

Structuring Your Thesis

Adapted from Patrick Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD* (2003)

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1. What is a Thesis?

Learning how the various parts and organs of a thesis are expected to function and be presented is crucial to thesis completion. Whilst every written doctoral project is unique in content, there are conventions and specifications that you need to be aware of (long) before attempting to submit your work. For the first steps towards building an understanding of thesis structure, scale and presentation, go to the library and request to view a recently submitted thesis from a subject or faculty related to your doctoral project. (In Queen's these are held in the McClay Library, Special Collections and are catalogued by faculty, not school)

Before doing anything else, go straight to the contents page and list the chapter and section headings below.

Number and title the various main chapter/section headings. Try to bullet-point the functions that you expect each section to fulfil.

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Ask yourself:

- Can I identify a logical order between these parts? (If not, read the abstract and try again)
- Do the chapters/sections seem to 'build' upon one another?
- How does the author attempt to link these sections together?
- Does this seem effective?
- Could the linkage between sections be improved?
- Does it need to be perfect?

Attention to linkage, logic, and order is often what separates an accessible, well-written thesis from an inaccessible, poorly planned sequence of findings. Regardless of the quality and/or validity of your research, you will be judged upon your ability to manage and structure your doctoral project. Academics are used to the rigorous process of peer-review, so they are sensitive to writing style and project structure. If your project is poorly structured it will be more difficult to read. Think about the effect that might have on your readers (/examiners). By making their job easier – enjoyable even – you minimise the risk of aggravating your reader. It is vital that they treat your research sensitively (and sympathetically), so give them easy access to your ideas!

2. Planning an Integrated Thesis

What we're doing here is building an understanding of how an integrated thesis is achieved. Overlooking the stylistic and structural components of integration could risk your thesis becoming fractured and incoherent. The individual parts may well be interesting and original, but if they aren't *made to cohere* it will be difficult for your reader to appreciate the project as a whole. A good starting point for planning an integrating thesis is to clearly identify the criteria that your thesis must fulfil. Can you answer the following questions?

Independent task:

- i. How many thousand words do I want to write (/need to write) and/or have I written?

- ii. How am I dividing this total? i.e. How many sub-headed 'chunks' am I employing within chapters? Am I being **consistent**?

- iii. How will I make(/have I made) this accessible to my readers?

- iv. Do my divisions help my argument cohere into a consistent storyline?

THESE QUESTIONS ALL NEED TO BE ANSWERED (MANY TIMES) AS YOU COMPLETE YOUR THESIS. IF YOU CAN'T DO SO NOW, RETURN TO THEM AT A LATER STAGE AND REEVALUATE YOUR PROGRESS

3. Queen's University Guidelines

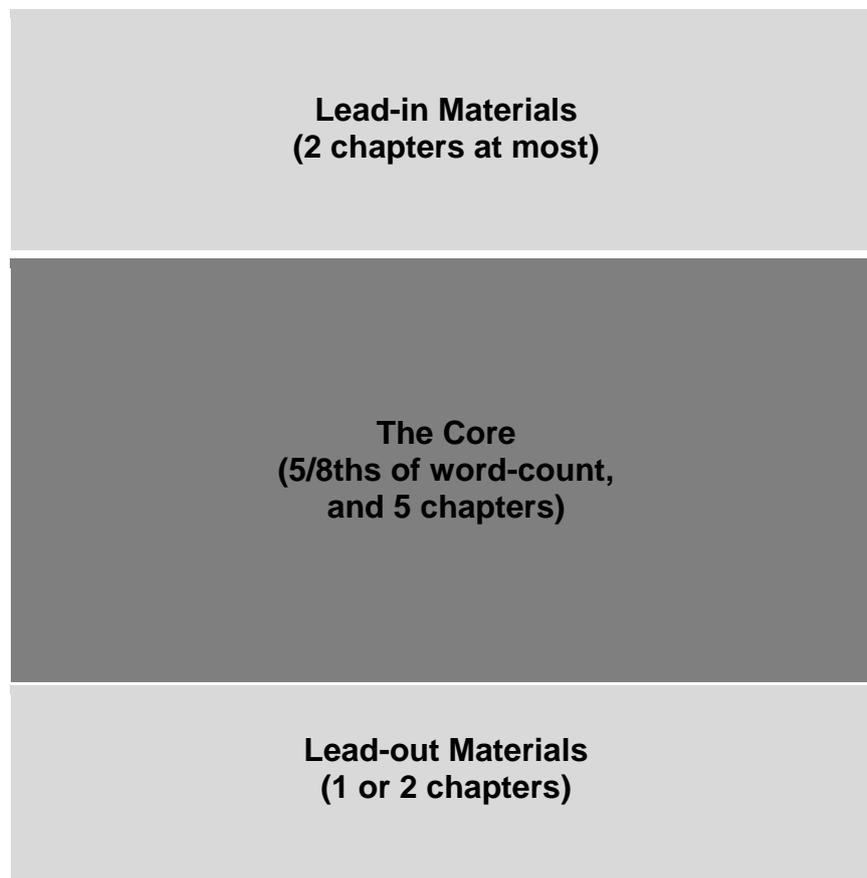
Below are some of the key guidelines for submission of a thesis to Queen's University Belfast. It is important to be aware of these ground-rules in order to effectively structure your written output.

- PhD and MD theses must not exceed 80,000 words, MPhil dissertations: 50,000 (excluding appendices and bibliography)
- Maximum page numbers: 400 for PhD; 250 for MPhil
- Must be bound and formatted according to university guidelines
- Title (and 'intention to submit') must be approved by department *and received by Student Records*

You can view the QUB policies around thesis submission through the following link:
(QUB Student Records and Examinations 2011:
<http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/srecords/FileStore/Filetoupload,16554,en.pdf>)

There are important timescales to consider for each of these points. Talk with your supervisor(s) / Postgraduate Director(s) about the specifics in your school. Be aware that your school administration staff will need to pass on certain forms and information to Student Records and Examination. Failure to do so (on time) can result in delays with university acceptance of your final thesis.

4. Thesis Structure (roughly speaking...)



(Dunleavy, 50)

The structure of your thesis should accord to the above diagram. Consider the below account of what each section entails. It might be useful to compare this structure with existing (successfully examined) theses from your subject-area.

4.1 The Core

- Defines the sections with high research value-added.
- Contributes to originality either by “the discovery of new facts” or by “the exercise of independent critical power”.
- Contains the substantively new or original sections of your research
- Should form distinct ‘blocks’ in the logical sequence of your thesis
- These blocks should build upon each other logically, creating a directed momentum in your thesis
- **Readers should be able to clearly identify ‘The Core’ as a set of discreet, high-value added chapters**

4.2. Lead-In Materials

- Introduce and 'set up' core materials for readers
- Must make information accessible and understandable
- Should be written with extreme care and attention to style, layout, and section-functionality
- Be aware – “Readers often page through lead-in materials ... looking for ‘the beef’ to found later in the core sections” (Dunleavy, 50)

4.3. Lead-Out Materials

- Fulfil the 'book closing' role for larger theses
- Should summarise, integrate, and/or restate the findings of the thesis
- Can set the findings in a larger context
- Can suggest areas for future research

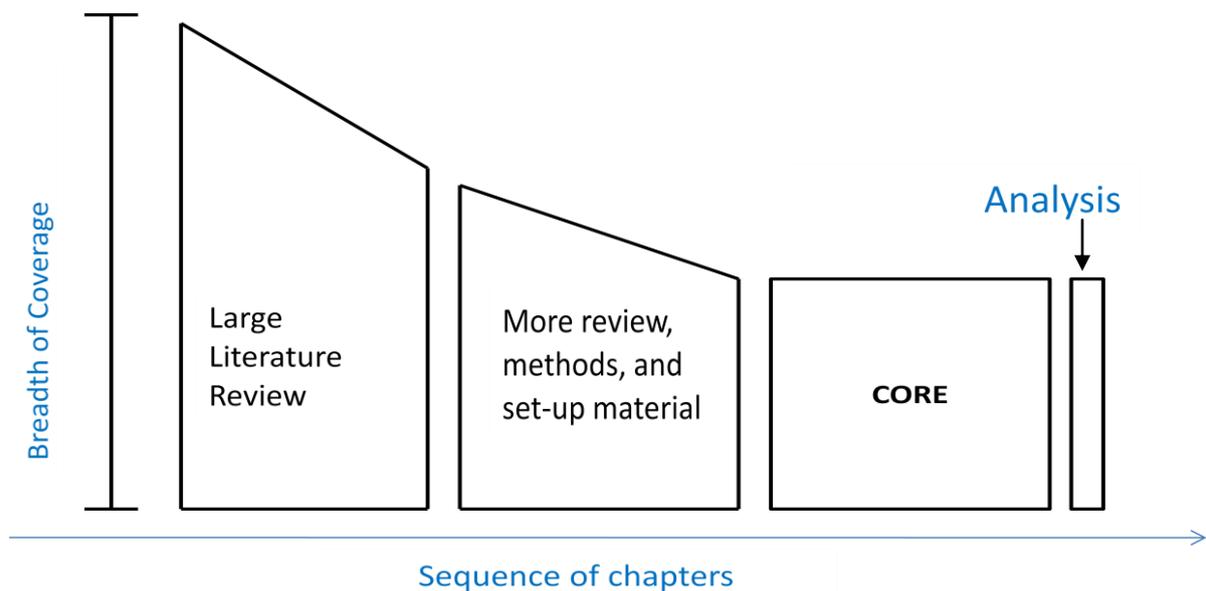
Attending to the precepts of the 'Lead-in', 'Core', and 'Lead-out' structure can give your thesis a foundational security and consistency. This is crucial to impress upon your reader(s) that you are in control of your material. A well ordered, consistently structured thesis reflects attention to detail; and structural clarity will make your points more accessible – carrying an air of controlled, measured style which will help to make your points all the more convincing.

5. Focusing Down or Opening Out: Models of Research Writing

(See Dunleavy, 43-74)

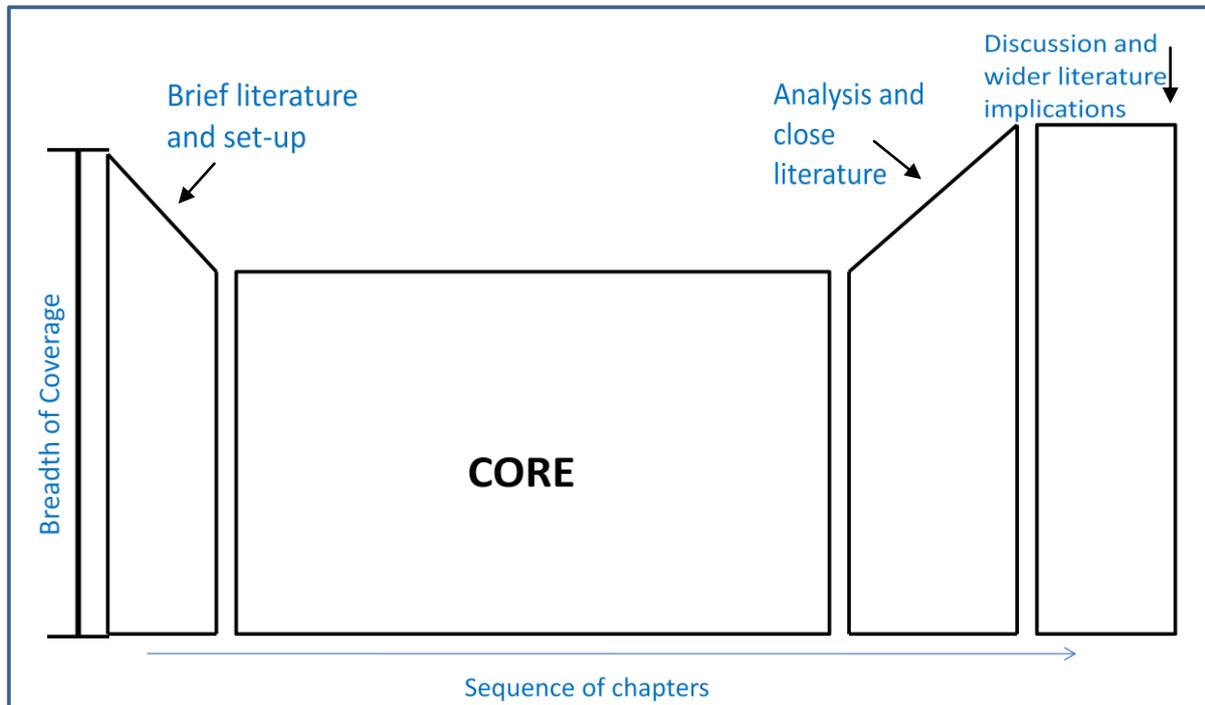
The ways in which typical doctoral theses structure and order their chapters can be understood through three models. These can be termed 'focus down', 'opening out', and 'compromise' models.

5.1. The Focus Down Model



In this sequence, the candidate typically presents an overly extensive literature review – or devotes too many chapters to literature review. This tends to be followed by a methods chapter. To stay within the time (and word) constraints, this approach often leaves only 3 to 4 chapters for substantive, applied, or empirical work, and a final, often very brief, concluding chapter. To a typical examiner, this structure carries a subtext of confusion, lack of confidence, and rushed research. Resultantly, the findings are more likely to reflect unsubstantiated positions cultivated through poor application in research.

5.2. The Opening Out Model

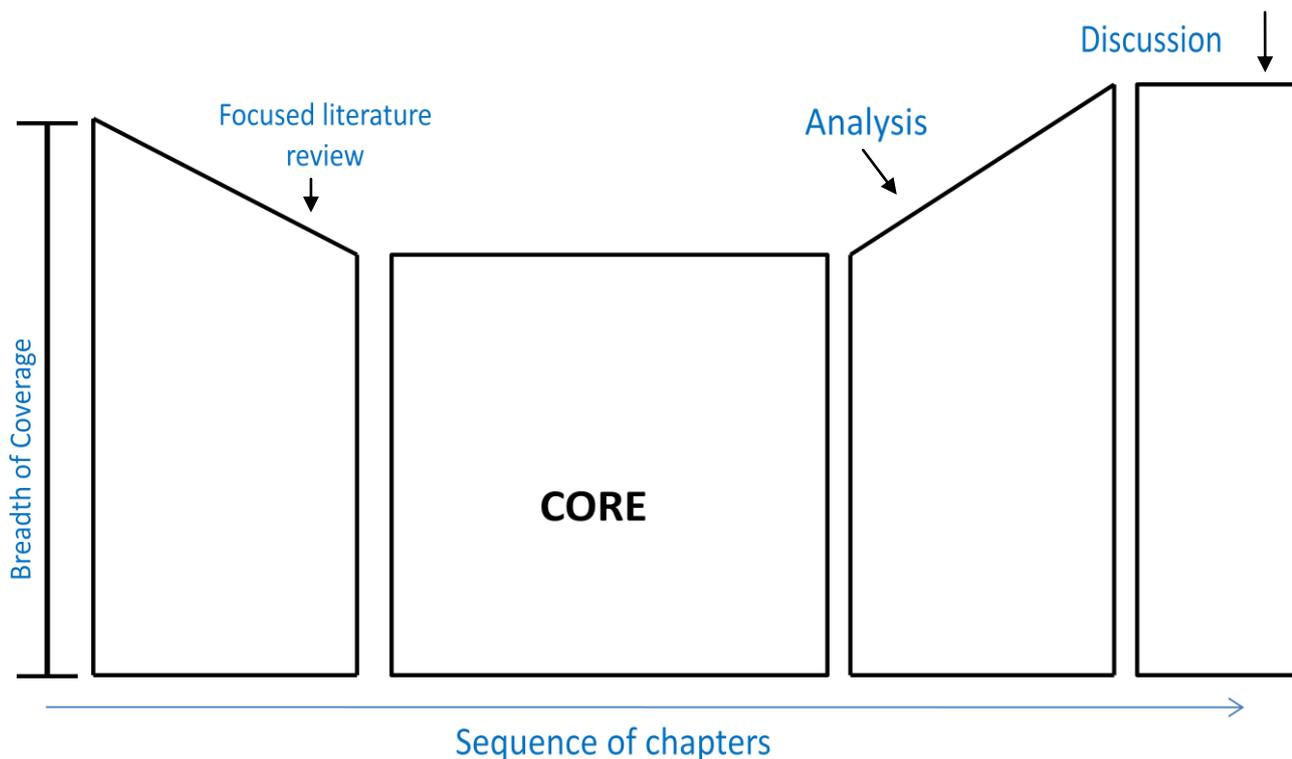


The opening out model works in almost the reverse order. The first element is a deliberately concise account of the research or thesis statement. It places the work within its immediate research context, surveying only the most recent, relevant literature. This is followed by a brief account of the essential 'set-up' information. This introductory material accounts for no more than 30-35 pages, launching the reader directly into the 'core' material. Next we have substantial analysis which connects the research findings to relevant literature, leading us into the conclusive 'discussion and wider literature implications' or 'lead out' materials. Adherence to this model has many advantages:

- Readers access your original work much sooner
- You display more actual **analysis**, and relate this to existing research
- It gives you more time and space to discuss key research findings
- New interpretations can be developed more fully
- Your voice comes through more strongly – it is unimpeded by over-reliance upon the work of others

There are, however, problems with this model. Many students (particularly from the humanities and social sciences) find it too demanding, and different from the advice of supervisors or colleagues. Therefore, the compromise model might be a better fit...

5.3. The Compromise Model



The third possible model is the 'compromise' above. Here lead-in materials are kept to a maximum of two chapters – keeping your original literature down to one contained chapter. This must be focused upon material directly related to your thesis statement – and reflected in the focus of your 'core' section. Any 'set-up', 'background', or 'methods' sections should be only present what readers *need to know*, avoiding long, descriptive digressions. The 'Analysis' section relates the findings of 'the core' to the theory and literature – giving your argument a neat, consistent circularity. Academic thinking is a cyclical process, so it makes sense to return to the literature during your analysis. Finally, your conclusive (or 'lead out') materials should reflect upon the results, theory, and literature to make some concluding statements. Here you can also gesture towards other potential avenues for research.

Like the ideal 'opening out' model, the 'compromise' has many benefits:

- Readers come into contact with your findings within (approx.) 50 or 60 pages
- Core research findings are not obscured by over-lengthy opening sections
- You leave space (and time) to conduct a thorough analysis of your findings
- Analysis is related to literature research – cyclical consistency

6. Structuring Chapters

Chapters are, as we have seen, the building blocks of a completed thesis. For your thesis to be considered seriously, these blocks must be load-bearing. But how is this achieved? This section outlines some guidelines for determining what a chapter needs to be and do to maintain the stability of your research findings. Whilst every research project (and chapter) is unique, there are some fundamentals that can help you plan and shape chapters according to established academic conventions.

6.1. A Standard Chapter Should Be...

- Approx. 10,000 words long (min. 8,000, max. 12,000)
- Subdivided into (4-5) 'chunks' of 2000-2500 words
- Introduced by 200-1000 words
- Concluded by 200-1000 words
- Linked to previous and/or subsequent chapters
- Clearly related to the central thesis-argument

This conforms to the thesis outline detailed above (p.9) whereby the 'core' of the thesis is approximately 5 chapters in length. It is unrealistic to expect that you won't deviate from this model; but by using it as a basic guideline, you can achieve the kind of structural consistency expected of clear and balanced academic writing. The important thing to remember here, in terms of structure, is that you clearly signpost your ideas, link between paragraphs and sections, and keep relating your findings to the wider aims of the thesis. We can also apply some basic (word-count related) rules to the subdivision of a chapter:

6.2. Structuring a 10,000 Word Chapter

Introductory text: 200 – 1000 words

1.1 First main section: 2000 – 2500 words

1.2 Second main section: 2000 – 2500 words

1.3 Third main section: 2000 – 2500 words

1.4 Fourth main section: 2000 – 25000 words

Conclusions: 200 – 1000 words

6.3. Basic Principles of Subdivision

Deciding where (and how) to subdivide chapters is a challenging process. Always remember to keep rearticulating the logical drive that should help govern the order in which you present your ideas. When you do use subdivision to break up your points, it is vital to remember the reasons for doing so. Subdivision must help your reader, not hinder him/her. Use the following guidelines to help:

- Use subheadings to make your reader's job easier
- Divide your text as evenly as possible
- Don't use more than four or five subheadings in a standard chapter
- Choose titles that elucidate your points
- Link subsections by using introductory and conclusive sentences

6.4. Devising Headings and Sub-Headings

Good headings and subheadings also function as important linkage devices. You can, in just a few words, capture the nature and direction of your argument. When listed on your contents page, these headings alone should reflect the cumulative (logic-driven) direction of your thesis. In order to maintain consistency and clarity in your subdivision of chapters you can apply the following guidelines.

- Number only the main sections of chapters (such as 3.1 or 3.2).
- Avoid using headings with more numbers in them (like 3.1.2 or still worse 3.1.2.1).
- Be consistent with font, size, and presentation
- Keep titles short and to the point.
- Capture energy by employing *verbs*: (e.g. '*Structuring* a Chapter...'; '*Theorising* Writing Skills...'; '*Understanding* Complexity...')

Above all, be consistent. Commit to one style of presenting headings and subheadings and apply it throughout your thesis. These can be reshaped as you continue to write, so experiment with different forms before selecting the style that suits you (and your research project).

7. Starting a Chapter

Attention to the opening words of your chapter are vital achieving the kind of structural cohesion expected at doctoral level. Your reader will pay special attention to your introductory sections as they attempt to 'get a foothold' in the chapter, and to understand exactly how it builds upon what has come before. Therefore, conditioning your chapter title and introduction for maximum concision and accessibility is a delicate but worthwhile enterprise.

7.1. The Chapter Title

The title you select for your chapter can be longer than your subtitles. This can help you to capture the focused range of ideas expressed through the chapter as a whole. You must be able to indicate your overarching chapter-focus here; and in doing so, you must attempt to captivate reader intrigue and convey dynamism in your work. Practice the following writing strategies when electing for a chapter title:

- Don't postpone writing your title; redraft and rework it as you refine your focus
- Include verbs/verb-phrases – they add dynamism
- Be creative – especially if the chapter might be reworked as a journal article.
- Be consistent with your titling – your contents page should have a degree of uniformity

7.2. The Introduction

The introduction to your chapter must include four elements:

1. The chapter title
2. some form of 'high-impact' start element, designed to particularly engage readers' attention
3. a piece of framing text which moves from the start element to some discursive comments on the chapter's main substantive themes, leading up to
4. a set of signposts to readers about the sequence and topic focus of the chapter's main sections (that is, those parts which have first-order headings)

7.3. The High-Impact Start

The opening words of the chapter should capture your reader's attention. They must also distinguish your chapter from what has come before in the thesis. Apply the following writing styles to shape your introductory words:

- Begin by addressing some (*stimulating*) general aspect or problem that the chapter addresses
- Later writing can (and should?) 'feed off' this opening material
- Try focusing on a paradox or problem: a puzzle with no obvious explanation
- Try to resist going with a 'safe', *low-impact* option
- Remember to link forwards, not back to maintain your reader's focus on the ideas and content at hand. Linking back to earlier writing will impede your reader's progress!

7.4. The Framing Text

This comes after the 'high' impact start and is crucial in making links and transitions from your opening words to the detail of the chapter-core. The objective here is to 'warm up' your reader to the chapter topic before 'throwing them in the deep end', so to speak. Ask yourself what your reader *needs to know* at this stage. Be concise and kind in your detail; resist the urge to saturate your reader in unnecessary details.

- Despite its importance, you must keep framing text to a minimum: at least 1 but not more than 3-4 pages
- Move substantial 'lead in' material (i.e. a lengthy contextual account) to an opening section of the chapter
- **Show off** the rationale of the core of the chapter

7.5. Signposting

The 'signposting' element should provide your reader with a concise account of the main aspects of the chapter's argument. It should give readers a clear account of the chapter's scope and structure: "this chapter explores, it then analyses, and concludes..." In this way you can map out your ideas in a clear, accessible format.

- Use simple and direct language: "Firstly, I discuss..."; "Later the chapter contends..."; "My argument concludes by considering..."; etc.
- Avoid referring to section numbers directly
- Try and outline the logic that guides your structure
- Don't over-simplify (via 'blurring out') the complex/sophisticated outcomes of the chapter – simply gesture towards them

7.6. Beginning and Ending a Section

Sections should be structured like miniature chapters that forge links between what comes before and after. The links between sections should be concise, to the extent that a reader is not consciously aware that linkage is being made. This has the effect of maintaining the direction of your argument without slowing down your reader's progress with awkward or clumsy linking phrases. Apply the following guidelines as you begin and end sections of your thesis:

- Avoid interrogative headings – give a flavour of your 'storyline' in each heading
- Don't give more than 1-2 paragraphs of lead-in materials
- Keep signposts brief and less formal than the chapter sign-posting
- Make the section's final paragraph look logical, well organised, and cumulative
- Stick solely to what has been done in that section, and not discuss anything else
- Make forward linkages to the next section – don't force (or expect) your reader to 'think back'. Forward links are much more effective, so use the final sentences of your conclusive paragraph carry those links to what is coming next!

7.7. Finishing a Chapter

Conclusions are often very difficult to write without sounding like you are repeating yourself. Try to go over the ground you have covered with a reflective tone. Your conclusion should

- Have a clear (distinctive) heading: i.e. 'Conclusion'
- Be at least 2 paragraphs long
- Sound reflective, **not repetitive**
- Break away from the ending of the previous section and relate to the wider chapter aims and themes
- End positively
- Use paragraph 1 to 'gather up' your key points
- Use paragraph 2 to 'open out' and briefly consider one or two broader issues
- Perhaps end by linking to one such 'open issue' explored by the next chapter

8. Structuring Paragraphs

Ideally, each of your paragraphs should focus upon **one** claim about **one** topic. Each of the sentences within a paragraph should build logically upon the one before; this links your ideas at a micro level, giving your reader the transitions they need between complex ideas and/or quotations. Presenting a paragraph's claims in an appropriate manner gives fluid links between points and gives your work a fluidity of argument. All of these aims are essential to PhD writing.

8.1 Topic, Body, and Wrap

By applying the simple formula of topic, body, and wrap to your paragraphs, you can control your presentation of ideas in significant ways. With this simple formula, you give the reader a 'topic' introductory sentence (or sentences) at the beginning and a 'wrap' conclusive sentence (or sentences) at the end of each paragraph. These function as follows:

The Topic Sentence(s):

- The opening sentence should clearly articulate the paragraph's focus
- It should be accessible and concise
- It should capture the full scope of the subsequent paragraph

Paragraph Body:

- Where you outline the substance of your focus (usually where you refer to extraneous information)
- Sentences should build logically (demonstrate this through LINKAGE)

The Wrap Sentence(s):

- The final sentence makes clear the bottom-line message, the conclusion you have reached.

Consider how this functions in the following example:

Coffee drinkers have never had it so good. Walking into a high-street coffee house, consumers are faced with a dizzying array of caffeine-coursing beverages from the metrosexual 'frappuccino' to the humble 'filter-jo'. CURRENT RESEARCH SUGGESTS that such a range of choices "keeps the market fresh", encouraging the caffeine-consuming everyman to broaden his or her consumer horizons (Frazer 2005). YET other studies argue that product variety breeds consumer confusion in many contexts. According to Nikos Janus (2001), FOR EXAMPLE, the consumer faced with too many options often elects for the cheapest – rather than risk time (and money) on that all important decision. FURTHERMORE, recent studies of the UK hospitality and retail sector demonstrate that consumers are unlikely to break habitual 'retail habits' for reasons other than economic satisfaction (Jackson 2009; Brown 2010). RESULTANTLY, Smith (2011) claims that "it's time for the high street to wake up and smell the retail opportunities" that are currently being missed by an over-adventurous service industry (p.45). Coffee drinkers may indeed be spoilt for choice in the ever expanding world of caffeine promotion.

Select Bibliography and Useful Further Reading

Dunleavy, Patrick. *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write, & Finish A Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

Petre, Marian and Gordon Rugg. *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004).