



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SKILLS UNIT

Honours

organisation
essay Referencing
Critical thinking *reports*
Referencing seminars
results *exams*
READING *academic*
exams Argumentation
Referencing *writing*
Critical thinking
reports
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HONOURS

Congratulations on being offered a place in the honours program!

As an honours student, this may be your first venture into conducting original research and writing an academic dissertation. You may feel both excited and confused as you discuss and finalise your topic, and select your supervisor. There are many new things to learn over the course of this research but remember that you bring valuable skills and knowledge from past academic experiences to your research.

An honours student is generally required to complete a research project, although the demands depend on departmental requirements. Students undertaking honours must complete both their research and writing over a concentrated period, usually within one academic year. Developing effective and efficient study methods are, therefore, crucial. This is particularly true if you also need to complete semester subjects and maintain honours level marks.

This booklet addresses a range of topics and questions on study skills relevant to the honours-year. It addresses issues specifically related to getting started, working with your supervisor and writing up your thesis. It also discusses the practical issues of organisation, time-management, motivation and stress management.

The information included in this booklet incorporates the experiences of past honours students and their supervisors. Each faculty and department has specific requirements and regulations outlining many of the activities involved in both undertaking an honours project and presenting it in written format. Thus you should use the information provided in this booklet in conjunction with the information provided by your supervisor and your department.

1. SUPERVISION

Your supervisor is your academic mentor. She/he will guide your research and academic development, provide academic support and encouragement, and give feedback on your work. It is important to select someone with whom you are able to communicate clearly and honestly.

CHOOSING A SUPERVISOR

When choosing a supervisor, consider the following:

Area of expertise: Most academics are experts in particular aspects of their discipline, so select someone who knows about and is interested in your subject matter. Each department has a website that provides you with full details of each staff member's research interests.

Personal learning styles: Consider the way you like to learn and be supported in your learning. You may prefer to work independently or you may require constant contact and reassurance. Talk to potential supervisors or their past students to find out about how they work with students. Choose someone who you think you can work effectively with.

Methodological preferences: If you are studying in the humanities, it is crucial that you are aware of the methodological preferences of your supervisor. Many problems arise because supervisors and their students don't view things in the same way. The best way to check is to go to the library and look up some recent books or journal articles written by your supervisor.

Personality: You need to be psychologically compatible with your supervisor. If you have been studying in a particular department, you will probably have a good idea about the personalities of the different members of staff. It is helpful to speak to other students to find out more about the members of staff or consult departmental resources that will provide information on staff profiles.

Student's expectations, rights and responsibilities: The student-supervisor relationship is a partnership. It is important that you have realistic expectations when entering into this partnership. As an honours student, you will be granted more freedom than you had as an undergraduate. You are required to work in an independent manner under direction from your supervisor and to show evidence of dedicated hard work. A research student's responsibilities are to:

- Have regular contact with the supervisor
- Seek to be guided by the supervisor but not overly directed
- Submit draft material to the supervisor and ask for constructive feedback

If you feel that your supervisor is not performing his/her duties, it is important that you discuss these issues in a forthright manner with your supervisor. If you are not able to resolve issues – and most issues can be resolved – directly with your supervisor, you can seek support from the Honours Coordinator or the Head of Department.

Supervisors' expectations, rights and responsibilities: Supervisors tend to expect that you will be responsible for both initiating and completing work. Typically you may not see your supervisor on a daily or weekly basis. Rather, it is more likely that you will see your supervisor every few weeks. You need to be independent. However, your supervisor is usually expected to help you with the following:

- Refine your research topic
- Guide you in setting up a framework for research
- Offer feedback and comments on drafts
- Provide constructive criticism and timely feedback about your academic progress
- Meet with you regularly and involve you in the academic activities of the department
- Help you seek assistance for personal crises that affect your academic work

Many supervisors take an interest in your future career (how you perform also reflects on their skills as a supervisor) and carefully monitor the final production and presentation of your research.

Some students express concerns about the quality of feedback received from supervisors. You have the right to expect that your supervisor will read your work thoroughly (given a reasonable amount of time between when the draft is submitted and when your meeting takes place) and provide you with detailed feedback about the content and written style of your work. Your supervisor should not edit but should provide constructive feedback that allows you to learn and improve the quality of your work.

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR

There is no ideal model for the relationship between student and supervisor. Depending on your own learning style, the way your supervisor works, and both your personalities the relationship will differ. Generally supervisors value students who demonstrate initiative, communicate effectively, work independently and write concisely and clearly.

Your collaboration with a supervisor usually develops in the following way:

- Initial meeting to clarify expectations, establish methods of communication, discuss the topic generally and organise a framework and boundaries for a research project that is appropriate in size and academic demand for an honours student
- Independent work for several weeks on a first piece of writing such as a literature review or general introductory piece of writing
- A progress meeting when you discuss with your supervisor developments in your research. You may have a completed draft and want to arrange a further time to review/discuss it. You may also discuss the writing process including time lines, drafting, and outlining.
- Further progress meetings where you can discuss issues and ideas from your research as well as supervisor feedback on your drafts. Send shorter and more important sections of your research to your supervisor, this helps feedback to be focussed and helpful. When you meet your supervisor, prepare a list of any problems/questions you wish to discuss. Afterwards, keep a written record of issues raised in your meeting.
- Final meetings occur when you are close to submitting a thesis. These final meetings should discuss presentation, formatting and minor revisions to your thesis. It is unhelpful to use this time for major changes to your thesis. This should be done in earlier sections.

In some faculties, like the sciences, the relationship may be very different. If you are conducting experiments, then you may work for very long periods without doing any writing at all. Some students work in the laboratory for the first half of the year and then spend an intense period of several months writing up their thesis. If you are conducting experiments, you may work closely with your supervisor in the laboratory. If not, then it is helpful to meet your supervisor on a monthly basis to keep him/her fully informed of your progress. During the writing-up phase, submit your work on a chapter-by-chapter basis to make sure you are progressing in the right direction.

You should contact your supervisor if there are major difficulties. Generally your supervisor will leave it up to you to indicate if there are any difficulties. Be honest about your progress and ask for the sort of help you need at different stages during the year. This may be more detailed feedback, advice on methodology, advice about staying on schedule or general issues of support and encouragement.

If supervisory problems occur

Problems are best discussed immediately with your supervisor. Try first to discuss the issue directly with your supervisor, if that doesn't work you should consult the Honours Coordinator or the Head of Department to help you work through these problems.

If the problems still persist you may wish to speak to someone from:

- Academic Rights in the Union Building
- Language and Learning Skills Unit
- Counselling or Health Services

Support from other sources

“No person is an island” is particularly true of the student undertaking a research project. Writing a thesis can be an isolating experience. Seek to enlist the support of your supervisor, fellow honours students, other members of staff, friends and – most importantly – your family. Negotiate time away from external demands on your time to write up your work particularly during those final few months.

2. GETTING STARTED

As an honours student, and a beginning researcher, there will be a number of necessary study skills to learn. To get started in an effective and efficient way it's important to consider how you manage information, use your computer, and set up a workstation. The following sections discuss these steps in greater depth.

MANAGING YOUR INFORMATION

Honours students often enthusiastically start to search the literature, collect everything and anything related to their topic. Finding and photocopying, however, does not equate to reading. Quickly try to develop an efficient, consistent and workable system. Use a strategic approach when collecting, evaluating and reading information. If you have a focused approach from the outset of your project, your work will be better balanced over the whole year.

Collecting information

Learn to use the relevant electronic databases and search engines to search the literature, using the main university library and specialist libraries for journals and books. The internet may also be a source of useful information; however, be aware of biased or poorly sourced information and *always* keep an accurate record of both print and electronic references used.

Evaluating information

When finding information, be aware of your thoughts and beliefs related to your topic. Do not let this bias the information you collect. At first you need to read widely, but later your reading should become more focused. Search for answers or information related to specific questions and issues. Read critically and continually question the value or contribution of each piece of reading to your research question. Make summaries from readings and note your own ideas/reflections rather than photocopying everything that looks interesting.

Storing the information

When collecting large amounts of information, you need to develop a system for storing and accessing the information easily.

Your system should be clear and logical. Think about your methods for identifying, locating, and cross-referencing information. Do you consistently record references? If you don't, devise a plan to keep all your references up-to-date. For honours students with access to sensitive information, securing and protecting your information is a must. Keep a back-up of information on your computer, with an external hard-disk, secure email attachment or portable USB storage device. Also consider how to retrieve information. If you are using a computer, prepare and limit the number of folders in advance. Use an electronic database, where necessary, as this keeps all the information in one accessible place.

USING YOUR COMPUTER EFFECTIVELY

Some departments have clear guidelines on project presentation. Before you start writing, familiarise yourself with formatting features. What font size and type is necessary? Check previously submitted theses, too, as they can generally guide you as to the department's expectations on headings, spacing, centring, numbering, captions, indenting and so on. Many computer programs, such as Word, can automatically format documents. The library runs general classes on formatting, and can assist you in making a document style guide, using headings and creating table of contents and reference lists. If you are unaware of your computer's capabilities, get informed through library classes, online references, or the 'help' facility of your computer.

You should also become familiar with the features of your word processing software such as spell checks and grammar checks which can help to improve your writing; however, it is important to understand both their benefits and limitations.

Some word processing packages have referencing systems. Some may insert notes into the text, footnotes at the bottom of the page, chapter notes at the end of a chapter or endnotes in a list at the end of the document. Other programs, such as EndNote, can help you compile a correctly formatted reference list. EndNote is a commonly used program used for storing references in a database. It includes pre-set referencing formats for hundreds of citation styles (e.g. APA and Harvard systems). It 'plugs in' to most Word programs, is compatible with library catalogues, and lets you insert references as you write. It also automatically creates a bibliography or reference list.

Always back-up your work. Keep a master disc of your up-to-date work. If you are using more than one computer, label each document clearly, and each time you save to an external device, mark the version of each document or file by date. Write your name on any disc you save to. It can become confusing if you have seven files all named 'introduction'.

ORGANISING YOUR WORKSTATION

In your honours-year you will probably be working at a desk for long periods of time. An organised and well-planned workstation is crucial. Being aware of basic ergonomics can help improve your productivity. Make sure you have a comfortable chair with good back-support. Your desk should be accessible, and your equipment easily reachable. Adequate lighting is also important. De-cluttering your workstation from time to time can also work wonders, especially if you don't feel in control of your subject matter. Finally, your workstation environment should be made as conducive to study as possible. Put up wall posters, decorate with pictures, or have a plant nearby – anything that makes you want to study.

Some tips to ensure that your workstation is comfortable are:

- **Adjust all equipment (particularly computer, desk and chair) to ensure correct ergonomic position**
- **Maintain a correct posture when sitting**
- **Take regular breaks to avoid injuries**
- **Regularly stretch during your working day and avoid maintaining a static position for long periods of time.**

3. STRUCTURING YOUR THESIS

The structure of your thesis depends on academic conventions of your discipline. However, it should generally conform to basic features common to all theses. Each thesis, for instance, should have a title, an abstract which provides a thesis statement and basic overview of your project, and a format, scholarship and style that is academic in nature. If you have not seen a completed thesis, ask your supervisor if she/he has copies of honours thesis that she/he has supervised. Look at the length, theoretical complexity, and structure – other theses from your department are really one of your most valuable resources.

A thesis generally takes a structure similar to an essay, although a thesis is a larger and more formal piece of work. It may include a beginning (a problem statement, the context and rationale, research questions and background information), a middle (the research, and what you found), and an end (a synthesis of your findings related to current knowledge and what you conclude from this). A reference list and appendices conclude the thesis.

All research should include sections that address the following questions:

Introduction and rationale	Why is this research being undertaken?
Review of current research and literature	What is already known?
Aims/hypothesis	What needs to be found?
Methodology	How will it be found?
Results	What was found?
Discussion	What does it mean?
Conclusion	What now? Where does it fit in?

A more specific breakdown of a thesis suggests you might include most of the following:

PRELIMINARIES

Your department may have more specific guidelines on the structure of your thesis. In general, though, honours theses include:

- **Title page** – including the title of the research, degree for which the thesis is being submitted, your full name, department and faculty and the date submitted
- **Declaration of authorship** – a statement of ownership of the research
- **Abstract** – a summary of the research, usually 300-500 words, including the aims, methodology, results and main findings
- **Acknowledgments** – a formal statement that acknowledges contributions and assistance provided by others in completion of the thesis.
- **Table of contents** – a listing of all chapters and sections included in the thesis
- **Lists of tables and figures** – a numbered list for each illustration.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction should both introduce your reader to your topic as well as guide him or her to themes and ideas found later in a thesis. You might include some context-setting information like background or a brief overview of the problem. Don't go too broad,

though. A skill of writing introductions is to set boundaries on the topic. One way to do this is to have a clear purpose in writing: Is your research a theoretical discussion, an experimental study or an evaluative critique? Introduce your research so there are little doubts as to what you are doing. The introduction might also include a statement of the problem or issue to be researched, a research question, the research aims and, if appropriate, the hypothesis/thesis statement that will be challenged. On top of all this, the introduction must be interesting! It must grab the reader's attention and make him/her want to read on. So leave adequate time at the end of your research to revise and review your introduction

BACKGROUND AND/OR LITERATURE REVIEW

Your first chapter(s) generally begins with a literature review. Draw from and review the literature, current opinion and published research on the topic. This chapter could include historical or descriptive material that provides a context for the current research, reviews of theory or practice, or preliminary surveys or investigations that will help formulate the hypothesis. This background information should also position your research within the specific area of study.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter reports on your data collection techniques or theoretical approach. It describes the research methodology you have chosen and the rationale for your choice. If applicable, information on sampling procedures, ethical considerations and details of research tools (including their development if appropriate) should be detailed. Methods of data analysis should also be included in this section.

RESULTS

If presented separately from a discussion section, the factual results of your research will be presented in this section. Information may be presented in tables or figures (i.e. graphs, diagrams, maps, photographs, etc.); however, these illustrations should not stand alone. An explanation of the relevant findings must be included. The results may be structured around the questions, hypotheses or themes.

DISCUSSION

The discussion should draw together the findings from your research and relate it to the literature or current knowledge of the topic. It should make sense of, or explain, what you have found and discuss what your findings mean.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion should not only summarise what you have found but also what the significance of your findings are. It should respond to the stated aims or hypothesis of the research. The conclusion may also include a statement of the limitations of your study and suggestions for future research.

REFERENCE LIST / BIBLIOGRAPHY

The reference list contains all the references you have directly used in the body of your work. A bibliography includes all the references you have read, whether they have been used directly in the thesis or not. This list must conform to your department's referencing style.

APPENDICES

Additional information that is related but not critical to the research can be included in appendices. Thus an appendix may contain a copy of a questionnaire, raw data, ethics approval, or a schedule of experiments. Each appendix must be referred to in the main text. The information in the appendices is not included in the word count; however, you should select this information carefully to ensure it includes only relevant information.

STRUCTURE OF EACH CHAPTER

Each chapter has a basic structure that guides the reader. Thus each chapter should start with an introduction that makes links to the previous chapters, states the aim of the chapter, and describes how this aim will be achieved.

The body of each chapter may be structured under several headings; however, the flow of discussion should develop logically through the chapter. Each section should be clearly linked to those before and after. The information should be concisely expressed with no repetition or irrelevancies. You should finish each chapter with a summary, recapping your main arguments.

CONSISTENCY

To ensure there is internal consistency in the overall thesis structure, check that:

- **The argument is consistent across chapters.**
- **Each section is clearly connected to the next.**
- **There are no missing or redundant sections.**
- **The discussion or content is balanced.**
- **The examples and figures complement and enhance meaning.**

A reminder: check your department guidelines regarding the format and presentation. Guidelines often focus on: referencing style, formatting requirements, chapters/sections to be included, length of the thesis, and type of binding required. While some departments are flexible, others require a standardised structure. If you are confused by directions in the guidelines, discuss structure issues and thesis presentation with your supervisor.

In summary, the four major sections of your thesis (the introduction, the background, the research study or investigation and the discussion) should always clearly relate to each other. Look for the following:

The introduction states the overall aim and rationale of your research. The background (often including the literature review) examines what is already known about this topic. Drawing on existing knowledge, how you undertook your research is described in the methodology, and what you found is explained in the results section. The discussion or synthesis of the project will not only discuss the implications of what you have found but will relate back to the original aims stated in the methodology and discuss your findings in relation to the current literature examined in the background section. Thus the thesis should be a coherent and interrelating piece of work, rather than a series of separate chapters.

4. MANAGING YOUR TIME

Time management is one of the major difficulties faced by honours students. Students often are unrealistic about the study demands that are required to complete a research project. This is compounded by the relatively short time span (usually one academic year) to finish the thesis, and the new experience of carrying out research and writing up a major project.

Many students have other things to do as well – paid work, social activities, relationship and family commitments. During honours-year, many students are overwhelmed and overloaded with the number of tasks to attend to. Your time is precious – use it both efficiently and effectively.

PLANNING YOUR YEAR – SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Because it is difficult to know what you need to do, how much you will need to do, and how long everything takes, it is important to plan for a range of contingencies.

Take control and start by drawing up a 'Thesis Schedule'. Start at the beginning of the year and end on the date for submission of your thesis. Then, starting from the due date and working backwards, create a timetable that identifies when you plan to complete each component. Use various methods to manage your time: a time-line, a list of tasks to be completed, a diary or wall-planner, or even a daily timetable. Use whatever plan works for you. It is a good idea to place this visibly near your work area so you can keep track of how well you are meeting your overall schedule of activities.

DEVELOPING A TIMETABLE

Given the time constraints of an honours project you may need to rethink your undergraduate study habits, especially if you are used to doing extensive revising, rereading and recopying. Avoid study habits that require you to go over readings several times as you may have to do some things more quickly than anticipated or maybe even cut some corners.

Once you have an overall picture of what you need to achieve, create a realistic weekly timetable. This helps you reach your goals, and monitor and evaluate your progress. Include all your other commitments such as family, social, work, recreation and rest times. Be flexible and allow for extra pressures when experiments, presentations or assessments are due or for that special social occasion!

GOAL SETTING AND USING LISTS

Many people find that setting goals helps to structure their approach. While it is necessary to have broad, longer-term goals (e.g. 'complete thesis'), the problem with many study-related goals is that they are vague or too broad (e.g. 'do literature review' or 'work on results'). It is much better to break tasks into small 'do-able' activities that can be completed in a shorter time. Use these to set goals that are achievable in one study session (e.g. 'read Chapter 6' or 'finish section on population study'). By doing this you will see that you are making progress.

The trouble with lists is that sometimes items get carried over day after day. Acknowledge that you have finished some tasks, and be realistic. Think about what *didn't* get done and *why* this happened, then restructure the task to make it more manageable. When reviewing your list each day, identify urgent activities, those to delegate, those to defer, and those to dump.

Tips for effective time management

- **Once you have made your timetable, commit to it. Develop some good habits. The best way to maintain study momentum is to complete at least some work every day. Working consistently and regularly helps you get into a good work routine.**
- **Setting realistic goals means you are more likely to achieve them. Identify specific tasks to accomplish and break these down into 30 to 60 minute tasks. That way, you can cross items off as they are done. This makes progress visible and can be motivating. Acknowledging that you have completed some or all of your tasks builds confidence in your performance.**
- **Keep your list in a place where you can see it. Put it in your diary, on a whiteboard in your room, or pin it to the fridge. Keep it where you can be constantly reminded of what you have to do and what you have completed.**
- **Think about your most productive time of day. Do tasks that require the most complex thinking when you are freshest. Save less complex study tasks (photocopying, formatting, etc.) for times when you are too tired to do more complicated tasks. That way, even if you are not enthusiastic, you will still be doing something useful.**
- **Work before dinner. After eating you'll find your metabolism slows down, you'll relax, and easily find distractions.**
- **Spoil yourself with rewards. A movie after you have submitted a draft, a chocolate bar after each successful interview, experiment or data collection, or checking your e-mails after an hour of reading or writing. Congratulate yourself on what you have done, rather than chastise yourself for what you've neglected to do.**

5. READING EFFECTIVELY

Undertaking any major piece of academic writing and research requires a large amount of reading. Effective reading is a complex and demanding task, requiring both skill and practice. Developing active reading skills helps you to manage reading for your honours project.

An *active* reader is one who constructs meaning from the text and actively engages with the material.

To develop skills in active reading:

- **Make connections and comparisons.**
- **Take notes in your own words.**
- **Make notes of your questions, comments and criticisms – this will help you generate your arguments.**
- **If you like highlighting, combine this with writing your own notes and comments in the margin, or on separate paper. A problem of excessive highlighting is that you have to reread the information to see why you highlighted it in the first place!**
- **If you read something that may be useful later, make a note of it now!**
- **Read when you are fresh and able to concentrate.**

TAKING NOTES FROM TEXTS

When taking notes from the text you are reading, you should:

- Start by recording the title, author, and page numbers of the book or article. This is essential for using exact quotes, referencing assignments, and checking the content of an idea you want to paraphrase.
- Distinguish between the notes you have taken from a text and your own responses to the text. Note whether these are questions, your own thoughts, or links to other authors' ideas. Such a system helps protect against plagiarism.
- Use headings and subheadings to provide a framework for your information. These can help you to distinguish the thesis from the supporting premises or the main points from the supporting points.
- Link notes to your plan or note how you will use them, e.g. supporting evidence, definition or contrasting point of view.

After you have completed note-taking from a particular text, review the notes for clarity and comprehensiveness. Ensure they are easy to read and in a useable format.

Taking good notes is a valuable skill – it allows you to review and to gather only relevant information, it allows you to reflect on the information and put ideas into your own words and it will reduce unnecessary photocopying, thus saving you time and money!

**When taking notes from texts to support your writing,
be aware of the *dangers of plagiarism*!
Severe penalties apply.**

KNOW *WHY* YOU ARE READING

How you read material depends largely on why and what you are reading. Do you need to gain an overview of a topic, understand the material in depth, find specific information for a literature review, understand the argument or main focus, or critically evaluate ideas?

It is important to have a clear goal for reading; develop some questions to focus your reading. Find information to answer these questions.

Use the questions below to guide your reading and note-taking. Asking them as you read will tend to slow your reading process down because you will be thinking as you go.

However, doing your analytical thinking while you read and making notes as you go will make the process of writing a critical review much easier.

The author

Who are the authors? Are they eminent in this field?

Where and when was this work published?

The purpose

Why and for whom was the information written?

Is the purpose explicitly stated?

What was the author trying to discover?

Why and how is this piece of research important?

The content

- What is the controlling focus of the material?
- What aspects of the topic are included / omitted? Why?
- Does this author focus on breadth or depth of information?
- What was measured / examined / reviewed?
- What information is available on experimental sample literature?
- Is supporting information well researched and accurate?
- Does graphic or quantitative information support or link to the discussion?
- Was the methodology clearly described?

What were the results?

- Can you accept the findings as true?
- What do the authors conclude and to what do they attribute their findings?
- How do results and conclusions compare with other works?
- Were different aspects or issues included?
- Were findings, discussion and conclusions logical and consistent?
- Can these findings be applied to your work?

The structure

- What framework is used to organise the material?
- Is it clearly explained and logical?
- Does the introduction indicate aims, thesis and main points of information?
- How is the argument or focus reflected in the structure?
- Is the content well-linked and balanced to reflect importance?

Style and format

- In what style is the information presented: simple, complex, narrative or persuasive?
- Does the style influence your opinion of and reaction to the material? How?
- Is there any bias in information presented?

PREVIEW YOUR READING

Pre-reading (or skim reading) a book, chapter or article gives you an overview or outline of the passage or text. A text is easier to understand if you have a general sense of the author's argument and evidence. Identify information relevant to your purpose and what to read in detail.

Pre-reading includes previewing. Preview aspects such as: the title and date, the abstract, the table of contents or index, the introductory paragraph, headings (major and minor), sections, illustrations (diagrams, graphs, figures, charts, etc.), the summary, discussion or conclusion.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEX TEXTS

Some texts are highly abstract and complex. If you have trouble understanding a complex subject, you might need to do some wider, more general reading. If the problem concerns language, you could first study and learn more vocabulary and technical terms. If you are

studying in areas that are new to you, the style and format may also make the text appear complex. You should thus take time to become familiar with the way information is presented.

- **When embarking on a new course or subject, note the vocabulary central to the discipline. When previewing, look for frequently used and unfamiliar words and concepts, and look these up before you read. Develop a system to record these meanings and the context in which they appear.**
- **Conduct a thorough preview of the text to determine the focus or thesis of the overall text. Then read and understand small sections. When all sections are coherent, synthesise the information again into a whole.**
- **Read several times. Each time builds on your previous understanding. Do not expect to read a complex text through once only; however, the time you spend on it will depend on your purpose.**
- **Read the easiest sections first. Go back to the more difficult sections and read slowly, trying to identify the author's argument or the writer's main points. Keep this argument or focus in mind as you read each section, paragraph or even sentence, depending on the length of the text. Think about how what you have read furthers the argument or relates to the main focus. Try to distinguish between a) the points being made to support the argument or develop the ideas and b) the elaboration of these arguments by illustration or supporting evidence.**
- **Draw a diagram of the material as you read, to aid comprehension.**
- **Always give yourself thinking time to process what you have read.**

Finally, comprehension of difficult material takes time. Discuss new ideas and information with your supervisor and peers. This helps increase your familiarity with new terms, concepts and ways of thinking. Your reading comprehension will also improve as you make progress in your overall knowledge of the area. This in turn makes writing easier.

6. WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is often the place to start for many honours students. Its main purpose is to show your engagement with key publications in your areas. On one level, you should describe previous findings, theories or formulas in an accessible way. For some students this means providing a chronological overview, for others a thematic one. On another level, however, you should critically evaluate the literature you review. Are there any inconsistencies or weaknesses in previous works? Are some publications more credible, reliable or valid than others? Most of all, you should use the literature review to give the reader a sense of how your research fits into a field and why your research matters.

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A good review of the literature demonstrates a critical understanding of existing work. You should show what others in your field have discovered as well as provide your own insights – that is, to interpret and to review the work critically. An effective review analyses and synthesises material and should:

- **Compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue**
- **Critically evaluate aspects of methodology**
- **Note areas in which authors are in disagreement**
- **Highlight exemplary studies**

- **Identify gaps in research**
- **Show how your study relates to both previous studies and the literature in general**
- **Have a logical and clear structure to content**
- **Conclude by summarising what the literature says.**

The final product of the literature review should raise questions to be further explored, rather than a definitive 'answer'.

GETTING STARTED

To get started, find and read a wide range of literature about your topic. As you read critically appraise this literature, synthesise the information and jot down important reference details. Keep your notes orderly. Next, think about how to narrow the topic. Remember, a literature review should have a clear focus and direction; so think about what you want to achieve, then develop a structure or plan for your writing, directed to that aim.

As your focus and scope become more manageable, a research question is likely to surface. This is the time to start writing. The earlier you put your ideas into writing, the easier it is to turn these notes into a first draft. Some students can take notes for months without committing any ideas to paper. They then find that there is hardly any time to work on drafts before submitting. Drafting early also makes polishing your writing easier at a later date.

Many science-based disciplines suggest students complete their experiments before the literature review, while for some arts students a review of the literature comprises the whole of the research project. For other disciplines, the literature review is completed mid year and is the first component of assessable work for students. A good idea is to discuss the literature review with your supervisor. As experts in the field, they can often point you in the right direction with sources, too.

LOCATING THE LITERATURE

Once you have a clear focus, the next step is a comprehensive literature search. Access a wide range of the available literature in your area of study. When locating sources, look for recent publications. The aim of your review, after all, is to place your thesis in the context of recent research. Start with major books directly related to your topic as well as key journal articles. Check the bibliographies and reference lists of these sources as they will lead you to more publications.

Make use of all library resources. The library runs training sessions on locating sources. This is handy when you need to track down department recommended databases, citation indices, or journals. Most faculties and some departments have librarians who dedicate their time to helping staff and student locate sources. Pick up a brochure at the library for further information, or contact the information desk.

You may borrow from a range of libraries both on and off campus, and staff can help with inter-library loans. However, allow yourself time to obtain books and articles. Searching in various libraries and waiting for things to arrive often takes time.

Keep a record of your literature searches – what you have ordered, what you have read, and what is unavailable. Although it may take time to write up this information, it prevents later duplication. Keep copies of call numbers and printouts of your computer searches so you have backups. This prevents losing the information.

READING THE LITERATURE

To present a critical literature review, thoroughly evaluate the material, ask questions and sift through information. Read critically and keep *your* purpose for reading in mind: previewing and skim reading for a general feel for the text, then locating key issues or arguments relevant to your research, and assess the value and merit of the information. See previous section for information on reading effectively.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

One of the most difficult things about a literature review is to know when to stop reading and start writing. As suggested above, you should begin writing as soon as you have a basic understanding of your topic area. Writing a draft can test your knowledge of your area of study and help you to decide if you need to do some more reading.

If you are making notes and typing up your comments as you go, you should have material already on the page. Create your draft from this material. While some people like to hand-write notes, using a computer saves time and allows an easy way to rearrange the material: add any additional comments, questions and ideas straight into your draft. A computer also helps the user make connections and comparisons between different articles. When you are doing this, double-check that you have all the referencing information.

If you are having trouble starting to write, start on a small section of the review. Identify something you know – write about this. Once you have started, you may find it easier to work on more difficult sections.

ORGANISATION OF THE CONTENT

An organised structure ensures that your literature review is a coherent piece of work. An initial brainstorming session helps you work out a plan. It may change and evolve as your reading widens. There are many ways to organise content – chronologically, by theoretical perspective, in order of importance, by methodological approach or any structure that is logical and fits the content.

Be open to structural changes. Read other theses and analyse how they are structured. Although your literature review will rely heavily on the sources you read for its information, the structure of the review should be dictated by you. It is important that the concepts are presented in an order that makes sense in the context of *your* research project.

A common error in literature reviews is for writers to present material from one author, followed by information from another, then another, and so on, e.g. Allen (1995) found one thing, Smith (2002) found another, and Holliday and Jackson (2001) found something else altogether. This reads as a list rather than a discussion of the similarities, differences, strengths and values of the literature.

Another major problem is that literature reviews are often written as if they stand alone, without links to the rest of the thesis. You need to demonstrate a clear relationship between the literature review and the hypothesis and methodology that follow. Thus at the end of your review, include a summary of what the literature implies, and how it is linked with your own hypothesis and methodology.

The following examples give an idea of how you can link ideas and authors or demonstrate a critical analysis of the literature:

Show how your study links to other work in the field:

- *The aim of the present study is to replicate Smith's (1991) work to investigate...*
- *Jobbs (2001) comprehensively reviewed the literature, finding...*
- *Nephew (1999) extended this study by specifically...*

Critically evaluate the works you read:

- *The limitation of this study is that the sample failed to...*
- *However, in this study Allen does not clearly justify her conclusions, so...*
- *The strength of this study was...*

Compare your findings with the work of others:

- *French (1999), using a sample of..., also found evidence to suggest...*
- *Similarly, Johnson (2002) found that...*
- *American studies (Greenbaum, 1988; Lovegrove, 1990; Findelbob, 1991) indicate..., while in Britain the opposite was found to be true...*

Indicate studies you consider to be the best in the field:

- *Russell's (1990) study represents the most comprehensive attempt to show the...*

Indicate the authority of the author:

- *Brown (1989; 1996; 1999; 1999b; 2003) is well published in the area of...*
- *Smith's (1991) much cited work states that...*

CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT

Your literature review should have a clear argument. Take all those critical comments you made in your reading notes, and use them to express an academic opinion. A well-argued literature review will demonstrate these qualities:

- **A clear relationship is established between the author's arguments and the evidence. Linking sentences make connections, and summary statements are used at the end of sections to draw conclusions.**
- **Facts and theory in the literature substantiate opinions. Examples, citation, and quotations are used where appropriate.**
- **Differing opinions are accounted for, rather than ignored. The author presents evidence, and also acknowledges opposing viewpoints. The author makes clear his/her preferences, rather than sitting on the fence, or leaving it to the reader to draw conclusions.**
- **The sections of the review are clearly connected. There is an outline statement in the introduction that makes the order of the arguments clear, and gives some reason for the author's choice in ordering the material.**
- **Evaluation of the literature is objective, fair and balanced. Personalised attacks and the use of strong or emotive language are avoided. Instead, a respectful, scholarly tone is maintained when discussing the work of other authors.**
- **The tone of the argument is confident. A good literature review is objective and fair, but also convincing and decisive. It avoids too many vague or qualifying statements such as 'maybe', 'perhaps' or 'it seems that'.**

USING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

For many students, the literature review is the section of the thesis that is written in the most formal, academic language. Good academic prose is *clear, concise, unambiguous* and *accurate*. Unless you are directed otherwise, it should also be as objective as possible, avoiding slang and emotionally charged words.

Concise word use and shorter, less complicated sentences, and paragraphs are better than complicated and jargon-laden prose. Remember simplicity in writing is generally a sign of clarity of thought.

If you are unsure about what constitutes an appropriate academic voice, read some theses in your area. These are available in the library (and there may be copies available in your department or at <http://eprints.unimelb.edu.au/>).

HOW A LITERATURE REVIEW IS JUDGED

Your supervisor and assessors, in evaluating your literature review, tend to look for the following:

Selection of the literature

- Emphasis on major research in the field
- Emphasis on *recent* developments
- Emphasis on literature relevant to present study
- Complete and correctly referenced bibliographic data

Discussion and analysis of the material

- Provides an understanding of the problem and rationale for your study
- Notes relevant research
- Provides appropriate balance and depth of each topic area
- Follows a clear pattern of organisation (e.g. chronological, thematic, strongest to weakest ideas)
- Focuses on various aspects of the literature (e.g. methodology, ideas, themes, research questions or hypotheses)
- Discusses strengths and weaknesses of previous research findings
- Identifies conflicting or inconclusive results

Organisation and development of the content

- Presents information in a logical order
- Explains the purpose and parameters clearly
- Uses appropriate academic language

A final tip: Knowing when the review is finished can be difficult. Once you have had some evaluation, and major issues are sorted out, it is time to get to work on the next task. You may need to come back to your review now and again, but don't keep searching for that elusive article. Other sections of your thesis are just as important: don't forget to get on with your analysis, experiments or interviews.

Use your review to guide the rest of your research. It should not stand in isolation. By the end of a review, a reader should get a sense of why your study is necessary, where it fits into current research, and what the 'research problem' is that will be investigated. Use the concepts it explored as you move on to later sections of your thesis.

7. EDITING

Your thesis is evaluated on both academic content and quality of presentation. Careful editing of your final draft is vital.

Editing does not mean rewriting; it means ensuring that the existing writing develops logically, relates to the stated aims, is clear and concise, consistently formatted and contains no spelling or grammatical errors.

Allow time between drafts for editing. You need to be 'fresh' when returning to your work. Edit several times, each time focusing on different aspects, e.g. structure, linking or proofreading.

EDITING WITH TECHNOLOGY

- Re-read carefully where you have been cutting and pasting
- Print your work out to read, then annotate the hard copy
- Use spelling and grammar checkers carefully. Spell-checkers check every word that you type, but don't identify the wrong use of a word: e.g. "sew" and "sow", "documents and" and "document sand", or "form" and "from"
- Check that you have the Australian version set on the auto-correct facility (not American, e.g. "-ise" vs. "-ize")
- When making changes to your work, keep electronic and hardcopy backups, with each version clearly marked.
- Revising and editing your own work involves evaluating both content and structure, as well as proofreading. You need to check everything, from the big ideas to the finer points of punctuation.

EDITING FOR CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT

Editing for content and structure is a major editorial task. It involves deciding on what to put in and what to leave out. Structural editing is an ongoing process.

Some structural editing begins before you start writing – experiment with different structures, rearrange headings and subheadings and develop a plan for the content. Check that the structure of each section reflects this plan and that it is still the best possible structure for your argument. When you have finished your draft, structural editing ensures that:

- **The argument is consistent**
- **The connection between each section is clear**
- **Ideas are in a logical order**
- **No one section is too long**
- **Everything is relevant**
- **Nothing is missing or redundant.**

Paragraphs provide a framework

The beginning of each paragraph should provide a clear indication of the information to be presented in that paragraph.

Each paragraph should have:

- One clearly expressed idea in a topic sentence
- Only sentences relevant to the main idea
- Information presented in a logical order

- The length of the paragraph consistent with the relative importance of the idea
- A balance between theory, and application or examples.

Review each section of your writing – how well does the whole piece fit together? Ensure the structure of your argument is explicit and that the order of the paragraphs gives a sense of progression. Linking phrases between paragraphs can make writing clearer and more coherent. Consider also the pace of the thesis: Is the argument moving at just the right speed? If not, work on balancing ideas better.

Including all information

One important skill to develop in editing your thesis is the ability to let go of work you have completed. It is sometimes difficult to admit that something you have spent time working on is not necessary in the final product. However, most students find that there are sections that are no longer relevant or that need to be rewritten. Leaving sections out can be a painful, but equally liberating, process.

One way to check is to ask yourself whether there is anything you are not happy with in a chapter or the thesis in general. Use your intuition – sometimes if it doesn't feel right, it isn't it. Give yourself some time to analyse those parts with which you are dissatisfied. Discuss them with your supervisor or another reader. Do this before you go on to refine the language and expression of the piece.

PROOFREADING

Proofreading includes making the expression clear; correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar; ensuring all references are cited correctly and that formatting is consistent, e.g. heading levels, indented quotes, etc.

Proofread by asking:

- **Are the sentences complete, do they make complete sense?**
- **Is there variety in sentence construction?**
- **Are long, complicated sentences avoided?**
- **Are unnecessary words removed?**
- **Is choice of vocabulary accurate and appropriate?**
- **Is the active rather than the passive voice used? (Evidence of too much passive voice is the existence of many “-tion” words, or of verb forms like “been”, “being”, “is”, “was”).**
- **Are pronouns too far from the noun they are replacing?**
- **Is the punctuation correct? Does the punctuation provide the appropriate ‘intonation’ for your writing and indicate separate ideas in a sentence?**
- **Is spelling correct? Do not rely totally on a computer spell-check; computer spell-checks do not correct accurately spelled but nonsensical expressions.**
- **Are references listed correctly according to the required referencing style? Have citations used in the thesis been checked against the bibliography and vice versa?**
- **Are numbering and headings, illustrations and their captions, pagination, list of contents and cover pages all correct?**

Proofreading should be the final stage of editing required on your thesis. When this is complete, prepare for submission.

8. STAYING MOTIVATED

No matter how well-intentioned you are at the beginning of your research, at some stage completing the work (or the writing) may seem to become just too hard. Working, often in isolation, is difficult and it is easy to be interrupted by anything other than your honours project. Lack of motivation and procrastination are often interrelated.

Sometimes this lack of motivation is due to boredom with the task, the topic, the whole subject, or even the chosen course. Perhaps simply the desire for knowledge has diminished. Alternatively, discovering a wide range of interests apart from study, needing to take on more paid work to survive, or experiencing personal problems may make it difficult to maintain the motivation required to complete an honours thesis.

For some people, a walk on the beach or a chocolate sundae will cure the problem, but for others it is not quite that easy to get fired up again. Of course, there are often no easy answers to some things that affect us (financial problems, responsibility for sick family members or personal problems). If this is the situation, you may need assistance from qualified professionals. However, for some students lack of motivation for study is a kind of sophisticated procrastination problem that also needs to be addressed.

Tips for overcoming procrastination and staying motivated:

- **Get into the habit of writing down your ideas when you have them, and follow up your work quickly. If you try to get some momentum going while you are feeling fresh and enthusiastic about what you have to do, you will be less likely to put things off continually.**
- **Remember to DIN (Do It Now). The task will take the same amount of time whenever you do it, but if you do it straight away, you can relieve the burden on your mind.**
- **Feeling guilty is a waste of energy. Be decisive about how you use your time. Either decide you really deserve a break, or put in an hour of work before you stop to do something more exciting.**
- **Procrastination sometimes involves your physical environment. There are things you can do to attune your senses to study. For example, having a well-organised study space, background music or moving from the desk to the comfy chair for certain tasks can help to settle you into study mode.**
- **Many people find it helpful to study where other people are also studying. Are there fewer distractions if you work in the library rather than at home? If you find the atmosphere of hard work is a good influence on you, then organise to stay at university later (or get in early) and work in the library.**
- **Get help from other people. Let your housemates know when your study times are and ask them not to disturb you, or tell them how they can help you. Research is often a lonely experience. Meet with other honours students to share experiences, discuss ideas or share frustrations. Talk with your supervisor and get his/her help, ideas and support.**
- **Students often complain that they have become bored with their work. If this happens, mix your activities so that you don't spend more than 30 minutes on the one task – you can complete many nearly finished tasks in that way. Mix some really interesting activities (even unrelated ones like reading a novel or writing to a friend) along with short sessions of productive work.**

Lack of motivation can follow illness or be the result of physical problems, so it is important to pay attention to your health and fitness. Do not forget to maintain your important friendship connections: sometimes a too-intent focus on study may isolate you from your friends, and when lack of motivation hits, you may have few people to share your feelings with.

Whatever you do, don't forget that life still happens. Get out into the real world for a little while, see some friends, and get things in perspective, remind yourself of your long-term goals.

MANAGING STRESS

An honours-year can be a very stressful time in terms of new academic demands, the necessity to maintain a high level of academic performance and the need to keep a balanced and normal lifestyle.

If you become too stressed you may:

- Feel sad or upset, or anxious or tense
- Feel like you are losing control (e.g. becoming angry or hostile)
- Feel continually tired or exhausted
- Have difficulty sleeping
- Have problems concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Have physical symptoms such as butterflies in the stomach, shortness of breath, digestive problems, etc.

The best way to avoid stress is to put study strategies into place that spread the burden of work evenly throughout the year. It's also important to make sure the time you do spend studying is as effective as possible.

You will also increase your tolerance to stress if you eat properly and get regular sleep and exercise. However, even the most organised students will "hit the wall" at times. It's not uncommon for students to feel overburdened by study and all the other things going on in their lives.

TIPS ON MANAGING ANXIETY

- **Find someone you can trust, and talk to them about the situation. (Getting your feelings out in the open almost always helps you feel better.) This could be an understanding friend, a lecturer or a family member. Talking to someone can help with how you *feel* about the situation – and they may also have some practical suggestions how to deal with it.**
- **Some students benefit by taking a break from work. Take some time off and do something relaxing and enjoyable then return to work refreshed.**
- **Try to put your workload into perspective. Decide what absolutely must be done, and which tasks can be reduced without affecting your final result. Prioritise your tasks (and give yourself permission not to be perfect all the time). By listing tasks in order of importance, you can tackle them one at a time. Try to focus on the task at hand, rather than risk being overwhelmed by everything at once.**
- **Try to stay focused. Understand clearly the nature and purpose of each task that needs to be completed. Develop and use efficient study techniques.**
- **Above all, seek help if you feel you need it. Do not struggle with your problems alone. Use University resources such as your supervisor or other departmental staff, the Counselling Service, the Language and Learning Skills Unit or other services as appropriate.**

9. PREPARING TO SUBMIT YOUR THESIS

Finishing your thesis and finally submitting it usually takes longer than you expect so you should allow enough time for those final, but time-consuming, tasks. Before you submit your thesis, you need to review your work to make sure you have presented a 'whole' piece of work. Check that each section or component of the thesis is complete and correct. Make sure you have reviewed *all* information provided by your department regarding any specific conventions or requirements of your thesis. This will include the assessment requirements provided by your department and the University.

REVIEWING THE WHOLE THESIS

- **Ensure the structure of the thesis and the line of argument that runs through your work is both explicit and clear.**
- **The writing should be easy to read and should not require the reader to reread sections or paragraphs to understand the meaning.**
- **Connections between the literature examined initially and the findings of your study should be fully explored. This discussion will demonstrate where your study fits with current knowledge of the topic.**
- **Return to your introduction – does it 'agree' with your conclusion? Have you done all the things you promised in your introduction?**
- **Ensure that the title of your thesis adequately reflects the content of your thesis.**
- **All introductory pages must be completed and presented in the order directed by the submission requirements. This includes the abstract, acknowledgements, declaration of authorship, table of contents and list of illustrations.**

FINAL EDITING

Final editing should include a review of the department's formatting regulations such as margins, headings and spacing. Check that all references used are in the reference list. Spelling and grammar must be thoroughly checked and consistent, pages numbered consecutively, headings and subheadings correctly ordered. Ensure that all figures mentioned in the text are included as near as possible to where they are referred to in the text.

PRINTING AND BINDING

Check departmental timeframes for marking, return of thesis, corrections and final submission. Decide where to have your thesis printed and bound. Academic printeries are busy at the end of the year, so check when they close for business and allow adequate time for printing and binding.

SUBMITTING YOUR THESIS

Recognising the time to let go of your work is difficult for some students. While more time may improve your work, you need to be realistic about the value of that extra time that you think you may need. Thus you need to work to the time frame established and submit when required by your department.

Before you go on a well-deserved holiday to relax, recover and forget, find out what happens following marking of your work. Check your department's requirements and timeframes on corrections, rewriting or final binding and submission. Also check when and where you will be notified about your results (make sure your department has your correct contact details).

Finally after you have submitted your bound work to your department, congratulate yourself on a job well-done, reflect on how much you have learnt during the process of your research and enjoy your freedom!

A FINAL THOUGHT

Why not talk with your supervisor about possible publications and presentations that may be developed from your research? Do not let all your effort sit on a shelf somewhere. You should share it with the rest of the world and help to further knowledge in your new area of expertise.

10. RESOURCES

For more information on resources to help develop your reading and research skills, visit the LLSU website and follow the links:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/resources/reading.html>

You can also search the University of Melbourne library website (<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/>) for valuable information on research skills, documenting references and referencing formats:

<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/sg/tools.html>

Websites on honours-thesis writing

Writing an Honours Thesis

Joe Wolfe, School of Physics, The University of New South Wales

<http://www.phys.unsw.edu.au/~jw/hons.html>

Writing an Honours Thesis in Philosophy

Catriona Mackenzie, Philosophy Department, Macquarie University

<http://www.phil.mq.edu.au/hons/honoursthesisadvice.htm>

Writing and Presenting Your Thesis or Dissertation

S. Joseph Levine, Michigan State University

<http://www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/>

Papers: Expectations, Guidelines, Advice, and Grading

Jeannine DeLombard and Dan White, Department of English, University of Toronto

<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~dwhite/paper2.htm>

www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/



Language & Learning Skills Unit

723 Swanston Street
Ph: 8344 0930
llsu-enquiries@unimelb.edu.au
www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/

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