Writing Theses and Reports

Geog 5110

Writing Theses and Reports

• Q: how many of us have written (or helped to write) any kind of research report?
  • Do you find this kind of writing “intimidating”?
  • What questions do you have about writing up your research?

Thesis vs. Dissertation

• Thesis/Dissertation: in general, these are focused works that maintain clear links to a more general field
  • Both involve extensive background discussion (pre- and post-findings)
  • Thorough documentation of the field of study (history of literature, research)
  • Study methods
  • Findings
  • Conclusions, including discussion of the meaning of the results

Thesis vs. Dissertation

• A master's thesis is intended to represent your ability to contribute to your own knowledge
  • Can you put together a plan to inform yourself about progress in a given field
  • Can you execute research that demonstrates you understand that field

Thesis vs. Dissertation

• A PhD dissertation represents your ability to contribute new knowledge to your chosen field
  • Planning and executing are important here too
  • Key point here though is the contribution – have you completed truly original research – a significant addition to your field

Thesis vs. Dissertation

• A PhD dissertation represents your ability to contribute new knowledge to your chosen field
  • Completing a good research project in itself is not enough for a PhD
Writing Theses

A few thoughts from your reading

1. Your thesis title is actually important
   - Spend some time thinking about your title, as you will live with it the rest of your life
   - Does your title give an accurate, brief indication of what's in the thesis?
   - Does your title help to generate interest in your work?

2. How you organize your work also contributes to thesis success
   - Your reading contains two models of "writing up"
   - I definitely recommend the "wine glass" model

"Wine Glass Model" of Thesis Organization

- Start general
- Become increasingly specific all the way through to your analysis
- Then begin to broaden again as you move through your results discussion to your conclusion
- Note the continuity that is an integral element of this organizational model

3. Make sure you justify any choices you make in your research
   - Decisions you made in data collection, analysis, or any area of methodology where multiple options exist and you chose one particular way to go
   - Addressing this area head on will make your thesis defense go more smoothly
Writing Theses

A few thoughts from your reading

4. Invest time in the discussion of your results
In many ways, this section is the entire point of your thesis: now that you have done what you wanted, what now?
This can be important in clarifying your future direction, in your own mind as well as for others: what’s next?

If you go on to PhD studies, your master’s thesis discussion can “set the stage” for what you do
If you go from your Master’s to employment, your discussion might set you up for a particular career path

Writing Theses

See two sample tables of contents for a couple of models of thesis structure and organization

One other thought related to writing
Writing a thesis (or any other research document) is a complex process
Sometimes, you will have breakthroughs
Other times, you will need to delete or revise

Also, have a look at two handouts that give insights into planning for your research
1. Basic Principles for Thesis Research
2. What Makes a Good Thesis?
Writing Reports

- Q: how many of us have written or read an “applied research report”? What’s the difference between a report and a thesis?

Writing Reports

- Research Report: highly focused, addressing a particular issue/problem
  - Whole document is specifically linked to the study purpose
  - Focus on results of research
  - Report may review related theory, but purpose of this would be context for understanding (not a complete and thorough review)

Writing Reports

- Typical research report outline
  - Purpose: describe the reason for writing the report – brief, specific, to the point
  - Problem: short paragraph introduction to the topic
  - Scope: define any technical limitations of the report (related to geography, or the phenomenon studied)

Writing Reports

- My report checklist handout gives some guidelines for you to self-evaluate the reports you write

Writing Reports

- Typical research report outline
  - Theory: concise summary of the theory directly relating to the report topic
  - History: any necessary historical perspective
  - Findings: clear outline of what you found

Writing Reports

- Typical research report outline
  - Conclusion: summarize the findings, and make recommendations based on what you found
  - References: list sources cited in report
  - Appendices: support material not directly needed to understand the report, but relevant to using the report