What an Examiner Expects from a Thesis

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Description
Professor Souter’s presentation outlines what he, as an examiner, looks for when assessing a thesis.

Location
iC - SBS Teaching Facility

This event is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/sbshdr/2010/papers/14
Every study is unique

So it is impossible to develop a set of rules that suggest a successful study

There is no such thing as “right” or “wrong” in formulating a research plan or in getting a “good” research question

Consequently, as an examiner, I don’t look for this
The doctoral process – some relevant quotes:

“To the deepest, darkest part of the forest”
“So that we can all find our way out together!”
“Lost in the wilderness”
“Like learning a Martian language”
“A Sisyphean struggle”

In Greek legend Sisyphus was punished for his misdeeds in life by being condemned to roll a heavy stone up a hill.

As he neared the top, the stone rolled down again, so his labour was everlasting and futile – not unlike a doctorate for some unfortunate students

Keep focused on a happy ending!

Research isn’t usually done in a vacuum

Even “ground-breaking” research relies on previous work in that field or in a related field

Good science is usually incremental – there are not many major breakthroughs – especially in a doctorate

Most research builds on what has come before

Know your subject!
Clearly, a thorough literature review is essential
Must include seminal papers & show you understand them

Pay attention to the details
Are there simplifying assumptions that need to be tested?
Are connections between key results by different researchers being ignored in your thesis?
Remember that your thesis needs to demonstrate

That you have a capacity for substantial independent research

That you have made an original and distinct contribution to knowledge

The research process is like an hourglass – so your thesis should be as well

Source: http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/strucres.htm
Some criteria for a “good” quantitative research study include:

Explicitness (distinct & testable concepts)

Clarity (Meaning obvious and clear relationships between concepts)

Originality

Testable and reasonable hypotheses

Theoretical significance or social relevance

**So, I do look for these things in a thesis**

You should have stated the research problem in a testable form.

I look for one or more hypotheses as these are critical to most quantitative studies.

They should be phrased as a positive, empirical assertion, such as there is a relationship between X & Y.

“As brand loyalty weakens, market shares will become more volatile”

Diagrams help me a lot when I look at hypotheses.
Davis & Parker suggest a good dissertation

- Has research that is needed and interesting
- Has a theoretical base
- Uses appropriate research methods to solve the problem
- Was clearly achievable from the start

So, I look for these things as well

I also look to see if the thesis was a SMART project
Specific, Manageable, Achievable, Realistic & Time-bound

It’s also nice if I can see that the research
Excited you
Turned you on
Created some passion

The best thesis is a “done” thesis!

Mullens and Kiley have found experienced examiners
• Expect the student to pass
• Are reluctant to fail a student - most are distressed if they do so
• Come to a decision about quality by about the end of Chapter Two
• Have a formative rather than a reflective view of thesis examination
• Don’t take all that much notice of institutional criteria when examining a thesis

That sounds pretty much like me
Examiners feel a ‘good’ thesis

- Has good critical analysis and argument
- Is self-critical, rigorous and confident
- Contributes to knowledge
- Is original, creative and has a degree of risk taking [but not too much]
- Is comprehensive
- Has a scholarly approach
- Has good presentation and structure
- Contains a sound methodology

A less than ideal thesis

- Has too much detail and a lack of real analysis
- Lacks good argument and rigour
- Has shoddy presentation (typos etc)
- Suggests a lack of confidence, energy and engagement
- Does not critique its own analysis
- Makes sweeping generalisations
- Has an inadequate or poorly expressed methodology
What is a good “quantitative” doctorate?

• There are no specific criteria apart from university guidelines for examiners and these differ – but remember what was said earlier!

• But it does usually have to make “a substantial and original contribution to knowledge”
  - but what is substantial and what is original?

• NO BLUNDERS is still key – especially in the quantitative methods used and the conclusions drawn about the quantitative results obtained

My evaluation checklist

• Is the quantitative analysis used CORRECT
My evaluation checklist

• Is the quantitative analysis used CORRECT

• Is the presentation of the analysis and the results APPROPRIATE [Do I know all I need to know from what is written?]

• Is the finish GOOD [Do the final chapters make sense and make a real contribution?]

IS IT CLEAN?

• The thesis should be a pleasure to read
• Language should be simple
• Appropriate references should be made
• Layout and spacing should be good
• Spelling and grammar should be correct
The final copy must be ACCEPTABLE to be kept in a library and the research itself should be of sufficient quality to be published in a very good journal

In conclusion – I ask

• Were the analyses done properly?
• Were the results sensible and clear from the data analysis reported?
• Were the results reported in appropriate detail?
• How were the tables and appendices [if any]?
• Did the conclusions and recommendations flow from the results reported?
• Is the thesis a good piece of scholarly work?
• Did the candidate do a good job?