

# A guide on how to write the master's thesis – Dep. of Social Work

The objective of this guide is to show you what a master's thesis written in the *monograph* form involves. If you are writing an article-based thesis, please see the guide written for article-based master's theses.

The way a thesis is structured will vary, depending on professions, the academic disciplines, its traditions, as well as the variations within a discipline. In light of this it is important to stress that this text is only meant as guidance, and should not be read as a set of strict rules – but we hope it will be helpful to get you started!

However, all thesis tend to have a shared structure that includes a *summary*, an *introduction*, a chapter on *theories and existing knowledge*/previous research, *methods*, presentation of *findings*, *discussion* and as the last chapter – a *conclusion/summary and maybe also some implications* for future research and/or practice. *Literature references and appendixes* must also be included.

## Summary

The summary should include an Introduction (topic, context, area of interest, and research question), the Method (research design, describing the type of data and how they are analysed), Findings and your Conclusion.

As you can see, the summary has a similar structure as the thesis itself, but normally it should not be more than 250 - 300 words.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction should describe and clarify the context of the research question, existing knowledge/previous research and the thesis' research question. A delimitation of the area of study is an important part of the introduction.

*Describe the field / context in which the thesis' research question unfolds:* You may picture the introduction as a "funnel" that leads towards the thesis research question. In the top of the funnel, the topic of your study is described in a general context, and in the bottom of the funnel (the last part of the introduction) you present the thesis' research question.

*Previous research:* Present what we already know about the issue (earlier research findings), or aspects of the issue you are focusing on. You might need the findings from earlier research later – in the discussion part – when you interpret your findings.

*Present the research question.*

## **Chapter 2: Theory**

In a thesis based on empirical analysis, the theory can be regarded as a "tool" to illuminate the data at a level above "everyday observations." Theory is your tool to discuss and understand what for example informants' say in the interview within a broader context. This is why it is important to present theories that you actually apply later (in the discussion chapter). Do not present lots of theory that you will not use later!

There is no 'correct answer' on how to structure the chapter on method, or the chapter on theory. Not all theses include a separate theory section. Some describe this in the "previous research" part of the introduction chapter.

Anyway, the kind of theory you choose to apply, depends on how you go about analysing the data. It is possible to have theories suitable for “placing” phenomena into various categories – such theories help reduce the complexity of the data. Or you can apply theories suitable for bringing out nuances and complexity, in a way that allows us to understand them as something “more” than only everyday observations. Then you use theory to develop something that initially seems “simple.”

### **Chapter 3: Method**

In the method chapter you may want to include a brief section on where your project and method places itself within the theory of science. This should not be a long and descriptive exercise, but it should demonstrate that you see the connection between theory of science and the production of knowledge.

The goal of the method chapter is to clarify how you have gone about finding the information to develop your thesis question. This chapter presents the “craft” itself, and it is here you can show that you have not only acquired general knowledge on method, but that you have also developed practical skills in applying this knowledge in your own project!

Explain the choice of method based on the thesis question you have introduced. For instance *qualitative method* (here the method of data production can be interview); or *literature study* (here the method of data production may be a structured literature search in specific databases); or *quantitative method* (here the method of data production may be using a questionnaire survey).

*Describe the procedure for data production* and explain the considerations you made. Present the selection criteria and recruitment process. The selection criteria may involve the recruitment of informants for an interview survey, or the research articles deemed relevant

from the structured literature search. The selection is part of a larger population. This is why it is also important to explain how you recruited the specific group out of the population (for example participants from a particular context like service users or employees of NAV; family therapists, youth from child welfare institutions...) and how they were invited to join the study. Another example might be that you chose to search for research articles in one or more specific databases, and then selected certain search queries to answer your thesis' research question.

*Describe how the data is analysed.* The method of analysis you choose depends on how you want to process the data. Analysis processes are often incremental and consist of a systemisation of the data material in the form of themes, codes and relationships between them. If you are conducting a quantitative study with for example a questionnaire, then you present the planned statistical analyses here. If you perform a qualitative study with interviews, then describe your chosen analytical approach. If you are conducting a literature study, describe how the findings from the selected studies are analysed and summarised to illuminate your research question. Findings from a systematic literature review can be analysed both qualitatively (such as narrative analysis) and quantitatively (such as meta-analysis), depending on the nature of the included studies, as well as the form of your thesis.

*Research ethics:* You must also describe the research ethical considerations, deliberations, and any dilemmas you have dealt with, including if the project has been reported to the NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data). Information letters, questionnaires, interview guides, NSD reply letters and the like, are attached as appendix to the thesis.

*Validity, reliability, study credibility:* Show how you have evaluated the validity during the process of the study, and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the study as it went along. This is evaluated and described in slightly different ways depending on whether it is a quantitative or qualitative study.

## **Chapter 4: Presentation of data/findings**

In this section the findings from the analysed data material is to be presented.

In a quantitative study with, for example, a questionnaire, the result of the statistical analysis should be presented here – in a qualitative study with, for example, interviews, the findings (often analysed and condensed into codes or themes) should be presented here and so on.

As a general rule the findings you choose to emphasise and present, are the findings that you regard as best suited to explore the relevant the thesis' research question.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The discussion of the findings can be included in the chapter on Findings, or the discussion can be put in a separate chapter. Anyway, the issues from the theory chapter and/or previous research should be used here discussed here to interpret your findings beyond the analytical level presented as Findings.

In the discussion you may discuss and contextualise your findings related to previous research – do your findings align/confirm, or does your data reveal other and new aspects? Then you can also discuss your findings in a broader theoretical context by demonstrating how they can be interpreted through your chosen theoretical perspectives.

However, if you are conducting a literature study, it will be more applicable to discuss the findings from the literature by setting them up against each other and compare them (since you have not actually produced your own empirical data).

This is an important chapter as it will demonstrate whether you actually have provided analytical and methodological skills in regard to apply existing knowledge and theoretical concepts to critically examine and interpret your own findings. When you discuss your data, that implies a process of presenting arguments for different understandings of your findings, and you have the chance to demonstrate skills to assess and critically examine your own interpretations.

## **Chapter 6: Summary and implications**

This chapter should be brief, but must in a clear and straightforward manner work as summary and ending of the thesis. It should include:

- a) Short summary of the thesis, what it aimed at and answering the research question
- b) Theoretical implications of the thesis: Do your findings support, contradict and/or bring new light to previous research?
- c) Implications for practice: Do your findings have relevance and be applicable for professional practice, if so, how?
- d) Recommendations on needs for future research?
- e) Reflections on the thesis' strengths and weaknesses

The introduction and the summary should be well connected in regard to its' content. The topics, aims and research questions that were presented in the introductory parts of the thesis, should be recognised in the summary and concluding parts.

This is also as good way for you to check if your thesis is equivalent. You might become aware that you presented something in the introduction and/or in the theory chapter that you ended up with not giving more attention – in that case, delete it.

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