Writing Skills – AMS Workshop

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AMS Writing Workshop 1

1. February work-in-progress presentations
   1. Purpose
   2. What is required

2. The AMS report/thesis
   1. What you are aiming for: Standard thesis structures
   2. Planning and getting started
   3. The first chapter
   4. Tips from past examiners’ reports
February Work-in-Progress Presentations
Purposes of work in progress presentations

1. Milestone towards final completion – ensures you are on track for submitting on time

2. Encourage you to produce a framework and plan for writing

3. Evaluate (formally or informally) your progress so far

4. Identify any deficiencies or problems in time to fix them
What is required in the presentation #1

- A clearly stated research question.

- The rationale for this research question – why it is worthwhile investigating this question.

- Method
  How you will go about answering the question and why you have chosen this particular method.
4. Background:
A brief overview of the background to the project - tell the audience what they need to know in order to understand your research project.

5. Literature:
- A brief general overview of what is in the literature,
- Mention by name any really important or central articles.
- Aim to show that you have read the literature, and know what main sorts of topics are covered.
6. Key issues/concepts

• For literature-based projects: include any analysis of concepts and/or arguments that you have done so far.

• For empirical projects: if you have already collected data, describe what you have collected, and briefly present an analysis you have done, even if not complete. If data collection has not been done yet, describe how and when it will be done.

7. Your timeline and plans for the rest of the project.
The AMS report / thesis
Getting started

- Do you know what is stopping you?
- Writing “in order”
The best way to get started is to have a good idea of what you are aiming for.
Are you ready to start writing your report?

Before you try to start writing, make sure you have:

- Found and read relevant literature
- Planned and made a framework
Do you have enough information/data?

- Primary and secondary sources
- Raw data
- Engaging with relevant debates
Planning

- Brainstorming
- Parts of the research report
- Allocating words for sections
- Time planning
What is brainstorming

- Generating ideas
- Recording ideas
  - butcher’s paper
  - index cards
  - the floor
  - software
- Class exercise
Generating ideas

- What is your question?
- What is the purpose of your research?
- How does your research relate to the field?
- What data do you already have?
- What extra data do you need?
- How can your data be best represented?
- What are the conclusions from your research?
- How does your research contribute to the field?
What AMS report contains: The basic elements

- Introduction
  - Research question
  - Background

- Statement of methodology

- Body of report

- Conclusion
A Standard thesis structure #1: non-empirical (lit.-based) projects

**Chap. 1 - Introduction**
- Background
- Research question and rationale for it
- Approach/methodology
- Overview of thesis

**Chaps. 2-4 – Analysis and argument**
- My argument/interpretation
- Possible criticisms / counter-arguments
- My responses to these

**Chap. 5 - Conclusion**
A standard thesis structure #2: qualitative projects

Chap 1 – Introduction: research question and rationale

Chap 2 – Background (“literature review”)

Chap 3 – Methodology

Chaps 4-6 – Findings, including
  • Results
  • Discussion – with reference to literature and theory

Chap 7 - Conclusion
A standard thesis structure #3: quantitative projects

Chap 1 – Introduction: research question and rationale

Chap 2 – Literature review

Chap 3 – Method

Chap 4 – Results

Chap 5 – Discussion

Chap 6 - Conclusion
Plan first, before you start writing

- Sort out your framework *before* you start writing
  - Brainstorming
  - Concept mapping

- You need to work out
  - Your research question
  - The basic argument or line of reasoning
  - Approx how this will map into chapters
Organising your argument

- Identifying key points
- Developing conclusions
- Engaging with alternative conclusions
- Finding the ‘logic’ in your argument
Example of an argument as thesis framework

1. Issue: should pharmaceutical companies provide HIV drugs free to developing countries?  
   Chap 1

2. Reasons why they should
   1.
   2.
   3.  
   Chap 2

3. Critical evaluation of these reasons
   1.
   2.
   3.  
   Chap 3

4. Conclusion at this stage – none of these arguments is very strong  
   Chap 3
Example (cont)

5. Other parties have also have a responsibility to meet the cost
   Party 1 and why it is responsible
   Party 2 and why it is responsible
   Party 3 and why it is responsible

6. Overall conclusion:
   a number of parties share responsibility for reducing cost of drugs – pharmaceuticals should not have to do this alone

Chap 4
Chap 5
Important points

Don’t just describe what other people have said

Put forward your own interpretation or line of thinking

Your conclusion does not have to be simple, definite or directly applicable to practice

The conclusion will often be that things are more complex than they first appeared
Parts of the research report

- Title
- Table of contents
- Acknowledgments
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion
- Appendices
- References
Title

- Keep it short
- Be careful about not over-stating your conclusions
- Make it informative
- Make it inviting to the reader
Abstract

- Be concise and relevant
- Between 200-400 words
- Usually written after the completion of report
- Make inviting to the reader
Introduction

- Often written after the body and conclusion are completed
- Introduces your research question
- Explains the relevance of your research
- Outlines the format of your report
- Tells readers why they should continue reading
Body

- Literature review
- Research method
- Results
Literature review

- Define the scope of your review
- What is the difference between a systematic review and a comprehensive review?
- Importance of keeping organised with your references
- Should describe the field to the reader
- Should clarify where your research fits with the field
- Making explicit your theoretical framework
Research method

- Describe your method in detail:
  - subjects/participants
  - qualitative/quantitative/mixed
- Justify your selection of method
- Explain your method/s of analysis
- Be clear about success and limitations of method
Results

- Describe how you obtained your results
- Be clear and realistic about the validity of your results
- What are the implications of your research?
- Theory generating
**Conclusion**

- Restate the purpose of your research
- Summarise main findings/results
- Describe what you think the implications of the research might be
- Make recommendations for future projects to compensate for any deficits in current research
Appendices

- Relevant documents/information
- Not to be used to develop further arguments outside the scope of the project
- Useful to present research tools employed in the project (e.g. questionnaires, interview questions)
Allocating words for sections

- Keep Introduction brief
- Ensure descriptive sections are concise
- Allocate as much ‘space’ as possible to your analysis
- Use appendices appropriately
Time planning

- Set realistic goals
- Be flexible
- Allow time to ‘polish’ your report
- A thesis requires “thinking” time, not just writing time
Writing

- Keeping it relevant
- Reviewing plan
- Drafts and revision
Language

- Avoidance of jargon
- Inclusive language
- Clarity
- Writing in the first person
Referencing

- Why reference?
- When to reference
- Choosing a system
- Maintaining consistency
- Referencing web-sites
Editing and proof-reading

- Getting report structure right first
- Don’t rely on spellcheck (see handout)
- Read report aloud
- Read (and listen) critically
- Keep reference books handy (dictionaries, etc.)
- Consider potential audiences
Support services and sites:

- University of Melbourne Learning Skills Unit
Tips from past examiners’ reports
Things that examiners liked…..

- The research question was clear and specific
- Shows good knowledge of the area, both theoretical debates and existing empirical data
- Thoroughly researched
- Clear and logical development
- Includes critical analysis, not just description
- There is consistency between the research question and the methods used to answer it
- The argument is explicitly stated at the beginning, and the following chapters closely follow the outline given. Excellent structure and organisation
Things that examiners didn’t like …

- Student needed to pay more attention to scope – too much ground was covered
- There was a lack of theoretical framework – the concepts being used were not made explicit or discussed in depth
- Needs greater integration of research findings with existing theoretical debates
- Sometimes not clear whose arguments or views are being presented, the student’s or those of an author previously mentioned
- Too much reliance on a single work of one author
- Too much reporting, not enough analysis
Comments specifically related to empirical qualitative studies (primary data collection)

- Needs better justification of the sample – why these participants?
- Better to include lots of the participants’ voices – not enough presentation of direct and extended quotes
- The student should have interrogated the data more, looked for more complexity
- Requires greater interrogation of the research findings with reference to the existing literature
Final advice at this stage
1. Meet with your supervisor before going on long break
2. Make a plan about what work you will do over the break
3. Make a timeline covering Dec – end of April 2007
4. Meet with your supervisor before your work-in-progress presentation – get feedback and advice on the content
Take steps NOW to avoid plagiarism

Failure to reference properly can constitute plagiarism

To avoid accidental plagiarism

- Take notes carefully – indicate direct quotes
- Put in references as you write – don’t leave it til later
- DO NOT copy and paste chunks of text from electronic sources
Plagiarism

- How to recognise plagiarism
- How to avoid plagiarism
- When to quote
- When to paraphrase
- When to summarise
Helpful Resources

- [http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/students/study/booklets.html](http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/students/study/booklets.html)
- [http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/students/study/booklets.html](http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/students/study/booklets.html)
- [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/)