Writing to convince your MSc/PhD examiners by drawing from the Toulmin (1984) argumentation model: the introductory chapter of your thesis or proposal

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# Table 1. The Characteristics of Dissertations

Below are the criteria the focus group members specified for each level of dissertation quality.

## Outstanding
- Is original and significant, ambitious, brilliant, clear, clever, coherent, compelling, concise, creative, elegant, engaging, exciting, interesting, insightful, persuasive, sophisticated, surprising, and thoughtful
- Is very well written and organized
- Is synthetic and interdisciplinary
- Connects components in a seamless way
- Exhibits mature, independent thinking
- Has a point of view and a strong, confident, independent, and authoritative voice
- Asks new questions or addresses an important question or problem
- Clearly states the problem and why it is important
- Displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated literature
- Exhibits command and authority over the material
- Argument is focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained
- Is theoretically sophisticated and shows a deep understanding of theory
- Has a brilliant research design
- Uses or develops new tools, methods, approaches, or types of analyses
- Is thoroughly researched
- Has rich data from multiple sources
- Analysis is comprehensive, complete, sophisticated, and convincing
- Results are significant
- Conclusion ties the whole thing together
- Is publishable in top-tier journals
- Is of interest to a larger community and changes the way people think
- Pushes the discipline's boundaries and opens new areas for research

## Acceptable
- Is workmanlike
- Demonstrates technical competence
- Shows the ability to do research
- Is not very original or significant
- Is not interesting, exciting, or surprising
- Displays little creativity, imagination, or insight
- Writing is pedestrian and plodding
- Has a weak structure and organization
- Is narrow in scope
- Has a question or problem that is not exciting—is often highly derivative or an extension of the adviser’s work
- Displays a narrow understanding of the field
- Reviews the literature adequately—knows the literature but is not critical of it or does not discuss what is important
- Can sustain an argument, but the argument is not imaginative, complex, or convincing
- Demonstrates understanding of theory at a simple level, and theory is minimally to competently applied to the problem
- Uses standard methods
- Has an unsophisticated analysis—does not explore all possibilities and misses connections.
- Has predictable results that are not exciting
- Makes a small contribution

## Very Good
- Is solid
- Is well written and organized
- Has some original ideas, insights, and observations, but is less original, significant, ambitious, interesting, and exciting than the outstanding category
- Has a good question or problem that tends to be small and traditional
- Is the next step in a research program (good normal science)
- Shows understanding and mastery of the subject matter
- Has a strong, comprehensive, and coherent argument
- Includes well-executed research
- Demonstrates technical competence
- Uses appropriate (standard) theory, methods, and techniques
- Obtains solid, expected results or answers
- Misses opportunities to completely explore interesting issues and connections
- Makes a modest contribution to the field but does not open it up

## Unacceptable
- Is poorly written
- Has spelling and grammatical errors
- Has a sloppy presentation
- Contains errors or mistakes
- Plagiarizes or deliberately misreads or misuses sources
- Does not understand basic concepts, processes, or conventions of the discipline
- Lacks careful thought
- Looks at a question or problem that is trivial, weak, unoriginal, or already solved
- Does not understand or misses relevant literature
- Has a weak, inconsistent, self-contradictory, unconvincing, or invalid argument
- Does not handle theory well, or theory is missing or wrong
- Relies on inappropriate or incorrect methods
- Has data that are flawed, wrong, false, fudged, or misinterpreted
- Has wrong, inappropriate, incoherent, or confused analysis
- Includes results that are obvious, already known, unexplained, or misinterpreted
- Has unsupported or exaggerated interpretation
- Does not make a contribution
The Introductory Chapter

- One of the things Msc/PhD students found hardest when writing thesis was getting the introduction chapter sorted.
- You need a kind of argumentation skill to craft out what is it that you are doing and why the work that’s been done, worth doing.
- What new contribution to knowledge this thesis is going to make. What does the reader get out of reading it?
- It should also serve as an orientation for what is to come, so the reader knows what to expect.
The Importance of the First Chapter

• Your first chapter is extremely important because it sets the scene and the tone for the thesis.
• It is your first real opportunity to highlight the importance and value of your work and to contextualize it, all in a well-written, clear and interesting manner.
• This is the first impression that the reader or your examiner will get. It will give an indication of the writing style, the depth of research and content, structure, language and complexity.
• It showcases the gap you are going to fill using analytical, conceptual and critical thinking to argue out your “baby” not as a still born, but a vibrant good-looking baby worth to be admired.
Examiners indicate that they pay considerable attention to the first chapter, which creates a strong initial indication as to the standard of the thesis.

“Especially early in your thesis, the reader is unlikely going to have a strong commitment to slogging through your writings.

If you make the task loathsome, the reader will simply stop. Make life easy for your reader. Help her to identify simply and precisely the contributions of your thesis to knowledge” (Davis 2001)
In more of a PhD thesis, or little less in MSc thesis, the ability to argue effectively has always been central to success.

As Christopher Shroeder notes, “A person who can argue coherently and cogently commands a considerable amount of authority in our . . . [community of discourse], and such a person is considered to be educated, to have power. . . .” (Shroeder 2008, p. 95)

Attention to argument also reflects authors’ emphasis on “rationality, critical thinking, and the need for high-level writing skills in formulating and justifying [the reason(s) for conducting the research]” (Kneupper, 1984, p. 113).
Unfortunately and too sad, a community of discourse that treats argument as a simplistic contest concerned themselves primarily with winners and losers (Bhaskar 2010; Toulmin 1984), where power play are predominately visible to silence emergence of new idea and academic freedom (Bhaskar 2008; Markus 1983; Ngwenyama et al. 1997; Okhuysen and Bonardi 2011).

That should not be the case in your thesis writing.

You are encouraged to offer rebuttal in a thoughtful and polite manner to the assumptions you feel is erroneous and if allowed un-critique could lessen the relevancy of your thesis or the novel idea you are conveying. “Separate your idea from the crowd”
Advantage of argumentation

- Nonetheless, in our increasingly diverse world with complex social phenomena, where information systems is increasingly implicated:
  - argument remains a valuable tool for breaking through divisions and moving dissimilar parties toward inquiry, understanding and negotiation with a view to develop new theories that explain the complex social phenomena that seems not to be obvious (Bhaskar 2008; Markus 1983; Ngwenyama et al. 1997; Okhuysen and Bonardi 2011).
  - You cannot persuade your reader that you have done something important if you cannot argue out what you did or why even you think it is important (Davis 2001).
Examiner recognizes the role of argument and persuasion in thesis writings”, noting that “argumentation helps develop:

- key cognitive skills, including defining different positions, synthesizing literature as evidence to support arguments, and assessing the author’s underlying theoretical assumptions that supports her thesis.

- If not done correctly, examiners consider your thesis, especially chapter one as rhetoric, leaden prose, spurious and “fallacies-of-made-up”, which negate the import of the novel idea you are trying to convey.
Stephen Toulmin Model of Argumentation

- Toulmin is a philosopher and logician from London who mainly taught in various universities in USA prior to his death in 4 December 2009 (aged 87) in Los Angeles, California.
- He devoted his works to the analysis of moral reasoning, meta-philosophy, argumentation, ethics, and rhetoric argumentation.
- His model has been widely adopted in thesis research writing because it is clear and easy to follow, providing the writer and reader with basic guidelines for creating a map of an argument that leads to a convincing thesis.
Toulmin’s (1984) Model of Argumentation

- **Fact**
  - **Data/evidence/**
  - **Qualifier/boundary**
  - **Warrant**
  - **(probably)**
  - **Claim**
  - **Conclusion**
  - **Rebuttal**
  - **Backing**
Definition of Data

- Data (Grounds) is the “Evidence, facts, data, and information that are the reasons for the claim in the first place.
- Data is significant because it establishes the basis of the argument. In effect, the data is the starting point from which all sound arguments must begin.
Kinds of data

Data in the form of Examples

- In order to develop an argument that handguns lead to unnecessary injuries and deaths, a writer may begin by citing the example of a child who carelessly shot himself while playing with a handgun, apparently from grey literature.
Testimony

- In order to develop an argument that air pollution is a significant cause of genetic mutations, a writer would begin with testimony from a renowned geneticist from peer-review literature.
Kinds of data

Statistics

- In order to develop an argument for introducing a persuasive information technology on HIV patients, the student could use the statistical data that justifies the pervasiveness of HIV, the number of deaths and anti-retroviral drugs in supply within the context of investigation.
A claim is a position on the issue, the purpose, the thesis behind the argument.

A claim is the point of the argument - the claim represents the conclusion that the arguer is advocating.

The claim is the essence of the argument, your position in the thesis.
Examples of Claims

- Persuasive information technology has been an excellent technology
- Handguns should be banned
- Increases in air pollution cause increases in respiratory illnesses
- Global warming is bad for our planet
If a writer was arguing that persuasive technology is important and relevant to HIV patients’ management, the writer may state that patients “will probably” adopt the technology. The writer is demonstrating to the audience that he or she cannot predict with certainty the subjective experience of others.
Definition of Warrant

- The warrant is the component of the argument that establishes the logical connection between the data and the claim.
- One could equate the warrant with the reasoning process used by the speaker to arrive at the claim.
- This is the point in the argument where audience members may not agree with the conclusions (claim) being drawn.
- Warrants are largely unstated - implied.
Why are Warrants Important?

- Warrants are essential to an argument. They make a logical connection between the accepted data and the claim.
- Warrants answer the often unspoken audience question - “How did you arrive at that claim based on the evidence presented?”
Types of Warrants

- A warrant can be classified according to purpose and type.
  - **Authoritative Warrants** - “there is a connection between these two things because this authority says so!”
  - **Motivational Warrants** - rely on appeals to the audience’s convictions, virtues, and values to support the claim -
  - **Substantive Warrants** - rely on traditional forms of logical reasoning - cause-Effect/Effect-Cause, Generalization based on series of examples
Authoritative Warrants

- A writer claims that persuasive IT reminds HIV patients to take their anti-retroviral drugs and exercise if they want to live longer. Warrant states: experts believe that regular intake of such drugs with exercising prolong their life and improves the body physique.

- A writer claims that handguns should be banned - Warrant states that experts believe handguns cause needless death.

- A writer claims that raising global temperatures will change global weather patterns. Warrant states that experts believe ocean water temperatures control world weather patterns.
Motivational Warrants

- A writer claims *Titanic* is the best movie of all time; the **Warrant** states that *Titanic* appeals to all of our romantic tendencies.
- However, note the argument wouldn’t be effective if the reader was an unromantic person.
- A writer claims that we need to control global warming for our grandchildren’s sake; the **Warrant** appeals to those who have children or plan to have them. It would not be an effective Warrant for a chronic and confirmed bachelor.
Substantive Warrants

- Writer claims: the government should tax companies according to the pollution they produce; the Warrant is that pollution causes damage to health.

- Writer claims: I shouldn’t vacation in Nigeria over the Christmas break with my daughters; the Warrant is: it is traumatic to relax when their local news are awashed with activities of kidnappers, cattle-rustlers, Boko-Haram terrorists and girl-child-forced-marriage (GCFM) syndrome.

- Writer claims: if we don’t do something about global warming we will have more storms like hurricane Matthew. Example to generalization reasoning – take a look at Haiti nation.
Definition of Backing

- Backing is the material that supports the Warrant in the argument (in thesis writing it is mostly your in-text citation)
- Backing can help audience members understand the reasoning used in the Warrant
- Without backing, audience members may question the reasoning in the argument.
Why is Backing Important?

- Without backing, the Warrant for the claim may lack support and the audience may not accept the claim.
- Backing appears to have its greatest effect on the credibility of an argument or speaker. With backing, the argument seems more credible. Without it, the argument seems lacking.
Types of Backing

- Backing can include any type of support material. Most commonly, backing consists of one or a combination of the following:
  - Citing the authorities in the field or in the context of discourse
  - Statistics
  - Examples
  - Testimony
A qualifier is an exception to the claim presented by the arguer.

In Toulmin’s model, arguments are not considered universally true. The qualifier demonstrates how arguments can be strengthened via limitations of the argument.

Rebuttal, shows the objection to an already existing claim. In thesis writing it important that you supply to the examiner contrary opinions to your conveyed idea/claim and how you critique them out of the way to usher in your claim with backings.
The Toulmin Sentence

- **Because** (data as support), **therefore, or so** (claim), **since** (warrant), **because, or on account of** (backing), **unless, however** (reservation/rebuttal), probably, in most cases (qualifier)
- In most cases (qualifier) no one should call while driving (claim) because of the new cell phone law that is in operation (data/evidence). Since it is good to obey the law, drivers are put on the know to avoid penalties (warrant) unless, of course, there is an emergency (reservation).
Writing the Toulmin Sentence contd.,

- **Claim** - People should wear seatbelts
- **Support** - High rate of serious injury in accidents when seatbelts are not worn
- **Warrant** - Serious injury should be avoided
- **Backing** - Serious injury is costly, painful, and dangerous
- **Qualifier** - Typically
- **Qualifier/Reservation** - Cases where seatbelts may be dangerous like small children
- **Rebuttal** - However, there are high rate of serious injury when seatbelts *are* worn, like cars gone into flames
In most instances we should all wear seatbelts because of the high rate of serious injury in accidents when seatbelts are not worn. This is true because avoiding serious injury is good. Serious injury can be costly, painful, and dangerous. Of course there are situations when seatbelts may be dangerous such as in the case of small children who might have their necks broken by the seatbelt. While some may say there is a high rate of serious injury when seat belts are worn, such as when the car goes underwater or bursts into flames, having a device to cut the seatbelt near at hand in such cases is better than not wearing a seatbelt at all.
What Introductory chapter contains

- This first chapter must introduce the thesis with a clear statement of the topic or problem under investigation. It generally includes:
  - Statement of the problem or 'gap' in the research
  - Aims /goal of the research project
  - Background /Contextual information that motivates the research work
  - Theoretical framework (meta-theory and extant theory)
  - Brief description of your methodology/ research
  - Outline of chapters - Thesis plan
By writing out your claim with evidence through warrant and backing, establish the need for your research. Also, by rebuttal discuss the problem which has not yet been adequately investigated among others. This is usually done by showing:

- the limitations of previous research in order for you to craft out the gaps from the previous research
- the unresolved conflicts/deficiencies that still require investigation, which you now come in to resolve
- new developments that are required by the current state of knowledge in your field, which your research should align to.
You can see from the previous slide that your problem statement did not come from anecdotal evidences/obvious research or consultancy-prone kind of problem.

Rather it is rooted in literature from where you argue out the new and important idea, and not the obvious happenstance (Davis 2001).

Outside literature there is no scientific research. The danger is that you might not have a community of discourse where your thesis can contribute to knowledge, if you go the way of anecdotal evidences/consultancy.

Then, from a well crafted problem statement, abstract your research question(s)
If you haven’t started with your problem—the thing that brings the disparate areas such as background, context and motivation into a meaningful conversation with each other will be less meaningful and —your introduction chapter will begin with a baffling array of potentially disconnected bits of information.
Toulmin language of Problem statement

Language Box: Introduction stage 2 - Justification

Stage 2a - Indicating a gap

Surprisingly, only one extensive article has been published.
This aspect of... has not been given much attention.
The limitation of all these interpretations is that....
Studies of... are rare

Negative expressions (few, little, not much, hardly, etc.) are very common here.

the literature on... has concentrated principally on...
Most of the data on... which can be found in the literature pertain to...
Most existing research on... has been based on relatively small samples...
which has made it impossible to carry out satisfactory studies....

Stage 2b - Indicating questions/problems

Either direct or indirect questions:

Would an analysis of... bear out their claims?
...requires clarification. Is it..., or is it...?
But the question remains whether....

Stage 2c - Importance of the topic

Highlight the positive value or advantage of the topic:

His elegant model merits testing as a macrosociological theory...
The article well deserves careful analysis...
Toulmin way of Problem statement

- Then pose your research questions
- State the theoretical goal of the research or the evaluation to explicate your theoretical contributions (Gregor 2006)

3e - Evaluation

... offers a possible explanation for ...
This study offers new proposals ...
There is some evidence to suggest that although the problem of ... is likely to limit their
Background

- Provide preliminary background information to place your study in context
Toulmin language of the background

Language Box: Introduction stage 3 - Orientation

1a - General statements

*Hunger striking has a long ... history in Ireland.*
*The sceptical paradox is well known:*...
*There has been much interest recently in the concept of ... and its relevance*
*Research and speculation on ... have been growing at a rapid rate...*
*In recent years the study of ... has focused on ...*

1b - Background Information

Stage 1b sometimes contains essential facts about the subject-matter which the reader has to know in order to understand the text - for example definitions, or other basic information.

1c - Reference to previous studies

*Parkinson (2012) has developed an elaborate framework to show that ....*
*There is now a considerable body of research which suggests ....*
*Most researchers in the field agree that ....*
*Recent studies have shown that ....*
*Much recent work ... has indicated that ....*
*Jenkins (2009) found ... that ...*
Each of the four research questions demanded a slightly different analytical focus. For the first two steps, in which episodes of ... were categorised and organised, and different transactional stages identified, I drew both on **Theory 1**, particularly as it has been applied to service encounters (see e.g. Author G 1987; Author B 2000), and Author J’s (1988) idea of activity types... while, for the next step, in which... were examined in greater detail, I used techniques derived from **Theory 2** (see e.g. Author K 1976, 1980) and the Birmingham school of... (see Author L and Author M 1975, Author N 1994). My analysis of relational patterns is based on the ideas of Author O: his notion of..., which resurfaces in **Theory 3** (e.g. Authors P and Q 1987; Author R 2000; Author S 2003), and his ideas on... **Concept 1** (1974, 1981), which have been used to develop theories relating to roles and participation... (e.g. Authors T and U 1982; Author P 1988; Author V 1993). The discussion of roles and identities is also informed by **Concept 2** (Author W, Authors X and Y 1997) and, specifically, by Author Z’s (1998) proposal that...

Finally, for training models I looked to the work of Authors AA and AB (2002) and their collaborators in the field of..., Author AC (2000) for her work with... and Authors AD and AE (1997, 2000) for the general principles involved in the use of... Underpinning the whole study, there are also the extensive literatures of **Fields 1, 2 and 3**, to which I will turn in the next chapter.
Toulmin way of presenting the methodology/ research design

Source: Tony Lynch

- State the philosophical assumptions and how you should apply it

3d - Means (method)

My approach is characterised by two assumptions ....
I have based my study on ....
The data on which the discussion will be based comprises ....
This study uses and extends those concepts and is based on ...
3c - Limitations

Since ... is beyond the scope of this study ....
It is not the purpose of this study to ..., but rather to ...
I will not attempt here to .... Rather than focus upon ..., my intention is ....
I do not attempt to describe or compare ... Instead, I seek to ...
Only the data from ... are considered here
Toulmin way of presenting the thesis structure

Source: Tony Lynch

Outline of thesis
In this chapter I have:

- explicated the research problem with the research questions
- the research purpose/aim/goal are clearly defined
- introduced the theoretical framework on which the study is based;
- outlined the development of my interest in..., particularly...;
- provided background information about... ;
- indicated what I set out to achieve in this study, and how.

The remaining chapters are organised as follows. Chapter 2 contextualises the study in the relevant literature. Chapter 3 is an account of the research methodology and method. In Chapter 4 regularities and variations in... are described, while in Chapter 5 the... patterns are reviewed, with particular emphasis on... In Chapter 6, there is analysis of the construction of... through variations in... and topic and, in Chapter 7, detailed discussion of identity construction... Finally, in Chapter 8, the implications for ... training are considered in the context of a review of this study and a consideration of the social meanings which are constructed through...
Summary of the complete list of what may go into an Introduction Chapter

**Justification**
- general statement (especially on the importance of the topic)
- Problem statement indicating a gap from literature that culminates to research questions
- Theoretical framework that scaffolds the research questions
- Purpose/aim of the research and the theoretical goal of the research and the practical relevance
- Rebuttals/limitations/qualifiers
- Value of further investigation (by you) of the topic

**Ways of conducting the research**
- Meta-theoretical assumptions and its application to the research
- Method/strategy that will be used to answer the research questions

**Orientation**
- Background information and motivation wrap around reference to previous studies

**Thesis structure**
- outline of the thesis
Avoid an author prominent writing style, when arguing your point.

Cutrone (2005) found that the tendency of Japanese learners of English to avoid confrontation, by providing regular positive backchannelling, caused frustration in their native English conversational partners, who were unable to decide whether or not their message was really being understood.

Read’s (2002) study compared one-way, scripted and two-way, unscripted versions of an EAP listening test.

Miller (2002) examined lectures from an ethnographic or generic perspective, but did not empirically assess how the discourse features so far identified might impact on listener’s comprehension.
Focus attention more on the research and less on the individual authors involved. This is known as research prominent or information prominent citations.

The role of students’ note-taking in helping to make lecture content ‘memorable’ has long been a focus of applied linguistic research (e.g. Dunkel & Davy, 1989; Chaudron, Loschky & Cook, 1994).

When the requirement to understand is combined with the need to produce, as it is in university tutorials and discussions, the international students’ feelings of inadequacy and frustration are exacerbated (e.g. Leki, 2001; Liu, 2001; Morita, 2004).
Summary

- Introduction chapter should critically lay the ground, highlight the important ideas, argue the case for the importance of the work, lay out the stall, sell the product.
- It should clearly state the aim of the thesis “what is it that you are researching” and the strategy of answering the research questions, and its contextual boundary/motivation.
- It should not be a-theoretically guided, apologetic or consultancy-prone, neither is it overbearing and arrogant, convinced it’s introducing the most important piece of writing on the topic ever written in a scientific manner.
- It makes a calm, considered case for the value of what the examiner is about to read, and should whet the examiner’s appetite to find out more about the details of this important idea.
- An introductory chapter should be an invitation, like an appetizer that makes you want to see what else the chef can do.
- The thesis reader’s journey is a long one—why not do what you can to ensure that your reader sets off with the maximal understanding of their destination?
The END
Big Thanks and Stay tuned

COMMENTS/QUESTIONS/CONTRIBUTIONS