

Writing a thesis or a big research report is often less difficult than *designing a realistic outline for it*. This Skill Sheet specifies what the most vital product in your thesis writing process, the research proposal or the thesis outline, could look like. In the early stages of the writing process for a thesis or a longer research paper you face two problems: (1) you do not know exactly what you want to know, (2) you do not know how you want (or are able) to tackle the problem. Too many scholars start writing with no clear plan in mind, instead of giving these problems considerable thought. Early writing mistakenly departs from the notion that it is better to write *something* down instead of only writing down what is relevant. If you write down your observations too early in your research project, you run the risk of having to make a lot of adjustments throughout the research. A powerful writing strategy (⊕B15), for a longer research project, requires that you take sufficient time to develop a solid outline. Such an outline requires considerable reflection on your personal aims (⊕A4) and research question(s) (⊕A5), as well as the execution of some kind of feasibility study (⊕A7). Skill Sheet A2 listed eight steps that can help you to arrive at this stage.

1 Writing a thesis is like writing a thriller

What should your thesis outline look like? It could be very useful to think of the design of your report in the same manner as the author of a thriller. A thriller author tries to design an exciting story. But at the same time a thriller should be logical, concise and lead to ‘conclusions’, which the reader should be anxious to find out about: the ‘plot’ of the story. These are properties that would also be useful in scientific writing! The successful American author Jonathan Kellerman is such a thriller writer. Kellerman notes that it pays off to control one’s inclination to start writing immediately. Suppressing this writing inclination is very difficult: writers are writers, they want to write! Instead, Kellerman first invests considerable time making a detailed outline.

‘Creativity does not come in waves, it is a state of mind if you prepare properly. (...) This requires a solid design, which is frustrating, because normally I have already started writing, having written the opening line. I try to become disciplined by not writing before the outline is clear, logical and on paper. The reward is that you don’t get blocked in the process of writing, because you know where you are heading.’

Jonathan Kellerman, successful American writer of thrillers, *de Volkskrant*, May 20, 1995

Kellerman’s practice is also worthy of consideration for researchers. The book outline then becomes your research outline. The back page of this Skill Sheet lists the components necessary for a proper research outline.

2 Components of a thesis outline/research proposal

In order to formulate the correct outline for a scientific text, you should have an idea about the ‘plot’ of your story! The following questions should be considered. Try to include the answers to these questions in a relatively detailed research proposal, *before* you begin the actual research.

■ Introduction

- State your *research question(s)* briefly. What is the idea behind the subject?
- History of the selection process for this topic: what made this particular topic especially attractive? What is your *motivation* to tackle this topic?

- *Context of the research*: did you collaborate with others, are there links to previous projects, do you have any plans to continue with this topic afterwards?
- *Context of the discussion*: which arguments and approaches does the thesis relate to, and how does it differ from existing approaches on the topic?
- To *whom* might your approach be of interest?

■ Contents of chapters

- What is the ‘Plot of the story’: attempt to clarify the content of your idea (arguments and counter-arguments can help you with the exact choice and systemisation of the chapters). **Write your ‘story line’ on a single page.** Inventing a story line will not only help you to keep the argument concise (⊕B8), it will also make it easier for you to memorise your own argument. Furthermore, this page can be given to prospective assistants (including your teacher), which helps them to understand what you want and establishes some kind of barter (⊕A9).
- Contents of chapters, sections and sub-sections can never be *too* detailed. You should include the following in the respective chapters:
 - hypothesis or question to which the chapter is supposed to give an answer;
 - arguments or counter-arguments that can be summed up at first glance;
 - literature to be consulted;
 - locations where to search for further material (libraries, bibliographies, archives);
 - contacts with persons or organisations instrumental in the research;
 - alternative strategies in case the intended strategy is not successful;
 - an idea of what could eventually be left out of the analysis (without affecting the main argument).

■ Working routine

- Make a budget for the size of the different sections of the thesis (*page budget*).
- Make a *time budget*: work scheme, work plan (what are your other obligations, both professional and private, while writing the paper?).
- Make a *financial budget* if your research project involves payments for yourself or for others.
- Documentation: how do you want to collect material, and at which stage of the research do you anticipate collecting the relevant sources (⊕A7)?

■ End

- What appearance and format do you want the thesis to have?
- What could be done with the analysis besides its direct function as a thesis? Could it be *published*, and if so, in what form? Do you want the thesis to help your job opportunities? If so, in what way?
- How do you want to monitor your own progress? What appointments (for example, with your supervisor) do you think will be necessary for that purpose?

(Thanks to Gerd Junne, Political Sciences Faculty, University of Amsterdam)