RESEARCH WRITING: WHAT IS A THESIS?

As a research candidate at RMIT you will be required to write either a thesis or an exegesis. This will be determined by the type of research degree, whether it is by thesis or project. The information here relates mostly to the thesis.

Exegeses differ widely between disciplines in their structure and orientation, although, as with theses, they must show the purpose and theoretical basis of the project.

Developing your identity as a scholar

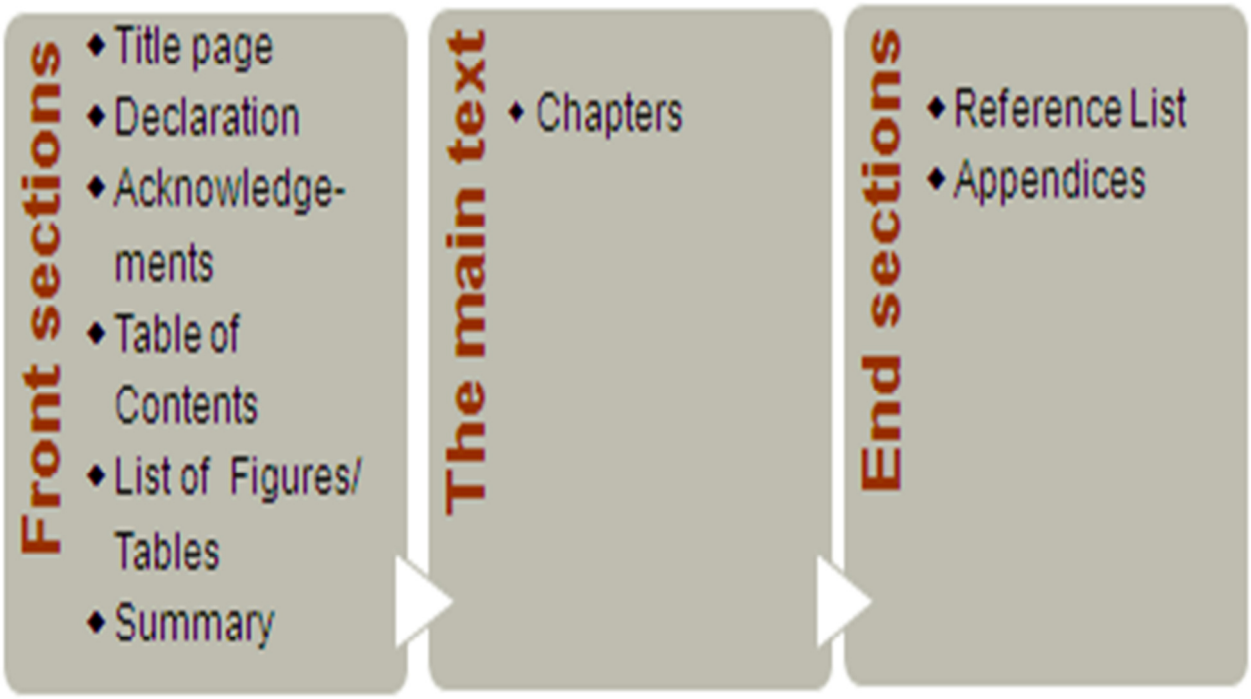
There are two parts to your thesis writing (Kamler & Thomson, 2006):

The text work: Knowing the conventions and textual practices (how the writing works through structures and sub-structures) common to your discipline is important.

The identity work: You don't start out being an expert—you become one. Most academic identity work happens through *writing,* but your identity also develops through professional gatherings and day-to-day work. Through this, you write yourself into your disciplinary scholarship. The literature review materials in the postgraduate section of RMIT Learning Lab have more information about identity work.

Structuring your thesis

Broad structure: The front and end sections are prescribed by the RMIT University HDR policy, but you will need to decide how the main text is structured.



The 'story' of your research

Your thesis tells the story of your research

You need to answer the following questions to tell your research 'story'…	…which is why the 'traditional' thesis structure looks like this:
What is the research about?	Introduction
What is already known?	Literature review
How did I go about my research?	Methodology
What did I find?	Results (Findings)
What do the results/findings mean?	Discussion
So what? What is the significance and what are the contributions?	Conclusion
What should happen now?	Recommendations

However, not all theses are structured in the 'traditional' way. Many are a variation of this, as in the following examples:

- If the literature review is very short, it is often found in a section of the introduction.
- Often results and discussion are put together and divided in another way, such as through methodology or research questions. That is, there could be one chapter of the results and discussions of quantitative methods used, and another chapter of the results and discussion of qualitative methods.
- Some theses divide in a similar way, but add the methodology to this; this produces two or three chapters, each containing methodology, results and discussion.

Aside from the traditional structure and variations, in some disciplines theses are produced that are thematically-based, each chapter dealing with a particular theme. However, even in these theses, answers to the questions above are all there. They're just not easily distinguishable by reading the contents page.

Because so much variation is possible, it is imperative that you read other theses from your discipline. These are very easy to find online from the RMIT Library.

Overall integrity

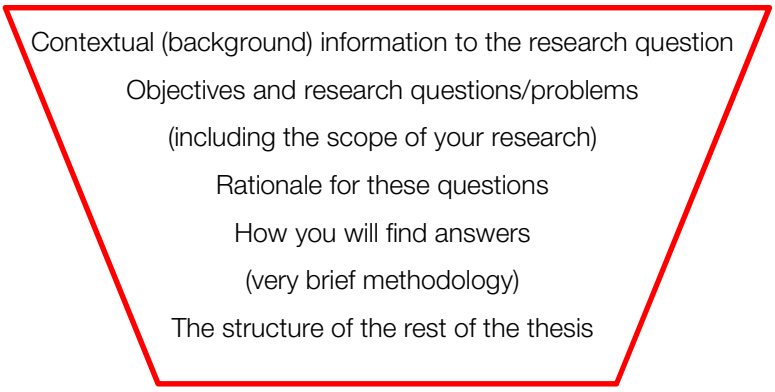
However you structure your thesis, it must have overall integrity:

- What's already known about an issue determines your research question or problem.
- Your research question or problem determines your methodology.
- Your methodology determines the data and results.
- Your results define what you can discuss.
- Your discussion determines your conclusion and recommendations.

Overall, your thesis will be judged on whether your research questions are aligned with the literature cited, your methodology, your results and the claims you're making.
Here are some important points to address at each stage of your thesis:

The introduction

The introduction generally has a shape, moving from the general to the specific and includes:



The literature review

- Review literature to define, explain, justify and show the gap that the present research will fill.
- Usually structured in themes
- Highlight areas of similarity and difference
- Remember to *analyse*, not just describe the literature.

The methodology

- Perhaps discuss your epistemology and theoretical perspectives (depending on your subject area).
- Discuss the limitations of your chosen methodology and any problems that arose.
- Use the literature to help justify your methodology (if not done in the lit. review).
- Explain how data were collected and analysed.

The results

- Use graphs, tables, etc., where appropriate.
- Don't repeat information in graphs – point to the interesting or unexpected data.
- Don't **discuss** results here if you have a separate discussion chapter.

Discussion

- Interpret and discuss the results in terms of the research question(s) or problem(s).
- Compare with results of previous research (bring in the literature)
- Discuss the effects of methods used on data obtained.
- Discuss limitations (shortcoming of the research or the research methodology)

Conclusion

- This is the 'so what!' section of your thesis – discuss the *significance* of the research.
- Return to the objectives and the research questions or problems and suggest whether they've been answered or 'solved'.
- Show what has been learned from the study and how it can be applied.
- Indicate possible future research.
- List recommendations (if any).

Signposting the structure

Because your thesis is a large document, it's important to signpost the structure through your writing. Here are some reader directions (meta-discourse) you could use:

- Forecasting, e.g.

> In this chapter, the results from the qualitative analysis are analysed.

- Recapitulation, e.g.

> The preceding section outlined the literature relating to the value of the doctoral degree; this section discusses diversity within doctoral candidates.

- Overview, e.g.:

> Before the analysis of results from this instrument, it is important to discuss the theoretical basis of this.

In a thesis you need to signpost throughout your writing at various levels.

- The whole thesis

> The focus of this thesis is...

- Another chapter

> The physical properties are presented and analysed in Chapter 5.

- The current chapter

> The remainder of this chapter discusses...

- Another section

> In the previous section, it was demonstrated that...

- The current section

> The following experiment shows...

How your thesis is judged

Your thesis needs to show that you can:

- plan, organise and carry out an investigation
- complete a critical review of the literature, identifying:
  - strengths and weaknesses
  - inconsistencies and gaps
  - (possible) problems in methodology and analysis
- show an understanding of research theory and techniques
- interpret data
- understand and convey the relevance of the research results to the general field of study.

Final point

Start writing early!

We recommend all research candidates read the official RMIT University HDR policy:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/Staff/Administration/Policies%20and%20procedures/Academic%20and%20research/Higher%20degrees%20by%20research/