CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A THESIS?

A completed thesis or dissertation is a major accomplishment of sustained concentration. It represents setting and achieving a high academic goal. Often the words “thesis” and “dissertation” are used interchangeably and there is no clear distinction between them. In some contexts, thesis refers to that completed at the master’s level, while dissertation refers to the doctoral level. In other contexts, the opposite is true. For pragmatic purposes, I will apply the term thesis to both levels. At the most basic understanding, a thesis is the result of a substantial piece of research and scholarly writing executed with a high level of autonomy. This is the case for both master and doctoral level theses, but a doctoral thesis carries the added responsibility of presenting proof of original contribution to knowledge.

The notion of what constitutes a thesis differs greatly among disciplines. Individual programs determine the preferred format, length, and criteria of an acceptable thesis. These factors change over time and today’s theses are quite different from those written as little as ten years ago (Paltridge, 2002). New methodologies have been introduced and some thesis committees now accept innovative formats. In recent years, theses have taken the form of a novel, a comic book, or a script for a play.

THESIS FORMATS

The student’s field, supervisor, and program largely dictate the choice of thesis format. Some supervisors are amenable to allowing students to extend the boundaries of thesis form and methodologies, while others hold views that are more traditional. Each format has advantages and disadvantages, and the supervisor and committee should be supportive in regards to the format selected by the student.

Monographs

The standard thesis is a single, book-like monograph that contains interlinking chapters, usually an introduction, literature review, methodology, the research findings, and a conclusion clearly identifying
the contribution to knowledge. Some theses conclude by indicating the need for future research and questions or directions that emerged from the research. Generally, a typical master’s level thesis is not more than 150 pages and the doctoral thesis is around 300 pages. Theses as long as 600 pages do exist, but this is not recommended. It is common in the humanities and social sciences to revise the thesis into a publishable book, and a 600-page tome will require substantial reworking.

In the past, theses were bound and students were required to provide copies for the library and program. Often, they gave one as a gift to the supervisor. Today, most theses are published online, which reduces the student’s costs and allows for much greater access.

The major disadvantage of monograph theses is the time they take to write. They can then be published as a book or a series of chapters, but crafting publishable papers from the thesis requires additional work. Chapters rarely conform to the word counts or form of published papers. For this reason, many programs that traditionally required monograph theses are rethinking their practices to include theses by publication.

Thesis by Publication

The thesis by publication is a collection of related papers either accepted or submitted for publication in research journals. The papers are linked by theoretical or practical connections that frame the research. The thesis can contain any number of papers, but most thesis committees require between three and seven. It is expected that the papers will have been published in peer-reviewed journals, and that the candidate is the first author or the major contributor of ideas and experimental data. In some disciplines, the first chapter must be published, the second submitted for review, and the last in progress at the time of the oral defense. Other programs expect all chapters to have been published or accepted for publication.

The thesis by publications better prepares students to take on future roles as researchers. As part of their studies, students learn to write for publication rather than complete a monograph, and then rewrite for publication. Each form requires a different set of writing skills, doubling the student’s workload. This model allows for and encourages faster dissemination of research, something that is important in highly competitive fields where information and technology demand innovations. By the time a student would have written and defended a monograph thesis, the topic or research might be obsolete or published by another researcher.