

How To Write Your First Thesis

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*This book is dedicated to our children,
Tobias Gruba and Anna, Alex, and Sonia
Zobel, who sometimes have to tell their
fathers to get away from the keyboard.*

Preface

Completion of a minor thesis involves mastery of a range of accomplishments. It requires that you read other theses, undertake an investigation, manage a large number of references, assess the work of others, objectively interpret data, critically reflect on your own work, and master basics such as writing a long document efficiently on a computer. Throughout this book we discuss the components of a minor thesis—typically, the first thesis that a student ever writes—and set out the various tasks that you need to complete in order to finish the work successfully.

This isn't our first book on thesis writing; we are also the authors of the companion volume, *How to Write a Better Thesis*, originally written by David Evans and published in 1995, and revised by us in 2003 and 2011. That book is primarily intended for senior research students undertaking a thesis across a period of years. In writing this new book, we focus solely on first theses. Although we have relied on content from the other volume (from which about half of this book is taken), we have observed that the challenges of writing a minor thesis, especially given the time and resource constraints, are very different. Another factor is that senior research projects such as PhDs take a range of forms, whereas a minor thesis is—and should be—the product of a more or less standard approach. Our goal here is to help guide you through your first piece of substantial research.

As in the earlier book, we have blended our voices to make the reading easier, so we write 'I' rather than 'we' (except in this preface). We have blended our research perspectives too, as one of us (Paul) has a background in the social sciences and the other (Justin) works primarily in computer science. By combining our perspectives and backgrounds, we believe that the book is made more accessible, and captures the best of what each of us has to offer across the disciplines.

David's voice is prominent in our companion volume, and we are deeply grateful to him and his estate for his text, and for inspiring us in our supervision of students. While this new volume contains fewer of his words, it is strongly influenced by his approach.

We are also grateful to Anna Zobel for the illustrations. Her sketches capture for us the spirit of intensity and joy that successful study can bring.

Two Introductions

In this book, we draw on the experiences of two of our students. We introduce you to them here, so that, when you come to our discussion of issues they faced, you understand their background.

Let us first introduce you to Anouck. Although she had been in Australia for a few years, she was originally from France. Fluent in French and English, she had also studied some Chinese. Anouck had completed one semester of a Master's degree, and during that time she earned good marks in each of her four subjects. Having been in one of my (Paul's) classes, she approached me before the start of her second semester to discuss a minor thesis. Anouck told me that she was interested in language and media, a subject that I taught, and we agreed to meet to discuss some ideas. Later, at our first meeting, she told me that she wanted to do a minor thesis because she was considering doing a PhD. Anouck didn't, however, know much about theses, how they are structured, or how they are examined. As her supervisor, I knew that she would need some guidance, but I was certainly interested in her project.

Like Anouck, Mickey also had an interest in language, but his interests stemmed from being an avid reader of stories, such as fiction published free by authors on the internet. As an IT student, Mickey had observed that web search tools were unhelpful for the task of finding new things to read, and that recommendations on websites were unreliable. When he first spoke to me (Justin), he brought a broad question: What are the alternatives to conventional search methods for finding fiction? This question combined some of my own interests, so, after a couple of meetings in which we talked through possible approaches, we decided to work together, and in the process turned his rather vague idea into a well-defined project.

The experiences of Mickey and Anouck (and our many other research students) have helped us to appreciate the challenges of undertaking a minor thesis, and this is why we use their experiences as examples throughout this book.

How to Use This Book

In Chaps. 1–3, we explain what a minor thesis is and how the task of undertaking a minor thesis should be approached. In Chaps. 4–8, we review the components of a minor thesis in turn, from the introduction to the conclusion, and discuss what is expected in each. In Chap. 9, we give guidance on editing and on preparation of your thesis for submission.

You can read the book cover to cover, or dip in and out of the chapters. We suggest that you turn to sections that you need at the time that you need them, and compare our advice to that of your classmates and supervisor. But remember that your minor thesis is your own work, and, when you have understood our advice (and its limitations), you should feel confident about doing what seems to best fit

your own particular project and style, even if this differs from the approach we have described.

You should also seek out additional resources. Other books give detailed advice on writing style, referencing, development of effective graphs, experimental design, and so on; these are issues of relevance to academic writing of every level, and our experience is that many students benefit from such resources far more than they had anticipated. Our focus here is entirely on the challenges that are specific to a minor thesis. Use of this book will, we hope, set you on the path to completion of a successful and satisfying project.

Paul Gruba
Justin Zobel

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