

How to Write a Master Thesis

Writing a master thesis is a sizable task. It takes a considerable amount of research, studying and writing. Usually, students need to write around 10,000 to 15,000 words.

It is completely normal to find the idea of writing a master thesis slightly daunting, even for students who have written one before at undergraduate level. Though, don't feel put off by the idea. You'll have plenty of time to complete it, and plenty of support from your supervisor and peers.

One of the main challenges that students face is putting their ideas and findings into words. Writing is a skill in itself, but with the right advice, you'll find it much easier to get into the flow of writing your masters thesis or thesis.

Top tips to consider at each stage in the process

1. Understand your thesis topic

At first, writing a master thesis can feel like running a 100m race – the course feels very quick and like there is not as much time for thinking! However, you'll usually have a summer semester dedicated to completing your thesis – giving plenty of time and space to write a strong academic piece.

By comparison, writing a PhD thesis can feel like running a marathon, working on the same topic for 3-4 years can be laborious. But in many ways, the approach to both of these tasks is quite similar.

Before writing your master thesis, get to know your research topic inside out. Not only will understanding your topic help you conduct better research, it will also help you write better thesis content.

Also consider the main purpose of your thesis. You are writing to put forward a theory or unique research angle – so make your purpose clear in your writing.

Top writing tip: when researching your topic, look out for specific terms and writing patterns used by other academics. It is likely that there will be a lot of jargon and important themes across research papers in your chosen thesis topic.

2. Structure your thesis

Writing a thesis is a unique experience and there is no general consensus on what the best way to structure it is.

As a postgraduate student, you'll probably decide what kind of structure suits your research project best after consultation with your supervisor. You'll also have a chance to look at previous masters students' theses in your university library.

To some extent, all postgraduate thesis are unique. Though they almost always consist of chapters. The number of chapters you cover will vary depending on the research.

A master thesis organized into chapters would typically look like this:

Section	Description
Title page	The opening page includes all relevant information about the project.
Abstract	A brief project summary including background, methodology and findings.
Contents	A list of chapters and figures from your project.
Chapter 1 – Background	A description of the rationale behind your project.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review	A summary and evaluation of the literature supporting your project.
Chapter 3 – Methodology	A description of the specific methodology used in your project.
Chapter 4-6 – Data analysis and Findings	An overview of the key findings and data from your research.
Chapter 7 - Discussion and Evaluation	A description of what the data means and what you can draw from the findings.
Chapter 8 - Conclusion	Main summary of your overall project and key findings.
Bibliography	A list of the references cited in your dissertation or thesis.
Appendices	Additional materials used in your research.

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Chapter 7 - Discussion and Evaluation: A description of what the data means and what you can draw from the findings.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion: Main summary of your overall project and key findings.

Bibliography: A list of the references cited in your thesis.

Appendices: Additional materials used in your research.

Write down your structure and use these as headings that you'll write for later on.

Top writing tip: ease each chapter together with a paragraph that links the end of a chapter to the start of a new chapter. For example, you could say something along the lines of "in the next section, these findings are evaluated in more detail". This makes it easier for the reader to understand each chapter and helps your writing flow better.

3. Write up your literature review

One of the best places to start when writing your master thesis is with the literature review. This involves researching and evaluating existing academic literature in order to identify any gaps for your own research. Many students prefer to write the literature review chapter first, as this is where several of the underpinning theories and concepts exist. This section helps set the stage for the rest of your thesis and will help inform the writing of your other thesis chapters.

What to include in your literature review: The literature review chapter is more than just a summary of existing research; it is an evaluation of how this research has informed your own unique research. Demonstrate how the different pieces of research fit together. Are there overlapping theories? Are there disagreements between researchers? Highlight the gap in the research. This is key, as a thesis is mostly about developing your own unique research. Is there an unexplored avenue of research? Has existing research failed to disprove a particular theory? Back up your methodology. Demonstrate why your methodology is appropriate by discussing where it has been used successfully in other research efforts.

4. Write up your research

Your research is the heart and soul of your thesis. Conducting your actual research is a whole topic in itself, but it's important to consider that your research design will heavily influence the way you write your final thesis. For instance, a more theoretical-based research topic might encompass more writing from a philosophical perspective.

Methodology chapter: The methodology chapter is all about how you carried out your research and which specific techniques you used to gather data. You should write about broader methodological approaches (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods), and then go into more detail about your chosen data collection strategy. Data collection strategies include things like interviews, questionnaires, surveys, content analyses, discourse analyses and many more.

Data analysis and findings chapters: The data analysis or findings chapter should cover what you discovered during your research project. It should be detailed, specific and objective (don't worry, you'll have time for evaluation later in your thesis). Write up your findings in a way that is easy to understand. For example, if you have a lot of numerical data, this could be easier to digest in tables. This will make it easier for you to dive into some deeper analysis in later chapters. Remember, the reader will refer to your data analysis section to cross-reference your later evaluations against your actual findings – so presenting your data in a simple manner is beneficial. Think about how you can segment your data into categories.

Top writing tip: write up notes on how you might phrase a certain part of the research. This will help bring the best out of your writing. There is nothing worse than when you think of the perfect way to phrase something and then you completely forget it.

5. Discuss and evaluate

Once you've presented your findings, it's time to evaluate and discuss them. It might feel difficult to differentiate between your findings and discussion sections, because you are essentially talking about the same data. The easiest way to remember the difference is that your findings simply present the data, whereas your discussion tells the story of this data. Your evaluation breaks the story down, explaining the key findings, what went well and what didn't go so well. In your discussion chapter, you'll have chance to expand on the results from your findings section. For example, explain what certain numbers mean and draw relationships between different pieces of data.

Top writing tip: don't be afraid to point out the shortcomings of your research. You will receive higher marks for writing objectively. For example, if you didn't receive as many interview responses as expected, evaluate how this has impacted your research and findings. Don't let your ego get in the way!

6. Write your introduction

Your introduction sets the scene for the rest of your master thesis. You might be wondering why writing an introduction isn't at the start of our step-by-step list, and that's because many students write this chapter last.

Here's what your introduction chapter should cover:

- Background
- Problem statement
- Research question
- Significance of your research

This tells the reader what you'll be researching as well as its importance. You'll have a good idea of what to include here from your original thesis proposal, though it's fairly common for research to change once it gets started.

Writing or at least revisiting this section last can be really helpful, since you'll have a more well-rounded view of what your research actually covers once it has been completed and written up.

Master thesis writing tips

When to start writing your thesis: When you should start writing your master thesis depends on the scope of the research project and the duration of your course. In some cases, your research project may be relatively short and you may not be able to write much of your thesis before completing the project.

But regardless of the nature of your research project and of the scope of your course, you should start writing your thesis or at least some of its sections as early as possible, and there are a number of good reasons for this:

1. *Academic writing is about practice, not talent. The first steps of writing your thesis will help you get into the swing of your project. Write early to help you prepare in good time.*
2. *Write things as you do them. This is a good way to keep your thesis full of fresh ideas and ensure that you don't forget valuable information.*
3. *The first draft is never perfect. Give yourself time to edit and improve your thesis. It's likely that you'll need to make at least one or two more drafts before your final submission.*
4. *Writing early on will help you stay motivated when writing all subsequent drafts.*
5. *Thinking and writing are very connected. As you write, new ideas and concepts will come to mind. So writing early on is a great way to generate new ideas.*

How to improve your writing skills: The best way of improving your thesis or thesis writing skills is to:

1. *Finish the first draft of your masters thesis as early as possible and send it to your supervisor for revision. Your supervisor will correct your draft and point out any writing errors. This process will be repeated a few times which will help you recognise and correct writing mistakes yourself as time progresses.*
2. *If you are not a native English speaker, it may be useful to ask your English friends to read a part of your thesis and warn you about any recurring writing mistakes. Read our section on English language support for more advice.*
3. *Read academic articles and search for writing resources on the internet. This will help you adopt an academic writing style, which will eventually become effortless with practice.*
4. *Keep track of your bibliography: When studying for your master thesis, you will need to develop an efficient way of organizing your bibliography – this will prevent you from getting lost in large piles of data that you'll need to write your thesis. The easiest way to keep the track of all the articles you have read for your research is to create a database where you can summarize each article/chapter into a few most important*

bullet points to help you remember their content. Another useful tool for doing this effectively is to learn how to use specific reference management software (RMS) such as EndNote or Mendeley. RMS is relatively simple to use and saves a lot of time when it comes to organizing your bibliography. This may come in very handy, especially if your reference section is suspiciously missing two hours before you need to submit your thesis!

- 5. Avoid accidental plagiarism: Plagiarism may cost you your postgraduate degree and it is important that you consciously avoid it when writing your thesis or thesis. Occasionally, postgraduate students commit plagiarism unintentionally. This can happen when sections are copy and pasted from journal articles they are citing instead of simply rephrasing them. Whenever you are presenting information from another academic source, make sure you reference the source and avoid writing the statement exactly as it is written in the original paper.*

***What kind of format should your thesis have?:** Different universities have different guidelines on how to format your thesis and it is important that you read these guidelines before submitting your thesis to avoid being penalized. Read your university's guidelines before you actually start writing your thesis so you don't have to waste time changing the format further down the line. However in general, most universities will require you to use 1.5-2 line spacing, font size 12 for text, and to print your thesis on A4 paper. These formatting guidelines may not necessarily result in the most aesthetically appealing thesis; however beauty is not always practical, and a nice looking thesis can be a more tiring reading experience for your postgrad examiner.*

***When should I submit my thesis?:** The length of time it takes to complete your MSc thesis will vary from student to student. This is because people work at different speeds, projects vary in difficulty, and some projects encounter more problems than others. However, your supervisor will advise you whether your work is ready and you should take their advice on this. If your supervisor says that your work is not ready, then it is probably unwise to submit it. Usually, your supervisor will read your final thesis or thesis draft and will let you know what's required before submitting your final draft.*

Set yourself a target for completion. This will help you stay on track and avoid falling behind. You may also only have funding for the year, so it is important to ensure you submit your thesis before the deadline – and also ensure you don't miss out on your graduation ceremony!