

Putting the Thesis Together: Structure and Coherence

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session you will have a better understanding of:

- Conventional / traditional PhD structures
- Ideas around planning structure and organising the whole beast!
- Where to prioritise time, effort, and word count
- Key signposts for coherence
- How to maintain focus and how to signal focus for the reader
- Patterns for structuring chapters
- Checklists for coherent and logical structure

You will also have the opportunity to consider your own thesis structure plan in light of this presentation.

Many of these suggestions are merely that. Percentages and word limit noted here are ‘rules of thumb’ or approximations only.

Folio format

Substantial dissertation together with reports, papers and publications in media appropriate for the professional context



Creative work plus exegesis

Visual, media, and performing arts, as well as creative and professional writing

Please consult your supervisors for full and discipline-specific advice.

Waiver

Thesis by publication

Paper series, some or all that have been published before the examination

Workshop: Preparing for the oral examination

- Those who just attended the Oral Examination Workshop ...
 - Can you tell us the best bit of advice they've learnt in the last hour or two?

Why is structure and coherence important?

- Gives authority to you ‘writer’s voice’/work.
- Your examiners want it!
- Forces you to focus and clarify your argument to yourself and your readers.

When should you have a clear idea of structure?

Start planning at the beginning and keep developing this throughout.

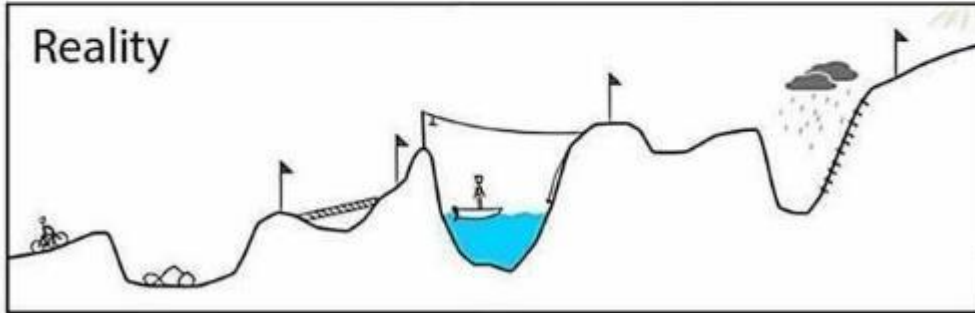


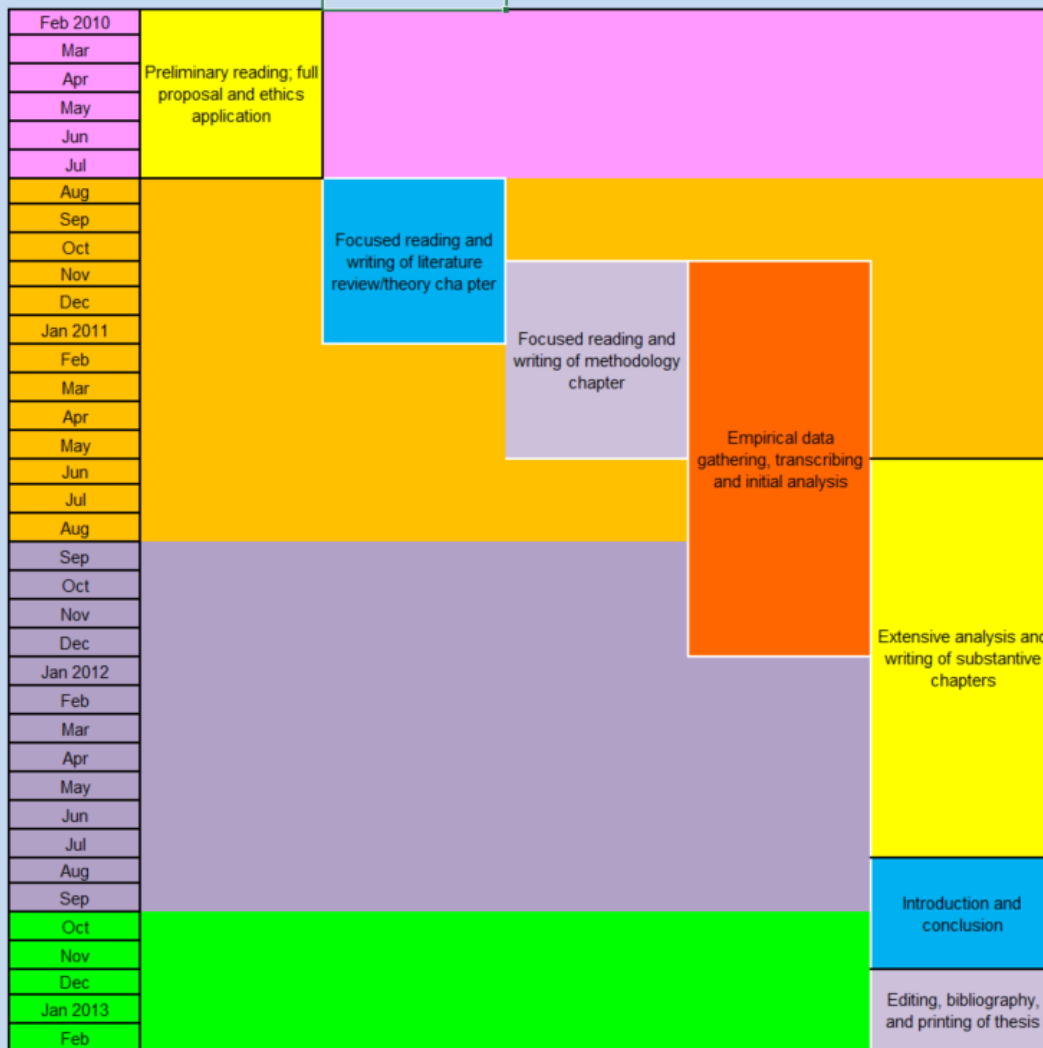
The thesis experience

Your plan



Reality





For when the thesis won't quite hang together.



The metaphor game

❖ Exercise

- Imagine your writing practice as a car. What kind of car is it? Is it new or old? What is the driving experience like? Is it in good condition or not?

Or,

- Imagine your thesis as an animal – what kind of animal is it? How does it behave? What is its habitat? Is it a daytime creature or nocturnal? Is it carnivorous, or not?

(Thesis Whisperer, 2014)

- In groups, write as many possible chapters/parts of a PhD that you can think of.
- Your group may come up with a few varieties of thesis structures – what are they? Which disciplines do the members of your group come from?

Massey Library Thesis Presentation Guide ('order')

- Title page
- Abstract
- Preface and/or acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations, tables, etc.
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Materials and methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Appendices
- Index

The thesis question/hypothesis



What is your core thesis question/hypothesis?

Audit what you have

- Make a list of discrete sets of data/areas/themes/concepts you have been writing about.
- Are these looking like chapters or sections of chapters?
- How many words/pages do you plan to dedicate to each?
- How do you track changes in the way you conceptualise your structure as the thesis progresses?
- **How do each of these parts strengthen your response/s to your guiding question/hypothesis?**

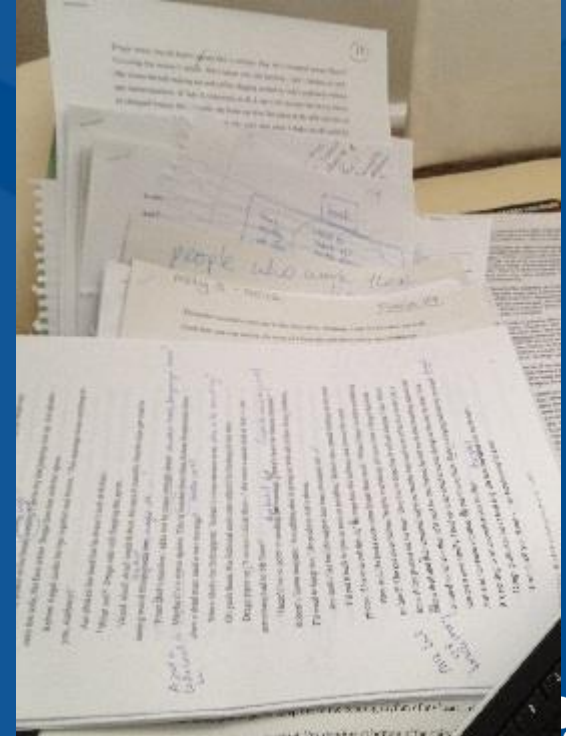
- Ask your supervisors for ‘model theses’ in your discipline and look at the structures employed.
- Length (max of 100,000 words)
 - How will you structure these? 10 chapters @ 10,000 words each/5 chapters @ 20,000 words each?
 - Introduction, Methodology, LitReview, Data, Discussion, Conclusion chapters?

Overwriting

Overwrite and be prepared to edit
to bits?

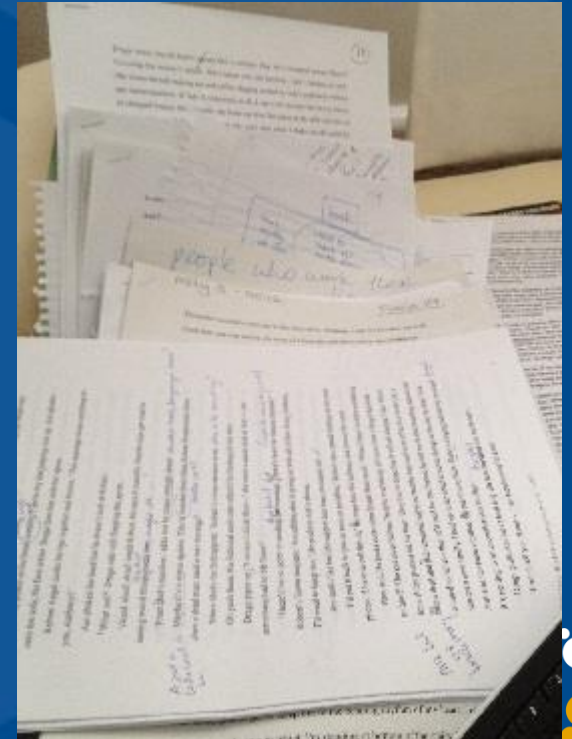
or

Seriously constrain yourself to the
word limit from the start?



Main text (~ 80,000 words)

- Subdivide reasonably easily into chapters
- Why 10,000 words?
- Minimum of 6,000 words per chapter. Why?
- Content chapters: 7 is a magic number
- Two-tier structure or simply indicate links between chapters in titles.



Readable chunks? ...

- When you imagine, or are planning the writing up of your findings, do you think you'll be able to describe them in one chapter, or break them apart?
- Do you see your findings as fitting together in 20-30 pages?

	3-Jun	10-Jun	17-Jun	24-Jun	31 Jun
Activity					
1. Refining Dissertation Structure					
A					
B					
C					
2. Literature Review					
A					
etc.				etc.	

(Gaines 2017)

Heavily cueing and branding the core

- Thesis title
 - Abstract
 - Chapter headings
 - Contents page
 - Preface
 - Introductory chapter
- (All these set up, signpost, and frame the core)



How do I avoid front and back end-loading?

- Don't leave all the good bits to the end! (last 1/4 or 1/3 of the thesis).
- Over-loading the front end = sacrificing space for the core.
- Identifying what is core and what is not is a critical process. Honesty is essential here!

Getting to the core

One chapter of literature framed closely around your central research question from the start

OR

Relevant literature threaded carefully throughout the thesis?

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Separate Methodology chapter

OR

‘Research Methods Appendix’?

## Keep reflecting on the purpose of your thesis

“In my thesis I am arguing that ...”

“Why should I believe what I am reading?”

**throwing a lot of fancy  
dancy words around  
does not make your  
argument more valid**



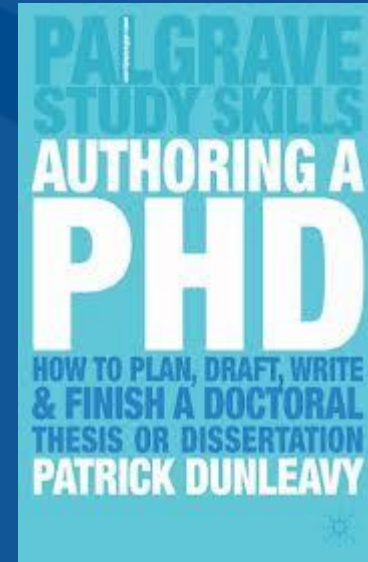
## Maintain a 3-4 page rolling synopsis

- Only for you and your supervisor/s.
- Main storyline of your thesis.
- Write your first one as early as possible.
- Keep revising throughout.
- Summarises your substantive arguments and conclusions.

# Four patterns of explanation

(Dunleavy, 2003)

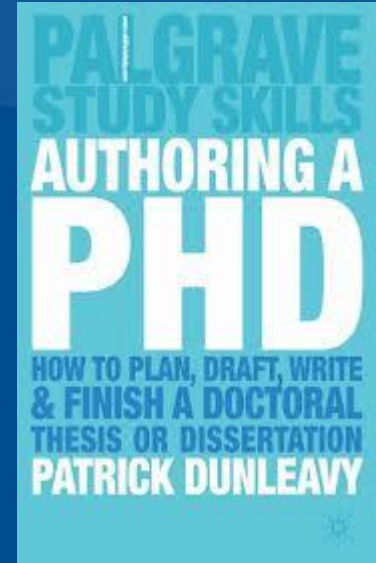
- Descriptive explanations
- Analytic explanations (robust organizing categories)
- Argumentative explanations
- Matrix patterns



# Four patterns of explanation: Descriptive

**Descriptive** (externally structured) explanations involve:

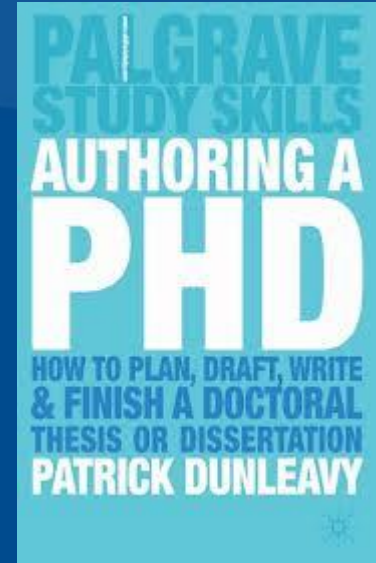
- Narrative, chronological, institutional theses (the ‘guidebook’ structure). Also, spatially organised work in geography, or biographical work.
- Very demanding to make these work and requires a high level of authoring skills (article vs. thesis).
- The meta-level descriptive account needs to be carefully woven into analytic concepts or argumentative themes.
  - It is important to get this right, as you may end up a thin description and a purely structured work of a complex topic without substance.



# Four patterns of explanation: Analytical

## Analytic explanations:

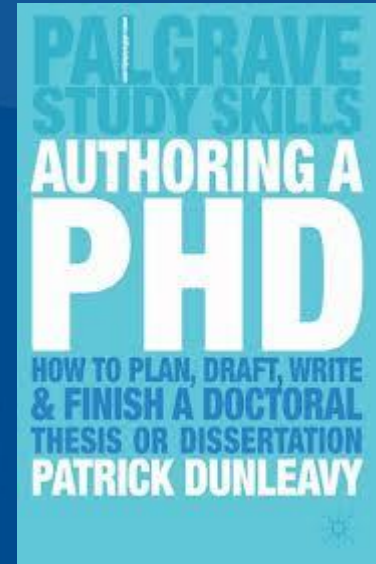
- Involve a robust organizing of categories.
- They are thematically structured. Mental categories of your own choosing.
  - E.g. Complex processes split into topics: An historic event split into economic, cultural, political, and social changes. Or a novel, or play categorised into myths, themes etc., (e.g. A thesis on climate change – micro, meso, macro levels split into conceptual themes – sociocultural, political, economic barriers to adaptation to climate change).
- **But:** What happens when interconnected & complex data are separated?
  - Inauthentic. Loses temporality, connectivity, relatedness etc.



# Four patterns of explanation: Argumentative

## Argumentative explanations:

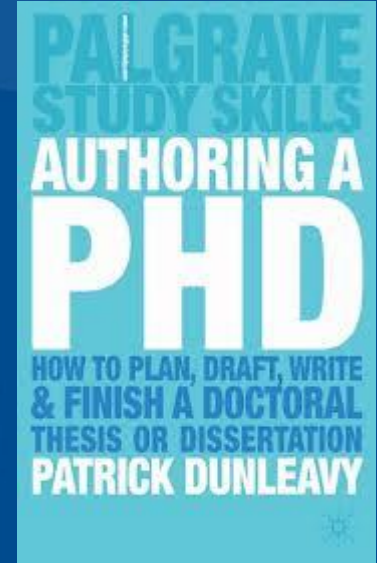
- Organise data in one interpretation or intellectual position and express them coherently.
- Next: assemble an opposing set of interpretations.
- Cons:
  - Arguments usually come in pairs: one chapter (pro): one (con). May not be enough for 8 chapters.
  - Covering all possible interpretations is not desirable or feasible (e.g. showing how 4 or 5 perspectives would handle a particular problem or interpret the same set of phenomena will quickly become repetitive). At most 3 lines of argument.



# Four patterns of explanation: Matrix

- **Matrix patterns** (combining approaches):
  - Analytic plus argumentative
  - Analytic plus descriptive
  - Argumentative plus analytic
  - Argumentative plus descriptive

**Pro:** Offers many advantages and usually generates enough categories to slot your chapters into  
(See matrix diagram, see Dunleavy, 2003, p. 74)



# Checklists for cohesion





# Checklist for a coherent and logical structure

- Does each section of the thesis perform its proper function? Does it fulfil its promise (made in the introduction of this section?)
- Does each section of the thesis logically and coherently develop your argument?
- Have you used subheadings to logically structure each section?
- Does your table of contents correspond to the major divisions and subdivisions of the text?

**In pairs, write a checklist for an Introduction chapter. What should an introduction include?**

- Rationale for why the work is being done
- Clearly state the aim of the thesis
- Clearly state how you intend to achieve this aim
- Provide a clear outline of the thesis claims
- Outline the pathway that the reader will travel in arriving at the conclusion
- Provide a roadmap so that your intentions are clear

# Coherence across chapters

- Read the introduction of each chapter in order. Do they follow logically?
- Read the introduction of each section in each chapter. Do they follow logically?
- Is there a link to the main idea of the previous chapter?
- Does each introduction foreshadow the argument to be made in the following section/s clearly?

# Chapter introductions

1. Link back to previous chapter and earlier parts of the thesis. Why is this chapter needed?
2. Chapter aim and function within overall thesis.
3. Does it tell the reader how you intend to achieve the aim in this chapter?

# Coherence within paragraphs

- Are sentences arranged so that there is a logical flow of ideas?
- Do paragraphs flow (not jump) between ideas?
- Have you used linking sentences at the beginning and end of paragraphs to improve the coherence and clarity of your work?
- Highlight key words, terms, phrases, and ideas.
- Use a highlighter and identify the topic sentences.

## Chapter conclusions

- Does each chapter conclusion respond to the stated aim for this chapter (given in your introduction)
- Does each conclusion foreshadow or link to the following chapter?
- Does it clearly respond to the ‘so what?’ factor?

Remember to think about how conclusions often need to be more than mere summaries, but also show how the chapter is advancing the argument as a whole.

# When structuring is problematic

- Complex data.
- Deeper values pulling against each other and underpinning choice. What are these values? List them.
- Decide which is privileged and provide rationale.
- Use this thinking process so that it drives your thesis.
- Don't be afraid to cut out often large chunks – even chapters.



## Revisiting this workshop session

In a day or two you can find a recording of this workshop at:

- <http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/research/researcher-development/postgraduate-research-student.cfm>

## CONSULTATIONS AND WORKSHOPS

- See a learning consultant: [tinyurl.com/masseyconsultation](https://tinyurl.com/masseyconsultation)
- See a subject librarian: [tinyurl.com/masseylibrarian](https://tinyurl.com/masseylibrarian)
- Ask a specific question about library resources  
[tinyurl.com/askamasseylibrarian](https://tinyurl.com/askamasseylibrarian)
- Book a library room for your group project: [tinyurl.com/masseylibraryrooms](https://tinyurl.com/masseylibraryrooms)
- Attend a library workshop: [tinyurl.com/masseylibraryworkshop](https://tinyurl.com/masseylibraryworkshop)

## VIDEOS AND RESOURCES

- APA Referencing: [tinyurl.com/masseyapavideo](https://tinyurl.com/masseyapavideo)
- Lit. review writing: [tinyurl.com/masseylitreviewvideo](https://tinyurl.com/masseylitreviewvideo)
- Thesis writing: [tinyurl.com/masseythesisvideo](https://tinyurl.com/masseythesisvideo)
- Editing your work: [tinyurl.com/masseyeditingvideo](https://tinyurl.com/masseyeditingvideo)
- Literature search: [tinyurl.com/howtousemasseydatabases](https://tinyurl.com/howtousemasseydatabases)
- APA referencing examples: [tinyurl.com/masseyapainteractive](https://tinyurl.com/masseyapainteractive)
- Endnote: [tinyurl.com/masseyendnote](https://tinyurl.com/masseyendnote)



Next time...

# Core Writing Skills Workshop: “Editing the Thesis”

Day: Wednesday 1 November

Time: 12-1.30pm

Place: VLT • Albany AT4 | PN GLB1.14 | Wellington 5C17

**Bring along:** a page or two of your thesis that needs editing  
(with 4 other copies for group work)