(my) guide to writing a master's thesis in political science

This is a little guide I cooked up over my years in the job to give you an idea of the process involved in completing this important degree requirement, and what is probably the largest piece of research you have ever written.

The guide is essentially geared at master's thesis writers who already have a topic, a supervisor, and a proposal! (From now onwards I will refer to you as MTWs).

The master's thesis:

The size of the thesis is determined by the rules of your institution's curriculum. If you haven't already done so, take a break from reading this guide, and look for your institution's official rules regarding master's theses. You want to know the size of the monster before you go and try to tame it. You should probably also be aware of key deadlines.

Now back to the thesis. The breakdown of the sections of your thesis can vary based on your topic, methodology, if you have more than one research questions – but – not everything goes. There is a logical order to these things. A literature review comes before a research design section. Your hypotheses should be presented relatively early on in the thesis, etc.

The below is a standard setup for the social sciences, get cute at your own peril!

1. Introduction

This is the place where you introduce your topic. It should answer three questions

- What are you doing in this thesis?
- How are you going to demonstrate this?
- Why is this research relevant?

Think of the introduction as the executive summary of the thesis. You need to state all the important moving parts. What are your research questions, what are your hypotheses, what is your demonstration, what are your key findings? After reading the introduction, your reader should have a clear idea of the structure of the thesis going forward.

Nb. You will start your writing by drafting your introduction, because it is the very first section, but this section will also be the last one you finish writing. It will remain an open "work in progress" throughout your writing process, a bit like the conclusion. Don't get frustrated.

2. Literature review/theory/hypotheses

The review itself:

Once you've introduced your research, a good master's thesis takes the reader through a tour of what we know about your research topic. You are not the first to write about a particular topic, we all stand on the shoulders of giants. We need to know who your giants are.

Science is essentially a community project, as we (us, meaning you, me, other scientists) all speak to one another though our work. To do this, you need to engage scholarship, and by this, I mean:

- What is the scholarly literature most relevant to your topic, more specifically, your dependent variable?
- What are the key contributions that have been made on this topic?
- How have other scholars answered your research questions?
- Do all scholars agree on your research question or is there a debate? (If they all agree, then you might have an already settled topic!)
- What are the key debates surrounding your research question? The most important fault lines or schools of thought?

Writing literature reviews is not an easy job because it entails many intertwined tasks. You need to find the relevant literature, you need to collect this literature, you need to read a bunch of things, and then, you need to organize this literature and sort through the different branches of it. Then, once you've sorted through this heap of information, you can start to write the literature review itself.

Here you need to show your supervisors that you have done your research thoroughly. Showcase your research skills! Don't just settle for 2-3 articles, but show you have a good overview. Make sure you have recent literature, not just stuff from 30 ago.

At this point, it is a good idea to get physically organized about this task. Consider a citation software to keep stock of what you have collected and help you write a professional looking bibliography (EndNote, Citavi, Zotero, etc.). Consider an Excel spreadsheet to track the key arguments contained each piece you read (key hypothesis, variable, findings, etc.).

Your first drafts will probably read like a laundry list. The main challenge is to find a good structure where all sections logically flow. Easier said than done, I know. Remember that this is part of the challenge to overcome. Consult other literature reviews such as those published in the Annual Review of Political Science to see how scholars boil down decades of research in a few pages.

Hypotheses/theory:

It is only once we know "what is known" about a topic that can we hope to bring something new, to settle some controversies and debates. You do not want to have to reinvent the wheel if it already exists. This is what we call being able to position the state-of-the-art in a field. For a master's

thesis, we do not expect you to surpass this state-of-the-art, but we definitely expect you to be able to locate it. We expect master's thesis writers to at least *try* to go beyond it.

Once, you know what's been said about a topic, you can start to have an idea about what is missing or incorrect from the topic. This is where your thesis comes in! This is the justification you need!

- How your work contributing new and/or important ideas to this literature?
- Based on your review of the existing literature, what are the things we (researchers) need to investigate? These things we need to investigate will become your hypotheses.

Formulating hypotheses is one of the key tasks of MTWs. The hypotheses you formulate should logically flow from your literature review. The fit, or lack thereof, between your literature review and theory (meat of your hypothesis) is one of the biggest perils for MTWs. In addition, your hypotheses should have clear testable implications, i.e. stuff you can reasonably perform in the thesis. they should be accompanied by some form of causal rationale, and definitely plenty of scholarly literature.

At this point you will have variables, independent variables, and a/or some dependent variables. Make sure that the key concepts are well defined. Don't throw hypotheses you are not in a position to test! All parts need to fit together.

3. Research design/Methodology

Once you have your hypotheses, you can start thinking about an appropraite research design and methodology. How will you answer your questions? How will you test your hypotheses? There are many details relating to research design and methodology, it is easy to get lost here. Remember there is no perfect method per se, but more or less appropriate ways to test your hypotheses.

When drafting this section, remember that you are speaking to people who do not have access to your head where things already make sense, but that things must make sense for external people as well. Start with the big important pieces (what is your universe of cases) then move to the details like a particular methodology, and measurement issues. Big pieces, then small pieces. If you start with a series of technical details without telling your reader you are drawing on a cross-country research design, they will get lost.

a) Big building blocs of your research design:
    - Cases, which, why? Years?
    - What are the different parts of the demonstration? Qualitative/quantitative? How many demonstrations do you need to examine all your hypotheses? Which are they? Do you use a survey? Case studies? Documents? Expert interviews? An experiment? Process tracing?
    - Why are you using this research design? What leverage does it bring you?
b) Key variables operationalization and sources of data
c) Precise details of your empirical demonstration (model selection, etc.)

Make this section very detailed, especially in your first draft. You are better off having committed the crime of including too much detail of how you've conducted your original research than too little. You can always cut later.

At this point, your reader should know exactly what will be done in the demonstration contained in the following sections. Make sure there are no surprises. Surprises are not a good thing in theses. Don't have your cranky adviser find out on page 64 that you are including two qualitative case studies.

Research writing is like playing billiards, all your moves should be called in advance!

4. Demonstration/analyses/findings.

This section, or sections if you have more than one demonstration, contain your analyses. Make sure these sections contain:

- A clear-cut/well-structured set of demonstrations for all your hypotheses
- Your findings
- A discussion of your findings, i.e., do you find support for your hypotheses?
- Does this challenge what we know about your topic, or does this confirm what others have found so far?

Note for quantitative demonstrations: your thesis is not your methodology homework. Do not cut and paste statistical software output, make your own tables (go to a peer-reviewed journal and copy the table style they have for your kind of procedure, this is fool-proof). Fully label all variables. All titles and graphs should have a number and a title. Identify data sources. Do not lose your mind on a thousand tables and figures, try to stay parsimonious and only include what you need for a solid demonstration. Try interpreting your findings substantively as much as you can rather than reciting coefficients/significance of everything you have in your tables.

5. Conclusions

Like introductions, conclusions should also be an executive summary of the work you've done. We can often see at this point that you got tired and that conclusions are drafted summarily. Give this a polished effort.

Tell us:

- Your key findings
- Try to place your key finding back in the literature you took it from. Does it confirm, does it challenge? This is what we mean by engaging the literature.
- What contributions does this research make to the research in your field? Can you generalize from what you found?
- What are some of the limitations from your study?

- If you did not find what you thought you'd find, try to think of reasons why this is the case: was your data too limited? Your measurement perhaps flawed? Your theorizing was wrong?
- Based on your findings, what future research do you think would shed more light on your research questions?

6. Bibliography

This is what most reflects your work ethic, so do not treat this too lightly. We can actually tell a bunch of things from bibliography. If it is really limited, your professors can immediately gauge the amount of effort you put into your research.

Remember:

- You must include a bibliography whether you use footnotes or endnotes in your text. At this level, bibliographies are never optional anyway.
- All of your formatting, including your bibliography, must be based on a manual of style. Pick a style and be consistent. No mix and match.
- Make sure references are complete. Nothing screams "I've never physically looked into that book" like an incomplete book reference.
- Use a citation software, most journals allow a simple one-click downloads for references. You can then simply click your references directly in your text and format your bibliography in a few simple clicks.
- Cite properly!!! Use quotation marks, use in-text references, note down where material is from. Work like a monk, document everything, make proper citations your religion when you write scientific materials.

7. Appendix

Not everything needs to be placed in the main text. Many of you will have worked very hard on some technical aspects of the demonstrations. Make sure we see this!

- If you have interviews and have a questionnaire, this should be here
- Quantitative research designs almost always involve details placed in appendix like variable descriptive statistics, coding decision, precise data generating processes if you've used text analyses methods, etc.
- Robustness checks are a nice touch.

Last pieces of advice:

- Make it look professional. Paginate, clean up typographical errors, make pretty tables and figures.

- Give the text/page setup a polished feel. Beg friends and family for proofreading help. Don't be silly and throw 80 pages at someone, break it up in smaller more manageable favors.
- Plagiarism: most universities dunk theses in plag-finder software. Make sure you've worked cleanly.
- Ask your adviser for feedback regularly for smaller parts. Budget that it takes most people at least 30 minutes per page to read/edit, so do not expect them to be able to read things right away, especially during the semester. If I need to slot half a workday to read your work, I need advance notice.