

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

GUIDE TO WRITING FOURTH YEAR PSYCHOLOGY DISSERTATIONS

1. Presentation and submission of dissertation

2010 deadline for submission of theses:

Monday, 11 October (Start of Week 12)

Note: Take the deadline for submission seriously. Penalties for late submission will be imposed. Extensions will be considered only in exceptional circumstances, since the School itself must meet deadlines for submitting final results to the University. Keep the Fourth Year Committee informed of problems during the year which delay your progress. The Committee cannot accept any excuses at the end of the year unless it has been informed earlier in the year.

Late theses will be penalised one (1) mark for every day late. Tuesday, October 13 will be considered 1 day late. In the past, students have often assumed that it is acceptable to submit their thesis 1 day late but that assumption is **incorrect**. If you believe that your thesis is late because of exceptional circumstances, then you should (a) discuss the situation with your supervisor to get their advice, and (b) inform the Honours co-ordinator that your thesis is going to be late by way of a written explanation (with relevant documentation). Your supervisor cannot grant you an extension. Further, after all the theses are marked, but before the final Fourth Year marking meeting where marks are finalised, the Fourth Year committee will meet and discuss all applications for special consideration. At that meeting, it will be decided whether you are granted full, partial, or no dispensation (i.e., whether none, some, or all of the late penalty will be applied). This procedure maximises the equity of the process (i.e., all students asking for special consideration are discussed by the whole committee at the one time). Please remember, though, only *exceptional* circumstances will be considered.

Presentation

Dissertations should be typed double-spaced on A4 paper.

Two copies of the thesis should be submitted in the standard covers supplied by the School. This is arranged through the Psychology General Office on Level 10 of the Mathews Building. After marking, one copy is retained by the supervisor while the other is available to be collected by you. You should make as many additional copies as you may need for your own purposes. Also an electronic copy of your thesis is required to be sent to your supervisor and the School's Test Librarian, Heather Proudfoot: h.proudfoot@unsw.edu.au. This is proof that your thesis has been submitted.

Word limit

Students sometimes appear to believe that the longer the piece of work, the better the mark given. This is not the case. Excessive length is often an indication that the writer has neither the necessary grasp of the subject matter to eliminate irrelevancies nor sufficient writing skill to produce a pithy, concise treatment of the subject.

The word limit is 15,000 words (60 pages double-spaced). This page limit does not include tables of results, graphs, references or appendices. Pages bearing figures, tables, etc., may be numbered differently from the body of the dissertation (e.g., in Roman numerals), but otherwise the pages should be numbered consecutively from the beginning to the end. Do **not** base numbering on **sections of the dissertation**.

2. Research

The exact nature and form of your research will be determined by you and your supervisor, then presented and discussed with your panel. One question that is often raised concerns the number of studies or experiments that should be undertaken. No rigid rule can be applied, as the issue is very much a function of the area in which the research is conducted. Students should, however, remember that the marker is more concerned with the quality of the research than its quantity. In general, one elegant study is worth much more than a number of less impressive studies. Note that data collection (other than pilot data) should not commence until after the panel meeting.

The gold standard with respect to writing in the psychological style and presentation of your data is the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. (6th ed.) (2009). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. The information below contains some of the major points from this manual as well as information more specific to the presentation of your honours thesis.

3. Format of dissertation

While the nature of the material should determine the most appropriate organisation, the general format of Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, References and Appendices should apply in most cases. This format is similar to that of a journal article, but with a more extensive literature review, more details of procedure, and a more extensive discussion. It is a good idea to look at some fourth year theses from previous years which are available from your supervisor in hard copy and also available through the School library (Heather Proudfoot, Mathews 803) in electronic format.

Certificate of originality

The following statement signed by the student should be included on a separate page between the title and acknowledgement pages:

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of the university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, even though I may have received assistance from others on style, presentation and language expression.'

Signature: _____

Student's Name: _____

Acknowledgements

The purpose of these is to state one's indebtedness, just as one acknowledges ideas found in reference material. Long, chatty or sentimental tributes should be avoided.

Abstract

Summarise the procedure, key results and conclusions in no more than 200 words. Don't waste space summarising the literature or listing hypotheses – the rationale and significance of your research should be apparent from the conclusions.

Introduction

This would normally provide a more extensive literature review than most journal articles, but do not get carried away. The Introduction, together with the Aims/Hypotheses, should be about 20-25

pages double-spaced. Recognise that some research areas have a vast literature while in others the supporting literature is very sparse, so if you do not have much to discuss do not try to obtain a “normal length” Introduction by padding. If the literature is vast, remember what you are doing – introducing your research and, ultimately, providing a rationale for your hypotheses, not necessarily giving a complete coverage of everything that has been done in a broad field of psychology. The criterion is relevance. You must adequately cover every aspect of the derivation of the hypotheses, the method, etc. A bad dissertation gives the impression of a long, boring, rambling and disjointed coverage of material, with no noticeable argument or organisation, so that the hypotheses come as a surprise rather than as a natural consequence. Ideally, your study should appear as the obvious one to do after reading your Introduction.

Method

Describe clearly and objectively the details of the procedures carried out. Conventional sub-headings are Participants/Subjects, Apparatus/Materials, Procedure, and Analysis. If reporting a series of studies in which the procedure was essentially the same, do not reiterate the details but simply note any differences and refer back to the first study for the detailed description.

Results

Present the data in a systematic fashion, starting with preliminary or background information (e.g., sample characteristics), followed by the primary measures of interest, and finally secondary or follow-up analyses. For each section, the general principle is to *present the data first*, usually in the form of appropriate descriptive statistics in a table or figure. Then draw the reader’s attention to specific outcomes, and back these up with inferential statistics where appropriate. Inferential statistics are tools to aid the interpretation of data - they do not substitute for the data, and they should not dictate the organisation of the results. For example, stating that there was a significant effect for a test is meaningless until you have informed the reader of the nature and direction of the effect. Where judgements are involved in the analysis (e.g., which models to test, what order variables are entered into a regression equation), inform the reader of the steps taken and the rationale that guided them. The conclusions you draw from your data should be influenced both by the outcome of your statistical tests and by the size of your effects, judged by the standards of the domain of your research. For example, in psycholinguistic research, an effect of 5 milliseconds may be considered small while an effect of 50 milliseconds may be considered large.

Tables and Graphs Make sure that tables and figures can be understood by the reader without the need for a search of the text for relevant information. All tables and figures should be labelled clearly.

Discussion

If reporting more than one study, a Discussion should follow each, with a General Discussion towards the end of the dissertation. Discussion sections at the end of each study should provide an interpretation of results and lead on to the rationale for the next one.

In the Discussion (or General Discussion), summarise the major outcomes of the research, but do not provide a detailed recapitulation of all the results. Discuss each major outcome in relation to the aims and hypotheses of the project. Consider alternative explanations of the results, and limitations to the inferences that can be drawn. Interpret the results in the context of the previous literature and the wider theoretical issues reviewed in the Introduction. Discuss the practical implications of the results, and directions that future research might take. For example, does your work have any implications for the questions that should be pursued in future research or how that research should be carried out? In general, the Discussion provides an opportunity for you to reveal your insight into the area. Normally the Discussion would be about 15 pages long.

References

The author-date method of citation should be used, e.g., “Smith (1970) compared reaction time ...”, “In a recent study of reaction times (Smith, 1970) ...”. If a work has two authors, both names should be cited every time the reference occurs in the text. With more than two authors, cite all

authors the first time the reference occurs and thereafter the surname of the first author followed by et al. and the year. Multiple citations of the same author are arranged chronologically; different authors are cited alphabetically. When listing references the following style should be used:

Journal article, one author

Harlow, H.F. (1962). Fundamental principles for preparing psychology journal articles. *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 55, 893-896.

Journal articles, two authors

Atkinson, R.C., & Shiffrin, R.M. (1971). The control of short-term memory. *Scientific American*, 225, 82-90.

Books, two or more authors

Anderson, J., Durston, B.H., & Poole, M. (1970). *Thesis and assignment writing*. Sydney: Wiley.

Appendices

In some cases the description of the development of equipment, or the construction, standardisation and analysis of tests and questionnaires or similar procedures may involve fairly substantial sections. These aspects of the research may be essential, but not necessarily directly relevant to the discussion of the main issues. Such material should be reported in order to furnish answers to questions that could be raised by a marker, but wherever possible it should be placed in properly organised appendices at the end of the dissertation. Very bulky material, such as test protocols, may be submitted as a separate volume. The treatment of this material in the body of the dissertation should be limited to short summary statements.

Raw data and full details of analyses should also be included in an appendix. Students sometimes misapply statistical procedures or misinterpret their results and full reporting will enable markers to convince themselves that this was not so in your case.

An appendix is not a device for circumventing the page limit. Remember that the marker will only refer to an appendix to seek the answer for specific questions. It will generally not be read in detail. Do not, therefore, include material that should be in the body of the dissertation.

4. Style of dissertation

Organisation

It is vital that your dissertation be properly organised. If the reason for doing the study is not stated until the discussion of results the reader will be completely lost. The reader should be able to grasp the logical development of the study from the initial formulation to the ultimate conclusion.

In a fourth year study, you may still be reading the literature while part-way through your research, and initial ideas may turn out to be rather simple-minded. You do not need to attempt to hide these changes. Markers are aware of the difficulties in developing a research design with relatively little background and will not penalise you. If any changes in the approach are made, or if your whole conception of the problem altered during the year, the thesis should reveal this and not be restated in a way that implies that you were fully enlightened when you started. If you do, the reader is likely to ask why on earth you did such and such, if you thought the problem could be solved in this other way.

Achieving clarity and organisation

Clarity of presentation of particular issues may be achieved by grouping the material under very specific headings, although one should not rely on headings alone to give clarity to the writing. If each such section is read independently it should reveal whether the material has been gathered together sufficiently well or whether vital parts are scattered through the other sections. The next step should, therefore, be to join these together in such a way that the thesis flows logically.

Arrange the headings in different orders and try to see which is the most logical development. Work out summary and linking statements, so that one section prepares the reader for the next. At this stage many of the headings will become unnecessary, as the “meaning units” become larger. Read the material aloud – if you stumble, it is probably the fault of the writing. If you have time, put it aside and come back to it a week later, when all that you first read into it because of your close involvement may not affect you. For similar reasons have a friend read through it and comment on it.

The following (inexpensive) book is an excellent guide to correct use of grammar and expression:

Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E.B. (1972). *The elements of style*. (2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Use of abbreviations, letter symbols, etc.

Try to avoid abbreviations except for those for standard units. Do not use “E” for the experimenter or “S” or “O” for the subject. In particular, do not keep referring to a mysterious “Group C2” or “Hypothesis 3” in such a way that the reader has to search through the earlier sections to discover what characterises this group or hypothesis. Use a concise verbal label instead.

Tense

Write in the past tense except when referring to something that is, and ever shall be, that something. For example: “The means were found to be ...”, but “Mean A is larger than Mean B”. “Smith and Jones (1971) did such and such ... and found that food is essential to life”.

Footnotes

There are differences of opinion about footnotes. In general, however, because some readers find them distracting, they should be used only sparingly. It is sometimes better to include explanations or qualifications as an appendix, in which case the reference in the text should read: (see Appendix X for complete explanation).

5. Thesis assessment

Two members of the academic staff of the School will mark your thesis. Your supervisor will not mark the thesis but will be asked to provide a report to the Fourth Year Committee on your overall progress and performance during the year. When preparing the final copy of your thesis you should remember that your markers, while experienced researchers, may not be familiar with your particular field of research.

6. Retention of data and publication of work based on honours theses

By collecting data in the course of your Fourth Year thesis you will be making a real contribution to the scientific discipline of psychology, collecting information about human or animal behaviour that has the potential to answer important research questions in your specialist field of study. In the past, the research carried out by UNSW Psychology Fourth Year students has often been subsequently published in scholarly journals or books. This means that the data that you collect this year are subject to certain general conventions and policies concerning the outcomes of scientific research. Two of the most important issues are: i) that publishable data needs to be retained for a minimum of 5 years; and ii) that “wherever possible, original data must be retained in the department or research unit in which they were generated” (Joint National Health and Medical Research Council/Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee STATEMENT AND GUIDELINES ON RESEARCH PRACTICE, 1990). In order to help the School meet these obligations, you will be required to lodge an electronic copy of your complete data set with your supervisor **before you submit your thesis for assessment**. This, of course, in no way impinges on your right to receive authorship credit for the work in subsequent publications.