

Common Thesis Problems

The following are some of the issues frequently raised by examiners of doctoral thesis, collated by the author over some 35 years and almost 200 examinations. They are presented in an order that combines both frequency and degree of seriousness.

Final chapters

No clear and detailed indication of the contribution made to knowledge (and/or practice if appropriate)

Lack of depth to discussion and conclusions - superficial

Cursory back reference to the literature to indicate what has been supported, exemplified, refuted, etc

Implications for theory/practice not discussed in sufficient depth

Alternative explanations of results not considered in the discussion

Critical review of the research undertaken not included or cursory or unrealistic

Suggestions for future research not included or cursory

Literature Review/s

Descriptive rather than critical literature review

Search system and procedure not described in enough detail or at all

Selection criteria for references unclear (or hardly applied!)

Review does not follow/produce a line of argument leading to (refined) research questions

Research questions/hypotheses

Not clearly or sufficiently focused

Lack of transparent, well-articulated link between previous literature /research and research questions/hypotheses

Little indication of ownership of research

Assumptions made not clearly articulated

Results

Not clearly presented – lack of or poorly presented summaries or tables, graphs, diagrams, etc

Results and discussion/conclusions not clearly differentiated

Design, Methods, Procedures

Rationales for approach, design and methods inadequate or muddled /

Lack of evidence to support selection of approach, design, methods, participant/subject or instruments, particularly data analysis techniques

Long-winded descriptions when tables or diagrams would be clearer

Application of instruments from other work without calibration or standardization to context

Presentation

Account not taken, or unjustified assumptions made about, readers' knowledge: jargon, acronyms and topic details not clearly explained

"Red thread" of argument from introduction to conclusion/discussion difficult to follow or not apparent

Lack of guidance to the reader through the use of signposts, links, references forward and back

Careless proof reading