

Thesis Format

HSSP Program

Brandeis University

After your research is complete, you are ready to write the thesis. The format of the thesis is ultimately up to your faculty advisor. What appears below are some general guidelines that you can follow if it is approved by your faculty advisor. Be sure to check with him or her first.

Style of the Thesis

Your thesis should follow a consistent style. Use Times 12 point font throughout.

Margins should be 1 inch on all sides. The right margin of the text should not be justified; a ragged-right margin is preferred.

Page numbers can be centered at top or bottom. Whatever the format, the placement of the page numbers must be consistent throughout. It is customary to omit the page number from a page containing a new chapter heading; however, the number may be centered at the bottom of the page, if you want to keep the page number.

If using footnotes in the thesis, page numbers should be centered at the top or placed in the upper right-hand corner, rather than at the bottom of the page where they might interfere with the spacing of the footnotes.

The first page of the text of the thesis is always page one.

Your thesis should be double spaced throughout, except for long quotations and references, which are single-spaced.

Content and Organization

At the end of the research process, you will be usually confronted with a wealth of information. The most difficult and often the most satisfying part of the process is organizing all of these materials.

Many writers want to use almost all these materials in the first draft of the thesis, and many faculty members agree that this approach is reasonable. Including as much as possible in the first draft allows you to organize all the material in some preliminary way. Furthermore, data are less likely to be lost if they are included in a draft.

However, you should realize that everything probably will not be included in the final draft. As draft succeeds draft, materials will be deleted, rearranged, or added — a normal part of any writing process.

Throughout the process—from the moment you begin to consider a research problem to the time of the first draft of a thesis—some rough organizational scheme guides both the research and the writing. As the work continues, this scheme inevitably becomes more coherent, logical, and orderly. The data, interesting in isolation, only become fully significant when their arrangement reveals something about the hypothesis that prompted the research initially.

Many writers feel that the preparation of an outline is of great help. Often they prepare an outline before they begin to write, and they use it as a way of keeping track of their use of research data. In fact, your faculty advisor may first want to see an outline of the entire thesis, as you envision it, before you begin to submit drafts.

An outline can be used in another way. After a first draft, many writers make an outline based strictly on the thesis itself. This outline is often a sentence outline—a one-sentence summary of each paragraph. It helps the writer recognize a paragraph that is too long, too full of information, or out of place. If it is difficult or impossible to summarize a paragraph in one sentence, divide the material into two or more paragraphs. In addition, the sentence outline helps the writer gain a quick overview of the entire thesis. Material that appears in several places is easily identified and consolidated. Work to strengthen your argument and to sharpen your introduction and conclusion. The organization of a thesis, as revealed through the outline, is always subject to revision.

Mechanics of Writing

Once the first drafts have been completed, the writer can turn to the mechanical details of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and to the issue of writing style. *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White, the *MLA's Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing* by Claire Kehrwald Cook, and other books are useful here. You should carefully review the rules governing the use of basic marks of punctuation, the more specialized elements such as hyphens, italics, parentheses, brackets, and ellipses, and the mechanics of long and short quotations.

The use of good English is essential in the final thesis. Errors in language, spelling, or usage can distract from an otherwise strong thesis. You are urged to check these elements of style at all times. It is as much your responsibility to write carefully as it is to research accurately.

Title

The first words someone reads, the title, probably should be written last. A successful title will emerge only after it has been determined, often by trial and error, just what you hope to accomplish. The title should be specific and clear. You may want to accompany it with a subtitle. Ideally, it should summarize the research problem with efficiency and style. Avoid titles that are vague or wordy, or that repeat the hypothesis statement or the main question of the study. Expressions such as “An Investigation of ” are not necessary. Titles of just one or two words, on the other hand, are often too brief to indicate the scope of the research problem. An overall rule is that the title should be explanatory but concise when standing by itself. Use key words that will make the thesis easily searchable by others.

Here are some examples of poorly worded titles that were effectively revised:

Original: “An Investigation of the Possibility of Improving the Tax Method of Many Massachusetts Cities and Towns for Raising Revenue to Cover Rising Expenses for Public School Education in Those Same Cities and Towns” (Too wordy)

Revised: “Improving Education Funding through Local Tax Revenues in Five Massachusetts Municipalities”

Original: “The Need for World Order” (Too vague)

Revised: “The Peace-Keeping Role of the United Nations in Lebanon since 1980”

Original: “Some Aspects of Animal Behavior in Monkeys” (Too vague)

Revised: “Group-Foraging Behavior in *Cercopithecus erythrotis*”

Front Matter

The materials preceding the text, such as the title page, abstract, acknowledgments, and table of contents, are collectively known as the front matter.

The thesis begins with a title page, followed by a copyright page, and then the abstract page, on which appears a summary of the whole thesis. These first three pages are unnumbered but counted in the pagination. Thus, in the following order, and on separate pages, include the following:

- Title page (no page number)
- Copyright page (no page number)
- Abstract (no page number)
- Optional dedication (page iv)
- Acknowledgments (page v)
- Table of contents (page vi)
 - List of tables (page vii)
- List of figures (page viii)

Title page. The title page includes the title, then the author’s name (your name), then a statement that reads “A Thesis in the Field of Health: Science, Society, and Policy in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of [Name of Degree, such as Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science], then Brandeis University, then the date. All of this text should be centered. No page number appears on the page.

Copyright page. This page should simply read, “Copyright [Author’s name][year]”.

The abstract. The abstract is typically a one-page, double-spaced summary, although a second page is also acceptable. It presents a succinct overview of the thesis including the question, the hypothesis or basic goal of the project, the relevant background, the research methods, the main results, and the conclusions. The abstract asks and answers a question. If the rest of the thesis were missing, the abstract could stand alone as a summary of the research, and would be comprehensible to a reader unfamiliar with the text.

Dedication. This page is optional.

Acknowledgments. It is customary to at least thank your faculty advisor. Note that

“Acknowledgments” has no “e” between the “g” and “m” in American English.

Table of Contents. Each chapter title should appear exactly as it does in the text, using upper- and lower-case, with no underlining or boldface. Each a-head should be indented 1/2 inch under its numbered chapter title, and each b-head should be indented 1/2 inch under the preceding a-head, and so on. The number of the beginning page should be indicated in each instance, connected to the title by a continuous line of spaced periods with no gap between the last period and the page number. Page numbers should be exactly aligned.

List of Tables and List of Figures. These are two separate pages. Each table or figure should be numbered consecutively, given a title or other appropriate legend, and the page number on which each table or figure occurs. The title is connected to the page number by a line of continuous spaced periods.

Chapter Organization

Theses often have four chapters, but additional chapters are sometimes included as well. The four chapters are the following:

Chapter I is called Introduction. The aim of this chapter is to show how your hypothesis relates to the current research in your field. It contains the literature review and the justification for the hypothesis.

Chapter II is the research methods, and it is usually called Methods or Materials and Methods. This chapter describes how you collected your data, the design of your experiments or research, and the techniques used.

Chapter III is called Results. This is where you report the results of your experiment or investigation. The data are presented, and any statistical analyses are reported. There is no interpretation here. In some cases, the results are presented in several chapters.

Chapter IV is called Discussion, and this is where you discuss the meaning of your findings. Begin by reiterating your hypothesis and briefly stating your supportive argument. You must explicitly state whether or not your predictions were supported by the data, and then place the results back in context. What new questions are raised? What are the conclusions one might draw? What about the limitations and future directions? This chapter closes with a conclusion, both about your findings and about your field of inquiry.

The difference between a thesis and a research article in a professional journal is the level of detail provided. Chapters I and IV are both longer in the thesis and are able to provide more coverage of the topic. In an article, there might be four or five background sources. In your thesis you are expected to include all of the major sources. In an article, you might highlight one finding, but in the thesis, you describe every result.

Headers

If the completed thesis can be readily reduced to an outline, it is probably well organized. A question then arises concerning the use of this outline to form headers. To what extent, if any, should the thesis contain major and minor headers to guide the reader? The answer varies with different fields, specific research problems, and your own preference.

In some theses, the chapters are subdivided, and each subdivision is marked with its own heading. The headers for the major subdivisions, equivalents of the capital-letter divisions of an outline, are called a-heads; subsections of these (equivalent to the Arabic-numeral divisions of an outline) are called b-heads; and subsections of these (equivalent to the lower-case-letter divisions of an outline) are called c-heads.

Headers should not serve in place of prose transitions. A well-written text that includes headings should flow smoothly even without the headings, which serve simply to help the reader.

Use of Tables, Figures, and Other Displays

In some cases, tabular, graphic, and other types of displays are useful in the thesis. These should be placed as soon as conveniently possible after their first mention in the text. If they are small, they may appear on the same page; if large, the next full page may be appropriate.

However, if there are many tables or figures, they are sometimes presented at the end of the relevant chapter or in an appendix following the text of the thesis.

The purpose of these displays is to amplify but not to repeat the text. The text should indicate the main points of the topic in question; further details are presented in the display. Whether a table or figure, it should include a number, title, and legend (*i.e.*, a description or explanatory caption). The legend should be placed at the bottom of the figure. The heading for a table should be placed at the top of the table. Figure and table numbering should be continuous throughout the thesis.

End Matter

Like the front matter, the materials at the close of the thesis have a special format and sequence. Known as end matter, they appear in the following order and begin on separate pages:

- Appendices or supplements, if necessary
- Bibliography or references

A list of references contains only those works specifically cited in the thesis. A bibliography includes these as well, but can, in addition, contain sources for background or further reading.

The three most widely used styles for formatting references are the American Psychological Association (APA) method, the Modern Language Association (MLA) method, and the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) method. You should choose one of these, or another method decided on by you and your advisor, and use it consistently throughout the thesis.