

Lynn P. Nygaard

Writing **YOUR**
Master's
Thesis

From A to Zen



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YOUR MASTER'S THESIS AND YOU

Moving towards academic Zen

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'Zen' and 'academic writing' are not normally said in the same breath – let alone experienced in the same universe. Most people would say that writing their thesis was as un-Zen-like as it is possible to get. That's because we usually think of Zen as a state of blissful relaxation. The only person I know who was blissfully relaxed while writing his thesis had copious amounts of medicinal assistance, and he is probably still sitting in some corner of Berkeley, staring peacefully at his unfinished manuscript. That's not what I mean by Zen. What I am talking about here is enlightenment – the kind that is based on simplicity and intuition, and direct experience with the world. And it's not only possible to achieve this kind of Zen, it's necessary if you want to get more out of your thesis than just the ability to say you survived it.

It's tempting to go into survival mode when you are faced with something like a Master's thesis: it's going to be difficult, but you'll never have to do again, so hunkering down and powering through it as quickly as possible looks like a good strategy. On the other hand, no

matter what you intend to do afterwards, writing is likely to be a big part of it. Writing a Master's thesis offers you the opportunity to develop skills you can carry with you wherever life takes you: how to organize and plan a project, how to think critically, how to read a large amount of material and make sense of it, and how to write something that is intentionally targeted at a specific audience in a specific context for a specific purpose.

If you want to continue in academia, and you want your career to be personally satisfying, coming to grips with writing and your relationship to it is essential. Academic life at all levels revolves around research and writing – doing it, reading it, and teaching it. Weekends and holidays are often less about having time off from writing, and more about having time to write without interruption from students or colleagues. If you don't understand the purpose of all this writing, it is hard to feel any sense of fulfilment. And if you feel unsure of yourself, it is hard to feel any joy. But if what you are doing feels meaningful, and you know what you are doing, then spending a few hours of your holiday polishing a manuscript will not feel like torture. (And perhaps more important, if you know what you are doing, then you will only need a few hours to do it and your holiday will not be completely ruined.) The more that the writing you do feels like it is *yours* – where you feel in control of both the process and the product – the more satisfying it becomes. If you want a career in academia, this is the state you want to be in.

Thus in this book, I use the concept of Zen to mean the intuitive insight that comes from understanding what it is you want to do with your writing and why. This means understanding that academic writing is always a matter of asking a question grounded in an academic discussion, and supporting your answer to that question with reasons and evidence. It also means understanding that the way you frame that answer, what counts as support for it, and how much you need to explain will depend on who will be reading it and what you are trying to achieve. This does not (unfortunately) mean that every moment you spend writing will be filled with deep meaning and profound joy, but it does mean that you will be able to say, 'I get what I'm supposed to be doing – and why'.

Knowing what you are aiming for with your writing is not the same thing as knowing what you are doing every single moment. Many scholars, even at the professor level, quite regularly feel like they have no idea what they are doing; they are afraid they don't know nearly as much as they should know, that their accomplishments are just a matter of luck, and that they do not deserve to be where they are. Regardless of how much they have achieved, they can't shake the feeling that they do not belong. This is what is known as 'Impostor Syndrome'. Feeling as if you don't know enough is almost inevitable in academia: by definition, researchers quite literally re-search – exploring the unknown, and sometimes the unknowable. What makes something original is that we push the boundaries of what has been done before, which means that at times we just have to make it up as we go along – not sure whether we have chosen the best approach or the most correct way to interpret something. To thrive in academia, or at least survive, you need to start getting used to the idea that not only do you not know everything, but you will *never* know everything, and you will *always* be wondering if there is some better way to do the things you do. Some self-doubt is healthy: it makes you think twice about what you write, and helps you develop your critical thinking abilities. But too much self-doubt will paralyse you. A basic intuitive

understanding of what you are doing, combined with the ability to think through the demands of your particular situation, should give you the confidence to think, 'I may not know enough *right now*, but I know what I need to do to figure it out'.

This book aims to help you better understand the task that lies before you when you write a Master's thesis – both the process you are going through and the product you need to deliver – and how this all fits into the larger picture of academic writing and knowledge production. Rather than seeing the Master's thesis as something to get over with as quickly as possible, this book sees it as an essential step in your development as an independent researcher and academic writer. The focus is on what you can be learning now that will help you build an intuitive understanding of writing and research that should not only help you feel more confident as a student, but also better prepare you for the kind of writing you will do afterwards, whether you choose to continue in academia or not.

The audience for this book is anyone writing a Master's thesis in the social sciences. It is aimed primarily at those writing within one academic discipline, but it also discusses challenges for those writing an interdisciplinary thesis, a professional thesis, or an industry-based study. The point of departure is an Anglo-Saxon style of writing, and as such this book will be particularly relevant for students in North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Since one of the main aims of this book is to explain *why* we do things the way we do, I also hope this book will be helpful for students coming from different disciplinary or geolinguistic contexts who are having to grapple with expectations different from what they are used to.

The remainder of this introductory chapter explores in more detail the conversational nature of academic writing and the specific genre of the Master's thesis, the kind of variations you might experience, and the organization of the rest of this book.

a WRITING AS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOU AND THE READER

When you can see someone – when you can register their facial expressions, when you can learn something about the way they think just by looking at them – it is much easier to say what you want to say because you automatically (and almost unconsciously) tailor your argument to suit that person. This is very hard to do if you cannot see them, or even envision them in your head. Likewise, it is much easier to write something if you know what it will be used for. Imagine right now that you are asked to write a 200-word autobiographical statement but you are not told why. What should you put in there? Should you focus on your academic achievements? What about your professional background? Should you say something about where you live? Your hobbies? Imagine your frustration if you decide to play it safe and just mention your academic background, then your piece appears in a pamphlet emphasizing the cultural diversity of your workplace – and you didn't mention that you speak four languages.

Writing is a form of communication. It involves more than just the writer: audience and context matter too. When you write academically, you are not simply typing up some results from your research, downloading your thoughts onto paper, or composing grammatically flawless sentences. You are communicating with a particular audience in a

WRITING YOUR MASTER'S THESIS

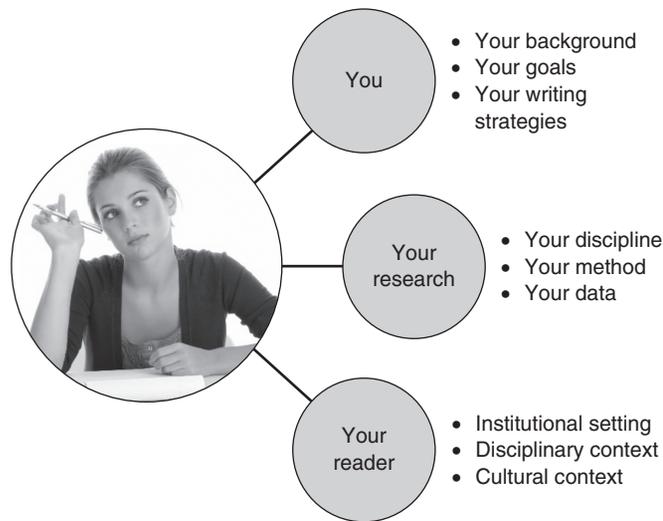


Figure 1.1 Getting to thesis Zen: Getting to thesis Zen means striking the right balance between what you want to do, what you are able to do given your research design, and what your reader (who is also your evaluator) expects from you.

particular situation, which means understanding what you want to say as well as how to say it so your readers will respond the way you hope they will. Brilliance may be in the eye of the beholder – but it's your job to make them see.

Your research skills will help you find the buried treasure; but your communication skills will help others see its value. Explain badly, and all they will see is a dusty, broken old urn; explain well, and they will see history, a missing piece of our heritage, and a vital clue to understanding how people lived two thousand years ago. Looking at your screen and wondering 'Is that introduction long enough? Do I have an appropriate number of paragraphs?' misses the point: you have the right number of paragraphs when you have said what you need to say to the audience you want to reach, in the way you want to reach them. (See Figure 1.1.)

b UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF: WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM THIS?

Reaching your audience successfully depends on how you define success, which means knowing what is important to you. Individual writers vary tremendously when it comes to what they fear, what they desire, what they feel they are good at, and what feels meaningful to them. When it comes to writing a thesis, some people just want the external approval and the degree that comes with it. Others want to feel that they have created something uniquely theirs. Some find writing painful and fear 'getting it wrong'. Others want to play with words and 'challenge the genre'. Think for a minute about who you are and what you want. You may even want to jot down your thoughts about the following questions:

- **What brings you joy?** Collaborating with others? Exploring the freedom of your own thoughts? Starting a new project? Finishing something?
- **What feels meaningful to you?** Saving the world? Solving an intellectual puzzle? Exploring the unknown? Fixing a practical problem?
- **What do you feel you are good at?** Understanding what others are saying? Seeing significance where others do not? Thinking of new ways to do something, or applying old knowledge in new ways?
- **What worries you the most?** The prospect of an insecure future? The possibility that you might not have anything important or original to contribute? Being wrong? Being overlooked?
- **What interests you?** If you were walking through a crowded place, overhearing snippets of other people's conversations, what conversation would tempt you to stop, listen, and maybe even say something?
- **What do you imagine yourself doing when you finish your thesis?** Continuing on to a doctoral degree? Working in the corporate world? Providing services in the public sector?

All of these thoughts and feelings will – consciously or unconsciously – affect the choices you make as a student researcher and writer. If what makes you happy is to have things under control (including having a secure source of income), the choices you make about your research and writing should probably be pragmatic and aimed at allowing you to finish on time. But if you want to contribute an original idea to a complex academic discourse, then you will probably be willing to take more risks. Finishing on time might be less important to you than creating something you can be proud of. Because the definition of successful communication depends on your achieving what you want to achieve, knowledge about what *you* really want is essential.

And keep in mind that identity is neither static nor singular. Your priorities are likely to change over time – particularly during such a rich experience as writing a thesis. Things that were important to you when you started may be less important as you progress, or vice versa.

C UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE: WHAT DO YOUR READERS EXPECT?

Once you know what you want out of all this, you can start thinking about your readers. In the context of your Master's thesis, your readers are primarily your examiners, the ones who will be deciding whether you get to move to the next level. Gatekeepers are present at all levels in academia: even after you finish your doctorate, you will face them regularly every time you submit an article, book, or book chapter for publication and it goes through a form of peer review. In each of these contexts, the gatekeepers will ask, 'Is this good enough? Can we let this through?' They have an exceptionally difficult job. Academia is about building knowledge and developing individual researchers who are

capable of thinking critically and working independently. But it isn't always easy to know whether someone is being uniquely brilliant and creative or has simply lost the plot. It also isn't all that easy to instantly know whether a particular set of findings should be trusted or not. The task of the gatekeepers is to ensure that the academic writing put before them meets the required standards for both the writing and the research behind it.

The thesis thus marks a rite of passage between one stage of academia and the next: from undergraduate, to graduate, to postgraduate. At each level you are expected to demonstrate an increasing ability to think critically, work independently, understand the field you are in, and contribute something original to it. The thesis is supposed to represent your competence in three main areas:

- **Knowledge of the discipline:** When you are granted a degree, you are granted a degree in a particular discipline. The examiners want to see that you are engaging with the core ideas of the discipline, even if you are importing ideas from other disciplines.
- **Ability to conduct research:** At each stage you should be learning more about applying critical thinking to an investigation that is designed to answer a particular question. The examiners want to see that you have made good choices in your research design and methods, as well as about ethics.
- **Competence in writing academically:** The examiners want to see that you can formulate an academic argument and provide sufficient support, as well as follow the specific writing conventions in your context.

Essentially, you are demonstrating a set of skills to an audience that is evaluating whether you are ready to continue to the next stage of your academic career. And at each stage, you will be expected to demonstrate these abilities at higher levels. For an undergraduate thesis, the demands for independent research are minimal, but by the time you finish your doctorate you should be ready to work on your own.



KEIKO

I studied English language and literature in Japan, but I never lived in an English-speaking country before I came to Australia for my Master's in education. The English they speak here is very different from the English I studied! It took some time before I got used to the accent and some of the expressions I had never heard before. I was terrified of saying something wrong at first, and was really unsure about how I should write. It helped to read some of the other Master's theses in my field.

Throughout this transition, your stance as a writer is shifting from speaking as a student to speaking as a full-fledged contributor to an academic conversation. The more you make academic writing your own, the more difficult it becomes to follow a rigid set of rules, and the further you move from using the formulas you have been taught

to figuring out what works for you in your context. As a Master's student, you are somewhere in the middle of all this – perhaps the rules you followed as a Bachelor's student are still a good fit for your current work, or perhaps you have already started adapting them to your context. As you move away from thinking in terms of rules and absolutes, your focus changes from 'getting the answer right' (i.e., getting your answer as close as possible to what the examiner is looking for) to arguing for an idea that is uniquely yours and convincing the examiner that you have a valid point. Getting to that point will require you to read extensively beyond whatever reading was required in your coursework, and while your supervisor will probably be able to point you in the right direction, you will have to search for much of this literature on your own. When you start writing, you will discover, quite possibly for the first time, that you know more than you can comfortably write about within the page limits you are given. So rather than forcing yourself to think about how to fill the pages (which is fairly typical for an undergraduate student), you will find yourself worrying about how to cut them down (which is more typical for professional academic writers). And particularly if you are entering your Master's programme as a mature student after working some years outside the university, you might find that you know more about your topic than your supervisor (and possibly your examiners), although you will probably still be a novice with respect to the related theory and method.

d WHEN A ROSE ISN'T A ROSE: VARIATIONS IN THE GENRE

The format of a Master's thesis varies considerably from setting to setting. In some educational contexts, particularly in programmes with a large number of taught modules, a Master's thesis is only slightly longer than a typical term paper. In other contexts it is a book-length document. And while most students write their Master's thesis firmly within one identifiable academic discipline, this is far from the only way to do a graduate degree. Different variations of the Master's thesis genre present different challenges.

i The interdisciplinary degree

Each discipline or sub-discipline has its unique brand of ontology and epistemology, its own understanding of what phenomena are worthy of study and how to study them. And each discipline tends to develop its own language and culture, populated by the theories and concepts that make up its 'vocabulary'. Choosing an interdisciplinary approach allows the student to combine ideas, approaches, and themes from more than one discipline. For example, if you picked as a topic 'adaptation to climate change in a remote northern fishing village', you would be required to have a fundamental understanding of both climate change and social processes, perhaps combining human geography, economics and insights from the natural sciences. While you are most likely to be based primarily in one discipline that will grant your degree, some programmes allow you to

receive degrees from both disciplines. The challenge of writing this kind of thesis is related to aiming at two very different audiences, often with different expectations of what constitutes good research and good academic writing.



EMMA

I'm writing my thesis in criminology, but some of the main concepts I'm using come from sociology and psychology. My supervisor didn't understand why I needed those concepts, so I had to spend a lot of time explaining, comparing them to similar concepts in criminology and showing how they were different.

ii) The professional degree

Some graduate programmes are tied more closely to a professional field – such as education, healthcare, or social work – than to academic disciplines like sociology, political science, or history. This means that the examiners do not just want to see your ability to conduct research and write about it, they want to see if you understand the significance of your research for a particular profession. For example, if you are undertaking a professional degree in education, you might explore research questions such as 'How can classrooms be better organized to facilitate learning?', rather than their more academic variations such as 'How does learning take place?' While there is considerable overlap between these types of questions, if you are doing a professional degree, you will be asked to reflect on your own practice in a way that other students will not. This means that you will be asked to draw on your own experience and professionalism in a way that might feel strange if you have only ever previously taken purely academic degrees. The challenge of writing this kind of thesis is thus to comfortably straddle writing for the profession and writing for academia.



ROBERT

I was involved in different kinds of social work for about fifteen years before I went back to school to get my Master's degree, and my topic is based directly on things I work with in my job. I wanted to make sure that whatever I wrote about would make a difference in the real world.

iii) The industry-based study

Like the professional degree, a thesis designed in collaboration with a business or industry means that you have close ties to 'the real world' and are expected to produce something directly relevant for the business or industry with which you are partnering. Sometimes this

means that you are expected to produce something that isn't even a written product, such as a management tool or a new kind of software. The challenge is that the university granting your degree will generally want a thesis *in addition* to whatever else you have produced.



SAMIR

I was hired by a multi-national telecommunications company to analyse the feasibility of expanding to remote villages of India. When I started, I wasn't that interested in the topic; I just wanted to improve my chances of getting a job when I finished. But I ended up writing something I'm quite proud of.

Each of these variations will have different formal requirements: what they want your thesis to look like, how you are supposed to submit it, and what will happen to it after you have submitted it. Some of the requirements you will be expected to follow are purely cosmetic, such as double-spacing, printing on only one side of the page, and how you are expected to bind your work. Other requirements have a far more profound effect on the way you will approach your writing: how long the dissertation is supposed to be, what the component parts are, and the timeframe for submission. Becoming familiar with these requirements before you start writing will help you visualize where you need to end up when you finish. Although you might feel that the most important thing for you to pay attention to is your research (and rightly so), becoming familiar with the requirements for submission – long before you are ready to submit – might save you from some nasty surprises at the end.

e WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PLACE MAKES: CULTURAL AND DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES

Sometimes the different requirements for a dissertation are related to what country you are in. Geolinguistic differences affect both explicit conventions about what a Master's thesis is (for example, how long it is supposed to be, how much weight it is given compared to coursework, and how much independent research you are expected to carry out) and what constitutes good writing style. The implicit conventions of 'good writing' can be particularly tricky to navigate.

The Anglo-Saxon style of writing emphasizes a straightforward, no-frills language with minimal adjectives and adverbs, transparent premises, and a clear line of reasoning. A more continental style allows for more expressiveness and a looser structure, but may demand more from the reader (for example, through tangential lines of reasoning). And within these general styles there are variations: US English is a less cautious and more informal language than UK English, for example.

What might make this difficult for students is that most people are generally not aware that they have adopted a regional style; they simply think that this is what good writing is.

So if you have attended university in one country and over the years absorbed the myriad comments from your teachers and built up a tacit understanding of what makes good academic writing, you may well find that understanding challenged – if not shattered – should you continue your education in a completely different part of the world. The language might be the same, but the way it is used might be very different.



SAMIR

My previous degree was in engineering. Now I'm doing a degree in business administration, and the writing is very different. And even though I consider English to be my first language, at least when it comes to writing, the style of writing in the UK is different from the style I was used to in India.

Similar differences can be found between disciplines. Not only are there different expectations related to language and writing, but there are also differences in how much importance they place on language and writing. Some fields (those dominated by the natural sciences, for example, or even quantitative research in the social sciences) place less emphasis on the unique authorial voice and more on standard expressions. Or, expressed another way, you might feel less pressure in the natural and quantitative sciences to play with the language and find your own voice.

You may not notice this unless you move from one discipline to another, or even from one sub-discipline to another. For example, say you did your undergraduate degree in international relations but switched to the field of education for your Master's degree (after having had a few years of classroom teaching experience). You might have been taught previously that you cannot use the pronoun 'I' because it will make your writing subjective. This might have been unproblematic in your Bachelor's thesis on neoliberalism and the Eurozone, where there was no reason to refer to yourself, but it will be very difficult to avoid in your Master's thesis on teaching international politics in a multicultural classroom, which requires you to discuss your own positionality and relationship to your participants. It is a difficult transition to move from thinking that using 'I' makes you a subjective writer (and therefore a bad academic) to not only using 'I' but also actively exploring how you might have inadvertently had some influence on what your informants told you just because of who you are. Even if you theoretically understand the different way of thinking about objectivity and subjectivity, it might take you some time before writing about it ceases to feel awkward.

COMING IN FROM THE OUTSIDE: ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

The subtle differences in regional variations and disciplinary conventions when it comes to writing can be particularly frustrating if you have English as an additional language. Not only

will you have to contend with the inexplicable small differences between varieties of English (such as punctuation conventions, what gets capitalized, and how you spell things), you will also have to try to pick up the differences in voice. And if you have worked very hard to develop one way to write in English (say, UK English suitable for everyday conversation), making the adjustment to another style (for example, American English suitable for writing academically as a sociologist) can be bewildering. Native English speakers have a closer relationship with the language and thus sometimes feel freer to play with it, to challenge conventions intentionally. Non-native speakers are often more focused on not making 'mistakes' or sounding like a foreigner. Trying to 'get it right' can be very difficult if what is 'right' changes whenever you move from one context to another.



AMINA

I grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but received most of my education in Brussels and the Netherlands, so English is actually my fourth language. It helps that everything I read is in English, and since I am doing a quantitative study, the vocabulary is pretty standard.

This might make it tempting to write your thesis in your native language – and indeed, there are very good reasons to do so: some people feel very strongly about preserving local languages also as a medium for academic conversation. But the dominant role of English means that much of the research you are likely to be reading will be published in English, and if everything you have read is in English, regardless of your native language, you might find it difficult (if not impossible) to talk about the topic in any other language but English. Some will argue that for precisely that reason it is important to write in local languages: attempting to explain the material in your own language when you have read about it in another language will force you to think through what you are writing because you do not have comfortable jargon to fall back on.

Just be aware that changing the language changes the nature of the conversation. Say you are a Norwegian writing about child care. Norway has a system of early child care (*barnehage*) that does not easily translate to 'day care', 'preschool' or 'kindergarten'. It is all of these things and none of them. Thus it is not just a question of finding the 'right' word in English, it is also a question of explaining the entire concept because there is no equivalent in English. This would not be necessary for a Norwegian audience. Sometimes having to explain and contextualize for a different audience gives you greater insight; sometimes it just means you have a very long background section.

The decision to write in English when it is not your native language is not a trivial one. Globalization and internationalization have meant that English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca of academic conversation. So, on one hand, if you write in English, you have a greater chance of having your work read by a larger number of people – not just native English speakers, but everyone else whose second language is English. This can give

you a much greater voice in the conversation than if you write in a language that very few people speak. On the other hand, writing in a second language might be more difficult and stifling for you. Writing your thesis can be hard enough without feeling constrained by a lack of fluency. It is worth spending some time thinking about this decision; input from your supervisor can be valuable in this respect.

9 ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book has two main sections: one that focuses on the process, the behind-the-scenes journey you take as a student learning to carry out research; and one that focuses on the product, the written work you submit for evaluation. We will look at these two separately because although the final product should look organized and rational, getting to that point is seldom an organized and rational process. Focusing merely on the end product without looking at what goes on before you get there would only further give the impression that writing a thesis is mostly about producing a document and not about learning how to conduct research and write about it. Below you'll find an overview of the focus and key message of each chapter.

PART I: The Process

- **Chapter 2. From topic to question to design: Planning your journey.** There is more than one path to good research. This chapter looks at different research approaches and which one(s) might apply to the question you want the answer to. The key message here is to better understand the connections between your general topic, a specific question, and research design – and how to move between them.
- **Chapter 3. Ethics: Making good choices.** It is tempting to treat research ethics as a checklist – items you can simply tick off. This chapter looks more deeply into the sometimes difficult choices you have to make as a researcher, and how to think through what is 'right' when you are in an unfamiliar situation without guidance, or when fulfilling one criterion seems to threaten another.
- **Chapter 4. You are what you read: Building a foundation of knowledge.** If academic writing is a conversation, then reading is how you listen to what others have said. The reading you do shapes both your foundation of knowledge and your implicit understanding of what academic writing should be like. This chapter talks about how to know where to start, how to know when to finish, and how to remember what you have read and incorporate it into your writing.
- **Chapter 5. Writing as thinking: From rough draft to final document.** Writing a document as long and difficult as a thesis is a daunting task. This chapter discusses how writing is not something you do all at once, but something that must become a regular part of a sustainable lifestyle.
- **Chapter 6. Supervision and guidance: Getting help along the way.** Although research can be a lonely undertaking, you needn't be completely on your own. This chapter looks at the important role your supervisor can play, as well as how you can get help from others, including your peers.

PART II: The Product

- **Chapter 7. Structure and argument: What's the logic of your story?** As rewarding and interesting as the process may be for you, the product you deliver needs to be designed with others in mind. This chapter looks at how to organize and tailor your structure to strike a balance between the argument you want to make and the way your audience expects that argument to be organized and supported.
- **Chapter 8. Your introduction: How do you fit into the conversation?** Academic writing is ultimately meant to represent a contribution to a discourse, and this chapter looks at how you present the conversation for the reader and position yourself within that conversation.
- **Chapter 9. Your theoretical and conceptual framework: What ideas are you using?** It is not enough just to give the reader a detailed account of your fieldwork; we need to see how you connect your thinking with what others are thinking. Showing your reader how you relate to existing ideas – including concepts, mechanisms, and normative assumptions – provides insight into how your work connects to the ideas of others.
- **Chapter 10. Your method: What did you do to answer your question?** There is a big difference between designing research, conducting it, and then explaining what you did to the readers. This chapter looks at how to explain your methodological approach to a critical audience.
- **Chapter 11. Your results and analysis: What are you building your argument on?** The bulk of your dissertation should consist of showing the reader what you found, and how these findings create the foundation for your overarching argument. This chapter discusses how to present your findings and analysis, for both qualitative and quantitative research.
- **Chapter 12. Your discussion and conclusion: So, what does all this mean?** After you have presented your research you need to bring your reader back out to the academic discourse you presented in your introduction and reflect on the implications of your findings. This chapter addresses the kinds of things you can talk about in your discussion and conclusion.
- **Chapter 13. The finishing touches: Polishing and submitting your work.** Even when you have a draft you are happy with, there are still things you need to pay attention to before you submit. This chapter covers the things you should think about when editing for clarity, language, and style (including your references), as well as double-checking the rules for formatting, binding, and submission.

Each chapter is illustrated with short vignettes that represent concrete (fictionalized) experiences of students I have worked with to show how they have addressed a particular challenge in the context they found themselves in. At the end of each chapter I give you a taste of Zen, knowing full well that achieving insight is always a work in progress, but it helps to know what you are aiming for. This is followed by some points for reflection that can help you to focus on how to make the general points of the chapter relevant for your thesis in particular.

Finally, I give you some tips for exploring these ideas further through additional reading. So take a deep breath, lower your shoulders, and focus: use this book as a way to think about what you want to put into your thesis and what you want to get out of it.



'You should spend 20 minutes meditating every day – unless you are really busy, then you should spend an hour.'

With the greater pressure on universities to push graduate students through the system as quickly as possible, it is easy to think of writing a Master's thesis as being more about producing a document than about learning how to conduct research, think critically, and write academically. But if your education is going to be a sound investment, when you hand in your thesis and walk away with another diploma under your arm you should also be leaving with an intuitive knowledge about research, writing, and communication that will serve you for the rest of your career – long after you have forgotten (or repressed) the actual topic of your thesis. Reflecting on what you are learning needs to be part of your everyday work – unless you become truly overwhelmed and then it should become your main focus.



Finding your path: Points for reflection

What do you want to get out of writing your Master's thesis?

- What aspects of writing your thesis feel meaningful to you?
- How does the thesis fit into your long-term career plans?

What do you think your readers (examiners and supervisor) will be expecting from you?

- How is good academic writing defined in your context?
- What are the expectations for the specific type of thesis you are writing?
- How much do you want to challenge these expectations?

FURTHER READING

Becker, Howard (1986) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*, 2nd revd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 2 'Persona and authority' challenges old myths about what academic writing is, and Chapter 3 contests the notion of 'one right way'.

Curry, Mary Jane and Lillis, Theresa (2013) *A Scholar's Guide to Getting Published in English: Critical Choices and Practical Strategies*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Although focused on academic publishing, the dilemmas for non-native speakers of English that Curry and Lillis identify are equally relevant for MA students.

Kamler, Barbara and Thomson, Pat (2014) *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. London: Routledge. Although aimed at supervisors, the book is useful for getting an idea of how academic writing can be different from context to context, and the identity work involved in writing a thesis.

Murray, Rowena (2011) *How to Write a Thesis*, 3rd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Murray provides a nice overview of what writing a thesis is all about, including some thoughts on how disciplinary context matters.

Paltridge, Brian and Starfield, Sue (2007) *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second*

Language: A Handbook for Supervisors. London: Routledge. Aimed mostly at supervisors, the book sheds light on some of the essential challenges for those who are writing their thesis in a second language.

Reid, Natalie (2010) *Getting Published in International Journals: Writing Strategies for European*

Scientists. Oslo: Norwegian Social Research (NOVA). Written specifically for non-native speakers of English, the book focuses on the sentence level and explains the Anglo-Saxon style of writing.

Sword, Helen (2012) *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Using her own research as a point of departure, Sword shows how different disciplines have different styles of writing.