,000 words)

(Be flexible about these points). Subdivide reasonably easily into chapters (max 10,000 words).

Why 10,000 words? Easier to: organise internally; convert into journals or book chapters (~6-8,000 words).

Chapter – min of 6,000. Why? Shorter chapters appear insubstantial or as an ‘add-on’.

Content chapters: 7 is a magic number (readers can hold the series in the forefront of their mind – and so can you!)

Consider dividing all chapters into two main themes. 1-4 one aspect of a meta topic and 5-8 with the other aspect of a meta topic. (e.g. National versus local processes of waste minimisation).

Core

- High research value-added/ ‘original/ish’ stuff
- 75% of your work publishable ☺

Non-core

- Lead-in material
- Lead-out material

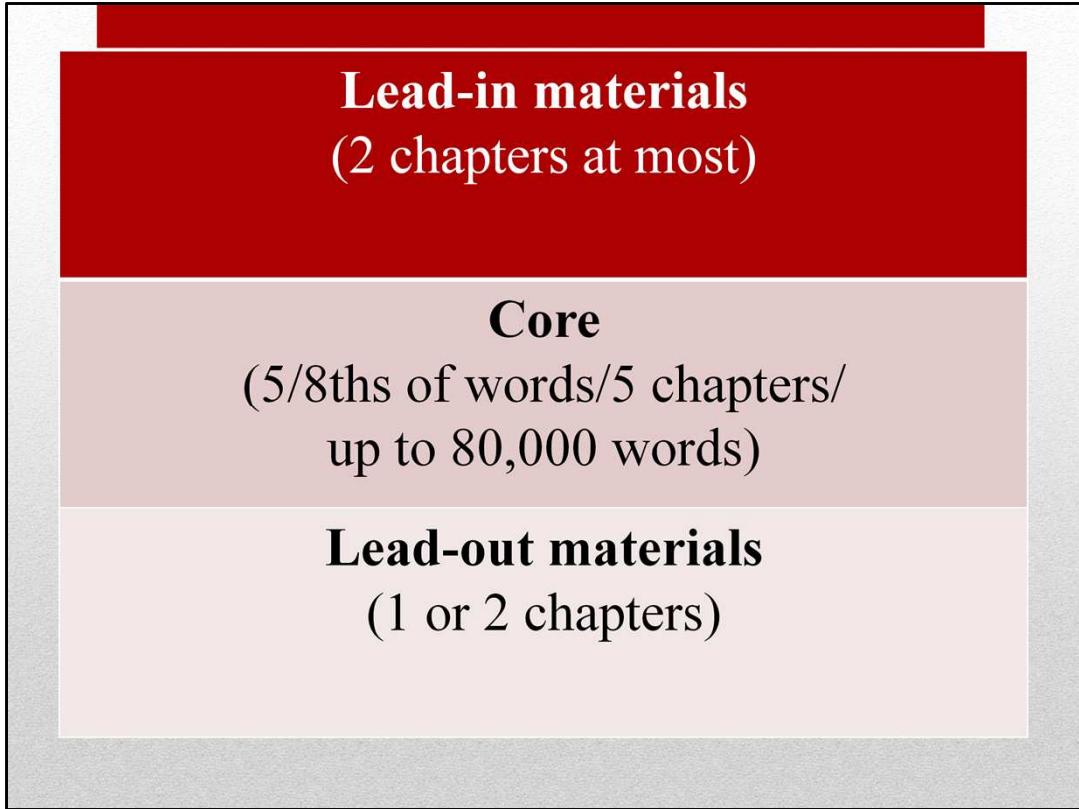
Core and non-core aspects

Core: High research value-added. The core contributes to originality either by ‘discovery of new facts’ or by ‘the exercise of independent critical power’. That is, all the most substantively new sections of your research (the ones that determine whether you get a doctorate or not). Original-ish stuff. Therefore, around 75% of your work needs to be publishable. Good to think about!

Non-core:

Lead-in material: Scene setting, setting up, account of your methods (unless your methods are new and publishable), contextual material, historical, positionality of the researcher, introducing participants, rationale. Needs careful management.

Lead-out material: book-closing, providing an integrated summation or restatement of what has been found and setting it in a wider context.



Lead-in materials
(2 chapters at most)

Core
(5/8ths of words/5 chapters/
up to 80,000 words)

Lead-out materials
(1 or 2 chapters)

- Thesis title
- Abstract
- Chapter headings
- Contents page
- Preface
- Introductory chapter

(All these set up, signpost, and frame the core)



Heavily cueing and branding the core

What do readers need to know in order to appreciate the value-added elements to come in the core chapters? You will not know this at the beginning of your PhD. This develops later. However, this needs to be considered in the early planning of your thesis structure.

- Don't leave all the good bits to the end! (last ¼ or 1/3 of the thesis).
- Over-loading the front end = sacrificing space for the core.
- Identifying what is core and what is not is a critical process. Honesty is essential here!

How do I avoid front and back end-loading?

Social sciences: tendency to over-extend the front end with lead-in materials and take forever to get to the good stuff. Also long 'legacy' chapters (literature done before) should be avoided.

One chapter of literature framed closely around your central research question from the start

OR

Relevant literature threaded carefully throughout the thesis?

Separate Methodology chapter

OR

‘Research Methods Appendix’?

Getting to the core

Literature Review Chapter

- Avoid raising a lot of broader issues you will never discuss again or you have little or no value-added contribution to make.
- Focus on material readers ‘need to know’ to appreciate your research contribution and no more.

Methodology chapter:

Separate chapter or ‘Research Methods Appendix’? (May help to avoid the disruption of the flow of the argument this way?)

“In my thesis I am arguing that ...”

“Why should I believe what I am reading?”

**throwing a lot of fancy
dancy words around
does not make your
argument more valid**

Keep reflecting on the purpose of your thesis

Think about this: Why do you believe your thesis? What made you believe or consider your central idea in the first place? What made your thinking develop in a particular direction through the course of your research? What made you question it from time to time and yet come back eventually to the same/similar conclusion? If it changed, what influenced that change?

Express as clearly as you can what that argument is and then refine it. Think about the various steps of the defence you are going to make. The support for the thesis will be complex and will have to be developed in pieces. What is the clearest way for you to articulate that overall argument in such a large piece of work? If you are unsure, further reading and research will likely be needed.

“Why should I believe what I am reading?” Are there gaps in the argument. Lack of logical progression and coherence? Another set of reading eyes is essential. That is what your supervisors are for!

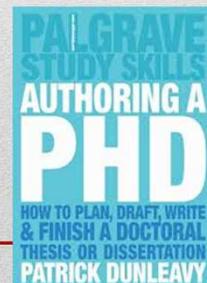
- Only for you and your supervisor/s.
- Main storyline of your thesis.
- Write your first one as early as possible.
- Keep revising throughout.
- Summarises your substantive arguments and conclusions.

Maintain a 3-4 page rolling synopsis

Summarises your substantive arguments and conclusions – what you have claimed, what you have discovered, and what you hope to discover.

- Descriptive explanations
- Analytic explanations (robust organizing categories)
- Argumentative explanations
- Matrix patterns

Four patterns of explanation (Dunleavy, 2003)



Descriptive (externally structured) explanations: narrative, chronological, institutional theses ('guidebook' structure). Also, spatially organised work in geography, biographical work. Very demanding to make these work and requires a high level of authoring skills. The meta-level descriptive account needs to be carefully woven into analytic concepts or argumentative themes. If this is not done properly, it may end up a thin description and a purely structured work of a complex topic without substance.

Analytic: Thematically structured. Mental categories of my own choosing.
E.g. Complex processes split into topics: An historic event split into economic, cultural, political, and social changes or a novel or play categorised into myths, themes etc., scalar (e.g. Paul's thesis – micro, meso, macro levels split into conceptual themes – sociocultural, political, economic barriers to adaptation to climate change).
Danger: splitting up a complex of interconnected phenomena that should never be separated. Inauthentic. Loses temporality, connectivity, relatedness etc.

Argumentative:

Organise data in one interpretation or intellectual position and express them coherently. Next, assemble an opposing set of interpretations.
Cons: arguments usually come in pairs: one chapter (pro): one (con). May not be enough for 8 chapters. Covering all possible interpretations is not desirable or feasible. Repetitive. At most 3 lines of argument.

Matrix patterns: (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 74) for matrix diagram

Analytic plus argumentative
Analytic plus descriptive
Argumentative plus descriptive



Checklists for cohesion

- Does each section of the thesis perform its proper function? Does it fulfils its promise (made in the introduction of this section?)
- Does each section of the thesis logically and coherently develop your argument?
- Have you used subheadings to logically structure each section?
- Does your table of contents correspond to the major divisions and subdivisions of the text?

Checklist for a coherent and logical structure

The table of contents tell the reader at once if there are any major problems in the logic of your thesis.

Link chapters in text: e.g. ‘In this chapter, the key question that emerged in Chapter Three will be explored in relation to...’.

- Does it say why the work is being done?
- Is the aim clear?
- Is it clear how you intend to achieve this aim?
- Are the thesis claims clearly outlined?
- Does the introduction outline the pathway that the reader will travel in arriving at the conclusion?
- Is there a roadmap provided in the introduction so that your intentions are clear?

Introductory chapter

- Read the introduction of each chapter in order. Do they follow logically?
- Read the introduction of each section in each chapter. Do they follow logically?
 - Is there a link to the main idea of the previous chapter?
 - Does each introduction foreshadow the argument to be made in the following section or sections clearly?

All chapters

- Each section or subsection should begin with a sentence or transition phrase linking it with what has gone before. For example, 'given what was outlined in section 3.2.4 or 'turning from international to local concerns...'
- Use a highlighter and identify the topic sentences. Where there is none, identify the main point of the paragraph and write this up as the topic sentence.

- 1.** Link back to previous chapter and earlier parts of the thesis. Why is this chapter needed?
- 2.** Chapter aim and function within overall thesis.
- 3.** How you intend to achieve the aim in this chapter.

Chapter Introductions

- Are sentences arranged so that there is a logical flow of ideas?
- Do paragraphs flow (not jump) between ideas?
- Have you used linking sentences at the beginning and end of paragraphs to improve the coherence and clarity of your work?
- Highlight key words, terms, phrases, and ideas.
- Use a highlighter and identify the topic sentences.

Coherence within paragraphs

Highlight key words, terms, phrases, and ideas. These can help draw thematic threads throughout your thesis. Use these in your text, particularly in your topic sentences. It will help the reader stay on track with your argument.

Treat your reader as an intelligent, curious person who knows little to nothing about your topic. This will remind you to define key terms, to provide enough background information, and to make your points clear without assuming the reader knows anything about it.

Check signposts through all levels of text (including headings, subheadings). As you will be articulating an argument through a long document (100,000 words), you need to carefully signpost throughout to make your work clear and accessible. Also signposts words and phrases: first, next, finally. Linking words: however, also, too, in addition, like, similarly, in the same way, but, on the contrary, therefore, as a result.

Provide directions or present and overview: The third chapter will cover' , 'In chapter two we examined...' 'We have seen that the key question which emerged...'

- Does each chapter conclusion respond to the stated aim for this chapter (given in your introduction)
- Does each conclusion foreshadow or link to the following chapter?
- Does it clearly respond to the ‘so what?’ factor?

Chapter conclusions

Conclusions should not be mere summaries but show how the chapter is advancing the argument as a whole.

- Complex data.
- Deeper values pulling against each other and underpinning choice. What are these values? List them.
- Decide which is privileged and provide rationale.
- Use this thinking process so that it drives your thesis.
- Don't be afraid to cut out often large chunks – even chapters.

When structuring is problematic

This is usually due to the complexity of the data.

Due also to deeper values pulling against each other and underpinning choice.

What are these values? List them.

Then decide which is most important, and ought to be privileged. Write about your thinking through this process so this is clear to your examiners that you have gone down a path not obvious to them.

Use this thinking process so that it drives your thesis.

Don't be afraid to cut out often large chunks – even chapters if they no longer support the direction of your thesis or your structure.