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Thesis Writing and Beyond: Fighting the Threat of Plagiarism

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Foreword

This eBook is a comprehensive guide to help the PhD candidates in writing their thesis from scratch. It is designed to simplify the overwhelming process of writing an extended thesis and furnishing it to produce a scholarly piece of research work. The guide begins with a systematic approach of demystifying the basic knowledge and steps involved to produce a fine scholarly PhD thesis.

The ebook is a work produced by the qualified research experts who have supervised the doctoral candidates and had minutely observed their struggle to write their theses.

Through this thesis guide, they aim to resolve the intrinsic issues and troubles faced by the doctoral candidates by giving the relevant insights into the life of PhD candidates.

We hope that this eBook will help the research scholars attain precision while writing a doctoral thesis.

Part One – THESIS WRITING

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What is a PhD thesis?

Hundreds and thousands of students have contributed to the existing cannon of literature in various fields of study and there are plenty of ideas circulated on how a thesis should be defined what exactly a PhD thesis is? While there are many definitions of thesis to consider, we found the following definition of thesis the most apt and justified a research thesis written and submitted by a student wishing to be awarded a PhD (Collins English Dictionary).

A thesis should essentially reflect vast personal knowledge that a researcher gathers during his extended research period that ranges from three to five years. Usually an idea is explored, investigated, argued and a solution is reached that either negates the broached idea or affirms it with new findings. Thesis is accepted by universities in the format of a printed document, a multimedia format or as an electronic attachment.

A thesis is written by undertaking two modes of research: primary research and secondary research.

Primary Research is concerned with gaining knowledge from first-hand experiences. This can be true to all sociological studies and empirical-based studies and involves analysing and interpreting a text on one's own. This is necessary to make the education experience complete in all respects.

Secondary Research is done by evaluating research documents of people who have significantly contributed to the body of existing knowledge. Most students resort to the secondary research and this is why the fear of losing out on original ideas is a matter of concern.

An Ideal Thesis Looks Like...

Ideal PhD thesis is one that is written meticulously under the guidance of the supervisor assigned by the college, and is at par with current research debates and discussions. It should reflect the ideas and the opinions formed clearly and should be free from ambiguous statements or blurred ideas. Your research thesis should explore, discover and engage in observations steadily. For example, a student's focus on architecture should not only analyse the current developments in the field but also manage to study specific domes, shapes and structures of a particular period in history.

The **introduction** of a thesis should never be awfully long. An introduction is meant to hold the ends of the chapters introduced in the thesis together. It should rather introduce the chapters that would be taken up in detail and put the entire research query into perspective by discussing the history or theory around the topic posed.

Above all, a good thesis should have a potential research question which offers a subject-angle that has never been discussed before or is relevant to the recent times. The research approach within the academic practice today stands very critical and settling down with

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an appropriate query within a topic is the toughest decision a research scholar has to take. This will be their idea for the coming five years in their life.

Steps to commence a valuable thesis:

- Once you have enrolled as a fellow research scholar in a university, think sufficiently about your research topic before finalising it. Weigh your options correctly in terms of the research material available and the probable sources where they could be found.
- Research, before you begin with your writing. See the viability of your topic.
- Look for places where sufficient research material would be available. It can be libraries, online catalogues, article websites, and online research paper libraries such as Jstor, etc.
- Once the research topic is finalised, then formulate your unique research question by investigating the topic extensively. If there is a potential question that is raised and an answer to it you came up by the end of your research seems justified, you know you are on the right path.

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How to Choose a Topic

There are varied courses and fields of study that can help you decide your academic interests and the concerned area of research. Assigned supervisors from universities or affiliated institutions give the student the freedom to explore the topic to a great extent, ensuring that the focus remains undiluted. However, there are instances where the choices presented to the student stand limited by the university research guidelines or the limited skills of the professors in the particular area of interest that you choose.

In such cases, we recommend that the student should approach the concerned Head of Department or a writing centre (if the university has one) and put up their query. This can help the matter get considered at a senior level and accord due relevance to the student's area of research.

Apart from that, unearthing the right focus for choosing a topic is necessary. For example, "Literature in Victorian Age" can be too broad for an area of research. It becomes imperative to narrow it down to one particular aspect of the same. So, it would look better if one focuses around "Tennyson's literature in Victorian Age". One should try and narrow it down to one miniscule aspect of the topic and research on it for findings and observations. For this, preliminary reading becomes essential before the outline of thesis is planned.

Even the most well-read students who are passionate about a particular subject keep on re-examining the finalised topic. This happens because of an unsure mind. So, make sure the same does not happen with you and for this you must study a wide literature upon your research topic and question.

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Structuring your Thesis

Structuring the thesis includes defining a broad outline of the content, chapter division and the essential points or arguments that would go into writing each chapter. Many students do not work on a defined structure or hesitate to work on it, because it does require preliminary research and forward thinking, as to what would each strata of the thesis comprise of. This is a tedious process, and it is strongly advised to do it lest your thesis should suffer with the lack of complete and correct information. While universities provide thesis guidelines and templates for guiding the students but students get stuck in writing in accordance with those. Hundreds of sample research thesis and dissertations are available on online journals, print journals, university libraries. You may choose to refer those for acknowledging the standard and structure accepted by the universities across the globe.

You must prepare the first draft of your thesis to get familiar with the academic writing style and procedure. Strategize and prioritize the collected research information on the basis of its relevance. This way one can delete data that is not relevant at all. It is essential to weed the unnecessary information out that tends to gather around you during your research.

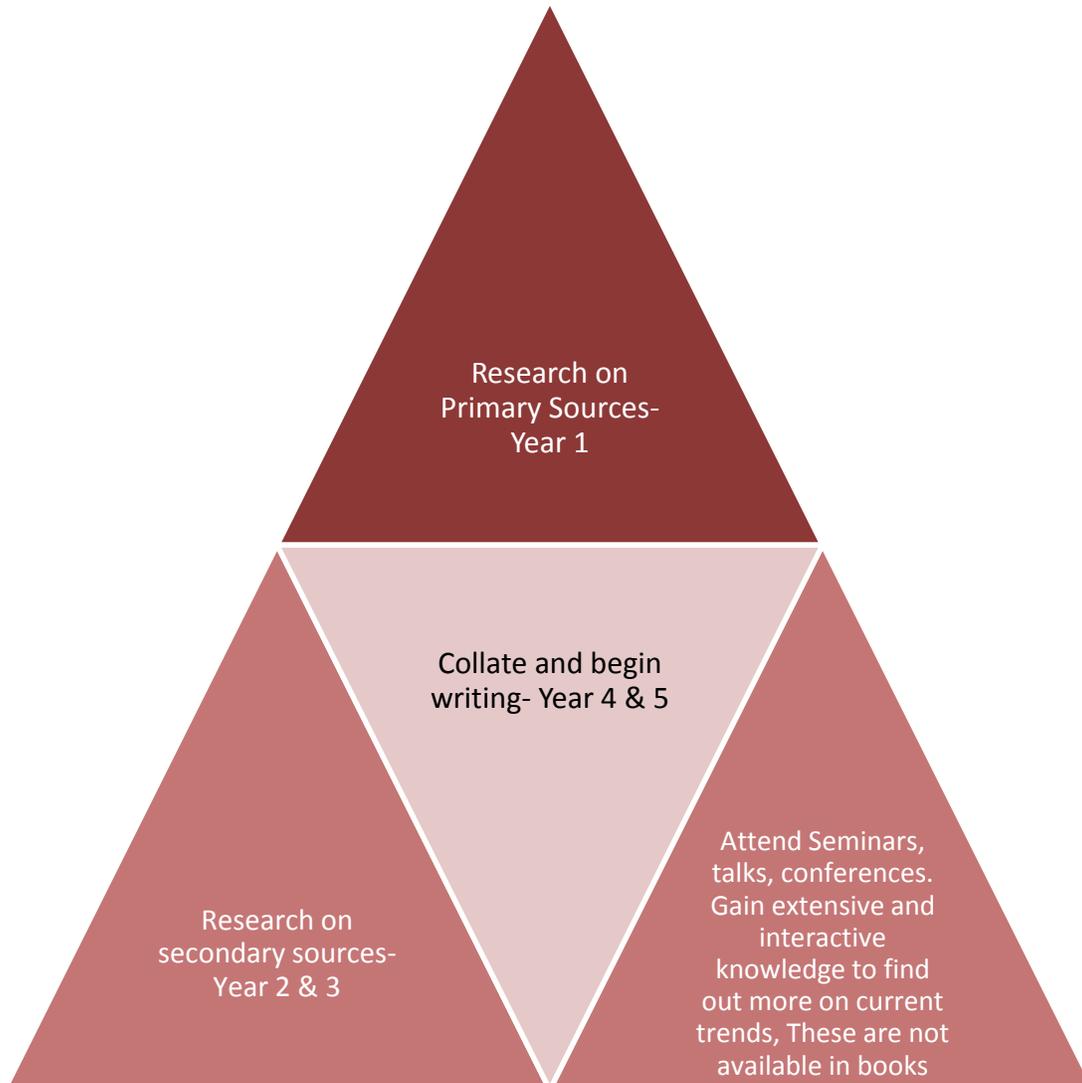
If you are wondering why exactly a thesis structure or layout should be prepared, below is an example of a typical case of confusion that students face when they begin writing without a systematic outline in hand:

Ana was a research scholar in English literature and her topic could be grouped into three different perspectives. Confident of her idea she started writing the first chapter. By the end of it, she found out that the first two perspectives were to be discussed in the subsequent chapters and she had mentioned it in detail in the first chapter itself. Ana had spent a good 15 days writing the first chapter and now she is left in deep dilemma. If Ana would have distributed her ideas broadly into structures, then she would have been at least clear about categorizing her ideas into chapters.

Understanding Time

Ana's problem seems to be universal in a way. A PhD research lasts up to five years and M.Phil. or an MBA thesis lasts for two years. With such a long duration we suggest that time should be fundamentally divided into the following:

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Time is very crucial for research. Many students either form a plan in the third year of their research or even simply a year before their PhD thesis submission is nearing its deadline. Hunting for data should begin right in the first year as your research idea or purpose keeps changing or modifying as you go on to understand the subject much more deeply. For example, if in the year 2003 you found out that stock market trading was at its peak and in 2007 the situation was extremely critical then it becomes much easier to draw a comparison amongst these two years and the years in between. Studying and analyzing the trends practically is much more dynamic than knowledge gathered simply from books! This will also allow the student to revise and re-edit the document for that much-needed finesse and confidence.

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Part Two - PLAGIARISM

What is Plagiarism?

Did you know that the word “Plagiarism” originally comes from a Latin word which literally means “kidnapping” or “theft”? Plagiarism is defined as unethical use of or incorporating earlier stated information or existing knowledge discovered by the preceding researchers without the consent or the acknowledgement of the owner. In the world of academia, plagiarism is considered to be a dishonesty which can deteriorate academic career of a research scholar. Universities follow the strict rules and regulation if any part of thesis is found plagiarised and therefore declare the conditions beforehand under which an idea or a work of research is claimed to be plagiarized.

Every piece of research has the potential to influence and affect people. Every institution and university protects their student’s contributions by monitoring and checking for plagiarized ideas or contents. The world at large strongly believes that once any work is declared as plagiarized then the trust placed in the author is broken permanently. This is why writers fear this peril.

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How to avoid Plagiarism

Here is how one can avoid intentional or unintentional plagiarism:

- Tons of research articles and papers are made available on the internet for a reader-centric consumption. This also creates fair chances of relevant information being lifted from sources and used for one's thesis. Internationally, several students sell their essays online. But in such cases, essays bought or sold, copied or modified, can be recognized or traced in terms of the content or ideas lifted from sources. With the help of plagiarism checking software, universities and authorities detect whether a work is copied or not.
- The correct way of approaching an existing idea is to challenge it or add something to it, and blend it according for answering your posed research question in the thesis. No borrowed research idea or theory should be presented and claimed as one's own. Proper acknowledgement of the author, or the source from where it is borrowed, should be duly mentioned in the bibliography or in the list of the works cited. This may include sentences, paragraphs, phrases, terminology or even words.
- The prime cause of a typical case of an unintentional plagiarism is when the researcher does not keep track of the material read and notes prepared on the same. Even if an idea discussed by an author seems relevant to your research topic and question, it is always suggested that one should take a note of it. A basic description of the source with the page number, the edition, the name of the publication and the book can save you from unintentional academic disgrace.
- Even if the author's words are rephrased and written in one's own language, this is also considered as plagiarism. In such cases, the idea tends to remain intact even if it is modified according to the need of the thesis.

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How to Use Quotes in Thesis Writing

Use of block quotes or extracts from a particular text can significantly help steer the arguments while writing thesis. Hence, quotations are widely used by research scholars who wish to highlight something that is apt for the research idea or problem being discussed or gives an interesting twist to the argument. Quotations are greatly helpful in explaining or supporting ideas that are being researched upon by students. In such a case, the accuracy of the quotation and the manner in which it is presented matters a lot. Many style sheets such as Harvard, APA, MLA, IEEE, etc. instruct on different ways of using the quotations in theses.

A student must understand the importance of an accurate citation style of quoting. Misquoting an author can lead to an unacceptable academic anomaly. Let us understand this with the help of an example taken from the MLA style guide (seventh edition):
“It was the best of the times; it was the worst of the times: wrote Charles Dickens of the eighteenth century (35).

It must be noted that a quotation must not undergo any change in spelling, bracket arrangements, punctuation marks or capitalization. If the quotation is written in American English, British English or any other language, it should be reproduced as it is, irrespective of the language the student is following.

Most importantly, a quotation should be introduced only within a specified context. Otherwise, it becomes a misfit in the discussion and constructs a forced discussion instead of a logical one. Also, there are many rules such as, within a quotation a sentence can be omitted and be replaced by ellipses provided the sentence still holds meaning to the reader. However, the only trick is to make the quote look intelligently brief. Longer quotes break the pattern of what the researcher has to say.

Case Study

A case study that discusses the points of plagiarism and the usage of appropriate quotes would be a great way to remember the points discussed above.

Tina is a student of University of Manchester and her area of interest is tracing out feminism in post-Mutiny Lucknow. While writing her dissertation, she explained an unquoted extract from one of the books she read but gave due credit to the authors she was referring to. Because the thumb-rule says that all references must be duly quoted in the thesis, her idea seemed lifted from the reference text and gave a sense of being an incomplete argument due to lack of substantial evidence of the thought. Also, as a reader of the thesis, one will not be able to immediately recognize the source and the description if the quote fails to mention itself at the time of the argument. Section 8.5 in the Publication Manual of American Psychological Association (fifth edition) states the problem and its differentiation as follows:

Original Phrase: There is evidence to suggest that newsmakers are becoming particularly savvy about placing items on the media agenda. When for example, President Reagan was running for his...

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Plagiarized Phrase: Evidence suggests that newsmakers are becoming keenly aware about placing items on the media agenda. When for instance, President Reagan ran for his second term...

Acceptable Phrase: Severin and Tankard (1992) observed that a president has considerable power to form public opinion by using media to his advantage. As an example, they cite President Reagan's photo ops during the 1984 campaign, in which he was visiting several remote national resources....

Any graphical representation, statistical information, data, spreadsheets, questionnaires and the like should be mentioned as it is while writing a research thesis. Changing the design template or structure while keeping the data same also makes a work plagiarized.

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Plagiarism Laws

According to the MLA style guide (seventh edition), any of the following instances are counted as plagiarism:

- Notes that are taken during research are an exact copy or a paraphrase from the original source and the student forgot to modify them. Even when the quotation is written in a student's own wording, this is also stated as a case of plagiarism.
- If the student buys a paper online or simply passes it off as his own, this would be called as plagiarized content.
- When the student uses someone else's idea or argument without acknowledging the author, this is stated as plagiarism according to all the style guides apart from MLA.
- A term or a phrase coined by an author during his/her research being used in your own thesis without acknowledging the author is a usual case of plagiarism.
- Borrowed or copied text is used in your thesis without quotation marks and is also not cited properly in the bibliography. This would also be called as a plagiarized work of research.

These cases of plagiarism happen frequently, and at times researchers do it without even realizing the plagiarism factor involved in it. These do bring the academic career under a caustic eye and put the researcher in jeopardy as cases for defending copyright issues get very complicated in the long run.

Here are ways in which plagiarism can be avoided:

- It is always recommended that you prepare a list of authors, texts and essays that has been read during the research
- Make a book-wise list of ideas that have been broadly discussed in the book. Prepare individual lists for every book.
- Never take a note of exact passages from the text without mentioning the page number and putting it in quotation marks
- If you are unsure of a particular point and its plagiarism issue, then cross-check with the books or with your supervisor.

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Part 3- REVISING PHD THESIS

Once you have finished writing the draft of your thesis, your next crucial job is to polish it and give it a shape of a scholarly piece. You must study your own thesis to spot grammatical, punctuation or any other language or contextual error left out during the writing process. This might take a month or two but it is necessary for your PhD success that you revise and give your thesis a finishing touch to improve both its potential and credibility.

So, how can you revise your thesis? The recent researches have shown that revision of any paper can be done best when you sit in a comfortable place with the print copy of the paper. At times, we fail to recognise the errors or mistakes in any written piece while reading it on computer, pc or any other electronic media. But simply editing your thesis with a pen and paper minimize any such possibility. Therefore, we advise you to take print copy of your entire thesis and edit it manually.

3 Steps to Thesis Revision

- **Editing**
Your first stance should be to edit your paper. The step involves a critical apprehension of each chapter of your thesis and examining if there adequate information and descriptions are provided or cited to support any of your arguments. Check if there is a logical sequence of arguments, theories or issues that form a meaningful whole, if your ideas are clearly expressed, research questions clearly stated and the paragraphs or chapters are coherently structured.
- **Proofreading**
Your next significant step should be to proofread your thesis well. Many a student perceive proofreading of same kind as editing is. But, there is a whole lot difference between editing and proofreading any written piece. Where editing involves a thorough check of content, coherence, structure, logic, writing style, transition in paragraphs and chapter, proofreading is a technical method to identify improper use of language, grammar and punctuation etc. When you proofread, you must check if there is any misspelt word, sentence structure, repetitive facts, figures or quotes, line spacing etc.
- **Formatting**
Formatting is an ultimate task of the writing process as it is done when everything else is in its place. Your university must have prescribe a thesis format or template according to which you must prepare your thesis. You ought to check if each section or chapter of your thesis has been defined as per the module and all formatting requirements are fulfilled.

Here is the basic format of a doctoral thesis:

Title Page

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- ✓ Relevant keywords which briefly convey the theme of your thesis
- ✓ Title in Uppercase letters at center of the page
- ✓ Minimum one inch margin

Abstract:

- ✓ Should not be listed in table of contents
- ✓ A brief summary of your entire thesis in not more than 400 words
- ✓ Should consist problem statement, research methodology, results & conclusions
- ✓ Formulas, diagrams, figures should not be included in abstract

Dedication (optional)

- ✓ If desired, you can add tribute to one or more people who have contributed in your research

Table of Contents

- ✓ Each chapter or section should be listed
- ✓ Write headings exactly as you did in contents
- ✓ List sequence wise page number entry

List of Tables & Figures

- ✓ If tables are more than five or six in your thesis
- ✓ Table or figure numbers, captions, page numbers should be enumerated

Acknowledgement

- ✓ Include funding and research grants
- ✓ Credit to individuals & organizations can be given

Body Text

- ✓ Write the main body of your thesis in third person narrative

Appendices (optional)

- ✓ Additional information, supplementary material, is cited or described

Bibliography

- ✓ All references formatted as per APA, MLA, CMS etc.
- ✓ Works listed chronologically as per date of publication
- ✓ Alternatively can be titled as Works Cited, List of References, or Literature Cited

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A Note to the Reader

Dear Readers,

We hope this guide created by our writers and editors has simplified the process of doctoral writing. We suggest you to read this guide from the beginning till the end before you begin writing your thesis to maximize your work efficiency.

If you like to add something to it that we might have skipped, we welcome your suggestions. You can write in to us start@6weeksphdthesis.co.uk.