Writing a Thesis
A Guide for Scientific Reports

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Abstract

This guide is an introduction to one way to write scientific reports, the way we have been using and taught to our students in Teacher Education Programmes and Child and Youth Studies.

It includes how to structure the text, suggested content to go under each heading, some rules about quotes and references, cooperation with the advisor and with fellow students and, finally, guides for the thesis seminar, an agenda for the seminar and advice for the opponent(s) and respondent(s).

Keywords

Academic writing, thesis, scientific reports, structure, references, opponent, APA manual
Preface

Thanks to all our students for helping us in sorting out what can be a useful first guide to academic writing.

There are number of manuals on academic writing, we would like to recommend the classic *The elements of style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, in its recent third edition illustrated by Maira Kalman and, in Swedish, *Rapporter och uppsatser* by Jarl Backman and *Skrivhandledning* by Sven Hartman.

Likewise, there are different rules about how to refer to other researcher’s work. In this guide, we follow the APA- tradition (American Psychological Association), usually used for academic writing within Pedagogy and Psychology in the U.S.

Stockholm in June 2009,
Good Luck!

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1. Writing a Thesis

During your studies at the Department of Child and Youth Studies, you will be writing some reports, individually or in groups. You will be asked to hand in papers and examination papers and in some courses to write formally correct scientific texts. You will be writing reports on projects carried out during a course. Most of the times, you can suggest your own topic within the studied field, and also choose to write alone or together with other students. Writing a Thesis for the Bachelor’s or Master’s degree is a major and interesting task.

A scientific approach is necessary. This means that the students should be curious, open and creative in their choice of topic and study. In an academic report you search for new knowledge systematically and methodically. This includes critical examination, raising questions, reflecting and analysing. The results shall be organised and presented in a comprehensive pattern. Considerations on ethics as well as on representativeness, reliability and validity shall be discussed.

1.1. Advisor, paper and peer reading

When writing a report or a thesis, students will be given advice by lecturers at the department. The advisors (supervisors) will be appointed by the course leader. Students can sometimes suggest advisors.

Students start by writing a short paper on the topic, background, aim and methods for the study and literature, (1-3 pages). This paper should be read and discussed by peers before the discussion with the advisor, and can also become useful when forming peer groups and co-writers. For further information, see appendix 1. A plan for meetings with the advisor is set, e.g. to discuss the paper before starting the empirical part, to discuss the results and analytical methods, and finally to discuss the next to final version, e.g. the one for the seminar.

Peer reading and discussions are important parts of the writing process and are recommended before each session with the advisor.

The advising hours are limited. The first meetings will be with groups of students. It is important for both students and advisors to be well prepared. Texts should be sent/handed/e-mailed to the advisor in advance.

1.2. The structure

1.2.1 The first pages

The report should follow a certain structure, and be written in the Stockholm University template and graphic profile, see [Ladda ner Wordmall för Diva](#), (to be updated into English). This section (1.2) suggests a structure for the different parts in a report.
The first pages shall include specific information.

The front page design is important as it tells a lot about the document in hand. Next page contains an abstract with key words. The abstract should relate aim, methods and main results. A bottom line with key words is helpful for libraries and databases.

A preface of a more personal character telling about the choice of topic, thanking helpful friends and introducing the author can be added.

Then there is an important page, the Contents. All headings and corresponding page numbers should be included. The page numbers should be positioned so the report can be copied on both sides of the paper, e.g. in the middle of the page, top or bottom.

1.2.2 Introduction

Here, the chosen topic or theme is clearly introduced and motivated and placed into a general context. It should be relevant to the course plan and, if you are a teacher student, also to the teaching profession. Also, the theoretical perspective can be shortly introduced. A short orientation about the structure of the thesis can be given here.

1.2.3 Aim and research questions

The overall aim is presented and, if applicable, a reference to national legislation or curricula can be included. The aim and corresponding hypothesis or research questions must initially be clearly described. Here, it is sometimes useful to clarify and to define important concepts used in the work as well as limitations for the study. Sometimes it is more logical to place the aim of the study after the literature review, in this example after 1.2.4.

1.2.4 Literature review or Previous Research

Relevant literature shall be described and related to the aim of the report. The chosen literature shall deepen the topic and give different perspectives on the studied issue/problem. Concepts and specific terms should be defined. The views of the author should be easily distinguished from the referred literature. This section shall pertain to and have relevance for the aims of the study. References and quotations shall follow a system, see section 1.3 and References.

The theoretical perspective(s) are described specifically here, if not yet included in the section.

1.2.5 Methods and Ethics

The type of study, whether it is an empirical study, a study of literature or a comparative study, should be described. You shall explain how you have carried out your study step by step. Methodological considerations concerning ethics, observation methods, selection, sample and proceedings are presented in detail. It is sometimes useful to put some of the information in appendices, e.g. a letter to the informants.
**Ethical considerations** on anonymity, consent and information to the involved persons shall be discussed. This is of utter importance if you involve children in your project/study, and especially for studies with a child perspective.

This part of the report should answer questions like: How did you collect data and information? How did you find the persons involved in your study? What considerations did you have when planning the observations or creating the questions for the interviews/the observation formulas/the questionnaire?

### 1.2.6 Analysis and Results

When the data collection is finished, your work with transcriptions, interpretations and analysis start. In this section, you shall be specific on how this is done, e.g. if you follow a certain tool, system or programme, telling about the process from data to results.

The results shall be presented in a straightforward way, following a described structure, including tables, diagrams, figures etc. If necessary, detailed data or transcriptions of interviews can be added in an appendix. You shall clarify the tools for your analysis but not yet give your own comments to the results.

Sometimes, it is useful to add as a separate heading *Analysis*, e.g. when the analysis is closely linked to theoretical perspectives.

### 1.2.7 Discussions and/or Conclusions

This final chapter shows the results in relation to the aims of your study, the referred literature and a context. Try to answer your research questions or comment on your hypothesis.

Conclusions shall be verified by the results. Considerations on ethics, as well as on the meaning of the results in a wider context, should be discussed. In this chapter, you can make your own standpoints clear and also comment on your results and conclusions. What contributions can your study give to the studied field?

Finally, you can write about the consequences of the study and if there are any areas to point out for future research.

### 1.2.8 References

A list of all the sources for references and quotes shall be added. See section 1.3 below.

### 1.2.9 Appendices

Detailed information, letters to informants, questionnaires and tables are best put as appendices. Enumerate each Appendix, App 1, App 2 etc; give each a title and also their own side numbers, starting each Appendix on page 1.
1.3. References and quotations

1.3.1 References, short version of the APA system.

The APA (American Psychological Association) manual is a guideline for articles in psychology, but it is often used in other disciplines as well. The APA system for references does not separate between different kinds of sources, but of course, you can tell in the text if you refer to a book, a journal or a paper et cetera.

In historic and literary research, it is common to distinguish between Literature and Sources, in which Literature is other scholarly work, and Sources (källor) are things like private letters, deeds or other written material that throw light or provide facts on your topic. It is not common to make this distinction in psychology or social sciences, but it is applicable in some educational research, perhaps under separate headings e.g. Literature, Videos, Interviewees.

In the reference list, each reference follows:

Author, Lastname, Initials or first name. (Year). *Title in Italics*. City of Publisher: Name of Publisher.

In the text, the references are written in one of the following ways:

a) Andersson (1994) has described the Swedish family support system as being one of …

b) Swedish day care is not a threat to children’s later development (Andersson, 1994).

c) This effect can be related to the fact that the family support system makes parents better parents concludes Andersson (1994).

d) Children and teachers are active agents in children’s learning and development which lead to a methodology based on the children’s experiences (Doverborg & Pramling, 1996).

You shall strive for primary sources, meaning the original text, for instance read Piaget in a book by Piaget, not only as he is described by others. However, sometimes you want to use a secondary source and could refer in this way:

e) These experiments were interpreted by Piaget to show that children think differently than adults (Piaget in Crain, 1992). In your reference list, you refer to Crain’s book.

f) If you refer to a certain section in a book, you could write (Crain, 1992, p.xx-xy), a helpful gesture to the reader.

References to scientific journals or anthologies in the reference list. When using an article as a source, you refer in the usual way in the text by stating author, year and, when relevant, page. In the reference list you write somewhat differently, but you still start with the author and year ant the title of the article. In italics, you put the name of the journal or the title of the anthology, e.g:


If you find **sources on the internet**, the system of how to write references is under development. You refer to the source in the usual way in the text by stating author, year and, when relevant, page. In the reference list you could write author, **year and date**, title and the full internet address. The discussion on this can be followed in different net-sites, e.g.:


**The use of footnotes** is more common today, thanks to the computers. We recommend footnotes for specific information, e.g. the translation or definition of a word, or for additional information that takes the reader a bit further or beyond the topic in question.

### 1.3.2 Quotations

Quotations can be used when you have found something fundamental or something that cannot be described in a better way. The use of long quoted paragraphs is not recommended. Try to describe the important knowledge in your own words and just refer to the book as shown above.

If you choose to quote, you must quote exactly as the author has written, even if you think there are linguistic errors in the text. When you quote a whole paragraph, more than 40 words, this is how to do it:

**smaller letters, broader margin and the author, year and page noted**

> I consider this magazine a very important instrument for the communication of unity, knowledge, and ideology. It had, together with very well-attended both Swedish and Nordic meetings, a great influence on the modelling of the new profession.

(Tallberg-Broman, 1991, p. 261)

You can also choose to quote one sentence or part of a sentence in this way:

Going through the history of the Swedish pre-school teachers, it is apparent that the reason for the new profession was due to ‘the new circumstances, work and the home/household were separated’ (Tallberg-Broman, 1991, p.257).

References to specific parts of a book should be written as

(Tallberg-Broman, 1991, p.261)

(Tallberg-Broman, 1991, pp. 261-263) or

(Tallberg-Broman, 1991, ch. 7).

### 1.4. Criteria for assessing a thesis

There is a presentation of the criteria used for assessing Papers, Reports and Thesis. The criteria are linked to the Learning outcomes, and will thus vary somewhat between courses. They will be handed out to you and discussed with your course coordinator and advisor/supervisor.
1.5. **Requirements during the course**

The syllabus shows how many points your thesis credits. There is no general rule about how many pages you shall write, for a Project Report, 15-30 pages and for a Thesis 25-40 could be our recommendation. The seminar version of your thesis shall be accepted by your advisor (supervisor) and be sent to the opponents approximately one week before the seminar. After the seminar, necessary changes are being made by the author(s). Two copies of the final edition should be handed in to the course coordinator. It is the final paper that will be assessed for grading.

But, to finish the course, you also have to fulfil some other obligations. You shall be a peer reader and discussant during the writing process to other students, you shall participate in the other students’ seminars for their presentations and you shall serve as an opponent once or twice at a seminar.

When you partake in a seminar, you should obtain a copy of the work presented and prepare questions about the content and the structure. The seminar is a meeting place for discussion and learning, so all present should read the paper and prepare some questions for the general discussion.
2. Thesis seminar

The system we maintain at the Department of Child and Youth Studies for thesis seminars is modelled upon the Swedish “disputation” for doctoral dissertations. This way of discussing an academic thesis in public has medieval roots. Other countries have variations on a similar theme, although quite a few have diverted from the practice of making it a public occasion.

The word seminar is built on the Latin word stem for the Swedish “seed”. Thus, it is a sort of intellectual nursery where seeds of thought are spread, hundreds of flowers flower, and where you train and retrain the flowers of your thoughts. (Hartman, 1990, p.115, own translation)

The seminars are open, thus, you may invite students, colleagues, lecturers and friends to your seminar.

2.1 The role of the advisor

The advisor is responsible to serve as a leader of the seminar or to arrange for a colleague to serve as the leader. The advisor does not normally take an active part during the opposition and discussion, but leads the proceedings and takes notes of criticism and praise.

After the seminar, the advisor and the author discuss what changes are to be made in the text.

2.2 The procedure at the seminar

The seminar leader welcomes everybody and introduces at least herself, the respondent and the opponents. A short presentation of the procedure is done.

First, the respondent (i.e. the author of the work under discussion) is given a chance to correct mistakes in the work that she/he has discovered after sending it out. If there are important mistakes which will change the meaning, like a missing “not” in the text, or labels in diagrams which are wrong, the respondent should make such corrections at this time. Smaller mistakes, like spelling, the respondent can acknowledge more generally; ‘There are many other smaller mistakes, but I will leave those without comment’. A conscientious respondent can make a list of mistakes and hand it to the respondent.

The next step, time for the opponents. If you serve as an opponent, you should start by making a short review or summary of the whole study. Make your own summary – do not rely on the abstract the author made. Tell more about what the author did, than about the contents of the literature review. The summary gives the audience an orientation of the work. Overheads of the outline or structure might be particularly helpful. This short presentation of the paper should be in a neutral tone – it should not be readily apparent what you think is good or not so good.

The summary above should take about 10 minutes, no more! A common mistake is to make it too lengthy. The purpose of this part is to show the respondent that the opponents have understood his/her work. Criticism from a person who ‘just doesn’t get it’ can not be taken very
seriously. The opponents end this part by asking: ‘Do you accept this account of your work as an adequate representation of its contents?’ The respondent might well have some minor additions or corrections, but will generally accept the summary.

Then, the main part of the seminar starts. The opponents are free to give there opinions about different aspects about the work. Important things to look at and, to ask questions about are:

- Is the aim clearly expressed?
- Is the review of the literature relevant for the research questions?
- Do you get a clear picture of the method, and does the method suit the problem?
- Do the results answer the research questions?
- Are the conclusions drawn on the results relevant, the only possible conclusions, or could there be other interpretations?
- Do the different parts of the paper follow in a logical fashion?
- What is the value of the work?
- What is the new knowledge it has provided?

Let the respondent answer your questions and objections. Of course, if there are things which you do not understand in the paper, you should ask for clarifications. If you run out of things to ask, you can always ask what the respondent would like to have done differently, or how she/he wants to continue researching the subject. And, of course, what would you like to have added to the work? What can you suggest concerning new ideas, literature etc.?

Furthermore, some comments should be made about the formal aspects of writing in an academic context; if the title is appropriate, if important concepts are defined clearly, the general style, spelling, punctuation, or the manner of doing references.

Generally, there should be both praise and criticism, taking into consideration individual differences and different cultural norms on expressing criticism and praise. Mostly there should be an informed and competent analysis of the thesis as a research endeavour, with its strengths and weaknesses. If you have very serious criticism, you should tell the advisor and perhaps the respondent ahead of time. You should not let the seminar be the occasion for a total disparagement of the work.

At this point, ideally about 50 minutes have passed, (not more than 60!). You tell the audience and the seminar leader that you have finished. Usually, there will follow some comments from the seminar leader and applause from the audience.

Then, the seminar leader opens for questions and comments from the audience. Usually, this is a free discussion, and, with a well prepared audience, often, it turns out very interesting.

Finally, after the seminar, the advisor and the authors shortly evaluate the seminar and discuss whether there are causes to change or add anything to the thesis. Two copies of the final edition of the thesis shall be handed in to the course leader.

After the seminar, the seminar leader gives a short evaluation to the opponents of their part in the seminar.
2.3 The role of the opponents

Students, who act as opponents, play a very important part during the seminars. Although the authors have done their very best, it is satisfying when others show that your work is interesting, important or maybe thought provoking. Get to work immediately. You will probably have to read the study several times.

Serving as an opponent is an important responsibility and it is not easy to do it well. As most of you will be beginners in this task, we feel it preferable that you share the responsibility with another student. Thus, there will be two students per thesis/report.

The main task of the opponents is not to find faults with the work. It is:

- to present the thesis/report,
- to give an idea of how others perceive the work,
- to contribute with new ideas and perspectives and
- to stimulate reflection and discussion in the larger group at the seminar.

Prepare well for the oral presentation. How can the presentation contribute to learning? Plan for a friendly atmosphere, balancing praise and criticism. Strive to give and ask for information, and do not try to “get them”! A good climate for discussion is created when nobody feels attacked.

Agree on some principles and divide the tasks between you. Perhaps, you could prepare some general questions for the discussion with the audience.

2.4 Obtaining a copy for the seminars

Students are responsible for sending copies of the seminar edition to the advisor and to the opponents. The text could also be distributed as an attachment to a mail, or, be put on an internet based communication platform for all students to read and prepare.

2.5 Good luck

This guide serves to introduce the task of writing reports in an accepted form. Although, there are different ways of writing, not every one of them are scientifically adequate. We have tried to describe the system recommended at our department at Stockholm University.

It is not easy to write a report or a thesis; which has been stated by many. We conclude with some words, ascribed to Winston Churchill:

“I hate writing. I love having written.”
References


http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/APA_style
Appendix 1. Outline for the Thesis

Name, adress, phone, e-mail address:

**Topic and preliminary title:**

**Background** (why is this topic interesting?)

**Aim, Research questions** (what do I want to find out?)
Literature (what sort of literature do I plan to read and refer to?)
