

# THESIS WRITING: AN ART OR A SKILL OF SCHOLAR?

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## Abstract

A good researcher must know the art to deduce enough information related to the topic and can apply them into his overall research project. Dissertation and thesis writing is more than essay writing. Research is a real skill that must be acquired by MPhil, PhD scholar, it is not about going to the library and getting surrounded by piles of books and it's also not about sitting in front of your computer googling something. In fact, in this phase, scholars must be selective and initially confine to the list of "must read" provided by your supervisor. PhD is the most envied degree. "Dr." or PhD is a title that distinguishes scholars from others in context of research innovative level. It is an honor that makes scholars to stand out from 'everyone' to someone'. Students generally get enrolled in PhD with lot of enthusiasm, unwary of the many obstacles they shall be exposed to in this labyrinth. They, by and large, do fairly well in coursework this gives them the 'false confidence' that thesis writing is 'no big deal'. But as they venture in this field, they many a times regret their 'coveted' decision. Therefore, this present paper highlight research writing related problems and suggest practices for good research report writing. Together with this present article is no (re) search article per se, though lot of 'search' and 'research' is involved in the process. This paper may be considered as a guideline for valuable research scholars based on my own experience as a research student and Dean of higher studies.

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**Keywords:** Dissertation and Thesis Writing, Steps of writing, research methodology and practices

## Introduction

Writing is an art. At least this is what is generally said and believed. Parallel to this is also the belief that every one cannot be a writer, as every one cannot be a singer, a dancer, or an artist. But then, those of us who can claim to be the great theses writers – be it of Masters, MPhil or PhD level – can we equally boast of being gifted with the art of writing? If this is the case, then isn't it true that despite the Research Methods / Methodologies,

Academic Writing, taught to us as part of our coursework; at thesis writing stage, we have been groping in the dark for long, to gear ourselves up and to be on the right track? And isn't it also true that we have had sleepless nights, we have had our blues, we have chewed our nails down to the skin, we have been through phases where we were convinced that we were good for nothing, and when we had thought of abandoning every thing, and considered life not worth living. Also, when we had created such an environment around us, that the air smelled of thesis, that every one we knew – family, friends, children, spouse, neighbors, servants, drivers, shopkeepers - all were talking thesis, we drank thesis, we ate thesis, we talked thesis, we slept thesis, we smelled thesis, we were thesis, all was thesis. 'Thesis, thesis every where but not a word to write' – would have said the famous writer had he passed through this phase. And even times when we had been at our worst, uncombed hair full of oil – as an antidote to a dull / dry mind – tightly tied, in the most uncanny attire, overgrown shave, black circles around the half open amber eyes, when we had lost the notion of time – when days were like nights and nights like days – when the clock struck more loudly and more quickly than ever before, when hours passed like minutes and minutes like seconds, when we had no appetite but for tea or coffee that we devoured umpteenth number of times to keep ourselves awake, and we had broken all previous records of smoking. But at the same time, it is also true that it was through writing, scratching, scribbling, drafting, editing, of feeding our dustbins with loads of crumpled papers thrown in sheer desperation that we had finally managed to say the right word. 'Eureka! I found it!'

The French have very rightly said, 'C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron', 'It is through smithing (working on the iron) that you become a (black) smith.' The equivalent for this expression is simple in English 'practice makes a man perfect'. But there is much more to smithing and becoming a (black) smith, than practicing and becoming perfect. It means striking over and over again on hot iron, melting it, molding it, working on it, hitting hard on it, repeating the same exercise over and over again, sweating from top to bottom – it means really grinding, scraping, squeezing, crafting, grafting, and all possible adjectives that you can use towards perfection, before arriving at the desired results. Still, there is no such thing as really perfect. The endeavor is to be as good as possible. This brings us to the conclusion that writing may be an art in so far as it is the innate talent of a person of putting his thoughts in words, but it is equally a skill that needs to be mastered and perfection. As Rome was not built in a day, so is a thesis not written overnight!

### **Merit of writing for ‘Master of Philosophy’ & ‘Doctor of Philosophy’**

Master of Philosophy! Doctor of Philosophy! - are all prestigious titles. It is an honor to have Dr. written with your name. To be Dr. so and so holds a great esteem. We have examples of people vying for admission in PhD as the word Dr. adds to their social standing. But what all needs to be a Doctor is not just the acronym Dr. D r - these two letters have a lot hidden in them, more than the two and two that make four. Besides being the highest academic degree, it has a whole philosophy behind it. For students, for researchers, for teachers doing PhD, a thesis is like an icing on the cake. It is the crowning of their long academic ordeal. These writers, in whatever category they may fall, are all students; for they are enrolled in a University, they study a certain number of modules, attend a certain number of seminars, write assignments, get the required score, and so on. And at the same time, a doctoral student, a researcher, a thesis writer, is part of a social set up where he / she has other responsibilities also, and thus has to create a balance between the rigors of thesis writing and accomplishing his other duties. It is here that you find yourself torn between your career and your family, your research and your other commitments, your future and your present, your mission and your responsibility. That is why, before embarking on this Herculean project, you need to first of all do some self-assessment and in all honesty, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this degree required to be a professional (university teacher) or a researcher?
  - Am I capable of accomplishing a small task in a given time?
  - Can I write a minimum of 3 comprehensive pages on a given topic?
  - Can I organize my ideas?
  - Can I arrange my documents and refer to them when required?
  - Can I follow a certain discipline / timetable of work for several months?
  - Do I have enough will and strength to overcome whatever obstacles come in my way?
  - Have I already written a good document of several dozen pages?
  - Am I genuinely motivated to write a thesis?
- I. If you have 8 to 9 ‘yes’ answers, you can take the risk, you may jump in the river – you will not sink, you are certain to swim across.
  - II. If you have 5 to 7 ‘yes’, you are at a risk, you may wade along the tide or go down gurgling.

- III. If you have only 4 or less ‘yes’, better beware and stay away from the tides or you will be swept along.

### **What is a Dissertation and Thesis?**

The most important task on way to ‘doctor ship’ – if you allow me to coin this word – is thesis writing. What actually is a thesis and what is thesis writing? A thesis is toil. It is toil that is long, demanding, imposing, and which weighs heavy for several years on the personal, professional and family life of the thesis writer, and also on your being ‘available’ to others when needed. It would hence be unreasonable to aspire for this highest academic degree if you do not have a sound academic record. A doctoral thesis is a research assignment. It is in a way a ‘master piece’ that proves your abilities as a researcher and as a writer. So, it is inadvisable to launch in this project for ‘negative’ reasons such as, joblessness, nothing to do at home, frustration, envy of being like others, etc. On the contrary, it is very important that this task is taken up with a very sound reasoning. It is equally important to streamline a personal strategy for this kind of work: is it required in a university career? or as part of simple research to develop a course? in which discipline? in which specialization? where ( at home or abroad)? in public or in private life? in an international organization? etc. It is obviously not possible to get an answer to all these questions at the time of registration in the program, nevertheless it is important to think about them and to be very clear on these issues, as this would help: in determining whether it is really worth taking up this long term assignment or not; in choosing the discipline, the specialization and the topic; in deciding the research supervisor; in planning the time frame of work. In short, a doctoral thesis means lot of work and your future depends to a great extent on these years that you are going to spend for the preparation of thesis. Under no circumstances should this task be taken in lighter vein. Only those should commit themselves who have a strong will and capability, and who really feel the need for it in their career. Students generally don’t like when they are advised by their mentors not to get involved in this kind of activity as they (the mentors) sincerely feel that they are not yet ripe for such a scholarly work. They hate such teachers and in an attempt to show them down, they get enrolled in the program. Even if they somehow manage to clear the coursework, their stubbornness results in frustration, when it comes to research. Stranded mid-way, they have burnt their boats and there is no retreat. For the lucky few, who, through whatever means, manage to deposit the written transcript, miserably fail in the oral examination and face nothing but embarrassment. At this point they either blame their supervisor who, as they claim, did not do his job right or the institution where rules are not student friendly but rule friendly, where there is too much of rigidity and less

flexibility. That is why it is often said, ‘a bad writer takes as much time writing a bad book than a gifted writer takes to write an excellent book’. Still, there are theses; and if, at one end of the rope, it is the quality of the thesis that is judged and not the time spent nor the will of the student; at the other, a good thesis results in lot of satisfaction for the researcher; now he is genuinely proud of his product, of his intellectual piece of art, of his writing skill, of his capabilities of reasoning and reflection

### **So, What’s a Ph.D., Anyway?**

1. Narasimhan,P. (2006) articulated and suggested that Dissertation is art and creative work of any scholar therefore it must be Significant and substantial piece of ground-breaking work
  - Can be in one single field or inter-disciplinary
  - It’s about defining a hypothesis and providing arguments to
2. substantiate or refute that hypothesis
  - Evidence that you can do independent research that matters
  - Your work must somehow make a difference in your field
  - Must have 2-3 key research ideas that you should be able to articulate at the drop of a hat
  - Definitely do not settle for less because of a rush to graduate
  - Your Ph.D. dissertation is a significant piece of independent writing
  - that you want to be proud of, for years to come
3. Don’t write something in a hurry that you will cringe at later

### **Great Ph.D. Dissertation starts when ?**

- One that kicks the door open for another 3-4 future dissertations it means that you started an area of work or a line of thought that opens many more lines of thought
- High-impact, i.e., “*Look, Ma, I ……*”
- Have left my marks behind in my field
- Fundamentally changed the way that something is done today
- Introduced a new concept that can be “mined” by others in the future
- Solved a problem that has plagued the field for years
- Eliminated a fundamental assumption that has been made in the field
- Provided strong empirical evidence that the field has been lacking
- Will continue to influence the field and be cited by others
- Accessible to others in computer science/engineering
- It’s great if you have a wonderful theory/system, but what if no-one except you (and your advisor) understands it? (Narasimhan,P.,2006)

## **Systematic Process of Writing Thesis and Dissertation**

### **• Selection of Topic**

Once self-assessment is done and need analysis is obtained, you are faced with the key issue: choice of topic and supervisor. Who is a good supervisor? A good supervisor will be the one who will be able to guide you, to show you the right direction, to put you on the right path, who will encourage you and at the same time criticize you, and who will, in one way or the other, influence, determine, facilitate or hinder your career. All put together, a good topic will be the one that will be of interest to your supervisor. Of course, your interest and your bent of mind cannot be ignored, but then it is equally important that the person you want to work with is equally motivated to assist you with keenness and interest. That is why choosing a supervisor is more crucial and critical than choosing a topic. The triangle topic + supervisor + supervisee must be in agreement with one another.

#### **- What is a good topic?**

A good topic is the one that can motivate you, that can interest you for a certain number of years (period of your research), that hits off with you, is sure to go well with you. Basically there is no such thing as a good topic or a bad topic in isolation. A topic is good or bad in relation to certain criteria. This criterion is by and large:

- ‘you’ first of all – does the topic interest you and motivate you? Do you have enough to say on it? Do you think that you can work on it for several years?
- your supervisor – does the topic fall in his field of interest? Will he pull along with you through the course of research with the same degree of interest?
- the field of research – is the topic not too beaten about? Is it possible to find enough material on it?
- the newness of the topic – is this issue in? Will you add something new to your research? Is there something that you will take up and that has not been dealt with so far?
- your own perspectives – how will your research help you in your career / professional life?

#### **- Titling or Stating a Topic**

The title of your thesis is like a magnet that would arouse the curiosity of your reader (your evaluator / examiner to start with), attract the on looker to pick up your document from the shelf and read it. It is like the key of a door tightly locked that incites you to peep in. So, once the topic is chosen, it is very important to know how to word it. There are certain absolute DON'Ts, as these topics confuse the readers and give your evaluators room to question you on all the ‘blank areas’:

**\* Don't choose topics that are too vague, like:**

- The New World Order
- Democracy Crisis
- Education System (in a country)

The vagueness of the topic is most only distracting but also weighs heavy at the first glance.

**\* Don't choose topics that are 'funneled', like:**

- The Problem of Under-Development: A Case Study

Such titles mislead the reader and provide room for criticism by evaluators / examiners / members of the defense board.

**\* Don't choose topics where comparisons are required, like:**

- Management Issues in Public and Private Sector Organizations

Such topics are difficult to handle as you have the possibility of not finding out from the labyrinth where you are lost, elements of comparison and contrast.

So what to choose? You have ample choice. A good topic is the one that is focused, and where your research premise is clearly defined and delimited and not researched before. Again, it is very important that your topic is worded in simple and clear terms. Avoid long titles, titles with parentheses, titles followed by colons, case studies, titles where several possibilities of research are possible. Remember always that the choice of your topic, that is, your document of research will be reflective of you and your supervisor for a long time. It is as much the reputation of your supervisor as your own reputation as researcher that are at stake. So, do justice to your supervisor and do equal justice to your own self.

**- What really matter? : Who is a good supervisor?**

***Is the good supervisor the one, as most of us think or would want to have, who will:***

- hold you by your finger and teach you how to walk?
- do all the work for you?
- keep telling you that you are doing a good job?
- be proud to have a student like you?
- discuss other students with you?
- be overly receptive to your personal problems and show over compassion?

***- let you work in isolation and keep reporting that the going is good?***

***- not bother about the time frame of work?***

***- remain involved in other activities and not bother you?***

***- run after you, send you SMSs, e-mails, plead you, beseech you to complete your work?***

The answer to all these questions is a big NO. Because both the supervisor and the supervisee sail in the same boat. The supervisor has as

much responsibility on his shoulders as the student. But he should never be taken as your scriptwriter. Remember, you are the sailor and he is just the navigator who will give you the right direction and see to it that you do not get astray. A good supervisor is definitely the one who will:

- strive to find time for you despite all his engagements;
- frustrate you through his discussions and critique;
- get on your nerves, but would refuse to see you if you are in the habit of not keeping your appointment;
- haunt you and be a nightmare for you.
- shout at you and tell you that the work you have been boasting about is not even worth feeding a dustbin;
- religiously believes in the dictum, ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’, because your supervisor is like your father / mother figure who knows what is best for you and how to get this best out of you, no matter how much you fret and frown;
- be hated and detested (at one point in time) and whom you will regret and lament having as your supervisor; because he is after you, because he has maintained your dossier and knows how many times you met him, how many times you told him that your mother had an accident and that your father was hospitalized, who knows that it has been ten months that you are saying that you are facing financial hardships as you have not been paid for the last two months. But finally it is this ‘devil’ who will turn out to be an ‘angel’ for you; who will result in a blessing in disguise for you, when your research document will be widely appreciated by the evaluators and your defense of thesis generously applauded by the jury and audience.

Nevertheless, before making the final choice of a supervisor, do go through this test:

- *Is he competent and authorized to supervise a thesis?*
- *Does he still have two more years to go before retiring?*
- *Is he generally available to the students and researchers working under his guidance?*
- *Is he competent enough in your field of interest?*
- *Is he likely to get interested in your topic of research?*
- *If he already knows you, did he motivate you to do research?*
- *Is he not over ambitious in accepting students (over burdened)?*
- *Does he readily accept just about any student even if he does not have the expertise for your area of research?*
- *Is he forcing you to research on a certain topic?*
- *Is he stopping you from going to other supervisors?*

It is advisable not to have as a supervisor, your friend (however reputed he may be) your very close associate or a member of your family or



even your colleague to avoid conflict of interest. You get too involved in personal matters; you have to show compassion and consideration; and you end up spoiling your relationship.

**All set? *Not yet alas! You could be faced with four types of situation:***

- You have the topic and the supervisor - This is the ideal situation. You have been discussing a topic with your seniors and you have found someone who is interested in working with you. So, on your marks, get set and go.
- You have the supervisor but not the topic – If you are determined to work with someone of your choice, take an appointment with him. If he is in a hurry at the time of appointment, if he keeps telling you to come some other time, if he is trying to ward you off, question yourself – does he really want to work with me? If he gives you a long list of topics from where to choose, don't get excited. These might be the topics that will not last long or that might not even interest you. If he hastily gives you the green signal to start working on a topic of your choice, watch out, because there are chances that he has not yet reflected well on the topic and is most likely to abandon you half way. What to do? Don't get frustrated. Best would be to have a thorough discussion with your supervisor and draw the 'construction map' of your thesis. Because thesis writing is like constructing a building for which you need to have a map (plan); and as no construction can be appreciable no matter how good the planner, the architect, the engineer or the draftsman are, no thesis can be worth award of degree if its key stake holders are at odds.
- You have the topic but not the supervisor – This is not a good sign as it is indicative of a number of lapses on your part: a) during the course of your study you have not been able to determine which one of your instructors can be your best guide; b) you have not been able to find a group of experts who can guide you; c) you have not been able to 'target' a supervisor who could be interested in your work; and d) worst of the worst, available supervisors are shying out as you do not have impressive scores or the required potential for research. In either case, you need to consult your teachers, your Advisory Committee, so that they can hear you in the right direction for the choice of supervisor. If many teachers refuse to be your guide or advise you not to work on a certain topic, question yourself, assess your shortcomings, be realistic, think, ponder, why the topic of your choice is not researchable?
- You neither have the topic nor the supervisor – Now, this is not only serious but also embarrassing as the bell tolls loud and clear. You have, during the period of your coursework, not really developed the insight for research, you have not done enough reading, you have not been a researcher in the true sense of the word, you have restricted yourself to

being a routine student who has been punctual and discipline; and who, by whatever means – rote learning, selective reading – has been able to secure average or slightly above average score. At this stage, you don't have much choice. The outright cry is, 'give it up'; or...or, the other best option, 'start all over again', from a scratch, from zero, by learning from your mistakes. To your hard luck, there's no third option. You not yet ready for the job. So? Patience is the rule of law. No need to panic. The day will come when you will ride the horse!

- **Research Strategy**

You are enrolled in a reputed institution. You have a good topic. You have the desired supervisor. The job is half done or is the real job to start? Where and how to get started? Real work starts now, because getting started on a good research is a huge work. It is a path full of obstacles where not only your knowledge, but also your personality (consistence, courage, organizational skills, perseverance.....) will be put to test. If any one of these qualities is missing in you, you are doomed and will alas, never be able to continue till the end. Before getting started, be very clear about the following:

- no thesis without an organized and large amount of work over a long period;
- no thesis without being able to get over innumerable difficulties of different kinds and nature and to which it is possible to find solutions;
- no thesis without a method and without discipline;
- no thesis if you are not in the habit of taking out at least one hour from your routine daily and scribbling whatever comes to your mind;

Remember, collecting too much data is not only confusing but also misleading. Everything seems good. Everything is good. But everything is not relevant. And everything cannot be put down. As 'all that glitters is not gold', similarly 'all that attracts is not required'. This strategy should obviously take into account the field of research, the topic, the demands of the supervisor, and the qualities and shortcomings of the researcher him / herself. Here are a few tips for you to follow:

1. **Step One**: Getting started - choice of topic (tentative framework prepared in consultation with the supervisor).
2. **Step Two**: Clearing the ground and trimming.
3. **Step Three**: Draft of the first research question and thesis lay out (discussion with the supervisor and general agreement on the plan).
4. **Step Four**: Research work (books, relevant material, field of research). Taking down notes, jotting down ideas, preparing reading list, making amendments in the first draft.

5. **Step Five**: Research work (on the accumulated material and brain storming).
6. **Step Six**: First draft of the second research question and writing (discussion with the supervisor).
7. **Step Seven**: Additional work.
8. **Step Eight**: Final draft of the second research question and writing (discussion with the supervisor and consent on the overall work).
9. **Step Nine**: Thesis writing (reading, editing by the research supervisor – correction / rewriting). Typing.
10. **Step Ten**: Final writing (re-reading, correction, last touches). Final draft.
11. **Step Eleven**: Making copies for submission.
12. **Step Twelve**: Preparation for defense.
13. **Step Thirteen**: Defense.

The above agenda is certainly not to be followed religiously. It is just a guideline aimed at helping you to organize yourself better. This may be modified as per your specific requirements, nature of work and your supervisor's mode of work.

- **Timetable:**

‘To be or not to be?’ – ‘To have or not to have?’ - should there or should there not be a timetable for research work? This is a million dollar question! Some might have the contention that a research work is so vast and so spread that it is not possible to follow a strict regime of time. And this is precisely why researchers need to follow a timetable so that they are not lost in the flood of ideas, in the labyrinth of material gathered and don't know any more from where to start and where to end. Generally, the ideal time given for MPhil is 2- 3/4 years and for PhD 3- 5/6 years from the date of enrolment in either program. This regime is followed in almost all national and international universities. But this is not the time period that you have to observe under all circumstances and in all situations, that you are bound to observe by all means. Like the students who would sit in the examination hall for three whole hours even if they finished the paper like others in 2 hours, because it is stated on the question paper, ‘Maximum Time: 3hours’. Maximum time or the stipulated time in case of research means that this is how far you can stretch yourself. You go beyond this and you will find yourself facing a complex situation – notices, warnings, possibility of name being struck off, etc. You can very well finish your MPhil thesis in a year and PhD thesis in 2-3 years after coursework. Nothing stops you from submitting your thesis before time. Actually this is the ideal time frame; the rest is all extension in time for reasons that could be beyond control. This period is a facilitator and not mandatory. Here-under is a tentative timetable

that is suggested. It might not hold true for all, nevertheless it could facilitate in organizing your work.

steps	MPhil – 1 - 2 year	PhD – 2 - 3 years
<b>Selection of topic</b>	2-3 weeks	4-6 weeks
<b>Writing</b>	6-10 weeks	18-30 weeks
<b>Correction / Rewriting</b>	2-3 weeks	3-6 weeks
<b>Final touches</b>	1-2 weeks	2-4 weeks
<b>Print</b>	1 week	1-2 weeks
<b>Preparation for defense</b>	2-4 weeks	5-8 weeks
<b>Total (including corrections / final print etc.)</b>	14-23 weeks	33-56 weeks

This is approximately how you can plan your work. What you need to remember is:

- those who believe they that have all the time in the world to finish their work, end up never doing it;
- those who are not consistent, are most likely to be caught in difficult situations;
- only those who are genuinely serious and follow a strict regime of work, will be able to make it till the end.

So.....don't get astray!

• **The question of number of pages:**

This issue has been haunting the researchers from day one. Pages or words? How many pages? How many words? In this case too, there are diversified opinions. Some think that research is a field that should not and cannot be restricted to number of pages or words, for that matter. A research is a research. After all, Churchill was given a PhD degree on just one letter. But then the same university awarded a PhD to a non-researcher and the most controversial writer. And there are also instances of theses being of 1000 to 2000 pages. How many times we get to hear, 'The issue is not of number of pages...the real issue is that of quality of work'. In fact, those who are so critical on this issue, are often the ones who end up writing a below average document. Though it cannot be denied that in pure sciences, the written document may be shorter in length as there is lot of experimental work involved. Still, you cannot leave a researcher out in the open running wild to decide how much to write; because this 'how much' would determine 'what' to write. All universities abroad and at home, do impose restriction of a certain number of pages / words that differ depending on the level of research. The universally agreed upon number is as follows:

- Masters: 80-120 pages
- MPhil: 100-150 pages
- PhD: 250-500 pages (1-2 volumes)

Of course the standard page size is A4 and the standard font is 12 Times New Roman. The prescribed length is quite reasonable, though it is also true that a lot does depend on ‘what’ and ‘how’ you are writing. Agreed, but then certain limitations have to be defined.

### **Organizing your research**

All set, you relax. You start to think, ‘Oh! It’s still a long way off’. But the fact of the matter is that you have no time. Your hours are numbered. The clock is clicking. You need to develop the habit of organizing yourself.

### **Spade work**

At this stage, you may not read everything from the first to the last page. What you actually need to do is explore, to probe, get a general idea and start taking down notes. Actually there is a difference between ‘connaissance’ and ‘savoir’. Like a ‘connoisseur’, you should be able to make the right choice, knowing how to sift your material, putting aside all that is irrelevant or less relevant and sticking to the essential. Here it is your ‘savoir-faire’ – knowing how to do (expertise) – that is involved. Here are some tips for the trick:

- start taking down notes and learn how to do it;
- the best way to make an inventory is to have card-index handy; these may be prepared author-wise, title-wise, subject-wise;
- whatever you have seen, probed; write down the reference including page number for future study;
- start jotting down whatever comes to your mind or what you have come across by chance (on the net, for example) – always remember to mention the source;
- look for all the material relevant to your research, flip through it, separate out the works that are directly related to your work and those that generally deal with the question;
- if it is field research, visit the places where you intend collecting your data, meet the people there, get the feel of the place and develop an interaction with your eventual research samples. This would also enable you to assess whether it is worth conducting research in that place or not.

### **What is important at this stage are four ‘musts’:**

- **‘Must Assess’** - assessing the amount of work: are there few, few dozen or few hundred books available on the topic; do some brain storming – question yourself on what you are sure about, your doubts, your interrogations, your strong points and your blank areas;

- **‘Must Read’**- getting hold of 2, 5, 10 books that you should read urgently, come hail, come storm, and analyze; read the most important books while taking down notes;
- **‘Must Meet’** - getting in touch with 2, 5, 10 experts, specialists, key persons, whom you should imperatively consult, meet and listen to seek advice;
- **Must Sort** - doing away with the unnecessary or less required material; making a choice between is required and what is not;
- **Must Focus** - concentrating on your research parameters; determining your line action – which areas I am going to focus on? – which areas am I going to develop?

### **Research problem**

Another problem? You might snarl. Hold on. This isn't any 'problem' (per se) falling from heavens. The fact is that you are already moving ahead with it, you have chosen a topic and you have done the spade work and by this time you know that what you call a 'problem' is in fact the most important and the most crucial component of your research. That is why the French distinguish between 'problématique' and 'problème'. While 'problématique' is not a problem, but the problematic, 'problème' is a problem. The thing is that it is your 'problématique' that will take you out of the 'problème', it will be a facilitator for you and not a problem maker. It is your research problem that will help you work on the topic of your choice. It is your research problem that will help you formulate your research question that should address your chosen topic – crisp and critical. It is your research problem that will help you organize your work. It is like the brain or you may say the nervous system of a human body. There can be no good thesis without a good research problem. Obviously, your 'research problem' evolves and matures as your work advances but it has to be really sound so that you don't find yourself running around in circles at any moment of your research. As it is very important to discuss this research problem with your supervisor, it also goes without saying that at this stage you and your supervisor are required to be on the same grid as far as the overall planning of your research work is considered so that both of you follow the same 'itinerary' of your research work.

### **Research Question**

Once you have defined your research problem you should think yourself out of the frying pan but you still have to go into the fire – your main research question! It is through a jigsaw puzzle of assumptions (hypotheses), questions, interrogations while using 'ideal tools' of clear concepts and theoretical elements, coherence and rigor that that you will

have to work on your research question or you will be lost in the maze. You must religiously work on it; carry it along with you in your mind no matter where you are. It is here that you have to be a ‘forgeron’. In simplest terms, think for a minute that you have to ask a big favor from someone. What should be your strategy? Obviously putting up your request in such a way that the other person is convinced. It is almost the same strategy that you need to apply here. Because it is through your research question that you will obtain the desired results. A well thought over, a well worded, concise research question will not only be the key of your research work, but the ‘master key’ that will open all locked doors for you and unveil the hidden secrets. Your research question will also eventually be the key to writing your thesis as meaningfully as possible. If you are not able to formulate your research question, if you are not able to make a choice among several questions scattered in front of you, if you are hopping from one to the other, trying to play the lucky draw game, there’s sure to be a problem somewhere: either you are not yet sure of what you want to do or you have an acute language issue. IMPASS? No worries. Stop at yellow light. Send an SOS to your supervisor and see him ASAP. Take your time. Just don’t start off without the desired research question or it would be like entering in a no man’s land not knowing where to go and what to do; and wondering, ‘Why am I here?’

### **Organizing your Material**

You need to be really organized, rather well organized while looking for material to work with. Prepare a timetable for your own self, give yourself a time line and keep checking whether you are respecting that time line or not. You have to be determined and promise yourself that every day you are going to devote certain number of hours (be it mere one hour) to your work. The fact of the matter is that you will have to (re) organize your life with regards to your thesis. Organize your material in such a way that:

- you are able to quickly find the required information during the course of your work;
- you can easily consult the desired material;
- you are able to go to the right source;
- you can identify the source of your material.

So for all this, you need to have the ‘ID cards’ of your sources; that is to say, always write name of the book / journal / material consulted, author, publication year, publication house, pages and even the library where this material is found. You can have your markers like starting from five stars for the most important and going down to one star for the least important. If it is your own book, if it is your own material, highlight what is important. Write in margins where it can be used. You can even make use of punctuation

marks - ? – perhaps; ! – a must; ..... - can be seen, etc, etc, it is up to you to use any abbreviations, markers or other devices to find your material. Use book markers so that the material is handy when required and you don't have to go from page one to the last page to find the required material. Don't read each and every word on each and every line like a reading machine. Read intelligently knowing what to skip and why; what not to skip and why not. Nothing can be more frustrating than pulling your hair, cracking your brain, thumping your feet, chewing your lips when you will have to go over and over again looking for the material you need. In other words, it amounts to being 'disciplined' from the very beginning.

### **Preparing the Draft**

At long last, you have almost all that you need and now are ready to write. You have obviously been writing earlier but now it is time to prepare your draft, perhaps the first one before getting the tenth one approved! (I neither want to sound cynical nor would want to scare you, but this is how things are, alas!). Keep showing your work periodically to your supervisor so that problem areas are taken care of from the very beginning. While preparing your draft, remember:

#### ***If you are writing in ink:***

- use a paper on which ink does not spread;
- use a lined paper to maintain straight lines while writing;
- use a pen whose ink does not fade;
- use a blue / black pen, leaving other colors for supervisor's corrections;
- write only on one side of the paper to avoid imprint on back page;
- leave enough space between lines (one line) for readability and corrections;
- leave margins on both sides (at least one inch) for supervisor's comments;
- paginate each page (front / back);
- make a photocopy before submitting to the supervisor – you never know – he might misplace it / loose it (which should not be the case any way); you might get 'revelations' and would want to add to your text;
- dispatch through a good postal system (TCS etc) instead of ordinary mail.
- If you are typing:
- use standard format on standard paper (A4 usually). This will help you while formatting or determining number of pages / words.
- save in more than one places – have a backup. We have had cases of students saying, “computer mein virus aa gaya aur mera sara kaam ur



gaya” (my file got corrupted due to virus in the computer). So if you want to prevent your work from ‘flying away’, engage the birdie;

- install spell check so that there is minimum possibility of spelling error;
- install automatic save system to prevent losing your material due to frequent and unscheduled load shedding;
- ideal is to type yourself, be it with one / two fingers, as it is often while typing that you get brain waves; then, since it is your work, you would know what to write and what not to write, where to write and where not to write.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Do I mean chapterization? No. Never. There’s no such word. It is some sort of a coinage. The correct term is chapter breakdown and not chapterization. How many chapters should a thesis have, there’s no hard and fast rule. It all depends on the pre-requisites of the format of your university. But one thing is sure, your chapters are like the different rooms of your house. As your kitchen can not be the first ‘room’ of your house or your drawing room the last, as you cannot have the washroom next to the kitchen and your staircase from the store, similarly your chapters cannot be randomly spread out. Each chapter of your thesis has a requirement and a special place. It is a given that first chapter is the introduction and last chapter the conclusion, it is a given that recommendations follow conclusion and last to come are bibliography and annexure. Anything otherwise would distort the entire lay out of your thesis.

### **Titles / sub titles**

These are like the ‘road signs’ that show you the right direction. They should be short, precise and express the essence of what is to be said. But brevity does not mean having ‘sticker titles’. It means having ‘expression titles’ that speak, that are expressive while being concise and precise. They should breathe the movement of your thought process. As coherence is the prime requirement of your work so is it required in your titles and sub titles. They should not be abrupt making you oscillate backward and forward.

### **General Lay Out Of Your Thesis**

Every thesis has to be written according to a certain format as recommended by your institution but you need to be consistent with the format you have opted for. There are certain essential elements of a thesis that are a part and parcel of every document, no matter which format you use. These elements include:

## **Acknowledgements**

Starting from your research supervisor, your acknowledgements can go down to any person you can think of, all those who helped you in this endeavor. But you should be very selective in the choice of your words. You should neither be too flowery nor too abrupt.

## **Abstract**

It is the theoretical, conceptual and intangible part of your thesis. It should hence be as crisp and coherent as possible, arousing the curiosity of the reader. It is the sum total of your work, worded as accurately and as precisely as possible. It is like the magnet of your thesis that would attract your reader and drive him through your work;

## **Introduction**

It is the curtain raiser of your thesis and should absorb your reader in your work, it means bringing to lime light and projecting your research question that will be discussed in each part, each chapter of your thesis; you have to place it in a proper frame (work), precisely state what the actual problematic is and tell how you will go about it.

## **Literature Review**

Review of literature does not at all mean giving a summary of works consulted or read; it is substantiating argument in the light of researches available on the topic of your choice, you need to look at things with a critical eye; here you have to be selective, all that appears important to you might not be of real value and make you drag your work; avoid giving citations that are too long, nor too many citations; create a balance and give just the essential, padding will not work, it will in fact distract your reader.

## **Research Methodology**

You definitely have to have a methodology of your research. Here we are not concerned with different methods of research used in social sciences, literature, management sciences etc; but our focus is on adopting a methodology that is relevant to your discipline, to your topic, to your material and to your approach. It is like the ‘site plan’ of your thesis, it is the foundation on which rests the edifice of your thesis, here you do not have to tell your readers about different methods of research, you have to develop an epistemology instead, develop a ‘scientific’ approach based on your literature review, your own knowledge, expertise and study; remember that there are different types of research – historical, sociological, experimental, etc – and each type of research has its own demands and exigencies, so you will have to adopt a methodology best suited to your type of research;

### **Theoretical / conceptual framework**

All research is based on certain theories and concepts. These theories and concepts are given by scholars, theoreticians and experts of the discipline. If you have one, two or three key words in the title of your thesis, a critical study of their definitions would enable you to define the context and to relate theories to your work. The quality of a ‘theory’ cannot be judged only by its ‘internal’ coherence but also by its capacity of adaptability to your work. Your theoretical framework is aimed at giving you clarity of concept and help you elaborate, improve and perfection your topic of research.

### **Conclusion**

It is as important as the introduction. Those who would not like to venture in reading your thesis from A to Z would definitely read backwards to see what is the end product. To conclude means to take out the essential elements of your thesis intelligently, to put them together coherently, to synthesize them and to suggest remedies to problems discussed in your work. Remember, it should never be replete with redundancies as most of you think and even tend to do in your conclusion.

### **Recommendations**

They should be cogent and practical. Instead of leaving everything to policy makers and to the government, give practical suggestions that can be implemented and that are realistic. Two sound recommendations are worth a dozen

### **Annexure**

It is all material that is not required in the body of thesis – questionnaires, notes, policies etc., that have been discussed in the body of the thesis but are not required as part of the written document. They do not even account for the length of the thesis.

### **Delimitation and Limitation**

You should know that delimitation is the parameter / boundary of your research while limitation is your inability to do this much and not more.

### **References and Bibliography**

References are what you have referred to in your document while bibliography is what all you have consulted; but bibliography does not mean listing all books that contained the material you consulted.

## **Plagiarism**

What is plagiarism and why is it an offense, an offense more serious than cheating, an offense punishable under law? It is copying, lifting, stealing, illegal use, breach of copy right. In short, plagiarism is reproducing other peoples' work word for word without even acknowledging it. Cheating is equally an unethical activity but while a cheater can be visible, a plagiarist might not be in picture. Related to this is similarity whose permissible index can be determined by relevant authorities. There is bound to be similarity as what you write is not all yours, it is based on other peoples' works, theories, literature etc. So consult your relevant department to know how plagiarism can be avoided and how similarity can be minimized.

## **Thesis submission**

At long last! Your document is ready for submission. But again, haste could make waste. So go through it over and over again. Read it thoroughly for language and typography – these errors are unpardonable. You can never blame your typist for errors. You can never blame electricity breakdowns for language flaws. You need to see carefully if all elements of your document are in place as required.

## **Defense**

The fact that presenting your thesis is called 'defense' and the experts present are called 'jury' is enough evidence of the fact that it is like being in a court room 'defending' yourself before 'jurists'. Nevertheless, there is a difference. While you 'defend' your thesis, remember that we are in an academic environment and not in a court of law. So neither be offensive nor defensive. Be convincing. Be logical. Be intelligently argumentative. Own your work. So get prepared. It is advisable to arrange a mock defense with your supervisor in the room where your thesis defense is planned. This will give you a feel of the surroundings and familiarize you with the lay out for defense day. Your supervisor should be able to ask you as many questions as possible on your work so that you are able to give desired replies to your jury members.

## **The End?**

It is true that every beginning has an end. But this beginning is not an end. It is the beginning of a new beginning, as there is no end to learning. And as you carry the title of Dr. don't take long strides with a stiff neck, head high in the air; remember that the more a tree is laden with fruit, the more it bends!

Good going!