Faculty of Economics and Business Administration – Universiteit Maastricht

The essential guide to theses and internship reports in Organization Studies and Strategy

Version 1.3

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Preface

Writing a thesis is part of the academic training at a University. Independently you have to research a topic of your choice. In this respect it is quite different from writing the second year paper, not only because of the greater workload, but also because of the degree of initiative that is required from you: to define a topic, to search for relevant literature, and –often - to conduct empirical research. As a result, writing a thesis is a more time-consuming and frustrating experience than most students expect. In fact, in recent years few students in our field managed to write and defend their thesis within 6-8 months.

Some of the problems students face cannot be avoided; they are inherent in doing research and are part of the learning process. Others can be avoided, simply because they arise from a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding: about the purpose of the master thesis, how to address a research problem, what to include or not to include in the manuscript, and what supervisors expect. The department of Organization Studies has taken the initiative to address these 'avoidable' problems in the form of a rough guide. This guide primarily focuses on problems involved in writing a master thesis, but it also contains useful information for students who are preparing their internship report. The guide synthesizes our experience in supervising students in master theses and internship reports. But, the guide is in no way complete. Ideas, suggestions and comments from users are therefore most welcome.

New in version 1.3. of the thesis guide is that more emphasis is given on the formulation of a thesis proposal since many students have indicated to have had problems with that. A good proposal, however, is the start to a good thesis trajectory.

Additionally, make sure to check our special thesis and internship web page. Go to http://www.fdewb.unimaas.nl/os/index.htm and click through to STUDY and THESES AND INTERNSHIPS. Lots of important procedural information, tips and a list of thesis supervisors! The site can be regarded as an addendum to this guide.

Finally, most students after graduation profess that writing their thesis was hard work, but one of the most -if not THE most - valuable learning experiences of their entire studies. So take heart: may preceded you and succeeded.... Enjoy!

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*) René Olie has left our Department for the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. René was the originator and first author of this guide.

Contents

1. Introduction

The purpose of the master thesis is twofold. The first objective is to learn how to research a specific issue. Knowledge and skills in this area are not only important from a scientific perspective, but they are essential in any business environment. Most companies base their decision making on some kind of research. Thus, knowledge of research methods will be of value: for people who have to evaluate research (proposals) prepared by others and who will use it as input for decision making, as well as for those who are preparing reports for higher management. The second objective is to communicate this research to a (virtual) readership. How excellent your ideas may be, they never come across if you are not able to communicate them in a clear and proper manner. Proficiency in writing documents, reports, brochures etc., therefore is an essential skill for any student.

The first objective is related to the *contents* of the study; the second to its *format, style or structure*. These different aspects provide the framework of this guide. We will start with the content of the thesis

2. Content of the thesis and the thesis proposal

This section addresses the following topics: the scientific nature of research, how to search for information and how to collect data. A more thorough discussion of these topics can be found in Cooper and Schindler (1998: chapter 1-3).

2.1 The research topic: what's new?

To put your thesis endeavours into a wider perspective, let's start with a short exposé on the academic or scientific nature of your thesis. The goal of scientific research is *to advance our knowledge*. More specifically, one could say that the goals of science include:

- *Description:* observing and documenting the 'what' or 'How' of a particular phenomenon; e.g. 'How many firms are involved in e-commerce; does this differ per industry?;
- *Explanation*: understanding how things work; what the (causal) relationship is between two or more phenomena; e.g. 'Which factors determine the successful implementation of empowerment'?

- *Prediction:* predicting the occurrence of a phenomenon; e.g. ‘Developments in IT will lead to a convergence of high tech industries’.
- *Application:* using and applying knowledge to fit practical purposes; e.g. ‘Controlling management expectancies can be used as a tool to increase the effectiveness of reward systems’.

The purpose of your thesis is to contribute to these scientific goals. Thus, a thesis has to have some added value. It is more than just a summary of books and articles that have been written about a particular topic. Reading about what we already know, is as much fun as reading yesterday’s newspaper. The value of a thesis can reside in two different aspects:

- *Theoretically:* the focus of your theoretical contribution can be either exploration or development. Exploration means that you discover a new territory where few researchers have set foot; development means that you cultivate an existing field and try to increase our knowledge about a particular phenomenon. For example, you explore it in a new, unconventional way, which opens up new ways of research. Or, fragmentation and incoherence characterize the field of study and you try to create some order in this unkept garden. Essential questions in this approach are: what are the white spots on our map? What has been researched, and what hasn’t? Which theories have been developed to explain and predict the phenomenon under study? What is the value of these theories? And, how can we explain contradictory evidence? All this is important to prevent that we are re-inventing the proverbial wheel.

- *Empirically:* once you have determined the white spots, or unknown territories, in your research field, you may decide to do some empirical research in order to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon in question. In the case of exploration, the focus will be *describing* the phenomenon and developing explanations about its occurrence; in the case of development it will be more on *testing* explanations.

In sum, theoretical and/or empirical relevance are two important criteria that define the quality of your work. One may also add a third criterion: practical relevance (how can we apply our knowledge to fit our own purposes?), although this is generally of secondary importance in academic work. Description, explanation and prediction first need to be addressed in order to develop reliable knowledge, before the next step can be taken: applying it.

2.2 In search of a problem statement and the key to a good proposal

N.B. It is important to note from the start that it is not the staff's obligation to help you find a topic.

The starting point for most theses is a general, vague idea about a topic. Ideally, you have picked up this idea during your studies in academic journals. But newspapers (e.g. *Het Financieele Dagblad*), or popular management magazines (e.g. *Business Week*, *The Economist*, *Quote*, *Management Team*) may also give you inspiration. Once you have developed some idea about the focus of your thesis, the most important point at this stage is reached: finding out what the ***scientific*** state of the art is in this specific field and to delineate your research focus. **If the scientific literature does not offer 'footholds' on your topic, it is NOT suitable as a thesis topic!!** This prevents you (and us) from dealing with popular and superficial hype-topics that lack theoretical backgrounds to study it properly. Useful starting points to assess this scientific standing of your topic may be the latest editions of the basic textbooks you encountered in your studies, like Daft for organization theory, Robbins for organizational behaviour, and Grant for strategic management/ industrial organization. Pay particular attention to the reference-lists they provide, to point your way to more specialized literature. Inevitably, textbooks are quite basic in their treatment of the literature. Therefore, the next step is to make a more specific search to find out what is written about your favoured topic in the scientific community. To this end, consult databases at the faculty/library website (especially EBSCO)., depending on the focus of your research.[1] Search smart! Use names of well-known specialists in the field and **limit your search to international peer-reviewed journals** (you can check a box to this end in EBSCO).. Articles *reviewing* certain topics are often a good starting point for getting an overall view of a field. Again, check the lists of references in these articles. After a while you will notice that certain articles are repeatedly referred to - the classics - whereas others are not. Focus on the classics. In this way you can narrow down your initial reading list to -say- twenty important articles on the topic (less for

[1] Notice, the library only contains the most important journals; more peripheral journals can be found in other faculty- or university libraries. Most volumes start in the mid-1980s (the time of the foundation of the Faculty).

newer topics, more for 'old' topics). The procedure just outlined is called the 'cross-referencing method'; it enables you to delineate what to read and what not. If done properly, you will be a semi-specialist already after reading these! Once you have collected and read these sources you should be able to define your problem statement more precisely and couch it in the relevant literature.

Another recommended approach, either to get inspiration for interesting topics or to find additional material on a chosen topic is to browse through a pool of excellent journals. Consult (i.e., physically *get* and *inspect* - very old-fashioned!) the three most recent volumes of leading *non-specialized* ('generic') journals in the field of organization studies. These are: *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ*), Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ), *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Organization Studies*, *Organization Science*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies,* A period of three to five years is usually sufficient to give you an idea of the state of the art. Once you have found an interesting article, the article's bibliography will be helpful in finding other major articles in that field of inquiry. Again: use the cross-reference method of literature gathering. At some point you will notice that you possess the bulk of references in the articles you read: this means you have found the most important (so-called 'key'-) references in the field. From these general periodicals you will - through their references- quite naturally be redirected to the best more specialized journals on a topic. This method will keep you at safe distance from all kinds of second rated or even plain bad journals you don't want to waste time on.

As regards this literature search, a few additional comments can be made:

- Articles usually provide more up to date information than books. In addition, since most articles are published in internationally refereed journals, they are generally considered of higher quality.

- Do not focus only on theoretical literature, but also look for empirical research in order to find out how research has advanced in this area.

Check the Nederlandse Centrale Catalogus (NCC) to find out where you can find other books and journals, if

- Although practitioner-oriented literature (e.g. *De Gids voor Personeelsmanagement*) may contain interesting ideas that can be taken up for research, this type of literature cannot be regarded as reliable sources of information. Most often, it is too anecdotal and fashionable, too much based on individual observations, or too much focused on solving problems than on understanding them.

As your search progresses you will be able to define a problem statement that will fit the requirements of theoretical and/or empirical relevance. Especially in the beginning, it is inevitable that you read more than you will use for your thesis. Initial research questions are usually quite broad and vague and become more focused, or redefined, as knowledge increases about the field of study. Most students feel very frustrated about this. But you must see it as integral part of the research process. It helps you to put your research question into perspective and develop a deeper understanding of the research topic.

Students often complain about having to read so much before they can 'start'. It is, however, essential for good academic work that you take and define your place in the broader field of inquiry of a certain topic. You will often find that your idea is not quite as brilliant and original as you have thought in advance! Mind that this is, however, also a big advantage! Having a set of good thinkers doing much of the groundwork *for you*, speeds up the development of your own theoretical model. Don't try to invent the wheel all over again and don't be hesitant in following the leads others provide. However: be honest in mentioning them!!!

Finally, ***try to add something*** in your own work. This doesn't need to be something earth-shocking (better not, even). *Think* of research others have done and ask yourself: how might I replicate -perhaps a small part - of what has been done here? Can I extend it in some (tiny) way? Can I apply it in a different setting? Or with a different dependent variable? In other words: try to be creative. It makes doing research much more fun!

Writing a proposal boils down to putting your ideas on paper in way that is consistent with what has been written above. A good proposal consists of about 1.5 pages of literature overview that logically culminates into the problem statement. Then, a couple of sub

necessary.

questions are formulated that will assist you in a step –by-step answering of the problem statement. Finally you end with a rudimentary idea of how you are going to deal with the (empirical) research; this includes method, sample etc. Of course, a list of used references should be used. An example proposal has been added as an appendix to this guide.

=====================ON THE USE OF INTERNET=====================
Although very tempting, it is generally not advisable to gather literature through broad sweeps of the Net, using search engines like GOOGLE or whatever. Reason is, that the internet is -for the most part- a huge information garbage can. Students - with all due respect- generally haven't got the expertise to discern the good from the bad scientific sources. Thus: go for the information infra-structure that has been filtered for you already: our good old-fashioned library. With real books and journal-volumes!!!
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2.3 Collecting empirical data

In general, empirical research in organization studies is not easy when primary data on internal organization phenomena are required. Most companies are not very co-operative in helping you with collecting your data, unless they have a direct interest in the research. You need a good 'pitch' to get them interested! On the other hand, many companies provide students with possibilities for internships that can be combined with doing some research. This may involve some self-marketing in order to 'sell' your idea or research project! Note also that doing research in companies is not always necessary in order to study a phenomenon. Other settings may also provide insight into a phenomenon. For example, the effectiveness of culturally diverse workgroups can also be studied in your own study environment, using a sample of students. Or you can set up an experiment with students or other populations.

Secondary data, such as annual reports, industry statistics or management biographies, are generally more easily accessible, but they may not suit your research purposes. A good source of such data is Ecostat. Ecostat contains all sorts of databases, annual reports, industry analyses, and company information. Other locations with useful data source include de Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB) in The Hague, the Economische Voorlichtingsdienst (EVD) in The Hague, Chambers of Commerce, foreign institutions and libraries, trade institutions, etc.

3. Writing the thesis

The second objective of the master thesis is to communicate your ideas to an audience. Once students have finished their research, they often believe they are nearly finished. ‘Now, I only have to write it down’, they say. However, writing a readable thesis is not an easy job and is almost never achieved in a single effort. Writing is a skill, and because most students lack substantial experience in writing academic texts, it requires more time than expected. ‘*Schrijven is schrappen*’ , 'writing means rewriting', is probably the most accurate description of crafting the thesis. It’s a bit like sharpening your pencil. With each new version you try to become more accurate in your communication.

As regards your audience, you don’t write for your supervisor. That’s why we refer in this text to ‘the reader’, instead of ‘your supervisor’. Your audience is the educated person who has only superficial knowledge of the topic you discuss. In most cases your readership will be limited to your supervisor, an occasional friend or relative. But how limited your readership of your thesis will be, even these readers like to be entertained and do not appreciate idiosyncratic writings that are only comprehensible to the author himself. The following sections address the ‘readability’ of the thesis.

3.1 Objectivity

Characteristic of academic writing is its objectivity. This doesn’t mean that personal preferences and opinions do not matter, but they go beyond the ‘sounds like a good idea’ argument. Argumentation, analysis and accountability are central to any scientific work. The reader must understand on what arguments and evidence the author has based his conclusions. And, if it concerns empirical research, ideally he must be able to replicate the research and reach the same conclusions. Related with the issue of objectivity are the following recommendations:

- Avoid the excessive use of ‘I’ (e.g. ‘I find..’, ‘I think..’, ‘I believe., ‘As I discussed before..’). This suggests too much identification with your topic, and too little objectivity and distance. The way you structure information and critically evaluate a scientific debate already underlines your personal position (if relevant).

- When writing an internship report: try to take the position of a consultant who is preparing a report for the client firm. Too many personalized observations and opinions make the report look rather unprofessional.

- A thesis is not supposed to read like a pamphlet. Interest in your topic is important, but too much identification is often annoying for a neutral reader. Some theses read like 'Business Process Reengineering is a panacea to all our problems; let's find some evidence to support this opinion!'. An attitude like this normally leads to a biased piece of work. This is quite acceptable if you're working in a marketing department and trying to 'sell' a product; in a scientific context it is undesirable.

- Also avoid phrases that express personal views; for example: 'Stewart (1994) has provided a *very* useful ..'. Don't copy information brochures when they merely express the opinions of a 'biased' source (e.g. a company presenting itself). Usually, this information reads like a folder: 'Company x is a leading company in internet technology, it has highly qualified personnel, it has an outstanding reputation, blabla, '. A more objective tone would be: 'Company x views itself as a major player in the field with ..'.

Notice that most of these comments try to prevent that the author acts as medium between text and reader. The reader should be able to draw his own conclusions!

3.2 Structure

People possess limited cognitive capacities to process information. This also applies to your readers, including your supervisor. In order to make information comprehensible, you have to structure it: offer it in bits and pieces. Organizing your thesis in chapters, sections and paragraphs, or visualizing information in figures, graphs and tables, are examples of providing structure. The issue is to find the right balance in this structuring effort. While structure is important, too much structure ('overstructuring') leads to annoyance on the part of the reader. For example, 'In the next section we will discuss …' followed in the next section by: 'As explained, in this section we will discuss…'. , is in most cases redundant. Other examples are the excessive use of section headings (e.g. '2.3.4.1, part a.'), and summations (a,b,c..). As a result, the story loses momentum and the reader easily loses track because of all the detail. It also suggests that the author is unable to integrate the different passages into a coherent story.

The opposite problem is: too little structure. Sections last five or more pages with no intermission, chapters comprise different topics with no apparent relationship, etc. A common error is that the line of reasoning in the author's head is not the same as is understood by the reader because important connecting arguments, facts, etc are omitted. As a result, subsequent paragraphs or sections appear unrelated.

The best way to correct these errors is to put aside you work for a couple of days once you have finished it. You'll soon find out that some parts of your work appear redundant, superfluous or incoherent. Other recommendations are:

- Chapters should reflect a logical order. In most books, chapters are interlinked and their order cannot be changed. Thus, you need to read Chapter Two in order to understand the chapters Three and Four, etc. In some theses, however, chapter Five can easily be changed with Chapter Two, or vice versa. They are 'stand alone' units. This may indicate that there is something wrong with your line of argument. In fact, it may indicate that there is no current thread at all. A similar problem occurs if you can leave out sections, or even whole chapters, without destroying the story line. This indicates redundancy: nice to read if you have the time and motivation, but not necessary. Thus, each chapter, section, has to have a function in the whole story. The thesis should read like an American film scenario: there are no loose ends, everything has its place in the plot of the film.

- Preferably, each chapter has a clear focus, an introduction explaining the central problem of the chapter, and a conclusion which wraps up the whole argument and explains what the reader should remember in light of the overall problem statement.

- Sections tell a coherent story; they are not simply a summary of different articles, but an explanation, analysis and critical evaluation of the literature. Use connecting sentences to link different paragraphs.

- Keep in mind that, after having read several articles and books on a particular topic you have already developed into a semi-specialist: you probably know more about the topic than most people do, including your supervisor. So, what may sound logic and obvious to you may not be true for your reader.

- Titles should convey the basic message of a chapter or section. Titles like ‘Theory’, ‘The conflict’, or ‘Literature review’ are not very informative or appealing.

3. 2 The introduction: what, why and how

The basic purpose of the introduction is to inform the reader about the purpose and background of your study. In brief, the introduction should inform the reader about the topic/ problem statement of the study (What?), the reasons why you undertake this particular study (Why?), and how you are going to deal with the topic (How?).

Many students tend to disregard the value of the introductory chapter. In fact, they prefer to write it as the finishing touch, at the end of their efforts. This is fatal. Students who have not really explored these what, why and how questions, tend to get lost in their own writings and lose track of the big picture. Thus, no matter how provisional your introduction may be, ***it is important as a road map*** for yourself and your supervisor. Furthermore, it must contain the thesis' purpose in a nutshell. If you cannot summarize the purpose of your thesis in three sentences, something is wrong.

A second objective of the introduction is to ***raise the interest of the reader***. Ask yourself: ‘why would anyone read this story?’. ‘What makes it interesting?’. Avoid standard openings like: ‘The world is changing rapidly, companies have to adapt, etc.’ This may be an eye-opener to your grandmother, but the more informed reader knows that about 90% of all master theses in organization studies since the mid-1990s, has this type of introductory statement.

In sum, the following recommendations can be made:

- The introduction should contain the following information: (1) Relevance of the topic to the reader; (2) Shortcomings in current research; (3) Your contribution to this debate; (4) Problem statement; (5) Overview of the thesis.

- Don’t wait too long before you present the central question of your thesis. Some students take 5 pages to get to the point. Until then, the reader is kept in the dark about which way the author is heading. A very straightforward way of communicating your message is to phrase it in the first line. For example, ‘This thesis is concerned with the effects of national culture on decision making in different organizations. More specifically, etc.’. Newspaper articles are usually structured along the same lines: first, a brief summary ('abstract'), followed by more detailed information. Of course, this is only one way of approaching it.

- Make sure that central concepts are properly introduced. When empowerment is an important concept in your thesis, make sure that the reader understands what empowerment is, even if you elaborate on the different interpretations of the concept in later chapters. This is especially important for broad concepts like ‘culture’, ‘flexibility’, etc.
- Postpone a detailed review of the literature to later chapters.

3.3 Theoretical and empirical chapters

After the introduction you start with a more thorough discussion of the problem. The theoretical chapter(s) give an overview of what other authors in the field have theorized, which theories have been developed to explain the phenomena central in your study, and what empirical research has been conducted to test these theories. At the end of your theoretical exposé the reader must understand what the general state-of-the-art is in your research field, what the 'white spots' are on the map, and what the additional value of your study in this respect is. **Be to-the-point!** Don't write several introductory 'theoretical' chapters on all kinds of side-roads, no matter how tempting as you have read so much! Are they *really* necessary? Make sure your thesis goes straight to the point from start to finish. In other words: streamline your argument to a clear purpose.

The empirical chapters provide the reader specific information about your research. The most important requirement is that you do not only present and explain results, but also **account for them**. As mentioned, any reader should be able to reconstruct and replicate your study. It is therefore mandatory that you explain the methodology of your study. Any article containing empirical research can help you finding out what kind of information you should or should not include. The following lists some important aspects that are usually included in quantitative research:

- *Research methodology*
  Population studied and sample characteristics;
  Method of data collection;
  Operationalization of concepts measured;
  Psychometric properties of scales.

- *Data analysis*
  Score means and standard deviations of scales or individual questions (if not grouped);
  Differences between relevant subgroups (e.g. differences between management and employees; differences between engineers and sales people).
  Correlations between independent variables.

- *Results*
  Testing of hypotheses with proper and clear reports of necessary statistics.

Again: **don't re-invent the wheel**! Any empirical journal (e.g., ASQ, AMJ, SMJ -see above) provides a clear example as to how to present and discuss results. Just copy!! Books like Cooper and Schindler (1998), Kinnear and Gray (1995), and Wonnacott and Wonnacott (1990*)* will be helpful in tackling problems in these areas*.* A good introduction to case study research is provided by Yin (1994).

3.5 Discussion and conclusion

People tend to remember the first and the last information they received. These phenomena are called the primacy and the recency effect. From a communication perspective, the introduction and the concluding chapter are therefore the most important of your thesis. An additional (and rather discouraging...) reason is that most people will only read these two chapters! Therefore, the perceived quality of your work will be based on their impression of these chapters. Paradoxically, most students put the least effort in them. Therefore, include in your chapter at least the following aspects:

- Evaluation of the study in light of your problem statement and research objectives.
- Discussion of scope and **limitations** of the study: reliability and validity of data; generalizability of findings, etcetera. This is one of the most overlooked yet important aspects of your thesis (Especially with regard to your oral defence!) In science it is mandatory to know your limitations, and to be able to **reflect critically on your own work.** This should be one of the principle things you have learned in an academic institution. Show it!!!
- Recommendations for future research. What issues are left unresolved? How might they be addressed in future?
- Practical implications. What have we learned that may be useful in practical settings?

4. How to annoy your thesis supervisor?

One task of the supervisor is to comment on your thesis as it progresses. Annoying however, is when a supervisor has to correct your writings concerning aspects that indicate sloppiness: things that you could and should have corrected yourself, if you had given it a little bit more attention. Here’s a list of important ‘wrong doings’:

Plagiarism
Ideas are considered intellectual property. Therefore, plagiarism, or the use of someone else’s ideas without mentioning their source is a serious offence in general, and in science in particular. Copying text without citation marks is equally reprehensible. Besides, the difference in style is always noticeable: the fluency of the original text and the more ‘bumpy’ tone of the novice. **When detected, plagiarism will be reported to the Exams Committee** to take necessary steps.

The reference list
This has a high irritation factor, simply because you have been explained how to make a reference list already in the first year. Check the guide to the second year paper, or any book or article for the proper format..

- Include all (and only those) sources in the bibliography which you use in the text;
- Book titles and journals should be underlined (or italicized), not the article or book chapter;

- Always include: Name, Initials (or first name), Year, Title (article), Title of Book or Journal, Volume (article), Pages (article), Publisher (book), Place of publication (book). Do not include the (student) edition reference. Do not use " " for titles.
  For citing electronic sources, see Cooper and Schindler (1998: p. 606-607).
- The precise order of references may vary (for example, sometimes the year of publication is put in brackets directly after the author, sometimes at the end). But, in any case: be consistent! Do not change the order of information provided, do not underline *and* italicise! If you use capitals for titles, do it everywhere or leave them out.
- The most usual form is to mention the author and year of publication in your text: e.g. 'Mintzberg (1984) distinguishes …'. Or: 'As is believed by some authors (e.g. Mintzberg, 1984)…'. Do not include initials.
- Do not use endnotes: they require the reader to go back and forth in order to check a reference.
- Avoid long citations. If you do quote literally, use quotation marks and include the page of the source, e.g.: 'Five coordinating mechanisms seem to explain the fundamental ways in which organizations coordinate their work (..). These should be considered the most basic elements of structure, the glue that holds organizations together' (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 4).
- Once you have referred to the work of three or more authors, at later stages you may use the construction 'et al.' (not: et. al.). For example, Blanchard, Carlos and Randolph (1996) are later referred to as: Blanchard et al. (1996). For two authors, you have to repeat the names.

Spelling

Spelling mistakes cannot completely be avoided. Most books or articles contain a few. However, two or three per page already start to irritate the reader, especially consistent misspellings such as 'management' or 'organisation'. These mistakes can easily be avoided by using the spell check on your computer. A grammar check may also be useful, especially when you tend to write 'there' instead of 'their', or 'where' instead of 'were'.

Usage of American and British English

Be consistent in your choice of American and British English. Do not write 'organization' *and* 'organisation', 'emphasise' *and* 'emphasize', or 'behaviour' *and* 'behavior' in the same text. Again, a spell check is very helpful to avoid this type of mistakes.

Grammar and syntax

Confusing grammar or incorrect syntax do much harm your message as they are usually interpreted as a sign of incompetence. Examples that can be found in any thesis are:

- Overly complex or grammatically incorrect sentences:

  'The one Balanced Scorecard of the newly to be formed firm which is described as the above as the result of the negotiations and analyses, is the one on which the decision to go ahead can be made'.

  'The relationship between departments is often set by the organisation. This is mainly done through their ability to ascribe different levels of interdependence between departments.'

  'Each individual manager has about 20 employees under its operation'.

- Sentences that are incomprehensible:

  '(.) It implies the existence of an ability that is capable of discriminating between specific aspects'. Very profound, but what does it mean?

Punctuation

Some of the more common errors:

- Semi-colon (;) instead of colon (:)

  Semi-colons are often used instead of full stops, in cases where sentences are grammatically independent but where the meaning is closely connected. Colons are used before explanations, before a list or to introduce quotations.

- Apostrophe (')

  In English we normally add *'s* to a singular, and an apostrophe ' to a plural. Thus, *the manager's job* (singular) or *the managers' job* (plural) instead of *the managers job*;

- Full stop at the end of a title

Typical Dutch errors

Many of the abovementioned mistakes of Dutch students are to some extent acceptable because you are writing in another language. Some of the most common mistakes are:

- Incorrect English translations, such as: 'industry' (the correct translation is *bedrijfstak*; the Dutch word *industrie* refers to the manufacturing sector, whereas the English word refers to any sector including services), 'paragraph' (which means *alinea* instead of *paragraaf)* and 'administrative' (normally should be translated as *bestuurlijk* instead of *administratief).*
- Incorrect use of words like *than* and *then*; *number* and *amount*, (e.g. 'a certain amount of employees'), *to extend* and *extent*, etc.
- Funny abbreviations like 'f.e.' or f.i.'.
- Another difference between English and Dutch language are compound nouns. Compound nouns are words that are made of two or more parts, such as 'top management'. While in English these parts are separated, in Dutch language they are *always* conjoint (thus, 'topmanagement').

Unacceptable errors however, are mistakes in your *own* language! A sentence like *'De inhoudt van dit verslag..'* , may be an occasional mistake, but you have a serious problem when you write lines like '*De klant bepaald wat geproduceert gaat worden*… '.

Colloquial speech

Given the formal character of the thesis, usage of colloquial speech or informal language should be avoided. Examples are: 'don't , 'a lot of times', 'have got', The same applies to other forms of 'informal' address, such as 'you': e.g. 'As a company you do…'; 'As a manager, you want to be the leader…'; etc.

Writing style

Apply a lively style:

- Use the present tense as much as possible in order to make your text more direct: e.g. 'Robinson *defines* empowerment as follows ..'(instead of 'defined'; this suggest that Robinson no longer believes in his own ideas). Use the past tense when the activity refers to something that happened in the past: e.g. 'Robinson found in his study that…'

- Avoid too many passive phrases: e.g. ‘In section 3.1 an analysis of the indicators of empowerment will be conducted’. A better formulation would be: ‘Section 3.1 analyses indicators of empowerment’.
- Write, if possible: ‘this’ instead of ‘that’, ‘these’ instead of ‘those’, etc.

Figures and tables

Figures and tables should be numbered and referred to in the text. Don’t write: ‘see the figure below’ or ‘on the next page’, or whatever. This also unnecessarily hinders you when editing the text; just write: ‘see Figure 1’,

Figures and tables have titles! The title should inform the reader at a glance what the table or figure is displaying. They have to ‘speak for themselves’. This means, that it should not be necessary for the reader to first read the text in order to understand what is being displayed.

Layout

A proper format is an important aspect of the presentation of your work. The most important function of the layout is that is supportive and emphasizes what the reader should note. Anything that distracts the reader from the content of your work should be avoided. Examples are:

- Unconventional letter types;
- Too much spacing between sections;
- Letter size of headings which do not correspond with letter size of text (e.g. 20 points vs. 12 points);
- Unconventional left/right and top/bottom margins.

5. Evaluation of your thesis

As explained, writing a thesis is a process. The same more or less applies to the evaluation of your work. It does make sense to show your supervisor one or two chapters in order to get some feedback on your writing and ideas. However, even for a supervisor it is difficult to assess to what extent individual chapters are complete as long as they are not seen in their context. Only when the final draft is ready, one can see what parts deserve more attention, and what parts should be de-emphasized in order to create a better balance in the manuscript, etc. Hand in along with your revised manuscript always the corrected version. Your supervisor will be able to provide more accurate feedback and it will greatly enhance the efficiency of the process. Mind also, that supervisors may have their own preferred style. Make clear arrangements beforehand to avoid confusion and disappointments!

The criteria used for evaluating the thesis are an integral part of all the aforementioned aspects. They include:

Content: originality and level of sophistication

- To what extent is the student original in his treatment of the topic?
- What is the added value of the thesis in terms of theory development and empirical research?
- To what extent does the student display a good understanding of the topic and is able to explore it in all its details.
- Does the student acknowledge and understand the **limitations** of his work?

Form, style and structure: readability

- Is the message of the thesis clear and comprehensible?
- Correct usage of grammar, syntax and punctuation?
- Proper layout?

Autonomy

- To what extent can the thesis be regarded as product of the individual student?
- **How much help did he or she need** to develop ideas, to steer him or her in the right direction, and to finalize the written report?

Personal position

- To what extent is the student able to explain his work in the oral defence and clarify the choices he or she made?

6. Summing up

- It is highly recommended to read Cooper and Schindler (1998: Ch. 1-4) before you start drafting your research proposal (in fact: the introduction of your thesis). Additional chapters of this book will be relevant when doing empirical research. Chapter 19 ‘Presenting oral and written reports’ provides a good checklist for the writing stage.

- Ask yourself: what is my contribution to this field? Take a critical position.

- Write with your reader in mind. Ask yourself: ‘Could anyone reading this thesis for the first time understand its ideas directly and simply?’

- Write accurately. Misspellings, poor grammar and layout affect your credibility and distract the reader.

Appendix 1: An example of a thesis proposal

Problem statement

The environment affects an organization's behavior and structure. In this environment other organizations are a major factor that influences the structure and behavior. Institutional theory argues that firms become more homogeneous, because of a quest for legitimacy (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983). A legitimate organization is one whose values and actions are congruent with that social actor's values and expectations for actions (Deephouse, 1996). Hannan & Freeman (1984) also agree that legitimacy is an important determinant for organization survival, and that there are strong pressures to imitate "successful" organizations. The process of imitation is referred to as isomorphism. Isomorphism is defined as the resemblance of a focal organization to other organizations in its environment (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983). Dimaggio and Powell (1983) identify three mechanism through which isomorphism occurs:

(a) Coercive isomorphism, results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function;

(b) Mimetic processes, is a response to uncertainty, for instance when technologies are not well understood, goals are ambiguous, or when the environment itself seems uncertain, pressuring the organization to imitate or resemble successful organizations in the field;

(c) Normative pressures, stems from professionalization like formal education.

In the literature several researchers defined organizational characteristics that are subject to isomorphism. Meyer and Rowan (1977) investigated the adoption of isomorphic structures and practices. Haunschild (1993), Haunschild and Miner (1997) and Haveman (1993) demonstrated the importance of imitating other firms, mimetic isomorphism, in the acquisition and diversification policy. Deephouse (1996) focused his study on the similarity of a focal organization's strategy to the strategies of other organizations in the industry. Deephouse (1999) also mentioned if a firm should be different or be the same as other firms. All these researches investigated organizational characteristics that lead to organizational similarities. Dimaggio and Powell (1983) state that this similarity can make it easier for organizations to transact with other organizations. Organizations constantly struggle with the tension created by the need to work together with others, while there is also a pressure for competition (Wit and Meyer, 2004). When organizations imitate each other and become more isomorphic (isomorphic behavior) it can be easier to cooperate (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983), but will cooperation increase? In order to contribute to the existing theory of isomorphism this thesis will investigate the effect of isomorphic behavior on cooperation. The central question this thesis tries to answer is:

"What is the influence of an increase in isomorphic behavior on the level of co-operation?"

To test this effect the biggest Dutch building trade organizations will be investigated. Starting with an evaluation of isomorphic behavior on specific organizational characteristics: similar takeover and clustering policies (mimetic) and similar top management policies (normative). When isomorphic behavior in these terms is demonstrated it will be investigated what the effect is on cooperation between the big Dutch building trade organizations. The cooperation will be measured in the number of building combinations the organizations work together in a project, during a still to determine time-period.

Sub-questions

Sub-questions have to be answered to create a framework of the problem statement. These questions form the boundaries of the research area of this thesis:

(1) Which theories are used to explain isomorphic behavior?
(2) How can isomorphism be demonstrated?
(3) Can isomorphism be demonstrated in Dutch building trade?
(4) What are the demonstrated consequences of isomorphism until now?

Method

The sample used in this thesis will be the biggest Dutch building trade organizations (Visser, 2002):

- Koninklijke Volker Wessel Stevin
- Heijmans
- HBG
- Koninklijke BAM NBM

- TBI
- Strukton
- Van Wijnen
- Ballast Nedam
- Koop Tjuchem
- Dura Vermeer

The information to check the rate of isomorphism in terms of similar takeover/merger and clustering policies (mimetic) and similar top management policies (normative) will be gathered among other things from annual reports. All the takeovers are mentioned there and it will be able to give a picture of the degree of clustering. The top management policies will also be gathered among other things from the annual reports. In these reports there is information about the top managers and there functional and educational background. To investigate the effect of cooperation the list of the biggest building projects in order of the Dutch government will be consulted, because there is information about the building combinations per project. Only projects in order of the Dutch government, because the information is attainable and it gives a good overview how it works in other projects. The data will be processed in the statistical program SPSS.

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