I write this because a number of students interested in studying with me have asked for clarification as to how I approach thesis supervision. I hope that my frank discussion below based on the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* (2009) is helpful and not too self-indulgent. Bear in mind that these are my own preferences and opinions and not necessarily shared by my colleagues.

Please note that these comments are made in reference to a research thesis and NOT a term paper. Term papers can be critiques of articles or other texts, literature reviews, the statement of a research problem or question, an outline of methodology, or a discussion of the classroom implications associated with research and/or theory. The term papers I ask for do not usually contain abstracts, tables of contents, theoretical frameworks, methodology, or findings. The format that I usually request for a term paper is either a critique of a specific text or a literature review. Nevertheless, I still ask for correct APA usage and a logical argument for an expository term paper that contains a clear introduction, body and conclusion. I also ask for title pages, double-spaced 12 point fonts and support for each claim you make.

Thesis and Interim Report Proposals follow the same general format as I outline below, but (naturally) do not contain a discussion of findings and implications.

**Outline**

Here is what I think a thesis should consist of:

Title page

Abstract

Starts off with the research question; then provide a 100 word summary of everything else; emphasize the findings (i.e. don’t make anything mysterious) and implications.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction/ Context

Leads off with a restatement of the research question (I strongly favor a singular research question: no secondary stuff, please); refers to the purpose of the study (noting two areas in which the study can make important contributions: 1) addresses gaps in the literature 2) in terms of teaching practice and/ or policy); includes some brief reference to your own subject position; describes the teaching and social contexts; ends with a paragraph noting how the thesis is organized.

2. Literature Review

Provides an overall description of some of the issues connected to the topic; then zeros in on the literature relates to the specific concerns related to the research question; refers to the gaps identified above (in your discussion of the purpose of the study); remember that your potential reader (a professor evaluating your potential to do research, hopefully) has probably (and hopefully) read all of the pertinent literature related to your topic and is far more interested in your actual findings and analysis. The lit review shows the reader that you know the background and can (probably) teach the stuff. However, if you want to get into a research -based program or net a research-based job, then emphasize your research! Don't let the lit review dominate your thesis.

3. Methodology

Briefly refers to your methodological options (i.e. demonstrate that you know the difference between these methods: but assume that your reader knows this stuff and doesn’t want to read something akin to ‘an intro to research’); describes why you chose a qualitative case study methodology; includes a description of the case (i.e. how did you ‘bind’ your study); gives an overview of who the participants are and how you recruited them (use an appendix to provide demographic information); goes into detail about the data collection procedure and instruments (making use of appendices to provide examples of your research instruments); leads to an overview of your data analysis procedure (how did the themes emerge out of the data); write a couple of sentences (no more) about your limitations; ends with a strong statement noting the benefits and appropriateness of your chosen methodology in this context.

4. Findings

This is the most substantial part of the thesis that tells the reader that the statements of opinion that you include in your conclusion is backed up by something; it provides a detailed look at the data arranged in the themes that emerged from your analysis; has lots of quotations that illustrate the themes and what most people said about them; includes some reference to how many said what (no statistics: meaningless given the lack of representativeness of (almost all) qualitative case study samples); for example: “most said this”; “a few said that”.

5. Conclusion/ Implications

You conclusion should discuss your study in terms of its contributions to both the research literature (explicitly referring back to the gaps you identified earlier) and to teaching practice and/ or policy. This section includes statements of opinion and recommendations that are backed up by the data; don’t scrimp on this section, since in many ways, writing it is the very point of your work.

References

APA

I strongly prefer this format since it is by far the most commonly used in education.

Appendices

e.g. demographic information about participants; examples of instruments; letters granting ethical approval

**Remarks:**

I strongly adhere to what Paltridge (2002) calls a *traditional simple* model for theses and dissertations. I favor this model because it is the most commonly accepted and feel that it is my responsibility to give students the best shot at getting into higher degree programs and bagging a job at the end of it all. Graduate programs are long-distance races with high failure rates and it is important to realize that a thesis is the most important gate-keeping device in this process.

I don’t begrudge other approaches and models, but I think that students should be aware of the implications of one’s decisions. In my opinion, one limits one’s options in traditional institutions the further out the limb one climbs.

This is in terms of form, NOT content.

It is a little like a Trojan Horse. Cloak your progressive or challenging content in the form which other people recognize as authoritative. Get them to read your stuff much in the same way that Ulysses and his colleagues gained access to Troy.

I realize that this might not be one’s goal and that opting out of a traditional model might be an important choice in terms of making a difference. However, one should make these choices with open eyes, especially at the beginning stages of an academic career when one’s position within the academy is tenuous. Of course, once one develops experience (and power) within academic institutions, the options open up.

I maintain that you can still do progressive work using the traditional model, much like one can say something beautiful and meaningful using a highly structured form such as a sonnet. Sure, there are lots of problems with traditional approaches. There is always the danger of ‘selling out’ (i.e. the form begins to impede the content). However, in this game (if academic success is the goal), I think one has to start with the tools one inherits.

For the same reasons, I favor a strict adherence to APA, the most commonly used referencing and citation format in education (see below).

The *traditional simple model* is comprised of five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results (or Findings), and Conclusion.

In education, given the importance of how research is applied, I favor a discussion of context within one’s introduction and a special focus on the teaching, programming and policy implications in one’s conclusion.

One should (in this postmodern age) include some brief statement of one’s subject position in the introduction as a way of telling the reader why you are doing this work. However, I think that one should be careful to avoid the appearance of self-indulgence since, after all, research in the humanities is mainly about other people. I like the occasional use of “I”, since I don’t like ‘pseudo-scientificism’, but really think that one should limit one’s use of it.

To be honest, I'm not sure how I feel about the term *conceptual framework*. I believe one should write a brief (and non-self-indulgent) statement of your subject position at the top (why are you doing this study?) and refer to your research orientation in your literature review, methodology and implications. So, I tend to favor a theoretical framework that is an implicit part of your introduction.

However, I most definitely see the value in making your *conceptual framework* explicit. This is what most profs want to see close to the beginning of your thesis. So, I would go for the explicit version.

The purpose of a theoretical framework, explicit or not, is to help readers understand the inevitable biases and assumptions you make in your research so that they can evaluate why you have chosen the factors you are examining and the relationships between them. A theoretical framework refers to the concepts and theories you have deemed important in deciding what to examine in your literature review and your choice of research methodology.

In any case, I generally like to see things up front, especially the research question, a statement of what you found and the implications. In my opinion, few people will read anything other than an abstract (sorry to say this, but I think that this is true for everyone). Give the store away at the top.

I am an unapologetic qualitative researcher and take the (albeit arrogant) attitude that qualitative methods (in our field, anyway) are vastly superior over those that are quantitative. The work of quantitative researchers is to be respected, of course. Mixed methods are also highly valuable and I am not above adding some numbers in my own research. However, qualitative work is where I am at.

Accordingly, I’m not sure what is actually meant by such terms as ‘trustworthiness’. I personally think that it is a waste of time to attempt to produce a foolproof methodology in qualitative work. We are looking at snapshots that have been chosen because we believe they illustrate something important. We explain why we have chosen these snapshots, but we cannot possibly adopt a scientific approach or some kind of ‘step by step’ procedure that somehow guarantees objectivity. (see Karl Popper for a critique of notions of scientific objectivity).

Unless you have done a lot of background work (with unassailable stats) to establish the fact, your work is not going to be representative or even typical of a demographically defined population. With enough time (and money), you can do this later. Why waste your time now? Be unapologetic of the work you have produced and do not succumb to the temptation of appearing to be scientific to those silly people who believe everything has to fit into the quantitative paradigm.

And don’t give your potential critics any ammunition. Sure, let’s agree that there are a few limitations in your study and give that a few sentences. However, again, let’s not apologize for our methodological choices.

Remember that academia can be a vicious game and you are wise to protect yourself from the sharks and vultures by adopting a self-confident attitude. I know that I speak from a position of (racial and gender) privilege, but I still think that this attitude is an important one to adopt for any new researcher. Hopefully, you can eventually temper this attitude with the humbleness that I admire in the best academics I have been fortunate to meet. Don't be arrogant, for it smacks of weakness.

All in all, however, if you believe in the importance of your work, the rest will eventually take care of itself.

Anyway, I digress.

Always assume that your reader knows the elementary stuff (e.g. don’t wax profane about the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods). With the possible exception of the research question, don’t repeat yourself (ever!). Assume that the reader progresses from one chapter to the next as a continuous text.

And don’t make silly mistakes in APA. I know that it is tedious and the job seems never ending, but it is one of those hateful gate-keeping devices we have to push through. Get a friend to proofread your work.

In general, use charts and graphs whenever possible.

Citations are important in establishing the fact that you know the field and the issues within it (see the article cited below by Boote and Beile). Without a substantial examination of the literature, few people will trust that your research is central to the field.

I favor a mixture of secondary and primary sources which back up every claim you make (every one!). Thus, I favor the North American standard, in which everything is backed up with an involved argument based on data or the referencing of a known authority.

Who is a known authority? Use recently published reference works (such as Hornberger's *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy,* which is open access through the U of O) to determine what the consensus is in the field and then investigate the actual work of the authority in question. Of course, there are choices in terms of who is regarded as an authority. Choose the one that reflects your orientation.

You run the danger of appearing to be unfamiliar with the literature if you provide extensive direct quotes from secondary sources. Once in a while you can get away with saying "as cited in...", but not very often. Try to paraphrase (giving credit where credit is due, of course) as an alternative.

If you cite big names (I shamelessly like to throw around the name of my pal, Aristotle, for example), be sure that you are accurate and that you demonstrate an awareness of the central aspects of their thought. Don't try to name-drop too much, especially if the links between your research and the big names you cite are tenuous. Of course, you want to show that your background is not narrow (the most common affliction within the modern academy), but be careful how you do this.

In SLE, for example, one can be forgiven for not reading Hegel's *Science of Logic* in the original revised German editions. Summaries and reference works (including cartoon versions: why not?) have important functions in this age of information glut. However, it is a major problem if you do not demonstrate familiarity with the (actual) work of authorities in your chosen area. How can you authoritatively critique them otherwise?

I like to see lots of citations up front and very few at the end. I basically believe that once you have done a thorough job in established the fact that you know the literature you should leave it alone. With the exception of bring up SOME points in your conclusion (for the purpose of reiterating that your research addresses particular gaps in the literature), I heartily dislike any discussion of the literature after your review. As a reader, I will generally skip the literature review if I am already familiar with the topical area. Why would I read it again if I have already been exposed to it (or even written about it) elsewhere?

I want to read about YOUR research in your chapters devoted to methodology, findings and implications. That is why I am reading your stuff to begin with.

Of course, I want to make sure that you know the literature so that I can trust that the groundwork for your research is sound. I do that by reading your reference list or bibliography. In fact, after the abstract, I usually read the reference list of any academic work as a way of deciding whether it is worth reading the body of the piece. I will often NOT read further if the reference list is incomplete (in my opinion), missing key authorities, or contains lots of citations not particularly central to the topic. One can usually get a pretty good idea of an author's orientation through a prior examination of the reference list. One's time is precious and there is a lot of stuff out there not worth the effort. Be careful not to waste a reader's time.

Which brings me to another point: be succinct. I love reading pieces in which the author saves me time by NOT repeating themselves or making ponderous statements of the obvious. I DO NOT want to read a 400-page thesis. Remember Lincoln's Gettysburg address? It took less than three minutes to deliver. Who remembers Edward Everett's two-hour speech prior to it?

Of course, you might like writing in an informal and entertaining style, full of anecdotes and asides. Generally speaking, however, beautiful writing is not the goal here. Remember that few people can pull this style off in this context and that you will probably try the patience of the average academic reader who is already inundated with paper and just wants to get to the point of your research. Save the entertainment until after you have finished the thesis.

Many people like footnotes. However much as I try to be tolerant, I personally really dislike them. I guess I believe that you can't put everything into one piece of work and that footnotes are tedious and distracting attempts to do this. Your next publication will contain the things you couldn't include in the thesis.

And, speaking of which: you are thinking of editing your thesis for publication ASAP, aren't you?

Paltridge, B. (2002). Thesis and dissertation writing: An examination of published advice and actual practice. *English for Specific Purposes,* *21,* 125–143.

For an interesting discussion of some of the problems associated with current approaches to educational thesis writing see:

Boote, D. and Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. In Educational researcher, 34, 3.

The online version of this article can be found at: http://edr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/6/3

For more details, including examples of current APA format, go the OWL Purdue Writing Lab website:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/