



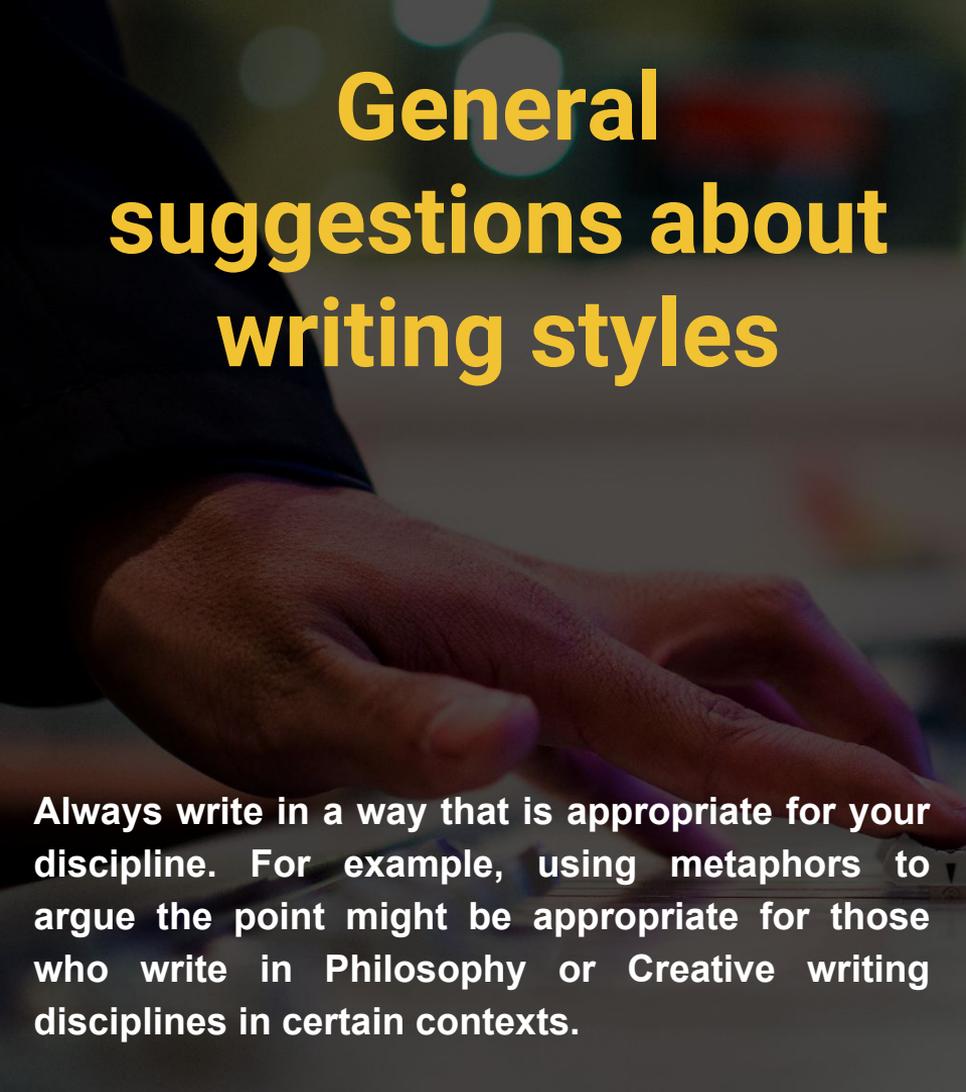
Developing your writing style for your thesis or dissertation.

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Objective:

This presentation explores different writing styles that research candidates may select from to craft their thesis or dissertation.

This presentation makes suggestions about which options are best suited to different scenarios.



General suggestions about writing styles

Always write in a way that is appropriate for your discipline. For example, using metaphors to argue the point might be appropriate for those who write in Philosophy or Creative writing disciplines in certain contexts.

Avoid bullet point discussion unless you are informed that it is appropriate for certain contexts.

Avoid writing indirectly such as using metaphors or 'coded' discussion.

A simple succinct writing style is usually the most effective way to put forward your point.

Avoid using **bold**, underline and *italics* in your paragraphs too often.

Only use words if you are sure what they mean. Overusing 'big' words that are obscure and known by a select few may cause your reader to constantly need to refer to a dictionary and this may obstruct the flow of their reading.

Writing style

The writing style that you use to construct your thesis is most likely determined by two factors: (a) the natural way in which you **prefer** to write and (b) the demands imposed by **other parties** such as university guidelines and your examiners.

Trying to categorise different people's writing style is difficult and subjective.

Despite these limitations, I shall try to define and distinguish two writing styles on the next two slides. Whether you can see these distinctions and agree with how I describe and classify these distinctions is your own decision.

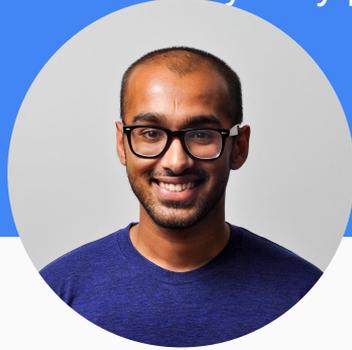
Be proud of your unique writing style

Your writing style is as unique as your fingerprint. I encourage you to positively develop this originality and be true to who you are. A research scholar aims to have their intended audience understand their arguments so that they may pass their dissertation examination.



Wendy Writer

Wendy chooses to use long sentences and long paragraphs to argue the point.



Ronny Reader

Ronny prefers to use short sentences and short paragraphs to put forward his argument.



Annie Author

Annie likes to use a creative and enriched writing style that takes the reader's mind on an enchanting journey.



Burt Books

Burt prefers to use a succinct direct style to craft his argument.

These four writing styles are not mutually exclusive.

Diplomatic, formal writing style

As a general rule, it is reasonable to assume that scholars anticipate that their peers will write in a way that is '**inoffensive**' and '**academic**'. What is *inoffensive* and *academic* is subjective. You may consult with others to determine the expectations required of those who study under the rules that govern your institution. The culture of higher education celebrates diversity of opinion as all knowledge is contested.

One way to write in a formal academic style is to show cultural sensitivity towards words that have lost popularity or are generally regarded as offensive. For example, in recent decades there has been a strong tendency to refer to the original inhabitants of Australia as 'Indigenous Australians'. Although the term 'Aboriginal Australian' is not necessarily offensive, this noun has lost favour in Australia in recent decades.

Diplomatic writing style (continued)

The requirement to use a **formal writing style** extends beyond the need to avoid using certain words. In most contexts, scholars are expected to use a formal style to craft sentences and paragraphs. The ability to do so is seen as an advanced scholarly writing skill. Of course, as stated earlier, you are always welcome to express your own opinions.

Compare these two writing styles:

My data proves that the management at XYZABC Ltd. are incompetent fools.

My data suggests that the management at XYZABC Ltd. do not possess strong business acumen.

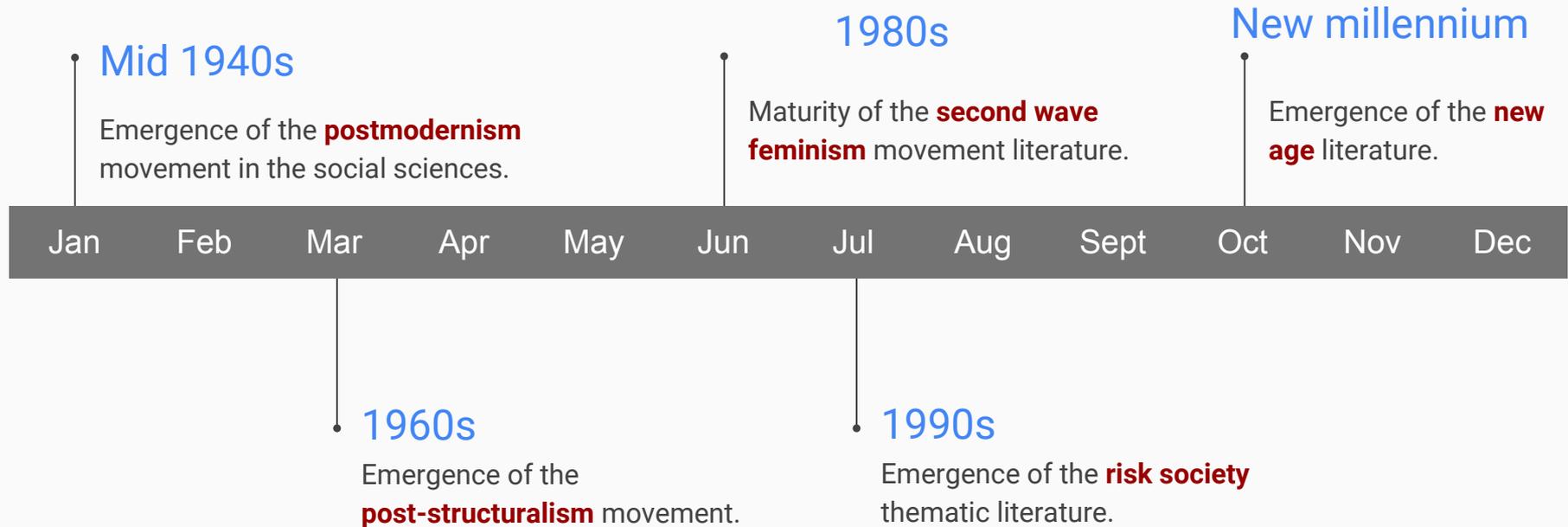
'Enriched' writing style

Foucault's discursive textual discussions are famed for their inventive, rich tapestry. This French sociologist of the post-structuralist era takes his readers on an exciting journey of intellectual inquiry to unravel the social foundations of the interlocking social problems that bedevil our society.

Factually concise writing style

Foucault's body of works consistently display a distinctive writing style. His works published in the 1970s offer fresh insight into the ways that overlapping social structures may shape problems that confront policy-makers.

Using a chronological writing style may be the best way to explore arguments within your chapter/s and between chapters. If you have a chronological structure, you must still make sure that your discussion is **thematic** and **conceptual**.



Use minimal footnotes and endnotes?

If your college style-guide or disciplinary norms mandate that you must use footnotes or endnotes in certain contexts, then you should use these in your thesis when required.

Some style-guides mandate that you must not use footnotes/endnotes - please check this.

If using footnotes and/or endnotes are optional, I suggest that you practice writing drafts that omit footnotes and endnotes in all cases where this is possible.

The insertion of footnotes may constantly cause your reader to switch from paragraphs to the bottom of your page. Your audience may lose their train-of-thought as they take time to relocate their original reading position after reading each footnote.

Endnotes remove your arguments from the context of your core discussion.

Some people argue that if a point is not worth including in your body of discussion, then it is a distraction or a piece of interesting trivia that does not truly belong in your thesis.

Past and present tense: citing theorists

Whether you write in the **past** or **present** tense may depend on factors such as your personal preference, the expectations of your discipline (e.g. examiners) and the style guide published by your educational institution for dissertations/theses.

When you cite a theorist's publication, it may work best to always write in the present. This style might be counterintuitive because a scholar's publication was written in the past.

Compare these writing styles and see which one you prefer:

Smith (1776) **argued** that an 'invisible hand' **managed** the capitalist economy.

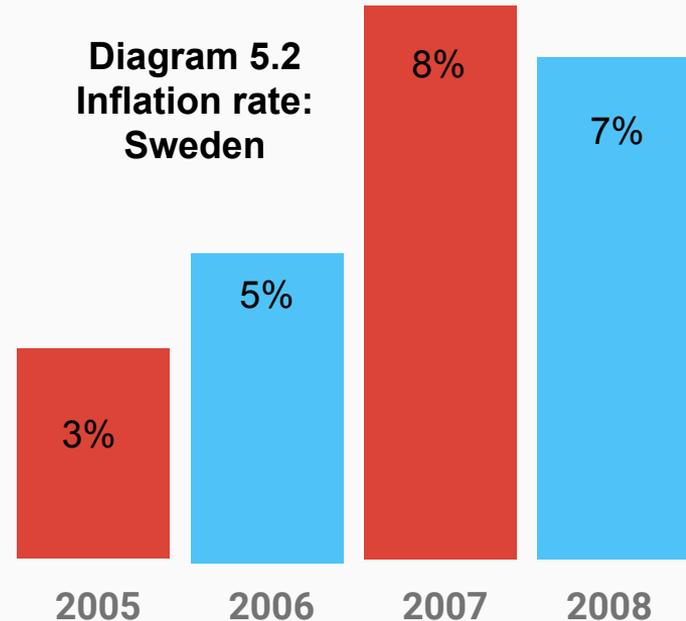
Smith (1776) **argues** that an 'invisible hand' **manages** the capitalist economy.

Avoid using both past and present styles to cite theory - choose one and be consistent.

When discussing quantitative data, it is normally acceptable to use past or present tense. When referring to a data set or diagram shown in your thesis, using **present tense** may work best. When discussing data generally, using **past tense** may work best.

The annual rate of inflation in Sweden was positive each year between 2005 and 2008. The rate of inflation in 2005 in this country was 3%.

Diagram 5.2 shows how the largest rate of increase in the rate of inflation, year-on-year during this period occurs between 2006 and 2007. The growth rate between two calendar years peaks at 3% during this period.



Past and present tense: citing original data

Whether you write in the **past** or **present** tense to analyse data may likewise depend on factors such as your personal preference, the expectations of your discipline (e.g. examiners) and the style-guide published by your educational institution.

Consider the case where you cite speech recorded during an interview:

Mary, age 19 (Transcript 4) **believed** that an 'invisible hand' **managed** Ireland's economy.

Ahmed, age 19 (Transcript 7) **argues** that an 'invisible hand' **manages** Ireland's economy.

Avoid using both past and present styles to cite data - choose one and be consistent.

Always keep your eye on the **big picture**. You should allocate more discussion to the core issues that your thesis/dissertation explores.

Minor issues ^{1.}

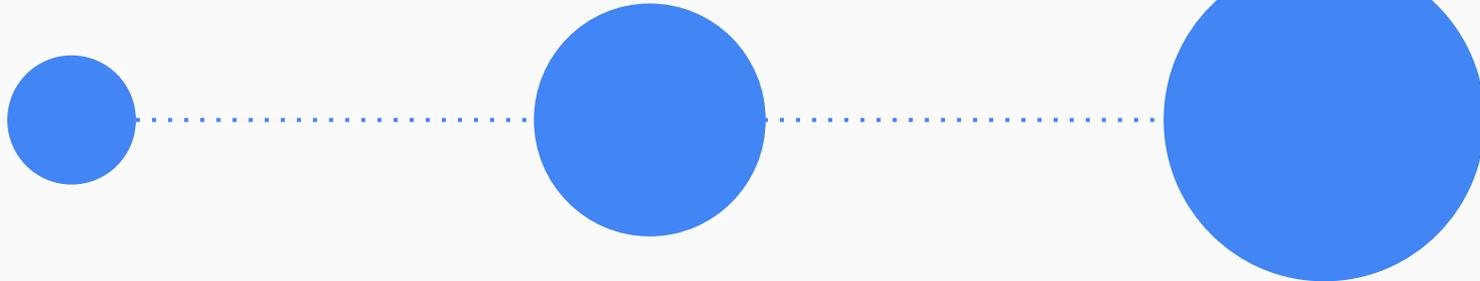
Sometimes an issue is relevant to the context of your thesis story, but it is not a core issue. Do not allow yourself to become sidetracked with minor issues.

Conclusion paragraphs

The conclusion paragraphs are a bookend to your chapter. It is normally acceptable to keep them succinct.

The big picture

Keep your eye on the big picture - your grand research question. Keep this question stuck on the wall at eye-level in the places where you write.



1. Minor issues may work best when explored as a brief discussion in a footnote or endnote.

Cumulative writing style

You should aim to write each paragraph in a cumulative way so that you build an argument from its foundation.

As you continue to write more paragraphs, you are developing further a single argument that you are posing throughout your chapter.



Foundation:
Chapter introduction

Building structure:
Body of your chapter

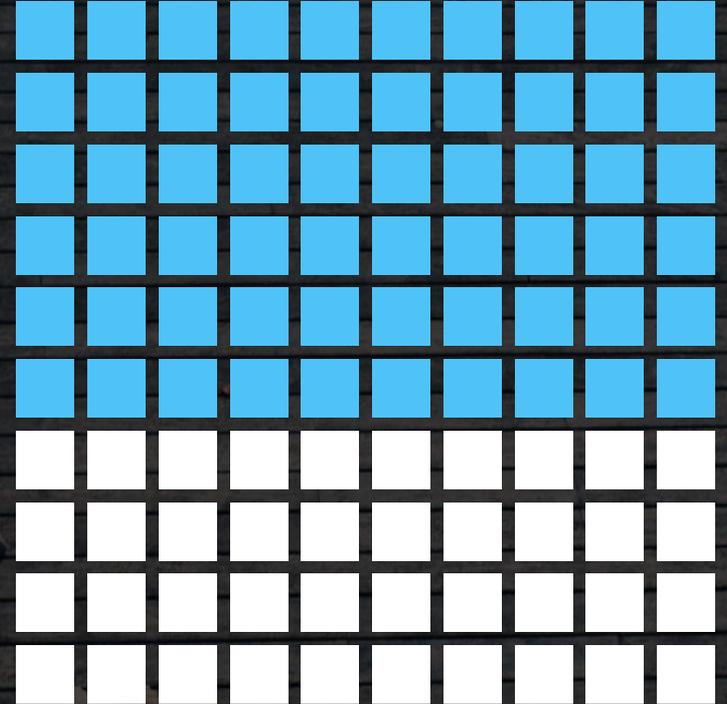
Balcony rooftop view:
Chapter conclusion

Can you not see the forest because of the trees?

It may be best to avoid having too many sub-arguments within a thesis chapter for arts and social sciences theses.

Discussing **two** or three Sub arguments within Your chapter may be an ideal number.

One argument is not enough to build a cumulative argument throughout your chapter. Five or more arguments within the same chapter may mean you lack detail or overwhelm the reader with too many distractions.



Simplicity

Segmenting your dissertation

As a general rule, theses that mostly or exclusively engage in qualitative data analysis use what is known as an 'extended argument' writing style. This means that you engage in long and connected textual discussion to put forward your point. To argue the point within a paragraph using this style, you may use this formula:

1. Introduce the argument, framing this with a conceptual statement
2. Explore the theory that you refer to by critically engaging with a theorist's texts
3. Illustrate and defend your argument with data analysis and/or empirical analysis
4. Explicitly state how your research advances theoretical knowledge
5. Close your argument by showing how you have illustrated the argument that you refer to in the opening of the paragraph. Aim to connect the wording of this sentence to the first sentence of the next paragraph.

Segmenting your dissertation (continued)

Because an extended writing style is favoured in the arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines, theses written in these disciplines tend to have less subsections and less short discussions than scientific theses and industry research reports.

Compare these two hypothetical structures that explore the same topic area:

Chapter 2 (thesis or dissertation)

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Socio-legal studies framework
- 2.3 Abstract philosophy framework
- 2.4 Conclusion

Chapter 2 (Industry consultancy report)

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Socio-legal studies framework
 - 2.2.1 Natural law
 - 2.2.2 International law
- 2.3 Abstract philosophy framework
 - 2.3.1 Western philosophy
 - 2.3.2 Eastern philosophy
- 2.4 Conclusion

Further reading



Fox, H. (1994), *Listening to the world: Cultural issues in academic writing*, Illinois: USA National Council of Teachers of English. <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED373331.pdf>>. Accessed 1 August 2016.

University of North Carolina (2016), *Style*, <<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/style/>>. Accessed 1 July 2016.

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