**Notes on the Structure of a Thesis**

There are some conventions about the patterns of academic writing, particularly in scientific and social scientific literature, which should generally be observed in writing a thesis or writing an academic article. The following account is consistent with the pattern described by Cameron and Bruce (2013). A visualisation of that general pattern is displayed in ‘General Structure for DMin and MA Theses at Harvest’.

Note that this structure is a guide only. What is important is that the functional elements of the introduction through to the conclusion are important. The ways that they are presented and the ways chapters are divided vary considerably.



The functional elements in the structure are:

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Discussion
6. Conclusion

These elements may form separate chapters. However, it may also be appropriate to divide some of these sections into more than one chapter. For example, if one has distinct areas of literature that need to be considered, such as theological and sociological, these may be written up in separate chapters. If one is dealing with several types of data, such as the results of qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey, one may present that data in distinct chapters.

The number of words that has been suggested is indicative only. For example, one may need more than 15,000 words to present the results and less than 10,000 words to discuss those results. However, these suggestions provide some indication of the approximate proportion of the thesis which should be dedicated to each section of the thesis.

Note that the diagram presents some correspondences. The discussion needs to correspond to the literature review and show how the results have contributed to what is in the literature. The conclusion relates back to the introduction and summarises what has been learnt about the topic.

**A Detailed Account of Each Section**

***Introduction***

The thesis should begin with a succinct description of the research topic. It may be that this is set out in terms of the aims of the research. This may be described in terms of what is the issue(s) in ministry that the thesis will address. It is usually appropriate to give a context for that issue(s): where and when it is arising. It may place the specific issue the thesis is addressing within a larger area of ministry. It may be pertinent to include some references to the Biblical or theological background of this area of ministry and to the specific issues you are addressing.

The introduction should include a statement about why this issue is important. Some of these materials may include some brief personal reflections on the relevance of the topic and indicate the passion of the researcher. At the same time, it may also be appropriate to indicate the orientation of the researcher and the perspectives from which the researcher is approaching the issue.

***Literature Review***

The literature review describes the state of knowledge about the research topic that has been identified. It should be organised in terms of the various aspects of the research topic. Thus, it is not simply a review of a list of books on the topic. For example, if one is doing a review on youth ministry, one might look at the literature that addresses the aims of youth ministry, and then the literature about leadership in youth ministry, moving onto the literature that looks at the sorts of programs that are appropriate in youth ministry, and then the relationships between church and youth ministry. The literature review may well consider the same book in different parts of the review as the one book deal with these different aspects of your research agenda.

It is important to note the context of the literature that is reviewed. American and English literature may or may not be relevant to the situation in Australia. It is also important to note the time context, as literature relevant fifty years ago may not be relevant today.

References to Biblical and theological materials on your topic may be included. These may help develop the specific issues that are important in your topic and ground the topic in the wider dimensions of Christian ministry and mission. It may be appropriate to include not only the Biblical references themselves but commentary on those references which provides a description of their background, context and interpretation.

Many people find that they quickly feel they have covered all the literature specifically on their topic. However, it is important to scan and discuss literature that may be more general in its orientation, but which may have implications for the research topic. For example, literature on youth culture may well be appropriate to a consideration of youth ministry. General literature on leadership may have some important insights that are relevant to leadership in youth ministry. It is often in the more general literature that one discovers general theories, for example, about how leadership works in contemporary Australian society, which may provide the basis for theories and hypotheses in the specific research area of the thesis.

Having reviewed the literature, it is appropriate to state the research topic in terms of a precisely worded research question that the research will attempt to answer. This research question should reflect existing knowledge in your area of interest, identify gaps in that knowledge and should build on the existing knowledge. Particularly at doctoral level, it is important to show that you will be ***adding*** to existing knowledge ***or proposing fresh applications*** of existing knowledge.

You may then have some specific hypotheses or sub-questions that the research will address in answering the major research question. These should clearly be related to the major research question. The sub-questions need to be stated in ways that they can addressed through the research, in other words, the specific questions on which research can provide information. Hypotheses should be grounded as much as possible in the theories that have been identified as relevant in your consideration of the literature.

***Methodology***

This section explains how the information that will give answers to the research question is gathered. It explains what methods were used (such as quantitative or qualitative research methods) and why they were the most appropriate to provide the information that was needed.

It may be appropriate to describe the sort of epistemological approach that was taken to the research. To what extent was the context of the research viewed as socially constructed, for example? To what extent did the researcher interact with those participating in the research in a dialogical manner, evolving the understanding of the topic, as occurs in a grounded theory approach? To what extent were the principles of appreciative enquiry adopted in the research, or did the research seek to be as neutral as possible in its approach? Why?

An important section of your methodology chapter will be a discussion of the sampling: those people who were invited to participate in the research and how they provided the information that was required. (For a discussion of the issues in sampling, see De Vaus 2014, ch.6.) It should include a discussion of recruitment methods and the extent to which they would ensure appropriate representation of the larger body of people about whom you wish to draw conclusions by being an appropriate random or selective sample or coverage of all people in the sample as occurs in a census.

It is also appropriate in this section to describe the sorts of questions asked of the participants. The actual survey or interview schedule will be an appendix, but the nature of the questions asked and how they ‘operationalised’ the sub-research questions and hypotheses should be described. There are usually three types of information that is gathered and discussion may occur under these three headings: the dependent variable(s) (that is, the major component in your research question that you are seeking to measure, e.g. the effectiveness of youth ministry), the independent variables (that is, the various factors which may influence the dependent variable, such as the quality of leadership and the nature of the program), and the contextual variables (such as demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and context variables such as the size of the churches of which they are a part, or whether the participants live in urban or rural contexts, which set the scene and may describe the different contexts in which the research may or may not be valid).

A discussion about any ethical issues that the research may involve and how those ethical issues were addressed is appropriate in the methodology section.

***Results***

The results section describes the responses that were obtained from the research gathering exercise. It is not a systematic account of all results. Thus, it is not appropriate to simply list the questions and the results obtained from each question. Rather, this selection describes the results that are specifically relevant to the research topic. Results should generally be described in the past tense, referring specifically to what was said by the participants or what they indicated by their responses to a survey.

For qualitative research, this section will outline the general patterns of responses. There may be some reference to the frequency with which certain themes were mentioned by participants, for example. There will also be a discussion of the variations in the ways these themes were handled. For example, if interviews were conducted about the qualities desired of youth leaders, one would describe the major qualities that were mentioned frequently, but also discuss some of the qualities which were not mentioned frequently. There will also be a description of the variations in the types of responses given to particular questions.

Depending on the research questions and hypotheses, it may also be relevant to discuss how different groups answered the questions. For example, how participants in rural contexts looked for different qualities in leadership to those participants in urban contexts. Or how female participants gave different answers to male participants? The extent to which you include descriptions of the various groups of respondents will depend largely on your research questions, sub-questions and hypotheses. On the other hand, you may also notice some unexpected results that emerge here. For example, the highly educated participants may be answering the questions quite differently to the less educated participants. You may describe those differences, even though this was not a factor which you had included in your hypotheses. However, it is expected that this presentation of the responses of various sub-groups will be selective as it is relevant to the research topic rather than be exhaustive.

Frequently, one is drawing from one’s research to generalise the results to a large group of people. For example, the researcher assumes that from a national survey one can infer something about the national population. In making such inferences, it is important to use tests of significance and to present the results of those tests in the results. (For discussion of generalization and the tests of significance see D. De Vaus 2002, Part 4, and chapter 39).

Tables and/or graphs may be used to present the results. If using graphs, it is good to include actual labels (usually percentages) in the graph itself. One needs to note that different forms of graphs (column graphs, scatter diagrams, line graphs, pie charts, etc.) are relevant to different types of data. (For a discussion of what graphs to use for what data, see De Vaus 2002, ch. 29 and 33). Note that while the absolute numbers of respondents should be stated and some description of the numbers in each sub-group (such as males and females), most results will be presented in terms of percentages, or, if reporting responses to scales, mean scores.

Univariate (one variable at a time) and bivariate (two variables at a time) analysis is usually sufficient for most MA theses unless the thesis specifically hypothesised a model in which a range of factors were seen as interacting. (For a discussion of the various forms of univariate and bivariate analysis, see De Vaus 2002, parts 5 and 6). For DMin theses, multivariate analyses (involving several variables simultaneously) as in regression models are often relevant. (See De Vaus 2002, part 7.) Regression models include a variety of variables within the model and describe how those variables interact with each other.

Note that any survey may be analysed thousands or even millions of ways in terms of the inter-relationships between the various questions that you include and the various contexts you examine. It is common in surveys to use scales which are developed from a number of questions which are often added together. You will need to also quote statistics which demonstrate the reliability of the scale. (For a discussion of the building of scales, see De Vaus 2002, ch.17 and 18).

Note that it may be appropriate to divide the results section if several types of methodology were used, or if there were distinct areas of results to present.

***Discussion***

The discussion considers the significance of the results in relation to the research question, sub-questions and hypotheses. Thus, it corresponds to the literature review and to the specific questions that were developed from it. The discussion examines the extent to which the null hypothesis (the idea that there was insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis) should be rejected. Rarely does the evidence ‘prove’ something to be the case. Rather, it is indicative that a relationship may or may not exist. Thus, on the basis of the results, this section discusses whether there were statistically significant indicators from a survey, or strong evidence from interviews, that a relationship may exist. One may then consider how this contributes to or modifies the understanding of the theories on which the research was based.

It is often the case that the results do not fit the hypotheses well. This means that one may need to consider alternative explanations for the results. In actual fact, if a researcher finds that the results do not fit the literature presented in the literature review, the researcher may want to re-work the literature review after the results have become apparent. Thus, the final thesis is presented in one tight format. It is inappropriate to move to a lengthy discussion of new literature in the discussion. Nevertheless, it may be appropriate to note new areas of literature or new types of explanation that may need to be considered in future research.

The conclusion of the discussion needs to state clearly what new information was obtained from the research and how this complements the existing literature.

The discussion may also examine the results of the research in relation to the Biblical and theological literature. It may note how the results are relevant to ministry. As research is about what IS the case, there are usually several types of responses. One is that it becomes important to seek to change what IS the case, for example, through educational processes. The other is that one may want to change how ministry is conducted. For example, discovering that youth ministry is appealing only to a specific group of young people may mean that one needs to change how one does youth ministry in order to appeal to a wider group. On the other hand, finding that most young people have little understanding of the Christian faith may mean that one needs to increase the education in the Christian faith that one offers to them. In other words, the results need to be discussed both in the light of Biblical and theological principles, but also in the light of ‘what works’ in our present context.

***Conclusion***

The conclusion corresponds to the introduction in stating what the research means for the topic area and the specific areas of ministry that have been explored in the research. In doing this, it is usually appropriate to discuss the limitations of the research, particularly in relation to the specific contexts to which these results may be applied. For example, one might want to note that the research did not examine non-English speakers and people born overseas. It also notes both what can be concluded and what cannot be concluded from this particular piece of research. It is often appropriate to indicate what further research needs to be done.

***References and Appendices***

All books, articles, websites and other sources of information referred to in the thesis should be listed at the end of the thesis in the format described in the Harvest Style Guide. You may also include additional literature that was relevant even if you have not referred to it, in which case your heading should be ‘Bibliography’.

Appendices should include the materials used in research including surveys and interview schedules, information sheets and consent forms.

References:

Cameron, Helen and Bruce, Catherine (2013) *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion*, London: SCM Press.

De Vaus, David (2002) *Analyzing Social Science Data: 50 Key Problems in Data Analysis,* London: Sage Publications.

De Vaus, David (2014) *Surveys in Social Research*, 6th edition, Abingdon, Oxon: Routlege.

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