

# The Master thesis

## How to write a quality thesis

Jan Hesselberg, 2015

### Content of the thesis

It is important to *start as soon* as possible with the master thesis. To decide early on a theme generally and then gradually limit the focus topic-wise give you more time to find relevant research literature. The choice of objective should be based on your *interests* (rather than on your view on possible future job opportunities). It is also necessary when choosing a topic to think about the practical constraints that may arise in the field. Remember that you have limited time.

Limit the *objective* of your thesis as much as possible. Remember that time is short. The objective shall preferably be the very first paragraph of the introduction chapter. Then motivate why your topic and objective are important academically, and have societal relevance. Make the reader want to use time on reading your thesis. There shall *not* be any conclusion from your analysis in the introduction (that would reduce the excitement of finding out what your conclusions might be). End the introduction with one or two sentences on each of the chapters in order for the reader to get a short overview of the contents.

When deciding on your objective, remember that it is easier to make a good thesis when studying an existing phenomenon. It is difficult to work on something that may happen in future. It is also *not* easy to make an appropriate analysis out of an evaluation of a project.

The final formulation of the objective and the introduction chapter are best to *return to* at the very end of the thesis writing. The grading of your thesis is based on whether there is a complete one to one relationship between what you say you will do and what you actually include in your thesis.

It is important *not* to include information in the thesis that is *not* directly relevant for the objective. Descriptive information that is easily available for instance in an atlas, shall *never* be included. And be very careful with *repetitions*. It is seldom necessary to repeat a piece of information. If you think you have to repeat something, then write for instance ‘as mentioned earlier’. It is most irritating for the reader to have to again and again read the same information. Be especially careful to avoid repetition of numbers.

Do not discuss concepts or theories in your *theory* chapter which are *not* used later in the thesis. You may of course discuss several theories and compare them in order to argue for the most relevant theory to use in your study. It may also be the case that you find interesting viewpoints in different theories that you may want to test out empirically.

For some relevant objectives there is a difficulty with finding an applicable theory at a high level of abstraction. The thesis does not become of less value (or get a lower grade) by using a theory at a lower level of abstraction. Furthermore, the theory chapter may only contain a discussion of concepts and empirical findings, cases and/or generalized data, from other places in the world (a literature review).

Today information is more easily available than only a few years back. The ideal of ‘going back’ to original sources may, however, still prove time consuming. Use the literature and sources you find by less use of time but remember to make the appropriate references to the original sources.

In the chapter on *method*, describe only the way you have gone about collecting your material. Do not hide your weaknesses. It is a strength to tell the reader about weak points in the data, and how they may affect the conclusions. It will often be impossible, given time and resource constraints, to follow a method completely according to the book. Try your utmost to get as close to the methodological ideal as possible, and give the reasons for not reaching it fully. Discuss your data’s reliability, validity and ethical issues. (The chapter on method shall be placed after the theory chapter because it then precedes the empirical part.)

There must be a *balance* between the various parts of the thesis. The introduction shall preferably be short; whereas the empirical part and analysis shall be longer. The chapter having most pages will of course to some degree depend on the chosen objective. A

quantitative data analysis will normally require more weight on method discussion, while a theoretically oriented thesis may have a quite short chapter with a critical evaluation of literature sources.

The conclusion must be short. Do not summarize at length. Try to highlight some main points and link them with the theory perspective (or literature review). Some thoughts on the usefulness of your choice of perspective and on practical, strategic or policy issues related to the findings *may* end the thesis.

Remember that one *type* of thesis is not inherently better, or gives a higher grade, than another. A theoretical thesis with little empirical data is not more valuable than an empirically “heavy” thesis with little space for lengthy theoretical discussions. The *grade* is, as mentioned, basically decided on how well you keep to your objective, link the various parts of the thesis, answer your questions and discuss them in a broader perspective both theoretically and empirically (Appendix). Ensure at the very end of your thesis work that there is a logical link between the formulation of your questions and your findings. Some minor changes may have to be made to the formulations of the questions.

It is sensible to use time in the beginning of the work with the thesis to decide on the *type* of thesis you want to make. The time available to you does *not* allow for a thesis that is extensive theoretically, methodologically and empirically.

The *length* of the thesis shall be up to a **maximum** of **48 000** words (**all text** including reference list and appendix). A thesis using sophisticated statistical methods may be quite shorter than the max, whereas a thesis based on a qualitative method, for instance analyzing texts, may require the max.

It is possible to make a thesis of only 30 study points (then the other 30 sp will be course exams). The max length is **25 000** words (all inclusive).

## **F o r m**

Master theses with different lay-outs may be equally nice. Thus, you have some freedom to choose what you think is most appropriate. However, the following standards shall be used.

*Front page:* The front and also the first page shall include the title of the thesis, your name, the name of the discipline (Human Geography), the institution (Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo), and the year of submission of the thesis.

*Text:* Line space - 1.5 point Letter size - 12 point

Style - Times New Roman (or an equivalent simple and nice style)

Remember at the end of fixing the lay-out to make the *right side* of the text straight.

Non-English words shall be used as sparingly as possible. Always use such words in italics or with “ ”.

The use of words like *ibid* and *op.cit.* makes reading more difficult and does *not* make your writing more efficient. Do *not* use these or similar words.

Never use *etc.* By using *etc.* you transfer work from yourself to the reader. The reader becomes annoyed by having to figure out what the other issues are that you are too lazy to point out. And never use *see* in references in the text; for instance ... (see Knutsen 2015).

*References in the text:* Use only surname: Name (2010); (Name 2010); (Name and Name 2010) or (Name & Name 2010); (Name et al. 2010). *Never* use comma between name and year but between different references in the same parenthesis (Name 1999, Name 2010). The oldest reference shall come first, and there is never *and* between different references (only between two authors of the same reference). If there are three or more authors of the same reference, use the first one plus *et al.* If there are several references of the same year, then organize them







*Journal standard:* Name. Year. Title. *Journal*, Vol.x, No.x. Page-page.

Amin, S. 2009. *Onlinking*. Zed, London.

Ateri, L.S. & A.G. Witt (eds). 2014. *Dependency and the beauty of the beast in my mind*. Polity, New York.

Bans, J. (ed.). 2013. *Peace*. Gyldendal, Oslo.

Hesselberg, J. et al. (eds). 2011. *Research*. Rawat, Jaipur.

Knutsen, H.M. 2000a. Commodity. *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, Vol. 30, No. 2. 45-67.

Knutsen, H.M. 2000b. Chain. In *Hesselberg, J. (ed.). Production*. Routledge, London.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2010. Corruption. *Working Paper No. 100*. Oslo.

The questionnaire shall always be included in an *appendix*. Appendixes can also be useful for more technical information such as details of method; informants and their position, status and characteristics; production processes and for lists of different kinds. A *list* of tables, figures, maps and abbreviations shall be in the front of the thesis after the list of contents.

### **Final comment**

Look at other master theses (you find them at DUO). Take as many ideas as possible from the questionnaires and ways of solving practical methodological issues as well as smart points of lay-out and ordering of the text.

When you start writing your thesis, it is usually best to begin with the description of your method, of how you have collected your data and their strengths and weaknesses. Thereafter, write the parts that you most feel like doing. At the end, check carefully that you have been consistent in your writing style.

Remember that you must write *every* sentence of your thesis yourself. Even text bits from papers you have written for other exams, cannot be just copied.

Table 1. Number of respondents by age and location.

Age	Baya	Moyo	Total
20 - 49	65	25	90
50 - 64	25	35	60
65 +	5	35	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>190</b>

Source: Fieldwork.

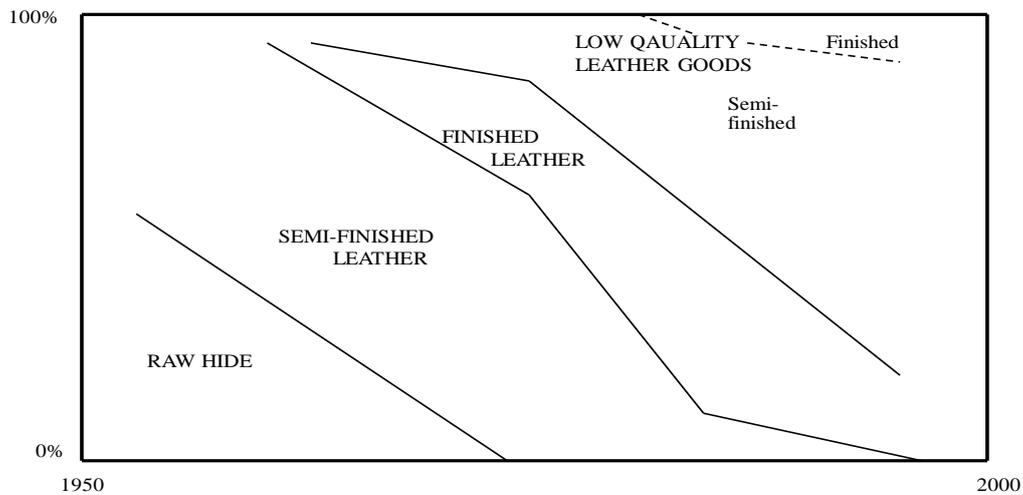


Figure 1. Per cent distribution of India's exports of leather and leather goods.

Note: The distribution in 1995 was: Almost termination of exports of semi-finished leather, finished leather 18%, low quality semi-finished leather goods 71% and low quality finished leather goods 10%.

Source: Based on Chandramouli (undat.), Thyagarajan et al. (1994), Central Leather Research Institute (1998).

## **A p p e n d i x**

### **Criteria for evaluating a master thesis**

#### **Objective**

Clear and limited research goals; possibly formulated as questions or hypotheses.

Argumentation for the scientific relevance of the study (theoretically, methodologically and/or empirically).

Reasoning for why the study is of interest for the discipline and/or society.

#### **Theory and previous research**

Review of the relevant research field.

Critical assessment of previous research on the chosen theme/topic.

Argumentation for the selected theoretical point of departure, concepts and model of analysis.

#### **Method and the reliability and validity of the data**

State the reasons for your choice of methodology.

Detailed presentation of the method(s) used, and its strengths and weaknesses.

Exact account of how the data are influenced by problems during data collection.

Discussion of ethical issues of the data gathering process.

Detailed explanation of how the data are treated.

If the thesis does not include own data collection, there must be a critical review of information sources.

#### **Analysis**

There must be a clear “red thread”, i.e. link, between research questions, theory, method and the use of the data. The main point is whether the interpretation of the empirical information is reasonable.

## **Conclusions**

The findings must be completely based on the data.

The research questions must be answered fully, and be believable.

The findings must be discussed in a wider empirical perspective, and theoretically.

Suggestions of policy implication of the findings and important future research may be given.

## **Independence**

To what degree is the thesis original?

Is there a critical discussion of the literature used, the data collected and choice of method?

## **Structure**

Does the thesis have a well organized and logical ordering of sub-topics?

Is there any *unnecessary* content in the thesis outside of the “red thread”?

## **Form**

Is use of concepts consistent?

Is the thesis checked for correct spelling and grammatical-wise?

Is the manual about form used by the discipline adhered to?

Is the discipline’s rule for length of the thesis complied with?