Advice for writing a thesis (based on what examiners do)
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ABSTRACT
In the article, ‘What examiners do: What thesis students should know’, we identified 11 things that thesis examiners do as they read and judge a thesis. But, we left a gap in the research: knowing this, What should thesis students do to write for their examiners? In this article, I fill the gap. The advice for thesis students is: first, treat your examiners as friends who want you to pass, and write calmly without agonising about getting it perfect. Aim to make your thesis reader-friendly, and do a thorough proofread to remove distracting errors. Identify the field(s) you will contribute to, and make your thesis interesting and convincing for examiners from this field. Write a draft, get feedback and use this to improve your thesis. Help your examiners to follow your train of thought: explain what you are doing and why, especially if your thesis differs from what they would expect. Convince your examiners that you have a sound interpretation of the literature, an important topic and an appropriate method, and that your conclusions make a significant, publishable contribution to your field. When you have submitted, expect lots of examiner comments, most of which can help you improve.

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Introduction
In 2014 my co-authors and I reviewed the literature and identified 11 things that examiners tend to do as they read and assess a written thesis (Golding, Sharmini, & Lazarovitch, 2014). But we left unexamined the implications for thesis students and their supervisors. So, in this article, I apply what we know from the 2014 article to develop advice about writing a thesis. My aim is to disseminate the implications of the 2014 review to those who would benefit the most: thesis students and their supervisors.

By ‘thesis student’ I mean any Research Higher Degree student writing a Master’s, PhD or other doctoral thesis or dissertation. By ‘supervisor’ I mean an academic whose official role is to provide research advice and guidance for a thesis student. By ‘thesis examiner’ I mean an academic who reads the completed thesis and gives a report recommending a result.

The advice in this article is inspired by the general principle of good writing: write for your reader. Elbow (1998) and Williams and Colomb (2012), three important authorities on excellent writing, argue that you can write more effectively if you anticipate the impact of
your writing on your readers. This article builds on this principle. Examiners are the intended readers of a thesis, so I offer guidance for writing a thesis based on applying what we know about how examiners read a thesis. If you know your reader, you can write a better thesis.

This is an unusual article which deviates in two important ways from what is standard in an education journal. First, the intended readers are thesis candidates and their supervisors from any discipline, rather than scholars in the field of education. Second, it presents the results of the scholarship of application not the scholarship of discovery. Most articles present new knowledge as a result of conceptual or empirical discoveries. These articles are part of what Boyer (1990) called ‘scholarship of discovery’. On the other hand, this article is part of what Boyer calls the ‘scholarship of application’ which presents a different kind of intellectual understanding as a result of ‘acts of application’ (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). The intellectual understanding I present in this article is the advice for thesis students, which was developed as a result of applying previous research about thesis examiners. In other words, the advice is the contribution of this article, and this advice was developed by applying what we already know from previous research. I do not claim that every piece of advice is a ‘new discovery’ in the sense of ‘never thought of before’, because this would only be appropriate for the scholarship of discovery, not application. However, I do claim that the article makes a valuable research contribution by offering an illuminating way to formulate and frame advice for thesis students based on previous research about what examiners do.

To better explain the unusual scope of this article, I will first give some more background about the different kinds of scholarship identified by Boyer (1990). Boyer argued that what we typically call ‘research’ is only a small part of the scholarly work of academics, and we should also give equal status to other kinds of rigorous investigation and their outputs. As well as scholarship of discovery (normal research), there is scholarship of integration, scholarship of application and scholarship of teaching. I will concentrate on the first three here, which I summarise in Table 1.

In this article, I develop advice for thesis students via the scholarship of application. My method for the scholarship of application is to apply the distilled knowledge from the 2014 review of what examiners do (which was the scholarship of integration), and which, in turn, was distilled from 30 articles about examiner practices (each of which was scholarship of discovery). I will explain each of the two preceding stages of scholarship that are

| Table 1. Three kinds of scholarly activity. |
|-------------------------------------------|
| **Rigorous investigation** | **Significant insights as a result** | **Outputs** |
| **Discovery** | What has yet to be known? | New knowledge that advances or contributes to a field or discipline |
| | How can we integrate our isolated ‘bits’ of knowledge to form a broader understanding? | Syntheses, connections, ‘larger intellectual patterns’, ‘more comprehensive understandings’ (Boyer, 1990, p. 19) |
| **Integration** | How can we apply our knowledge to solve problems in practice? | Applications, guidelines, policy, advice, ‘outreach’ or ‘engagement’ (Boyer, 1990, pp. 21–22) |
| **Application** | | The traditional research article |
| | | Literature reviews, systematic literature reviews and interdisciplinary articles |
| | | Articles in applied fields (though this only includes articles about how our knowledge might be usefully applied to practice, but not articles that attempt to discover something new about practice) |
foundational for this article, but which are not part of the method for this article, and then I will go into more detail about the methods for the scholarship of application that are used in this article.

Scholarship of discovery was involved in each of the 30 articles that are the foundation for the advice presented in this current article. These articles were each about what examiners do as they read a written thesis, and they include all the relevant articles we could find in the ERIC database up to 2013. These 30 articles report data from examiners of all kinds of theses – Masters, PhDs and other doctorates – from all the disciplines and from multiple countries.

The total data from the 30 articles we reviewed include: 3504 examiner reports and recommendations for approximately 1324 theses, 426 rankings of thesis quality by examiners, and qualitative data from 698 examiners participating in interviews, questionnaires, case studies, focus groups or panels. (Golding et al., 2014, p. 566)

Scholarship of integration was involved in the article I co-wrote (Golding et al., 2014) which synthesised the findings from the 30 articles about examiner practices. We distilled 11 common tendencies for thesis examiners which would be useful for thesis students to know. The results of this integration were as follows:

What are the common conclusions from the literature about examiner practices that would be beneficial for thesis students to know? Thesis examiners tend to be broadly consistent in their practices and recommendations. They expect and want a thesis to pass and they are unwilling to recommend a fail. But first impressions count, and as they begin to read, they will quickly make up their mind whether a thesis is likely to be high or low quality. They will read with academic expectations and the expectations of a normal reader. Like any reader they get annoyed and distracted by presentation errors, and they want to read a thesis that is a coherent whole not a series of unrelated points. As academic readers they favour a thesis that engages with the literature, has a convincing approach, analyses and engages with the findings, and which is publishable. In fact, being publishable and making a contribution to the literature is the most important thing examiners look for. When they have finished they not only give a final evaluation of a thesis, but also instruction and advice to improve the thesis and any further publications and research. (Golding et al., 2014, p. 573)

Scholarship of application is the method for this current article. I applied what we know about the 11 practices of thesis examiners as part of a rigorous investigation to answer the following question: What should thesis students do to write for their examiners? The output, or the results of this investigation, is the advice for thesis students.

I used three main methods for developing this advice:

(i) Some of the advice is a direct implication of what examiners do, as presented in Golding et al. (2014). For example, we know examiners get annoyed by frequent typos and then doubt the competence of the writer, so the obvious advice is thesis students should do a thorough revision and edit before they submit.

But sometimes what a thesis student needs to do is not directly implied by what examiners do – we know examiners favour a good read and a coherent thesis, but what should a thesis student do to achieve this? When it is not obvious what a thesis student might do to write for their examiners, I developed the advice in two further ways:
(ii) I looked for general principles of writing that would address or respond to what examiners tend to do. For example, we know that examiners want a ‘good read’, so I developed advice by applying general principles about how to make your writing a good read (for example, from Elbow, 1998; Strunk & White, 2000; Williams & Colomb, 2012).

(iii) I developed advice as part of my professional practice. I supervise thesis students and I offer workshops and one-to-one learning advice for supervisors and thesis students from all disciplines (around 50 supervisors and 400 thesis students per year). I used informal cycles of action research in these contexts to develop the advice about how to write for thesis examiners. For this action research, I first developed tentative advice, then trialled it and evaluated how well it helped, based on what thesis students and supervisors said was useful. I then refined the advice, trialled it and evaluated it again, etc. until I could see that it was useful. For example, I saw it was useful when (1) the supervisors I worked with said it provided a new or clearer way to explain how to write a thesis which their students found illuminating; and (2) when the thesis students I advised said that the advice helped clarify what was confusing, and I could see in their writing that after following the advice, these students wrote more clearly, coherently and prolifically.

My aim in this article is to develop advice for thesis students through the scholarship of application, so I have outlined my methods for formulating this advice. I am not engaging in the scholarship of discovery and so I am not trying to discover the impact of this advice, or trying to prove anything about the usefulness of the advice. More work in the scholarship of discovery can be done to empirically study what happens when thesis students follow this advice.

However, I did do an informal evaluation of the impact of an early version of this advice, because this was a necessary step for formulating and refining the final version of the advice. In 2012 I surveyed a group of 64 thesis students from a diverse range of disciplines about their response to a draft of the advice. I had offered to share the advice with any thesis student at the research intensive university in which I work. The 64 students had all volunteered to hear about the advice and all of them completed an anonymous written survey afterwards. Their reactions suggested various ways in which the advice could be refined, but all of them indicated that the draft advice was useful. Some of the more common reasons given were that the advice is useful because it:

- enables thesis candidates to ‘see it from the examiner’s perspective’ and ‘know who you are writing for’;
- is ‘motivating’ and ‘encouraging’;
- is ‘reassuring’, ‘puts your mind at ease’, and reduces the fear of the unknown;
- fills a gap in research training. They said the ‘examining process is under described’ and ‘few people talk about it to students’, so they valued knowing more about how to write for their examiners.

For the rest of the article, I will present 11 sections of advice for thesis students based on each of the 11 things examiners tend to do. Sometimes I will start by briefly summarising what examiners do, but I will not reference these summaries which are taken directly from
the appropriate section of ‘What examiners do: What thesis students should know’ (Golding et al., 2014). See this article for more about what examiners do. Because I am presenting advice for thesis students, for the rest of the article I directly address ‘you’ the thesis student.

1. Examiners expect a thesis to pass

Be reassured: when they start reading, your examiners expect you to pass, and even want you to pass (Kiley & Mullins, 2006). Also, even though they appreciate work of the highest standard, they only require competent, passable research, and so less than 1% of all theses that are submitted fail (Lovat, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2008, p. 70). So, the advice is concentrate on writing an excellent thesis without being overly worried about whether you will pass. Your examiners may ask you to revise your thesis before you pass, but if you do what they ask, your thesis is very likely to pass. A related piece of advice is that if you stop worrying about whether you will pass, it becomes easier to write a great thesis, but nevertheless, do not aim for perfection, because this makes you prone to ‘writer’s block’ (Boice, 1990). You do not have to perfect every word, sentence and paragraph to have a good thesis.

You do not have to perfect every word, sentence and paragraph to have a good thesis. Putting this another way, the advice is to treat your examiners as friends, someone on your side, not as enemies. This attitude can help relieve some of your unnecessary stress and anxiety, and when you relax a little you will write a better thesis.

Once you realise that your reader is a friend and helper, sometimes you can cut through that abstractness or complicatedness or fog that has plagued you for so long … When … we feel the reader as genuine friend and ally, suddenly words flow more easily and humanly. This effortless change of audience can do more than all your strenuous wrestling in the past. (Elbow, 1998, pp. 144–145)

2. Examiners tend to be broadly consistent in their practices and recommendations

Because it is rare for examiners to give wildly inconsistent recommendations, you also need not worry about ‘the examiner from hell’ who gives a radically divergent judgement from the other examiners, or who recommends your thesis fail for a seemingly crazy reason. These are rare exceptions, memorable only because they are extreme. All your examiners are likely to be looking for similar qualities in your thesis, and they are all likely to give a consistent recommendation to pass (though they may disagree about whether minor or major changes are needed) (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Fairbairn, 2008; Lovitts, 2007).

On the other hand, examiners are less likely to be consistent if you do something unusual or cross boundaries, such as cross-disciplinary or cross-cultural research, or if you use an uncommon method, structure or writing style (Devos & Somerville, 2012; Mitchell & Willetts, 2009; Wisker & Robinson, 2014). So, if your thesis is typical for your field, the advice is do not worry about crazy examiners who might take it the wrong way because this is very unlikely. But if your thesis is unusual, the advice is:

(i) First figure out which fields of research you draw from and which field you contribute to. Then, write your thesis for the field you contribute to, and ask to have examiners
from this field or sub-field. For example, you might draw from psychology in order to write a thesis about art history, and so you write the psychology for art historians, not for psychologists. If you are contributing to more than one field, either you will have examiners from each field (and so will have to write in a way that will convince them all), or you will pick one of the fields to contribute to for the thesis (though future articles might contribute to other fields).

(ii) If you deviate from what is normal in the field you are writing for, then explain to the reader how you are deviating, and justify your choice. For example, if you use psychological research methods in a thesis for art historians, you have to explain and justify this choice so the art historian readers are satisfied. Often the reason you deviate is because this is the best way to address your particular topic. For more on writing an unusual thesis, see Golding (2010).

3. Examiners judge a thesis by the end of the first or second chapter

Examiners make a judgment about the quality of a thesis early in their reading, and this first impression shapes how they read the rest of the thesis – if they have a poor impression they will read critically looking for faults, but if they have a good impression they will relax and enjoy the read. The practical implication is that it is very important to refine the first chapter or two of your thesis, especially the introduction and literature review (Carter, 2008). But these may also be the chapters you wrote first, when your writing was weakest. So, the advice is you should revisit and polish these first chapters as you near the end of your candidature, after you have improved your skill at writing, and before submitting your thesis.

4. Examiners read a thesis as an academic reader and as a normal reader

Examiners want to enjoy and understand a thesis, so the advice is to make the thesis reader-friendly rather than hard-work – it must be a convincing, accessible academic text, and it must be a good read. As Elbow puts it, you should write so the reader will be with you rather than against you (Elbow, 1998, pp. 256–257). Put another way, the advice is to write your thesis so that your examiners will read it because they want to, rather than because they are obligated to as your examiners.

To make your thesis a good read, you need to take a reader-centred approach to your writing. First work out what you want to say, but then change your focus and write it (or translate it) so it is clear, interesting and convincing for your readers. Put in a different way, you should write with ‘style’ (Strunk & White, 2000; Sword, 2012; Williams & Colomb, 2012).

Of course you cannot write a reader-centred thesis unless you can identify your readers. Even though you will probably not know the specific identity of your examiners, you should identify the general sort of person you are writing for. You write a different thesis for specialists in your particular topic compared to generalists, or for specialists in one sub-field rather than another. Discuss with your supervisors which field you are contributing to, and thus what sort of examiners would be appropriate (Golding, 2010; Kiley & Mullins, 2006). You might even write for readers in two or more fields.
Once you have identified the general kind of reader for your thesis, how can you make sure your thesis will be clear, interesting and convincing for them?

(i) Read as a writer. Read good articles and theses in your field, study their style and structure, and then emulate the way they write.

(ii) Write as a reader. Consider where it might be possible for a reader to misunderstand what you write, and then rewrite to clarify and explain. Consider where you make the reader go through unnecessary work, and refine your writing to make it easier and less tiring to read. For example, you might remove unnecessary words, simplify convoluted sentences, clarify vagueness, and explain or remove jargon terms or acronyms.

To write like a reader, you have to be able to read what you have actually written rather than what you meant. To help you learn to do this, you might leave enough time between writing and revising so you forget what you meant before you revise, or you might read your writing out-loud, record it and play it back, or use text-to-speech software.

However, the only way you can be sure your writing is reader-friendly is to give it to a reader. So, the advice is to test your writing with readers. Find readers who are similar to your examiners – your supervisors are a good start. Do they consider your thesis to be a clear, interesting, good read? Regardless of how good you think your writing is, if your readers think it is unclear and unconvincing, your examiners will likely have the same reaction unless you rewrite and clarify.

Yet getting feedback from your supervisors will probably not be enough. They do not have enough time to give you all the feedback you need, and you need to test your work against other readers (especially if your supervisors are dissimilar to your intended examiners). So the advice is to get lots of feedback from different readers and use this to refine your writing (Gardiner & Kearns, 2010). This is a normal and necessary step in any academic writing. Share your writing in seminars and conferences, with other thesis students, and send it off to journals. Use any feedback to figure out how to make your writing more reader-friendly. This is the gift of feedback – it gives you ways to improve your writing, and helps you to write like a reader.

In summary, the advice is to see writing a thesis as a process of re-writing (Zerubavel, 1999). Write down what you mean, then re-write to make it a good read. Give it to others to read as your proxy examiners, and rewrite again in light of their feedback (and potentially rewrite it again and again as it takes multiple drafts to get clear, interesting and convincing writing).

5. Examiners are irritated and distracted by presentation errors

Yes, that is a deliberate mistake in the heading, but if you frequently make that sort of mistake in your thesis, it will annoy your examiners and make them doubt the quality of your research. They will think ‘If the candidate can’t even do something easy like checking spelling and references, then how can I trust their data gathering, analysis or literature review?’ If you include frequent typos, errors or inconsistencies, your examiners will doubt your competence as a researcher and will read hyper-critically, looking for further faults.
The advice here is to make sure you leave enough time so you can give your thesis a thorough proofread and remove most errors before submitting (Kiley & Mullins, 2006). Take time for revising, editing and formatting, checking and rechecking, so you reach a high standard of presentation. You will probably have to proofread your final draft several times, checking for different things each time. Go through once to check references, then another time to check spelling, then check that what you write is what you actually mean, etc.

6. Examiners favour a coherent thesis

As well as wanting a thesis to be a good read, free from presentation errors, examiners want a thesis that is a coherent whole. They want some sort of continuity or flow from point to point, section to section and chapter to chapter. Because your examiners are likely to be reading your thesis in chunks over days or weeks, they need to be able to put it down and pick it up later and still be able to follow your train of thought – remember, they may have forgotten what you wrote in chapter 1 by the time they get to chapter 5. So the advice is to help your examiners follow your thesis. Make sure they can tell why you make the points you make in the order you make them.

To create a coherent thesis, you might organise what you write according to the typical structure of other theses and journal articles in your field – this is what an examiner will expect. But, if you deviate from the typical structure – perhaps you have an unusual approach or are doing interdisciplinary work – then you have to explain to the reader how and why you deviate from what they expect.

You might also have a ‘red thread’ that runs through the thesis, linking it all together into one coherent whole. Williams and Colomb (2012) call this creating ‘global coherence’. For example, each chapter in your thesis might relate to a common argument or narrative. State this explicitly and explain how each section and chapter contributes. Perhaps your literature review shows why your research question needs to be addressed, your methods shows how it can be addressed and each results chapter answers one of your subsidiary research questions, so that when combined in the conclusions chapter, they answer your main research question.

Although a red thread is useful for structuring a thesis, the reader also has to be able to follow the thread. Even if you know that each part of the thesis connects into a coherent whole, you need to provide a map or a plan for your reader so they can also see the connections. Do not just expect them to see the links without explanation. So the advice is to explain your structure. Explain what you are doing in each section and chapter, and why you are doing this, and explain how the parts relate together, and how the parts relate to the whole. For example, explain why you include this point in this chapter, how it leads to the next point and how both points lead to the main conclusion of the chapter; then explain how this chapter leads to the next, and how the main conclusions from each chapter contributes to your overall thesis (the main conclusion you are making).

A good way to check that your examiners will be able to follow your thesis is to give it to a reader and ask them where they get lost. If they go astray anywhere in the thesis, or misunderstand what you were writing, explain to them what was confusing (‘Oh, I included that point here so I could show … ’), and then write into the thesis whatever you explained
out-loud. That written explanation is needed so a reader can follow your thesis without getting lost.

There are several other related tools you can use to create a coherent thesis:

(i) Meta-text and signposting: Meta-text is where you write about what you are writing (Mauranen, 1993). For example, ‘This chapter will build on the previous chapter by …’ or ‘I will start with discussing x, then show how this links to y …’ Meta-text can function like signposts in your writing: words and phrases that indicate where you have been, where you are and where you are going next. For example, at the chapter level signposts indicate the relationship between different sections and different chapters. As well as titles and lists, signposts include phrases like: ‘My conclusion is …’, ‘There are three main reasons …’ or ‘When we combine the conclusions from chapter 4 with these findings, we can now conclude …’ At the paragraph level, signposts include terms that indicate the relationship between different sentences and parts of a sentence: ‘because’ indicates a reason is coming next, while ‘for example’ indicates an example will follow. For more on signposting see Carter, Kelly, and Brailsford (2012).

(ii) Summaries and previews: Like signposts, you can also provide previews, overviews, summaries and reviews at the beginning and/or the end of sections and chapters. These orient the reader, and remind them of their place in the overall thesis.

(iii) Referring back and forwards: An additional way to orient your reader is to refer backwards and forward in your thesis. For example ‘I will expand on this description in chapter 7’, or ‘Building on the example I introduced in chapter 3 …’

(iv) Repetition: Repetition of main ideas can also be useful to create a coherent thesis. Word-for-word copying would be tedious, but your reader may also have forgotten important points raised several chapters earlier, so it may be useful to paraphrase them in the current chapter. Also, emphasise your main point by telling the same story several times throughout your thesis at different levels of elaboration – the very short version in the abstract, a longer version in the introduction, the very long version throughout the thesis and then a different, shorter summary in the conclusion.

(v) Do what you say: Make sure you do what you said you were going to do (Kiley & Mullins, 2006). If you say that you were going to give three reasons, check you have given three reasons, and check that the reader can identify each of them (listing them would perhaps be the easiest way). Because your actual research may have deviated from what you thought you were going to do when you started writing, it is important to revise your earlier chapters to check they match what you actually did. Make sure the questions you start with are the questions you answer.

(vi) Be consistent: Use consistent terms with consistent meanings throughout your thesis, so it is easy for the reader to see the connections. Avoid using several different terms for the same thing or the reader may become confused, thinking you are writing about different things. It is also crucial to avoid changing the meaning of a term part-way through your thesis. For example, if you use the term ‘energy’ in the introduction, make sure you use it with the same meaning in the conclusion, and do not switch to using the term ‘power’ part-way through.
7. Examiners favour a thesis that engages with the literature

Examiners want you to critically engage with the literature in your field. At the minimum you should present your critical interpretation and summary of the literature relevant to your topic. But more importantly, you need to show how you have contributed to this literature (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2007). Metaphorically, you engage with the literature by first mapping or charting the current state of the intellectual terrain, and then drawing up a plan for how you will renovate, reform, repair or remodel this terrain, and finally you build something that contributes to or enhances what was there. Alternatively, you can see engaging with literature as first identifying what Thomson and Kamler (2013) call a ‘discourse community’, then listening to what has been said so far, and finally, joining in the conversation.

One part of engaging with the literature is reviewing, summarising or interpreting what has already been said on your topic. First, it is important to only refer to literature that is directly relevant to your study, and to explain how it is relevant. When you find literature that is not relevant but which still grabs your attention, my advice is to ‘dump’ it in a file called ‘interesting but irrelevant’. Second, you should draw your own conclusions about the main features of your field: What do you take to be the main positions and conclusions? The areas of ambiguity, controversy, debate and disagreement? What new trends, categories, connections and relationships do you see?

When engaging with the literature you should use the literature to inform, support and justify your conclusions, and avoid merely listing who said what. The literature is your data and your job is to analyse, interpret and synthesise this data in order to draw conclusions. For example, if Jones (2012) says x is 10%, Carr (2013) says 15%, and Kong (2014) says 12% you do not merely repeat what they have said, you instead make your own conclusion: ‘x is no more than 15%’ or ‘x is likely to be between 10–15%’ and then include the references afterwards as justification for your conclusion. In other words, the literature review is an argument to convince your examiners of your interpretation of what has already been said.

One way to focus on your own conclusions is to write about the ideas you draw from the literature rather than write about people or articles. You should typically write about these ideas in your own voice, making your own claims, rather than hiding behind what others have said. For example, you might write ‘x is the best way to rear children (Davies, 1978)’, which is your statement backed up by a reference, rather than writing ‘Davies (1978) says that x is the best way to rear children’, which conceals you and your claims. You might also try writing the main conclusions from the literature without referring to any articles or books. Then you are forced to write your own conclusions in your own words. For example, you might clear your desk of all articles, books and notes and then write: ‘Levels have now fallen to below 50% (add references later)’ and you can go back to the literature afterwards to check you are correct and to get accurate references.

Engagement with the literature also goes beyond critically reviewing what has been said. You engage with the literature by using the literature to:

(i) Locate yourself: Explain the field you are contributing to, and the fields you are drawing from. Define the focus and boundaries of your research, and the relevant literature.

(ii) Evaluate the literature: You evaluate the strengths and limitations of what has been done in relation to your study (not in relation to some universal standard of a ‘good’
or ‘bad’ piece of research). For example, you might argue that an otherwise ‘good’ piece of research is of limited use for your study on the perspective of women because the research does not include any females in its sample (or better still you might use this research to argue that your study is needed to fill the ‘gap’ about women’s perspectives).

(iii) Justify your research: Provide a rationale for your research based on how it will contribute to what has been done. Show that there is a ‘gap’ in the literature, and that it is important to fill this gap.

(iv) Explain and justify your approach: Compare what you are doing with what has been done, and so illuminate what you are doing and why this is an appropriate approach.

(v) Explain and justify your contribution: Show how your research adds something important to what has been done in your field.

When you engage with the literature in these ways, you are doing what Thomson and Kamler (2013) call ‘identity work’. By writing about your field, and your contribution to this field, you are creating your academic identity.

This also means that you engage with the literature throughout your thesis, not just in the literature review. In the introduction, you use the literature to explain and justify your research. In the literature review, you locate your research, and present your interpretation and evaluation of what has been said so far. In the methods, you use the literature to explain and justify your approach. In the discussion sections, you discuss your findings in relation to what others have found – for example, where do you confirm and where do you contradict previous research? In the conclusion, you convince the readers that you have made a contribution to the literature. Alternatively, if you are working in a non-empirical field, you may not have a literature review or chapters for methods and findings, and instead you engage with the literature in the above ways in every chapter of your thesis.

8. Examiners favour a thesis with a convincing approach

Examiners want you to explain and justify your approach to your research. So, the advice is do not just state your topic and method, but present an argument that will convince your examiners that you have a researchable topic, and that your method and approach is a good way to tackle this topic. Also, convince your examiners that you will contribute to the literature by using your approach. Going back to the building metaphor, at the start of your thesis you have to show that you are using the right tools for the job, and that you will be able to complete the job. Remember, you have to justify not only your approach to gathering data, but also your approach to analysing the data to draw conclusions. You have to convince your examiners that if you gather data and analyse it in the way you propose than you will answer your research question. And you have to explain any limitations or potential biases in your approach, and show why these are not insurmountable problems for your research.

As I suggested in sections 2 and 6, it is fairly simple to convince your examiners that you have an appropriate method if you use the normal, expected methods of your field. However, if you deviate from normal methods, you will need to write more to explain and justify why this unusual approach is a good way to address your research topic.
And, as I also said above in section 6, make sure you do what you said you would do. This may mean re-writing your methods after you have completed your research so the methods section reflects what you actually did.

9. Examiners favour a thesis that engages with the findings

Examiners expect you to engage with your findings just as they expect you to engage with the literature. The minimum is to make your findings explicit, and explain and justify how you reached these (or, in non-empirical fields to make your conclusions explicit, as well as the arguments to support them). But to fully engage with your findings you also need to interpret what you found and draw further conclusions. In particular you need to discuss what your findings imply for your research field by relating your findings to what others have already found, and showing how your findings contribute to the literature.

Do not overstate your conclusions, or draw conclusions beyond what your findings justify. You may have to weaken some conclusions if they go beyond what you have found (change the conclusion to ‘x is likely’, rather than ‘x will happen’), but be careful not to weaken them so much that they say nothing (‘x might happen’ may merely say what we already know, and so it is not an appropriate conclusion). You may also need to strengthen your conclusions by explicitly stating why they follow from your findings and from the findings of other studies.

10. Examiners require a thesis to be publishable

The key criterion examiners use to judge your thesis is whether it makes a worthy, significant contribution to the literature, or in other words, whether it contains publishable material. For a doctorate this means a substantial, original contribution, and for a Masters some lesser contribution.

However, it is also important to limit the scope of your research so you can complete it within your available time. Making a contribution, even an original publishable contribution, does not mean you have to solve every problem, revolutionise your field or change the world. You only have to add something useful to your field. For more specific examples of original contributions, see Golding et al. (2014, p. 571) and Winter, Griffith, and Green (2000, p. 35).

The advice from many of the previous nine sections is also useful for convincing your examiners that you have made a worthy contribution to your field:

(i) Be explicit about the field (or fields) to which you are contributing (section 2).
(ii) At the start of your thesis convince your examiners that your research will result in significant contributions to this field (section 8).
(iii) At the end of your thesis, convince your examiners that you have made a significant contribution to your field. Explain how and where you make a contribution, and give an argument that this is a worthy (original) contribution. It is up to you to convince your examiners, so do not assume they will figure it out on their own, or that they will need no convincing (sections 7 and 9).
(iv) Check whether you have made a convincing contribution by giving seminars or conference presentations, or by sending your research to journals in your field – this is
the real test whether those in the field will agree that your research does make a significant contribution (section 4).

The most effective way to convince your examiners that your thesis makes a worthy, publishable contribution is to publish from it. So the advice is to send off articles for publication before you finish your thesis. Even if an article is rejected, you will still probably get valuable feedback about how people similar to your examiners respond to your research. This will help you hone and improve your thesis to make it more convincing for your examiners.

11. Examiners give summative and formative feedback

Finally, some further reassuring news to reinforce that your examiners can be treated as your friends not your enemies. Examiners are more likely to offer constructive criticism than they are to offer condemnation. They offer feedback which assists you to improve your thesis so it can pass, and they offer feedback so you can develop and enhance future research and publications even if your thesis has passed. So, the advice is to be prepared for some negative comments, but recognise that most examiner comments will be constructive feedback (even if they do not seem to be), useful for improving your thesis or developing further research and publications.

When reading examiner comments, it is useful to distinguish obligatory requests which require action, from optional suggestions which do not (Starfield et al., 2015). Also, realise that almost all of the comments are about the thesis, not about you, and you should not take these personally. If examiners point out that a section in your thesis is unclear, this simply means that the writing can be clarified.

Finally, do not be disheartened by the large number of comments from your examiners. This does not mean your thesis is substandard, because examiners will offer lots of advice about how a candidate can progress as a researcher, even if their thesis is of the highest quality (Hansford & Maxwell, 1993; Lovat et al., 2008, p. 73).

Conclusion

In this article, I applied what we know about thesis examiners to provide guidance for thesis students. Some of this advice is not new, but the aim of the research was also to revitalise this advice by framing it in a new way – how to write for your reader, the examiner.

In summary, what advice do I offer thesis students so they can write for their examiners? First, treat your examiners as friends who want you to pass. You can then write calmly and fruitfully, and avoid the trap of aiming for perfection, or agonising about the very rare ‘examiner from hell’. Your goal is to make your thesis reader-friendly and give your examiners a good read. Aim to create a good impression right from the first chapter, and do a thorough proofread before you submit to remove distracting errors. In particular, ask yourself: What field (or fields) will I contribute to? And, how can I make my thesis interesting and convincing for examiners from this field? You write a thesis by writing, getting feedback and then re-writing. So, write a draft, get feedback from readers about their responses to your writing, and use this to improve your thesis. Help your examiners to
follow your train of thought throughout the thesis, and to understand how each point you make relates to the overall thesis. Explain what you are doing and why, and provide signposts for your examiners to follow, especially if your thesis is different from what they would expect. Convince your examiners that you have a sound interpretation of the literature in your field, that you have an important topic and an appropriate method for addressing this, and that your conclusions make a significant contribution to your field. This means that your thesis should include worthwhile, publishable research (and if possible, you should actually publish from it). When you have submitted your thesis, be ready for lots of comments, most of which can be used to help you improve. I hope that this advice about how to write for your examiners will be a useful guide for writing a better thesis.

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