

10 Fundamental Thesis Preparation Tips

Dr. Dario Toncich



Tip Number 9 – Thesis Balance - What is In / What is Out?

There is a common perception amongst research students that examiners will be impressed by a large, thick dissertation full of content. There is also a perception that by filling appendices with large amounts of data, software source code, charts, etc. that the examiner will be impressed by the amount of work in the program. Neither of these perceptions are valid.

The most critical element to writing a thesis is the establishment of a simple, **central research theme** which summarizes – in one or two basic sentences – the scope of the work. Every inclusion in a thesis, be it a graph, chart, equation, table, source code or sentence needs to be assessed against the central research theme. If it is not relevant to the theme then it should probably be excluded from the thesis. To an examiner, there is no more obvious sign of a lack of grasp of the field than unnecessary padding in a thesis.

For many students the other issue for including/excluding work relates to what material should appear in the body of the thesis and what material should be relegated to appendices. In simple terms, the body of the thesis is where a research student tells the story of a program of research as it relates to the **central research theme**. Any large section of material (be it mathematical/chemical analysis, untabulated data, software design, experimental calculations, etc.) which interferes with the reading of the research story probably belongs in the appendices – provided that it is relevant to the **central research theme**. For example, in the body of the thesis, the first and last lines of a mathematical proof might be included but the detailed mathematics relegated to the appendix.

The appendices are for detailed material which relates to the **central research theme** but is included because it is not common/general knowledge. For example, the design of a portion of software might be included, but the design of a surrounding piece of user-interface software might not (because it can be classified as common/general knowledge and it is not specific to the **central research theme**).

The critical lesson here is that the thesis should not become a garbage dump for materials which look peripherally relevant to the research field but which, in the context of the **central research theme**, are not relevant to the research story.