



From Finish to Start

Writing your thesis with the end in view



- What can we learn from research into what examiners look for in a thesis?



Not a Nobel Prize

- 'A PhD is a stepping stone into a research career. All you need to do is to demonstrate your capacity for independent, critical thinking. That's all you need to do. A PhD is three years of solid work, not a Nobel Prize' (Examiner)



What examiners say

- Examiners approach reading a thesis with an air of expectation and even enthusiasm, but this disappears if the thesis is not **reader-friendly**.
- General impression and overall presentation of the thesis seems particularly important to the examiners.
- The reader needs to be assisted through the use of summaries, logical sequencing, signposts and removal of excessive repetition.
- **All** readers require assistance to understand the work.
- They feel distracted and irritated by poorly presented work.
- They appreciate well-written, interesting and logically presented arguments.



First impressions count

- Experienced examiners decide very early whether assessment of a thesis is likely to be 'hard work' or 'an enjoyable read'
- Initial impression of quality of thesis usually formed by end of 2nd or 3rd chapter - often by end of lit. review



Research findings

- Experienced examiners want students to be awarded the PhD & see their feedback as helping this to happen.
- Experienced examiners should be sought, not avoided, because of their high degree of tolerance.
- Experienced examiners expect thesis to pass
 - Reluctant to fail students
 - Of total of more than 300 theses examined only 10 reported failing a thesis



Warnings to students

- Careful attention to detail and the avoidance of sloppiness are essential. Sloppy presentation indicates to the examiner that the research might well be sloppy.
- Actually doing what one says one is going to do, or explaining how and why changes have been made is important.
- Experienced examiners check carefully for the link between the introduction, where students outline their intentions, and the conclusions, where the intentions should have been realised.

Typical Guidelines for Examiners



- The thesis demonstrates authority in the candidate's field and shows evidence of command of knowledge in relevant fields.
- It shows that the candidate has a thorough grasp of the appropriate methodological techniques and an awareness of their limitations.
- It makes a significant contribution to knowledge.

Typical Guidelines for Examiners - ctd



- Its contribution to knowledge rests on originality of approach and/or interpretation of the findings and, in some cases, the discovery of new facts.
- It demonstrates an ability to communicate research findings effectively in the professional arena and in an international context.
- It is a careful, rigorous and sustained piece of work, demonstrating that a research 'apprenticeship' is complete and the holder should be admitted to the community of scholars in the discipline.



Learning Centre Support

- Courses in your schools and faculties
- Workshops (by request for groups of 5 or more)
- Thesis writing support groups
www.lc.unsw.edu.au for more info
- Books on thesis writing – for loan



So...

- Work backwards from intended submission date.
- Leave yourself ample time for proof-reading, editing, redrafting. Use checklist in Evans & Gruba, ch.11.
- Make sure your thesis has a clear organising structure/argument.
- Remember - Presentation is vitally important.

My best advice



- Write early
- Write often
- Get feedback

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References



- Evans, D. and Gruba, P. (2002). *How to Write a Better Thesis*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Johnston, S. (1997) Examining the examiners: An analysis of examiners' reports on doctoral theses, *Studies in Higher Education*, 22, 3, 333-347.
- Mullins, G and Kiley, M. (2002) 'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize': How experienced examiners assess research theses, *Studies in Higher Education*, 27: 369-386.