

18th International Summer School

13 July 2012, Rome, Italy

Becoming a European PhD holder in 3 years:
transferable skill in time management , writing
your doctoral thesis and a successful short article

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- Strategies for:
 - an effective time management during the 3 doctoral years
 - elaborating your thesis as a whole
 - designing good studies for your thesis
 - writing better the thesis and the short article
 - increasing chances of getting published in English language journals

Goals

Three parts

1. Time management strategy
2. Constructing a solid thesis: good theoretical part and good studies
3. Tips for writing more clearly a scientific text

TYME



Overview of today's talk

Part 1

Time management strategy

How to complete your PhD thesis in 3 years

You're not writing your thesis. You are what you write.

- Research work is time consuming:
 - Reading
 - Planning
 - Drafting
 - Writing
 - Reporting
 - Adjusting and re-writing
 - Finishing and submitting
 - Prepare the thesis defense
- Basic rule: Don't do even more things.
- Become aware of what you have to do.



- A doctorate is more than just a pile of words, or a smartly bound thesis with your name on the front in gold letters.
- It is a process of change, and the crystallization of a substantial slice of your intellectual life.



Understand your mission

- Most important: explore and decide!
- The way you start will influence the way you finish.
- Acutely taxing time, involving multiple decisions and transitions.
- “*Beginnings are difficult in all the sciences.*”
(Karl Marx)

First year



- Focus on
 - bibliographic knowledge (**red line**)
 - theoretical and research planning (**green line**)
- My advice
 - Get to know your tutors, foresee the mobility
 - Reduce the bibliographic knowledge to the first 12 months
 - Try to complete 3 meta-analysis per month
 - Envision your thesis as a whole and start your draft
 - “*Do not read, think!*” (Arthur Schopenhauer)

First year

- Focus on:
 - writing theory (**green line**)
 - completing your studies (**green line**)
 - international mobility (**blue line**)
- *“I write when I’m inspired, and I see to it that I’m inspired at nine o’clock every morning.”*
(Peter de Vries)

Second year

- My advice:
 - Don't stop unless you have finished one micro-structure
 - Things get easier, as your materials accumulate and chunks of work get completed
 - Get feedback from your foreign tutor
 - Decide upon the “short article” and write it

Second year

- This year is actually 3 or 4 months
- Focus on the minor and final adjustments
- My advice:
 - Print – edit – revise – upgrade
 - Final text formatting, header, cover, figure and table arrangements
 - Binding and submitting
 - Prepare to go public (defense preparation)

Third year (the BIG trick)

- Be aware of the next step.
- Have confidence.
- Be persistent.
- Learn from your mistakes.
- Take an incremental view, not an entity view.
- Know that organization and style matter.
- Know that writing skills can **ONLY** be improved though practice and critical feedback.

From the very beginning...

Part 2

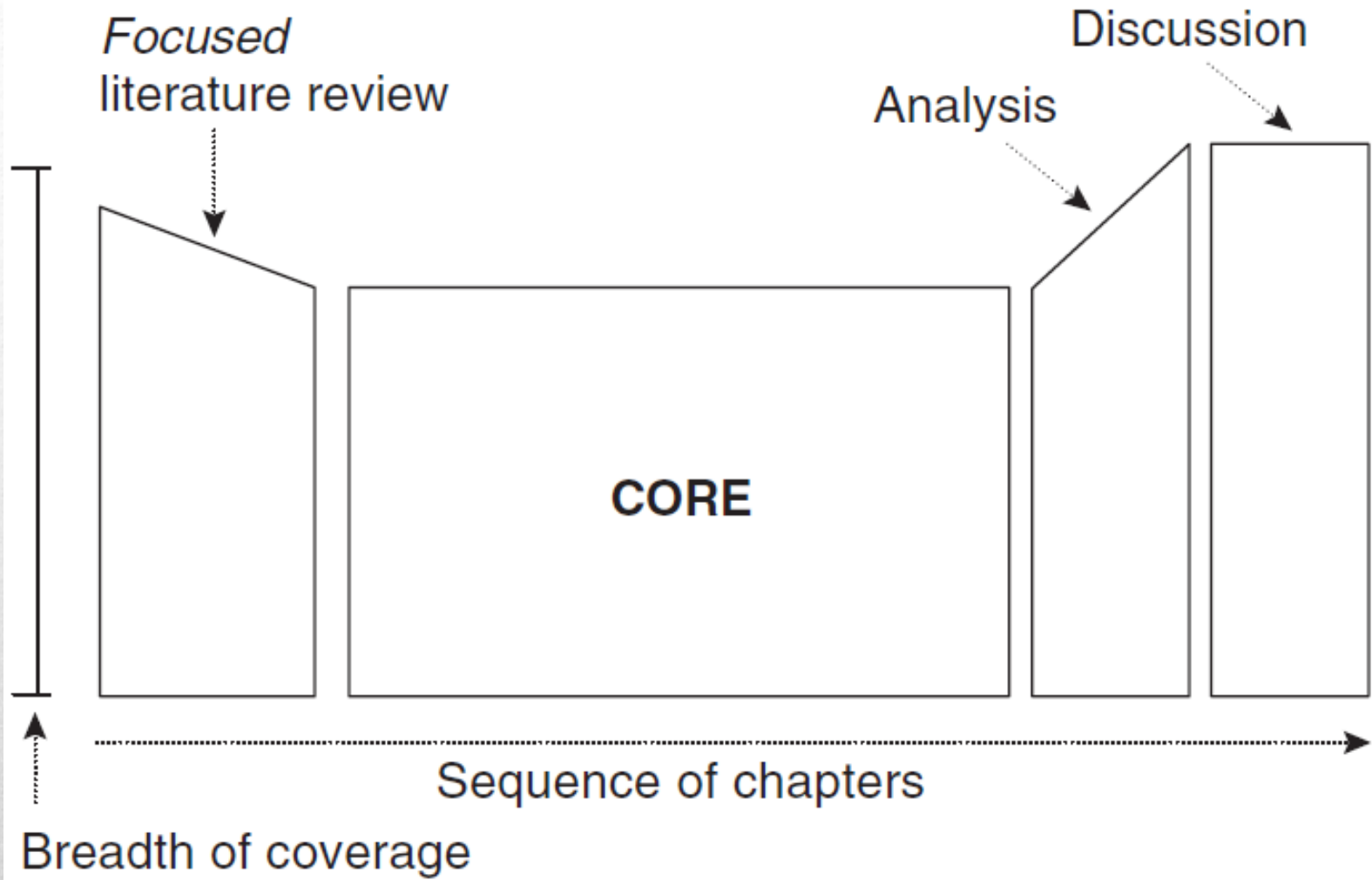
Construction strategy

How to build a “solid” thesis: good theoretical chapters and good studies

Good planning + good management of critical parts

- The Euro PhD program:
 - allows originality and personalization
 - is a compromise between the classic PhD model (big book thesis) and the modern PhD model (trainings and coursework plus papers model dissertation).
- Planning the integrated thesis (the macro-structure) and discourse logic

Organizing the macro-structure



The compromise model

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- *“All rules for study are summed up in this one: learn only in order to create.”* (Friedrich Schelling)
- *“The PhD is not an encyclopedic exercise but a test of creativity.”* (Serge Moscovici)
- *“All good things which exist are the fruits of originality.”* (John Stuart Mill)
- *“Creativity takes time.”* (Tardif & Sternberg)

1. Be creative and short

- Why is your topic important?
- Why is your research question important?
- Why should anyone care?
- Does it matter to anyone outside of your small circle or researchers?
- Could you convince your friends/family that your study is worth conducting?
- How would you convince someone to fund the study?

2. Have a reason and a purpose

- Take what is known and take it one small step further.
- But HOW?
 - by asking a new question
 - by generalization (new population or sample)
 - by addressing a flaw with a published study

3. Be on the “cutting edge”

- *“Everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.”* (Albert Einstein)
- *“Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication.”* (Leonardo da Vinci)
- Do not try to do too much in one study
- Ask one clear simple question and provide a clear answer
- You should have one single purpose per study

4. “KISS” – Keep It Simple

- Try to solve a problem worth solving using a theory that offers a solution
- The study should test the theory as well as try to solve a practical problem
- For example, using SRT to address:
 - clinical issues (e.g. mental illness)
 - environmental issues (e.g. pollution)
 - financial issues (e.g. global crisis)

5. Make it theoretical

- Good = clear
- The purpose = to communicate your findings to others
- If badly written
 - it may not get reviewed
 - will get poor reviews
 - if it gets published, it may be ignored
- “*Don’t get it right, get it written.*” (J. Thurber)

Next... write a good article

- Reviewers are busy people
- Make it easy for them
- If they have to struggle to understand your writing, they are likely to
 - lose interest and patience
 - start looking for problems
 - give up and reject it

So... keep in mind

- NOT from the beginning to end!
 1. Title
 2. Abstract
 3. First paragraph of introduction
 4. Last paragraph of introduction
 5. First/last paragraph of the discussion
 6. They may read discussion before introduction
 7. Methods and results next to last – WHY?

Keep in mind how reviewers
read articles

- Methods and results next to last – WHY?
- Because:
 - They will not bother reading this part if they believe the study is not important
 - Statistics do not matter if the reviewer is not interested in the topic or believes the study has major flaws

Keep in mind how reviewers
read articles

- Design correct and effective figures and tables in order to present your results in a friendly way.
- It is becoming harder and harder to publish text-only articles.



Handle attention points

- The title
- The abstract

- First paragraph of introduction
- Last paragraph of introduction

- First paragraph of discussion
- Last paragraph of discussion

The most important parts of
your work

- After the title, it is the first thing the reviewer will read
- Some will reject an article based only on the abstract
- It will influence opinions of the rest of the article
- A confusing abstract can undermine your credibility

The abstract – why so important?

- Brief: no more than ½ page long
- Clear: a non-scientist should be able to understand it
- State the purpose of the study
 - You should be able to complete this sentence in no more than 25 words: “*The purpose of this study is to...*”

A good abstract:
concise and clear

- Indicate the theory on which the research hypothesis is based without including references
- Briefly state the design and method (2 sentences)
- Summarize main findings without providing data (1 or 2 sentences)
- Do not end it with “*Implications for future research are discussed.*”

A good abstract:
concise and clear

Like other formal norms, traffic rules are rigid, inflexible and very often judged out of context, whereas traffic is always contextual. So, depending on the traffic situation, a perfectly rational norm can turn perverse in case it has nothing left to do with road safety but with the mere punishment of the drivers who violate it. Thus, perverse norms are believed to be an important factor leading to deviance in traffic (Fernández-Dols & Oceja, 1994; Pérez, et al., 1998, 2002). However, they are not a wide studied topic. From a particular social perspective, norm violation originates in the general perception of norms being irrational or useless for real safety needs (Yagil 1998; Lucas & Pérez, 2003). Other concepts reveal almost the same idea: injunctive norm (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991), unrealistic norm (Kanellaidis et al., 1995), illogical or redundant norm (Yagil, 1998), inappropriate or incredible norm (Goldenbeld & Schagen, 2007). In the current research we examined the degree to which drivers perceive a set of norms as being perverse from a general perspective and from a contextualized point of view. Results show the importance of contextual perversity mainly in case of speeding, as well as the connection between perverse traffic contexts and other dimensions such as usual driving behaviour, general respect for the law and risk perception.

Example of bad abstract



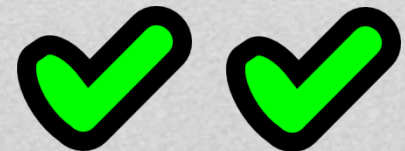
Like other formal norms, traffic rules are rigid, inflexible and often sanctioned out of context, whereas traffic is always contextual. Therefore, a perfectly rational traffic rule can turn perverse when it does little to enhance road safety but seems directed primarily at punishing the drivers who violate it. Thus, perverse traffic rules may actually increase the probability that drivers will violate traffic laws. This study examined (a) if drivers engage in deviant behaviour as a consequence of the perverse norm and (b) if other factors also facilitate this process. Participants evaluated six traffic rules from a general point of view. Then they were faced with six scenarios which referred to the same norms but in irrational traffic situations, and were asked to report their potential engagement in a deviant behavior. In addition, multiple regression analyses were used to predict the deviant behaviour in each irrational situation. Results suggest that drivers are more likely to violate the rules because they seem useless for real safety needs, and less because of the individual differences. The data supports this idea mainly in case of speeding. In most of the tested situations, deviance from norm is predicted by the usual driving behaviour, general respect for the law and risk perception. Our results indicate that the explanations of deviance built mainly on the theory of planned behaviour (TBP) may be limited.

Better



A perfectly adequate traffic rule can turn “perverse” in situations when it does little to enhance road safety but seems – at least in the drivers’ minds – directed primarily at punishing those who violate it. This study examined traffic rule obedience in situations in which the rule was not in accordance with real safety needs. Six rules with major impact on road safety were analyzed: waiting at red traffic lights, legal overtaking, obeying the 50km/h speed limit, wearing seatbelts, legal stopping/parking, and driving the car in good technical condition. Participants evaluated how adequate these rules are for safety. Then they were faced with six scenarios, that made each of these rules appear irrational, and were asked to report their potential engagement in deviant behaviour. The survey data were collected in a sample of 605 drivers. Multiple regression analyses showed that in most situations rule violation depended on the usual deviant behaviour, perceived irrationality of the rule, little respect for the law and low risk perception. These factors best explained the 50km/h speed limit violation. The results suggest that the lack of situational risk factors, which makes the rule look meaningless, is important determinant of rule violation. Implications for massive disobedience and road safety are discussed.

Even better



- An article is not a mystery story that makes people figure out what your study is about.
- 1st paragraph / sentence – tell the reader why your topic is important
- 2nd or last paragraph – state purpose of study

Introduction section

- Emphasize ideas and findings, not people and individual studies
- It should not be a series of paragraphs that all begin with: “*John Doe (1985) conducted a study on... Frick and Frack (2001) also investigated that...*”
- Save this kind of sentence for the 1, 2 or 3 studies on which your work directly builds (most recent and relevant for your work)
- Don’t just state, integrate!

Introduction section

- “*Never ignore, never refuse to see, what may be thought against your thought.*” (Friedrich Nietzsche)
- Do not restate the results. Do not re-report the data. Avoid statistical language.
- Interpret the results. Tell the reader:
 - to what extent the results support the hypotheses
 - what the results tell about the theory from which the hypotheses were derived

Discussion section

- 1st paragraph – summarize main findings
- Then – elaborate on each finding in order of presentation in subsequent paragraphs
- Then – derive conclusions

Discussion section (order is very important!)

Part 3

Tips for writing more clearly

Basic rule: write so you cannot possibly be misunderstood .

- Long sentences tax the reader's attention and memory
- Basic rule: one idea per sentence.
- Two ideas at the most.

Keep sentences short

Although it has been found by a number of studies that cognitive therapy is an effective intervention for people with depression, it has also been found by some studies that cognitive therapy used in conjunction with medication may be more effective than when cognitive therapy is the only treatment, although these studies have methodological problems, and therefore it is difficult to draw from them firm conclusions about the relative effectiveness of cognitive therapy and medication in the treatment of depression.

Bad sentence



A number of studies have found that cognitive therapy is an effective treatment for depression.

A number of studies also have found that cognitive therapy and medication used together are more effective than therapy used alone.

These latter studies, however, have methodological problems, that make it difficult to draw firm conclusions from them.

Better



- Long paragraphs:
 - are intimidating and tiring
 - encourage skimming
 - are too long because the sentences are too long and wordy.
- Basic rule: a paragraph should be shorter than 1/3 of a page.

Keep paragraphs short

- It is better than passive voice because:
 - It is simpler and more direct
 - Requires less effort from the reader
 - Saves words – the more words you save the stronger the readers attention

Use active voice

Passive



- “The ball was thrown to Robert by Stefania.”
- “It has been shown by several studies that...”
- “In the results section it has been shown that...”

Active



- “Stefania threw the ball to Robert.”
- “Several studies have shown that...”
- “Results show that...”

Passive - active examples

- Neatness, spelling and format
- Errors:
 - make you look sloppy and lazy
 - undermine your credibility
 - can encourage reviewers to look for other evidence of sloppiness and laziness

Accuracy is important

- Use spell-check and the grammar check
- Get a pre-review from at least two colleagues
 - one who is familiar with your topic
 - and one who is not
- Become friends with someone whose first language is English

So what can you do?



- Basic rule: if you have a choice always use the shorter word
- Anglo-saxon words vs. latin-greek words
 - Together in conjunction with
 - Home/house domicile/residence
 - Use utilize
 - Pet dog canine companion animal
 - Died expired
 - Yet and though



Use short, simple words

- Technical words are unavoidable
- However, if too many of them, your text may sound confusing, tiring or too sophisticated
- So... what to do?
 - Define them clearly when you first use them (E.g.: “To me, a SR is...”)
 - Use the same term consistently throughout (but as rare as you can)
 - Do not use a variation just for the sake of variety

Use jargon sparingly

- Avoid statistical terms in introduction and discussion
- Use statistical words only in results section
 - *“Research with married couples has found a strong and positive correlation between measures of forgiveness and measures of marital satisfaction.”* 
 - *“Research has found that the more often married people forgive each other, the happier they are likely to be.”* 

Avoid statistical prose

- “**Proves**” – absolute certainty. No such thing is science. Never use it.
- “**Shows**” / “**demonstrates**” – strong certainty. You are highly confident about what you are saying.
- “**Indicates**” – a little less certainty
- “**Suggests**” – even less certainty
- “**Is consistent with previous research**”

Understand degrees of certainty

- Basic rule: be modest! Better understate than overstate your certainty.
- Overstating:
 - can make you look arrogant or irresponsible
 - can cause vulnerable points in your evaluation
 - can raise questions about your judgment, critical thinking, psychological interpretation abilities

Understand degrees of certainty

- Basic rule: don't say the same idea twice.
- Avoid:
 - *“It is possible that it may/might support the theory.”*
 - *“It may support the theory.”*

Avoid redundancies

- *“It is important to note that...”*
- *“It is significant to note that pollution is a growing problem in developing societies...”*
- *“It is quite interesting that this study found that...”*
- *“An important aspect of this theory is...”*
- *“A surprising / disappointing result of this study is...”*

Avoid irrelevant descriptive phrases

- Basic rule:
 - Say it in a way that makes it clear it is important / interesting / significant
 - Report findings/ data / statistics and let them speak for themselves

Avoid irrelevant descriptive phrases

- Rather
- Quite
- A little
- Somewhat
- Very
- *Substitute “damn” every time you’re inclined to write “very”; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be. (Mark Twain)*

Avoid qualifiers

- *This study has a number of limitations.*
- *More research is needed.*
- *The study clearly demonstrates the need for further research on this problem.*
- *These findings may or may not apply to other populations.*
- *This is likely to be so or so.*

Avoid stating the obvious

- Parenthetical phrases (like the one inserted here) because (and I am certain you will agree) they are “damn” distracting (if you know what I mean).
- Footnotes. If it is important, put it in the text. If not, leave it out.
- References inserted throughout a sentence. Save them for the end.

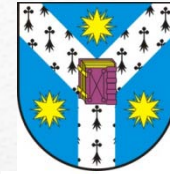
A few more things to avoid

- There is no perfection.
- Do not try to achieve a perfect style by endlessly polishing or tinkering with your text.
- Once you have achieved a certain level, your substantive arguments and the quality of your research will be decisive in shaping readers' reactions.

Last but not the least

Thanks to:

- Luminița Iacob
- James Maddux
- Patrick Dunleavy
- Juan Perez
- Farida Saad
- Annamaria de Rosa



Believe in yourself,
the results will speak for you!