Writing a Masters Dissertation – writing a first draft

Dr Reza Gholami
Academic Development Directorate (ADD)
add@soas.ac.uk
Aims & Outcomes

• To gain an understanding of the common difficulties and problems encountered in the course of producing a dissertation

• To feel better equipped for overcoming those challenges by way of writing techniques and strategies for planning/strategies

• To start writing?
Stages?

- Remember: although it may be easier to think and talk in terms of ‘stages’, writing a dissertation is in reality one continuous process.
- ‘Stages’ will, therefore, overlap (writing/reading/thinking).
- Think in terms of on-going intellectual processes of research, analysis and knowledge-production with which you are personally and deeply involved.
- WRITING IS A CENTRAL AND EQUALLY ON-GOING ASPECT OF THESE PROCESSES.
Producing a structured outline

A framework working from *overall title* to *chapter title* to *section/sub-section headings* provides:

- A constant point of reference, mapping unknown territory for the reader
- A structural guide for the writer
- A point of reference for discussions between writer and supervisor
Drafting an outline

• Abstract?
• Introduction?
• Literature review?
• Methodology?
• Presentation & analysis of data?
• Conclusions?
• Appendices?
Planning your chapters

- Organise your ideas and arguments in order to argue effectively
- Split chapters into sections linked by a common theme. Provides clarity
- Chapter headings and subheadings are organisers which should convey a sense of the key points in the chapter; should be substantive, informative, and relevant.
- Avoid over/under-organisation of chapters
- Avoid repetition and ambiguity
Planning your chapters

- A sense of **logical progression**; structure must keep your argument on track
- **Coherence**; establish clear links within chapters and between chapters
- Include signals or signposts into your text that will help guide the reader
Research questions

- What are you interested in / what do you want to know?
- Write these down as concretely and in as much detail as you possibly can.
- This will help to identify where the weaknesses/gaps (or indeed strengths) are and point you in the direction of further research/reading.
- Of course, it is taken for granted that you have a good grasp of key literature in your field.
No concrete Q yet?

• Don’t worry if your question is still quite vague.
• Keep working hard on it (it is intellectual labour after all!), but be aware that a good question can take time to develop.
• Work with what (and however many) you have.
• CRUCIALLY: use these questions/ideas/arguments to draft a working ABSTRACT
• This is a great starting point!
• Use the abstract to draft an outline…
Introduction
I. Muslims in Migration

- Dominant trends within the field (a fixated approach to ‘Muslim religiosity’);
- The reasons for this fixation – approaches to religion in modern Western intellectual tradition; a problematic secularization thesis; the Rushdie affair; 9/11; 7/7; Islamophobia, etc.
- Identifying the gaps, highlighting potential contributions and signposting to following sections.

(There are lit. reviews running through this chapter!)
Example of an outline

II. The Complexities of the Secular

- A brief outline of the history and theoretical approaches to 'the secular'.

- Focus on the complexities and nuances of the secularism (especially cross-culturally).

- Pointing out what my aims are — what do I find useful and not so useful (highlighting the need to look at Shi'ism and diaspora).

(There are also lit. reviews running through this chapter).
Example of an outline

III. The Iranian Context

- The history of modern Iran and the Islamic revolution (to the extent that it’s relevant to diasporic secularity)
- Specific cases of secular discourses and practices – from media, literature and personal encounters and experiences (talk about methods).

(Again, relevant lit. is engaged with.)

Conclusion – revisit question(s) and debates. State what has been achieved. Make recommendations.
The Hijab: A mark of freedom or a symbol of oppression?

1. Background – the Hijab’s multifarious meanings
   1.1 The hijab in its historical dimension
   1.2 The hijab in its theological dimension
   1.3 The hijab in its social-political dimension
The Hijab: A mark of freedom or a symbol of oppression?

2. The Hijab in Turkey
   2.1 Secular Turkey
   2.2 The Turkish constitutional approach to equality and religious rights
   2.3 Case law before the European Court of Human Rights: Leyla Sahin vs. Turkey
The Hijab: A mark of freedom or a symbol of oppression?

3. The Hijab in France

3.1 Secular France

3.2 The French constitutional approach to equality and religious rights

3.3 Case law before the European Court of Human Rights: Dogru vs. France
The ‘so what?’ factor:

- Why is this topic worth researching?
- Why are you asking these particular research questions?
- What do you want to find out?
- How does your research complement existing scholarship?
- Why is your dissertation worth reading?
Planning the introduction – the ‘what?’, ‘why?’ and ‘how?’

Research focus
• Provide brief background information to make it clear why you are conducting this research and why you think it will be significant.
• Make the precise focus of the research clear.
• Set boundaries if necessary. (Don’t fear your limits; embrace them – explicitly!)

Research question(s) & argument
• State your objectives, i.e. the main questions which the research seeks to discuss and answer
• Present your main hypothesis clearly (in one sentence).

Overview
• Give a brief description of the content of the other sections of the research paper; how will you achieve your research objectives? Manage expectations!
Introduction

‘The struggle for women’s rights in the 20th century represented a historical march towards freedom and equality. … Despite the emergence of international human rights law, legal rights provide no guarantees that women’s rights will be upheld, fundamentally because of the perceived role and status of women in different cultures. It is in this regard that the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, is discussed…’
The Hijab: A mark of freedom or a symbol of oppression?

Second paragraph:

‘The **main objective** of this dissertation is to **analyse** the constitutional approaches of Turkey and France with relation to the right of adorning the hijab, and the wider issue of religious freedom and the right to equality. **This entails a study of** not only the domestic laws of Turkey and France, but also the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as an **appraisal** of international law’s standpoint on religious freedom.’
‘ [In this dissertation] it is put forward however that the decision to proscribe the hijab in both countries runs counter to accepted international standards of human rights, in particular freedom of religion and equality. … it is asserted that such a proscription is an affront to the rights of a number of Muslim women. … It is this author’s view that there is a critical need to strike a balance between public and private rights.’
Integrating the literature review

- What is a literature review?
- Does it have to be in one section?
- Writing begins while reading: importance of critical reading skills and keeping careful records
- Importance of presenting a rounded debate: all the relevant arguments and the counterarguments
- Most important of all is to make your own voice heard e.g. via interim conclusions. These also help keep things on track.
Methodology

• Important to make very clear the rationale for data collection: justification for primary vs. secondary

• Important to make clear the stages of data collection and the context

• Aim towards ‘triangulation’ of data, i.e. cross-checking information from multiple sources
Conclusion

- Explain the main findings of your research, and relate them back to your original argument/question
- Make clear connections between the different parts of your dissertation; synthesise or tie everything together
- More than just a summary! Consider the implications of your findings, i.e. their meaning, significance and consequences
- If appropriate, make recommendations for future practice or research
- Be confident (though not pompous or cocky)!