

Tips from Frank Stilwell for aspiring writers of academic articles and theses...

A. Some suggestions for articles (and individual thesis chapters)

1. Write early, even if it is just a preliminary 'stab' at how you're approaching the topic. Writing is thinking.
2. The opening is very important. You can think in terms of, say, four initial paragraphs: the first sets up the topic, explaining why it is important; the second says, briefly, what is already known, i.e., summarises how the topic has previously been tackled in the literature: the third raises questions, indicating what we need to explore/investigate now; and the fourth summarises how the current article (or chapter) seeks to respond to these concerns, i.e., introduces the key concepts, explains the analytical method and briefly sets out the structure of the article.
3. The main body of the article can then follow that structure. It can be organised under 4, 5 or more sub-headings (always a minimum of 3).
4. Work on developing a clear 'voice' in your writing. You may draw on other people's ideas and evidence (indeed, you normally should), but it is your story. So you need to take the reader by the hand, explaining the nature and significance of each step of the journey. You may selectively quote from other authors where this is useful, but you must develop the argument throughout in your own words. Your 'voice' will come through more clearly if you keep sentences short. You may need to use long sentences from time to time, but try to intersperse them with some short ones.
5. The conclusion of any article (or chapter) is also very important. It should briefly summarise what the article (or chapter) has argued and demonstrated. It should then indicate why this matters (e.g., what are the policy implications). Finally, it may indicate what remains unresolved: in the case of an article this indicates 'issues for future research', whereas in the case of a thesis chapter it should give a lead-in to the next chapter.

6. When you think you've got an article or chapter 'done' you should congratulate yourself, take a break for a day or two and then re-read it afresh, looking for ways in which the expression can be simplified or clarified. The most useful changes are often those involving less words. Look at each sentence to identify any repetition or redundant words and excise them. Read out aloud: if it sounds convoluted or tedious it almost certainly needs editing. Try to make the text 'flow'. Time spent on this process makes the difference between OK and impressive. Two, three, four or even more rounds of improvement are recommended, although 'the principle of diminishing returns' does eventually kick in.

B. Some more general thoughts about writing postgrad research theses...

1. Whatever your topic, the success of the work will depend on how effectively the thesis is constructed and the interest it engenders in its readers. Getting the chapter structure clear is fundamentally important because this signals the sequential development of the investigation and argument. This chapter structure is the skeleton on which you can, bit by bit, hang the flesh. The conceptual framework of your thesis gives the skeleton its distinctive form.
2. Think in terms of developing one central theme in the thesis (i.e., a central question or concern to which you are seeking to provide a valuable contribution) and also perhaps 3, 4 or 5 supplementary themes which feed into that central theme. Introduce these themes in the introductory chapter and refer to them recurrently throughout the thesis.
3. The introductory chapter should set the scene, saying why the topic is important, indicating the key concepts and the method of inquiry to be adopted in answering the key questions, and giving a brief foretaste of the structure of the chapters that will follow.
4. The next chapter may review the current state of knowledge on the topic (i.e., serving as a 'literature review'). The review needs to be well structured (e.g., according to your thesis theme/sub-themes) and the selected literature should be described and assessed from your own critical perspective. Importantly, it should conclude with a clear indication of how you are going to progress the understanding of the topic, e.g.

by approaching the topic differently from previous writers OR by building on the existing stock of knowledge in an innovative way.

5. The bulk of your thesis comprises a series of chapters in which the main body of argument and evidence is presented. The number of chapters should depend on how the material 'naturally' breaks up but, normally, writing about 8,000 words per chapter is sensible in a postgrad research thesis in the social sciences. Each chapter should begin with 'scene-setting' and posing questions (see notes above re. constructing articles) and end with conclusions which show how the argument and evidence that has been presented fits into the overall thesis.
6. Interim 'signposts' to the development of the argument are often very useful within individual chapters: the reader needs to be recurrently reminded of where the argument is heading, how it all fits together and what is novel about the material that is being introduced at each stage.
7. Each chapter should be strong on its own but, together, also strong as a member of a team. Reassurance: sometimes a strong team can have a relatively weak team member.
8. Finally, the concluding chapter of the thesis needs to: (a) briefly summarise what has been argued/demonstrated, preferably by explicit reference to the central theme and sub-themes that you introduced in the opening chapter; (b) discuss limitations and unresolved issues, and (c) state what are the implications of this new understanding, if any, for public policy and/or for further research.
9. The bibliography (headed References) comes at the end, of course, with all works cited shown in alphabetical order by author. This should include all - and only - works to which reference has explicitly been made in the thesis. Consistent presentation of these references is very important. The Harvard system of referencing is the simplest, keeping footnotes to a minimum.
10. For both articles and theses, there is always scope for improvements through re-drafting. With theses there is sometimes need for 'oxy-welding' (repositioning of

sections into different chapters where they may fit better) as well as lots of polishing (correcting punctuation, improving grammar, splitting long sentences, deleting repetition or redundant words, etc). Always go back to the introductory chapter at the end to make sure that you didn't promise something that you haven't delivered: if you did promise too much then modify the intro to promise less.

These tips reflect learning in 'the school of hard knocks'.

I hope they may be useful to you.

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