How Theses Get Written:
Some Hot Tips

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Outline

- Part 1: Writing your thesis

  (1) Context: What is a thesis (for)?

  (2) How Do I Get Started?

  (3) What Should My Thesis Contain?

  (4) How Do I Get Finished?

  (5) Summary

- Part 2: The Examiner's View

  (1) Oh God, not another thesis to read...

  (2) What's this one about?

  (3) Now there must be some corrections...

  (4) Let's see, what can I ask the candidate?

What is a thesis?

- An argument

- An exposition of an original piece of work

- The product of an apprenticeship

- Probably the largest (most self-indulgent) piece of work you'll ever do

- Something that could be published

"A thesis for the PhD must form a distinctive contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality shown by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power." (U. of London regulations)

Examination Issues

- The thesis is what you are examined on. Hence:
    - → **Choose your examiners well**
    - → **Target your thesis at them**
    - → **Keep abreast of their work**

- Whatever your research is like, it's what you say in the thesis that matters

How do I get started?

- Do this today:
    - → **Decide your title**
    - → **Write your title page**
    - → **Start a file**
    - → **(Look at some theses in your area)**
    - → **Plan your argument**

Plan Your Argument

Introduction (area of study)	"A Ph.D. is examined by submission of a thesis...
The problem (that I tackle)	"Many students fail to complete their theses within the regulation four years...
Literature Survey	"Empirical studies indicate that late submission is highly correlated with delaying the start of the write-up...
My solution	"A model of DPhil study which encourages an early start to the thesis writing task is clearly desirable...
How I implement my solution	"Such a model encourages the student to plan a structure for the thesis and collect material for each chapter throughout their study...
The result	"Application of this model dramatically improves submission rates."

Plan your thesis

- Convert this argument into a chapter outline

- Start a file with a division for each chapter

- Collect material in this file

- Set out clearly what each chapter should say

What the thesis should contain

Title (and title page) - conveys a message

Abstract - for the librarian

Contents Listing - shows the right things are there

Acknowledgements - get your supervisor on your side!

Introduction - says "I am going to look at the following things".

Review of Previous Work - show you know the subject

Philosophy of Approach - no great detail

Plan of Attack - a bit more specific

Description of the work

Critical analysis of the results - show you know its limitations

Future Work - show you know what's missing

Conclusions - repetition of the intro, but with reference to the detail.

References - Cover the field; examiners will look for key references

Appendices - Nitty Gritty details that would clutter your eloquent description

Say everything thrice

- In the thesis as a whole:

What the thesis will say (Introduction)	Details of the work (Body)	What the thesis said (Conclusion)

- Within each chapter / section

What this section says (Signposting)	The details (Body)	What this section said (Summary)

- Within each paragraph…

- But it's not just repetition, it's linking and rationale.

Bibliography

- Keep a database of complete references
  - → **Use a consistent citation style**

- Note: readability is reduced by:
  - → **having to flick to bibliography (or foot of page)**
  - → **having too much detail**

- (assume the reader is familiar with the main references).

How do I get finished?

- Answer: by not getting stuck.

- You've written most of it ...

  ... but for the bits you're avoiding ...

  ... you keep rewriting other bits ...

  ... doing more reading ...

  ... tinkering with the layout ...

  ... seeking neat quotations ...

- STOP!!!

  Q: Why are they difficult to write?

  A: Because they are not relevant.

  → **Don't be afraid to change your plan if it proves too hard.**

  → **Be savage in cutting irrelevant bits.**

Reviewing

- Get other people to read your drafts

- Peers will give friendly comments (and may have the most time!)

- Supervisor will steer you

- Other academics will spot things your supervisor has missed.

- Above all, get the bugs out before the examiners see it.

Summary

- Start writing today (never tomorrow)

- Make up a title page for inspiration

- Write down your argument succinctly

- Turn the argument into a chapter plan

- Maintain a file of stuff to put into these chapters

- Don't be afraid to change the plan

The Examiner's View

- Oh God, not another thesis to read...

- Your examiners are busy people

- Examining theses is a chore, but:

  "It might help me keep up to date with an area of research"
  "It might inspire me"
  "I might learn something"

- Note: the reading will be done in trains, planes, and departmental meetings!

Examiner's first question

- What's this one about?
  - → **Examiners have little time available, so they want to extract the most juice in the shortest time:**

abstract

(bibliography)

conclusions

contents list
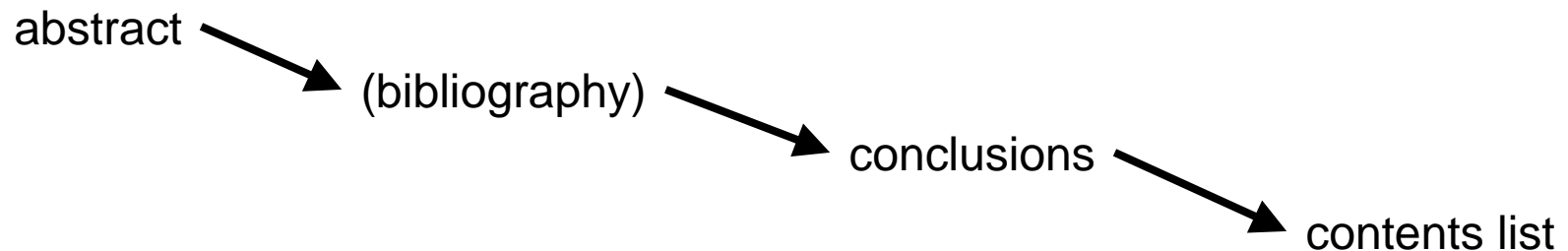
- This may be enough to decide whether it's worth a PhD.

- Then:
  - **1) What questions now spring to mind?**
  - **2) ...read through...**
  - **3) Were the questions answered?**

Corrections

- "Now there must be some corrections…"
  - → **Many examiners don't feel they've done the job unless they find some corrections to do.**

- Typical errors
  - → **Typographical / grammatical**
  - → **Poor presentation**
  - → **Missing statements / references**
  - → **(Superfluous / redundant statements)**
  - → **Missing pieces of work**
  - → **Whole sections missing...**
    - **research questions**
    - **critical review of literature**
    - **research methodology**
    - **presentation of results**
    - **discussion and conclusions**

Thesis defense

- "Let's see, what can I ask the candidate?"
  - → **The examiners may have decided before the exam whether to pass you.**

- Defense, viva, exam, ...
  - → **viva = "viva voce" = "lively discussion"**

- The exam is to check it's your work...
  - → **Talk fluently about the work; show you've thought about it (which you have!).**

- ...and a chance to clarify things that aren't clear in the thesis.
  - → **These are areas where corrections are likely.**

Summary

- Know your audience

- Help them understand:

- Keep it short; use signposts; get the contents right.

- Make sure you've covered the bases

- (Leave some simple mistakes in?)

What the examiners are looking for

[Adapted from Brown, G., and Atkins, M. (1988) Effective teacting in Higher Education. London: Routledge]

- Review of literature
  - → To what extent is the review relevant to the research study?
  - → Has the candidate slipped into "Here is all I know about x"?
  - → Is there evidence of critical appraisal of other work, or is the review just descriptive?
  - → How well has the candidate mastered the technical or theoretical literature?
  - → Does the candidate make the links between the review and his or her methodology explicit?
  - → Is there a summary of the essential features of other work as it relates to this study?

- Methodology
  - → What precautions were taken against likely sources of bias?
  - → What are the limitations in the methodology? Is the candidate aware of them?
  - → Is the methodology for data collection appropriate?
  - → Are the techniques used for analysis appropriate?
  - → In the circumstances, has the best methodology been chosen?
  - → Has the candidate given an adequate justification to the methodology?

- Presentation of results
  - → Have the hypotheses in fact been tested?
  - → Do the solutions obtained relate to the questions posed?
  - → Is the level and form of analysis appropriate for the data?
  - → Could the presentation of the results been made clearer?
  - → Are patterns and trends in the results accurately identified and summarized?
  - → Does the software appear to work satisfactorily?

- Discussion and Conclusions
  - → Is the candidate aware of possible limits to confidence/reliability/validity of the work?
  - → Have the main points to emerge from the results been picked up for discussion?
  - → Are there links made to the literature?
  - → Is there evidence of attempts at theory building or reconceptualisation of problems?
  - → Are there speculations? Are they well grounded in the results?