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How to Write a Dissertation Introduction: The Seven Essential Ingredients

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Abstract

The introduction is usually the first chapter of a dissertation or thesis, and research on thesis examination suggests that examiners form an early judgment of a thesis within its first chapter or two. This article describes what an introduction does, how its usual organization moves from a broad research territory to a specific gap and the study that addresses it, and how it differs from the literature review. It then compares the first chapters of six openly licensed theses, three master's and three doctoral, in logistics, computing, language study, nursing and agricultural education. The six vary widely in length (4 to 17 pages), in the sections they include and in the order of those sections. On that basis, the article presents seven parts of an introduction as a checklist of tasks rather than a set of required headings: the opening section; the background; the research problem; the aims, objectives and research questions; the scope and limitations; the significance of the study; and the outline of the remaining chapters. Each part is illustrated with an extract from one of the six theses and a short analysis. It is intended for students drafting an introduction and for the supervisors and educators who teach thesis writing.

Keywords: how to write a dissertation introduction; thesis introduction; dissertation introduction example; dissertation introduction structure; dissertation chapter 1; thesis introduction example; how to write a thesis introduction; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

The introduction is usually the first chapter of a dissertation or thesis, and it is read early and closely. In a review of 30 articles on thesis examination, Golding et al. (2014) found that examiners tend to form an initial judgment of a thesis's quality early in their reading, within the first chapter or two, and that this judgment can change, but only slowly. Examiners who read an excellent introduction are more likely to overlook problems later in the thesis, whereas after a poor introduction the rest of the thesis must be excellent to make up for it (Golding et al., 2014).

Advice on writing the chapter often presents a fixed list of sections. In practice, introductions vary considerably between fields, degrees and institutions, and a university or program may prescribe its own structure. This article therefore treats the parts of an introduction as tasks that the chapter must accomplish, not as headings that every introduction must carry. It uses "dissertation or thesis" for the extended research document submitted for a master's or doctoral degree, because the term used for each degree varies between countries and institutions.

The article is written for students planning or drafting the chapter, and for the supervisors and educators who teach thesis writing. Section 2 describes what an introduction does, how it is usually organized and how it differs from the literature review. Section 3 compares the first chapters of six published theses. Section 4 sets out seven parts of an introduction, each illustrated with an extract from one of those theses. Section 5 discusses when the chapter is best drafted and revised.

2. What an Introduction Does

An introduction presents the study to its readers. It explains what is being investigated and why it is worth investigating, what the study covers and where it stops, and how the rest of the document is organized. The role is the same in a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation, although, as Section 3 shows, the length and level of detail differ.

2.1 The usual organization: from territory to niche

Research on academic genres (recognized types of academic text, such as the research article and the thesis) offers a useful description of how introductions are organized. In Swales's Create a Research Space (CARS) model, an introduction usually proceeds through three moves (Swales, 1990, as cited in Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022). Sun and Crosthwaite (2022), who apply the model to PhD thesis introductions, describe the moves as follows. The first establishes a research territory, by providing background information, reviewing earlier research and defining key terms. The second establishes a niche, by indicating a gap in research, a need to extend existing knowledge or a problem that needs to be solved. The third occupies the niche, by presenting the aims or hypotheses of the present study, stating its value and outlining it. They describe the second move as the hinge that connects what has been done before to what the present research is about, and note that a failure to establish a niche has been recognized as a key shortcoming in thesis writing (Allison et al., 1998, as cited in Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022).

The seven parts described in Section 4 follow the same broad-to-specific logic. The opening section and the background correspond to the first move, the research problem to the second, and the aims and research questions, the significance and the outline to the third. The scope and limi-

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tations have no separate place in the three moves as described above; they set the boundaries of the study that the third move announces.

2.2 The introduction and the literature review

The introduction draws on published research, but for a different purpose from the literature review. The writing guide of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Center for Scholarly Communication (n.d.), describes the introduction as establishing exigency (the reason the study is needed) and introducing the problem, using a body of literature to do so. The same guide notes that some studies draw on one body of literature in the first chapter and on another in the second, while others must draw on the same literature in both chapters and avoid repeating themselves. In either case, the introduction cites as much research as is needed to show why the problem matters and what is missing; a fuller account of the field, and the theory on which the study rests, belongs in the literature review.

3. What Published Introductions Contain

To show how much introductions vary in practice, Table 1 lists the contents of chapter 1 in six openly licensed theses: three master's theses and three doctoral dissertations, five from the United States and one from the United Kingdom. They were chosen to show a range of fields and degrees, not as a representative sample. The sections are taken from each thesis's own table of contents, and from the chapter itself for openings that have no heading; the field is taken from each thesis's degree record, and the page count is the number of pages before chapter 2 begins.

Table 1. Contents of chapter 1 in six published theses, from their contents lists and chapter text.

Thesis	Degree and field	Chapter 1 pages	Sections in chapter 1, in order
Luong (2025)	PhD, logistics (business school, UK)	8	Research imperatives; research gap; research aim and objectives (with the thesis outline); research scope; research methodology
Shao (2019)	Master's, computer and information technology (US)	4	Unheaded chapter overview (p. 8); statement of the problem; scope; research question; significance of the problem; assumptions; limitations; delimitation; summary
Bushur (2026)	Master's, computer science (US)	6	Background and motivation; research questions and contributions; thesis organization
Osumi (2019)	Master's, languages and cultures (US)	8	Background of this study (three subsections); research questions
Herron (2025)	PhD, nursing (US)	10	Unheaded background (pp. 1–5); problem statement; purpose statement; significance to nursing; definition of terms; research question; summary
Huang (2019)	PhD, agricultural sciences education and communication (US)	17	Unheaded opening (p. 14); eight background sections; problem statement; significance of the study; purpose of the study; research questions; assumptions; definition of terms; limitations

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Six theses cannot show what any one field requires, but three patterns stand out. First, length varies widely: chapter 1 runs from 4 to 17 pages. The two longest chapters belong to doctoral dissertations, and Huang (2019) devotes about ten of its seventeen pages to background, counting its unheaded opening (pp. 14–24). The two computing theses are the shortest. Bushur (2026) combines the parts of an introduction into three sections, while Shao (2019) gives each part its own heading but only a paragraph or two, or a short bulleted list (pp. 8–11).

Second, the theses omit, add and rename parts. Only two of the six outline the remaining chapters (Luong and Bushur), and only two have a limitations section in chapter 1 (Shao and Huang). Luong (2025) leaves limitations out of chapter 1 and discusses them in later chapters, including its final chapter, "Conclusions, implications and limitations" (p. 6; contents, pp. viii–xi). Three of the US theses add assumptions or definitions of terms (Shao, Herron and Huang), and Luong adds an overview of the methodology. Third, the parts that are present are not always in the order set out in Section 4: Shao (2019), for instance, places the scope before the research question, and Huang (2019) places the significance before the purpose.

The practical conclusion is that the seven parts are best used as a checklist of the tasks an introduction must perform, with each task done somewhere in the chapter. Where a university or program prescribes the sections, their headings or their order, its template takes precedence.

4. Seven Parts of an Introduction

Figure 1 sets out the seven parts. The first four narrow the focus step by step: the opening and the background set up the problem, and the problem justifies the aims. The aims in turn determine what the scope and the significance must cover. The outline then turns from the study to the document, telling the reader where each part of it is found. The subsections below take the parts in order, each with an extract from one of the theses in Table 1.

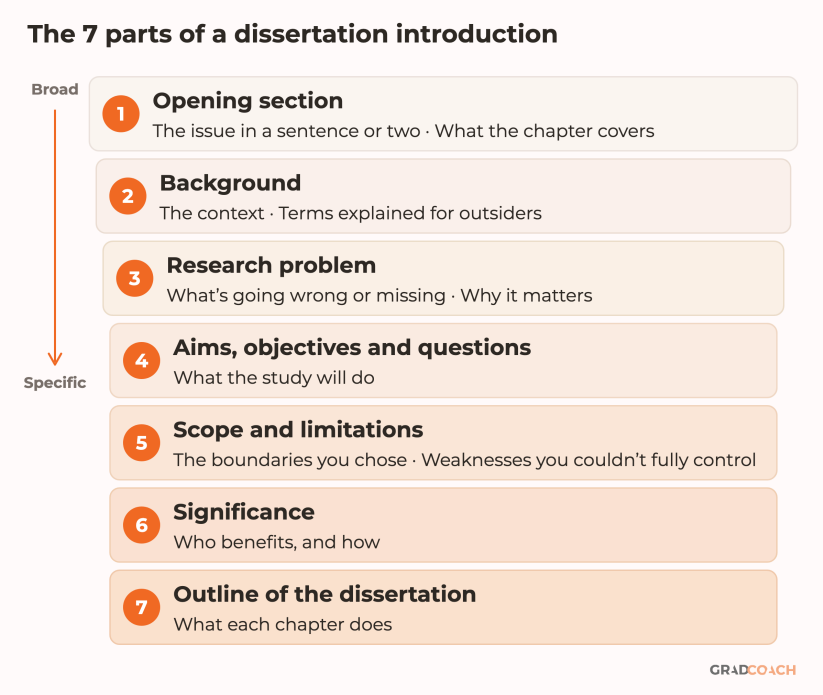


Figure 1. Seven parts of an introduction; the first four narrow the focus from broad to specific.

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4.1 The opening section

Within a paragraph or two, the opening moves from the field or real-world issue in which the study sits to the specific problem the study addresses. It is a short overview rather than a full account. A strong opening usually introduces the broad issue, names the specific problem, states what the research aims to do and previews the rest of the chapter. Each of these needs only a sentence or two, because the rest of the chapter develops it.

A doctoral thesis in logistics from a business school, by Luong (2025), examined consumers' intention to use collection-and-delivery points, also known as pickup points, "where consumers can collect or return their online orders at designated locations" (p. 1). It opens as follows:

> The rapid expansion of e-commerce has significantly reshaped global business operations, driving an unprecedented increase in parcel delivery services. [...] However, many parcels are too large for standard mailboxes or require a signature upon receipt, meaning that customers must be present at the time of delivery. A recurring challenge in last-mile logistics is that consumers are often absent when deliveries arrive, resulting in failed home deliveries (Deutsch & Golany, 2018; McLeod et al., 2006; Santana et al., 2022; Yuen et al., 2019; M. Zhou et al., 2020). These failed attempts lead to additional delivery attempts or package returns, increasing operational costs and fuel consumption. Studies estimate that the failure rate for home deliveries ranges from 15% to 60%, depending on geographical location and delivery policies (Rai et al., 2021).
>
> Luong (2025, p. 1)

The paragraph moves from a broad trend to a practical difficulty, then to its cost, and ends with a sourced estimate of the problem's size. A reader with no knowledge of logistics knows by the end of it which problem the study responds to, and the next paragraph introduces collection-and-delivery points as a response to it (Luong, 2025, p. 1). Where a problem has a measurable size, a sourced figure early in the chapter shows the reader that the problem is real.

4.2 The background

The background gives the context of the study: a brief history of the topic, recent developments, key studies and the factors that make the topic pressing now. A researcher knows the topic far better than most readers of the chapter, which makes it easy to omit explanations that those readers need. The background is therefore best written for an informed reader from outside the field, with specialist terms explained when they are first used.

A master's thesis in computer science by Bushur (2026), on attacks against network security systems, shows how this can be done in a technical field:

> Network intrusion attacks have become increasingly prevalent in modern computing environments. Attackers conduct targeted attacks on business, government, or private networks to leak confidential information, obtain financial gain, or cause disruption. In these scenarios, attackers must connect to the targeted network to perform the intrusion. For example, in an active wiretap attack, an attacker may intercept traffic on a network and gather sensitive information from the traffic contents.
>
> To defend against such attacks, Network Intrusion Detection Systems (NIDSs) are deployed on networks to monitor network traffic for intrusion attacks. Today, Machine Learning (ML) models serve as an increasingly popular choice for building NIDSs [1].
>
> Bushur (2026, p. 15)

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Each term is spelled out before it is abbreviated, and a concrete example (the wiretap attack) comes before any technical detail. The section then turns to the specific detection system the study examines and to the weakness of such systems that motivates the study (Bushur, 2026, p. 15). The background is long enough when a reader can see why the problem stated in the next section matters; anything beyond that belongs in the literature review.

4.3 The research problem and the research gap

The background may point to several problems; this part narrows the focus to the one the study addresses. A research problem is something that is going wrong in the world, or an important question that cannot yet be answered. Ellis and Levy (2008) state that a research problem exists "if at least two elements are present" (p. 22). The first condition is that the current state differs from the ideal state (Sekaran, 2003, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22); the second is that "there is not an 'acceptable' solution available" (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22). They also ask how something can be considered a problem "if one cannot identify something that is going wrong or, at the very least, not as well as it should" (p. 22), and caution that "it is important to not confuse topics – areas of interest – with problems" (p. 22).

The research gap is what existing research has not yet established about the problem. The second of Ellis and Levy's conditions covers two forms of gap: no solution may be documented in the literature, or the documented solutions may have led to mixed or contradictory results (Creswell, 2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22). A thesis usually needs to state both the problem and the gap, which means making three things clear: what is already well established in the research; what is missing, unclear or contested; and why that gap matters and for whom. In the CARS model this is the second move. Gaps are most commonly signaled with negative words such as *not* and *no*, or quasi-negative words such as *few* and *little* (Swales & Feak, 2002, as cited in Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022).

A master's thesis in languages and cultures by Osumi (2019) studied why college students in the United States learn Japanese. It draws on a framework of language-learning motivation, the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), in which L2 denotes a second language. Its background section ends with a summary of the gaps the study set out to fill:

> The following is a summary of research gaps that this study attempted to fill. First, there are still a limited number of research studies using L2MSS in the field of Japanese language education even though L2MSS is one of the most updated systems to discuss L2 learning motivation. Second, despite a large number of students who are learning Japanese in the United States, there are not many studies that examine learners in the US context. In addition, to understand Japanese learning motivation more closely, studies at the local level are necessary, but there have not been research studies that specifically focused on Japanese learning motivation among learners at the study site. Third, to understand interest in Japanese pop cultures and Japanese learning motivation, further research is necessary since previous studies have reported conflicting results.
>
> Osumi (2019, p. 17)

The passage names three kinds of gap: a framework that has rarely been applied in the field, settings that have received little attention (learners in the United States) or none (learners at the study site), and conflicting findings. Its wording shows the negative and quasi-negative signals de-

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scribed above: “a limited number of research studies”, “not many studies”, “there have not been research studies”. The summary itself says less about why the gaps matter and for whom, the last of the three things a statement of the gap needs to make clear. The thesis makes that case a page earlier, where it notes that many students stop studying Japanese as course levels rise (Osumi, 2019, p. 16), but the summary does not repeat it. A sentence linking each gap back to that problem would complete the argument.

4.4 Aims, objectives and research questions

Once the problem is clear, this part states what the study will do about it. Introductions often set this out in up to three layers, each more specific than the last. The research aim is the overall goal of the study, usually stated in a sentence. The research objectives break the aim into specific things the study will establish, each opening with a verb such as *identify*, *compare* or *evaluate*. The research questions are the precise questions the study will answer. Farrugia et al. (2010) describe a study objective as an active statement of how the study will answer its research question. They also note that a well-defined, specific research question is more likely to help guide later decisions about the study’s design, its population and the data to be collected and analyzed. Not every program asks for all three layers: some require only research questions, others an aim and objectives.

A doctoral dissertation in agricultural sciences education and communication by Huang (2019) is a quantitative study of how undergraduates perceive culturally responsive teaching, which the dissertation defines as teaching that values students’ cultural backgrounds and assets and uses inclusive methods to engage them (p. 28). It states its aim as a “purpose” in two parts (STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics):

> The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to develop and validate an instrument to measure culturally responsive teaching from undergraduate students enrolled in agriculture and STEM programs, and 2) to predict the relationships among students’ perceptions of culturally responsive teaching practices, sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy.
>
> Huang (2019, p. 26)

Each part opens with a verb or verbs (*develop and validate*; *predict*) and names what the study will produce: first a measurement instrument, then an account of the relationships among three variables. Numbering the two goals makes each easy to check against the findings later, and the dissertation’s five research questions follow immediately (Huang, 2019, pp. 26–27).

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Osumi's (2019) thesis, discussed in Section 4.3, shows the step from gaps to research questions. Directly after its summary of gaps, a new section begins (JFL stands for Japanese as a foreign language):

> To address these research gaps, this study attempted to answer the following fairly broad research questions:
>
> Research Question 1:
>
> What are the primary reasons for learning Japanese among college-level JFL learners in the U.S.?
>
> Research Question 2:
>
> What general characteristics do the JFL learners show with respect to their motivation to study Japanese?
>
> Osumi (2019, p. 18)

These are the first two of the thesis's five research questions. The opening sentence ties the questions directly to the gaps stated on the previous page of the thesis (p. 17), and the first question names its population and setting: college-level learners of Japanese in the United States. An explicit link of this kind lets an examiner see which gap each question addresses.

4.5 Scope and limitations

This part sets the boundaries of the study and acknowledges its weaknesses. The two are easily confused. The scope is the set of boundaries the researcher chose: the population, place, period or variables on which the study focuses. Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) use the term delimitations for limitations that originate from such conscious choices, made to narrow the scope of a study. Limitations, more generally, are weaknesses within a study that may influence its outcomes and conclusions (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). In a thesis they can arise from the sample, from access to participants or data, or from the time available for data collection. The scope belongs in the introduction because it tells the reader what to expect. Narrowing the aims and questions to a defined scope also keeps the study feasible, since a problem that is too broad cannot be investigated in depth within a single thesis.

The place where limitations are discussed varies more between theses. Two of the six theses in Table 1 list them in chapter 1, while Luong (2025) discusses them in later chapters, including its final chapter (p. 6; contents, pp. viii–xi). Writing about journal articles, Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) recommend that a presentation of limitations describe each limitation, explain its implications, offer possible alternative approaches and describe the steps taken to minimize it. They also caution against generic limitations that could apply to almost any study. Examiners take a similar view: Golding et al. (2014) found that examiners value a well-explained and justified approach that acknowledges its strengths and possible limitations.

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Huang's (2019) dissertation lists its limitations in chapter 1:

> There were several limitations that the researcher faced during this research study. First, there was a short timeframe for data collection. The data collection occurred during April where participants were getting ready for final exams, therefore, the timing of data collection could have discouraged undergraduate students to participate in the study. [...] Further, the study only focused on undergraduate students' learning experiences about their first college mathematics course, therefore, the experiences and perspectives of the participants in this study cannot exemplify their experiences in other college courses.
>
> Huang (2019, p. 29)

Each point describes a limitation and explains its implication, the first two of the elements Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) recommend. The first is a limitation in the strict sense: the examination period lay outside the researcher's control and may have discouraged participation. The second point quoted appears to be a design choice, which makes it closer to a delimitation in Ross and Bibler Zaidi's sense. Its consequence is that the findings cannot speak for other courses. Some theses place both kinds under one heading, as this one does; Shao (2019) gives limitations and delimitations separate headings (pp. 10–11). Labeling each kind correctly makes clear which boundaries were chosen and which were imposed, and stating the consequence of each shows how far the findings reach.

4.6 Significance of the study

The significance section states who will benefit from the findings and how: usually researchers, practitioners or both, together with the difference the study could make. Golding et al. (2014) found that examiners expect a thesis to add something to its field, but not the kind of definitive contribution that transforms it. Claims of significance are therefore more persuasive when they are kept in proportion to what a single study can deliver.

A doctoral dissertation in nursing by Herron (2025) studied nurses' experiences of dying patients' end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs). Its whole significance section, headed "Significance to Nursing", reads:

> Witnessing ELDVs is a familiar concept for generations of nurses. As nurses continue to care for the dying, knowing about ELDVs and their meaning may give nurses the confidence to guide and support patients and loved ones about the phenomenon when and if it occurs. This research may also provide a platform for researchers and educators to examine the evidence for themselves and consider the potential philosophical and educational contributions to nursing and patient care.
>
> Herron (2025, p. 6)

The benefit to practice comes first: understanding ELDVs and what they mean could give nurses the confidence to support patients and their loved ones. The benefit to research and education comes second. The wording is measured ("may give", "may also provide"): it states what the findings could make possible without promising more than one qualitative study can deliver. The section is short, and it names each group that stands to benefit and what that group could do as a result.

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4.7 Outline of the remaining chapters

The final part is a short outline of the document: a sentence or two for each chapter, stating what the chapter does rather than summarizing its findings. Kawase (2015) compared the introductions of PhD theses with those of research articles that their authors later published. The thesis introductions referred more often to other parts of the text, and Kawase attributed the differences to features of the thesis as a genre, including the preview of the chapters that follow. Golding et al. (2014) explain why such signposts help: examiners may read a thesis in sections over a week or two, and signposts and summaries that indicate what is coming help them follow a coherent structure.

Bushur's (2026) thesis, discussed in Section 4.2, closes its introduction with one sentence per chapter:

> The rest of this thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 reviews background information on NIDS datasets, ML-based NIDSs, adversarial attacks against NIDSs, and defenses against adversarial attacks. Chapter 3 presents the system design of the proposed framework. Chapter 4 discusses the background of and details behind each of the evaluated traffic reshaping attacks. [...] Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis, summarizing the main findings and offering directions for future work.
>
> Bushur (2026, pp. 19–20)

Each chapter receives a verb that states its function: *reviews*, *presents*, *discusses*, *concludes*. Luong (2025, p. 6) goes a step further and names the research objectives that each chapter addresses, a device worth adopting where a program uses objectives. In either form, the outline needs only to tell the reader where each part of the study is found.

5. Drafting and Revising the Introduction

The introduction can be drafted early, but it is rarely finished early. The Academic Skills service of the Australian National University (n.d.) notes that supervisors frequently recommend writing the introduction before a full first draft. Writing it early, the guidance explains, has the advantage of clarifying the overall purpose of the thesis and what each chapter will do and why. The same guidance adds that an early introduction will need rewriting to accommodate changes made during the writing. A writer who drafts it early must also check that the thesis has done what the introduction said it would, and that the argument of the introduction matches the conclusion (Australian National University, n.d.).

This check matters because examiners read for coherence. Golding et al. (2014) found that examiners favor a thesis that forms a coherent whole, held together by an argument that connects the research question with an answer and connects the conclusions with the evidence and the literature. In practical terms, the research questions stated in chapter 1 should be the questions the final chapter answers, and the aims, scope and outline should be checked against the finished document before submission.

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6. Conclusion

The introduction presents a study to readers who have not yet seen it, and examiners tend to form an early view of the whole thesis within the first chapter or two. Its usual organization moves from a research territory, through the gap or problem that creates a need for the study, to the study itself. The six theses compared here show that real introductions merge, rename, reorder and omit sections, and that their length ranges from 4 to 17 pages. The seven parts described in this article are therefore best treated as a checklist of tasks. An introduction needs an opening that reaches the problem quickly, a background written for readers outside the field, a problem and gap stated together with the reason the gap matters, and aims and questions tied explicitly to that gap. It also needs a scope that separates chosen boundaries from imposed limitations, a significance claim kept in proportion, and a brief outline of the chapters. Where a program prescribes the structure, the program's template governs the headings; the tasks remain the same.

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