

# **On writing your MA thesis**

**Hanna Weselius 2022**  
**hanna.weselius@aalto.fi**

**What is academic text? How to write academic text?**

## **What is academic text? How to write academic text?**

Academic research has its rules and conventions. They also show in academic text:

- Neutrality (which of course is a negotiable concept)
- Reliability (how to build that?)
- Clarity (how to argue complicated things clearly?)
- Relevance (to whom?)
- Building up knowledge (referencing to earlier research)

## **The basic structure of an academic thesis (or journal article)**

- 1. Abstract (a separate appendix)**
- 2. Introduction: personal interest, research question(s), significance**
- 3. Theoretical background (concept definition, literature review, reference artists) and methodology**
- 4. Materials and analysis**
- 5. Findings and discussion**

## Thesis structure 1

### Abstract: the research in a nutshell

- Subject of study
- All components of the thesis work (e.g. artistic part(s)&text part)
- Context
- Method/s
- Data / materials (which may be your artistic work process)
- Findings
- Significance
- Supervisor and advisor(s)

## Thesis structure 2

### Introduction (often the last part to write)

- Components of your thesis (e.g. artistic part(s)&text part)
- Your *personal* interest towards the subject, your motivation
- Your research interest -> your *research questions*
- The gap you are filling: significance
- The objectives: what you are aiming at
- Hypothesis / hypotheses (not so popular in our fields)
- Methodology
- The structure of the thesis; *metatext*: taking the reader by the hand (and keeping the grip until the end)

## Thesis structure 3

### Theoretical background and methodology

- The context of your study (academic discipline or specific field of art; the discussion(s) your study takes part in; relevant theory/previous research; societal and/or cultural context)
- *Theory = what has been written previously*
- **Defining your concepts** (theory operates with concepts)
- Your research questions (your research interests *elaborated* reflecting theory & previous research and *defined*)
- The methods you use that will give answers to your questions
- Why did you choose this theory and this methodology?

## Thesis structure 3

### Theoretical background and methodology

Methodology = the ways in which you force the world to answer your questions

Methods = the tools you use



## Thesis structure 4

### Materials and analysis

- What is your research material
- How you collected or produced it
- How you posed your questions to it
- Examples and elaborations, questions and viewpoints
- Reflecting theory & previous research all the way, discussing with it, building your argument
- In artistic research: *how* do you discuss your artwork along the way? The hermeneutic circle

## Thesis structure 5

### Findings and discussion

- Finalising it: what it is all about, what did you find and learn
- Repeating your research questions and answering them
- Reflecting your work and your own position: what was planned, what was done, and how your findings can be applied
- Discussion: what is the significance of this study, and what could and should be done next

## Options for writing

- Essay form. What is an essay?
- Other literary texts (poems, short stories...)
- Mixed text types in one thesis: essay form, research text, artistic texts, interviews, letters, diaries...
- Yet: certain ingredients have to be there. We are dealing with complex matters and realities – thus we have to be *as exact and clear as we can*. The overall aim is to lead the reader firmly through it and make them understand your point.

## **Before you start: Research plan**

The research plan is a tool for your work. You start by writing what it is that you are interested in and what is the mystery that intrigues you (research interest), what you want to do and with what schedule, your research question(s), how you are going to solve them (methodology), and what you will need to accomplish your task (theories and materials).

You should be realistic about your schedule and your plan. What is doable in the given time?

The research plan should be updated as you go.

## And then: Write!

Start writing right away. **Start today!** Then you will have time to find your own way of writing and thinking as you write. Probably your first jottings will not be included in your thesis, but you can use them in your discussion part as you reflect your work.

Start lightly. **Keep a diary. Draw *mindmaps*.** Make notes and save them. **Read** what others have written. Read theory, read articles, read literature. Read poetry. **Write & save documents of what you have read , and write down the references immediately.**

Talk with others and **show your text to people.** Take small steps, one thing at a time, and make deadlines to yourself...

... and soon you will start to see it evolving.

Keep writing. Soon you will have lots of pages in an irrational order.

Then, now at the latest, **write the index!** As you write, you can move the headlines in your index here and there, up and down. *Your index will be like a chest of drawers* where you keep on moving the place and content of drawers.

At that point, if not earlier: **book a meeting with your supervisor** to put your chapters in order. *Find an advisor.*

Keep writing. **When you need help, we'll be there.**

Dillon, Brian 2017. *Essayism*. London: Fitzcarraldo.

Eco, Umberto 1977/2015. *How to Write a Thesis*. Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press. <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/umberto-eco-how-to-write-a-thesis/>

Hannula, Mika; Suoranta, Juha; and Vadén, Tere 2014. *Artistic Research Methodology. Narrative, Power, and the Public*. New York: Peter Lang.

Kniivilä, Sonja; Lindholm-Yläne, Sari; and Mäntynen, Anne 2017. *Tiede ja teksti. Tehoa ja taitoa tutkielman kirjoittamiseen*. Kolmas, uudistettu painos. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Svinhufvud, Kimmo 2015. *Gradutakuu*. Helsinki: Art House.  
<http://www.gradutakuu.fi>