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How to Structure a Dissertation: The Standard Structure and Layout

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Abstract

The structure of a dissertation or thesis is the order in which examiners meet its argument. Yet students often treat it as a matter of formatting, and published guidance describes a narrower range of structures than theses actually use. This article explains the conventional structure in three parts: the front matter, the core chapters and the back matter. It sets out what each part and each of the six conventional core chapters (introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion) is expected to do, and shows how their order follows the research process, from a question to its answer. It then describes the main variations documented in institutional guidelines and in research on doctoral writing: the five-chapter dissertation, the paper-based thesis (also called a thesis by publication or manuscript-style dissertation) and the thematic, or topic-based, thesis. Four tables of contents from completed master's and doctoral theses, in education, agricultural sciences education, community health sciences and business, show these structures in practice. The article is intended for students planning a dissertation, for early-career researchers and for the educators and supervisors who guide them.

Keywords: dissertation structure; thesis structure; dissertation chapters; doctoral thesis structure; dissertation structure example; thesis by publication; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

A dissertation is read in the order in which it is structured. When a chapter sits in the wrong place, or does the work of another chapter, the argument becomes harder to follow, however sound the research behind it. Structural problems in a draft often come from uncertainty about what each chapter is for, rather than from uncertainty about formatting.

A second difficulty is that there is no single correct structure. Paltridge (2002) compared published guides to thesis writing with master's and doctoral theses written at one research university. He found that few guides gave the topic much space, and that the theses showed a wider range of structures than the guides suggested. Institutional guidance acknowledges the same variety. The University of Westminster's library guide opens with the statement that "there isn't a single convention on dissertation writing" (University of Westminster, 2025c, Structuring Dissertation Chapters section). The University of Calgary's guidelines similarly state that "there is no prescribed format for a thesis at the University of Calgary" (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 4).

The words "dissertation" and "thesis" are themselves used differently from country to country and from one institution to another. This article uses "dissertation" for the extended research document written for a master's or doctoral degree, and "thesis" where a source does. Section 2 explains the logic behind the conventional structure. Sections 3 to 5 describe the front matter, the six core chapters and the back matter in turn. Section 6 describes the main variations, and Section 7 presents the tables of contents of four completed theses.

2. The Logic of the Conventional Structure

A dissertation has three parts. The front matter introduces the document, the core chapters report the research, and the back matter holds the sources and the supporting material. Figure 1 shows the conventional arrangement, with the question that each core chapter answers.

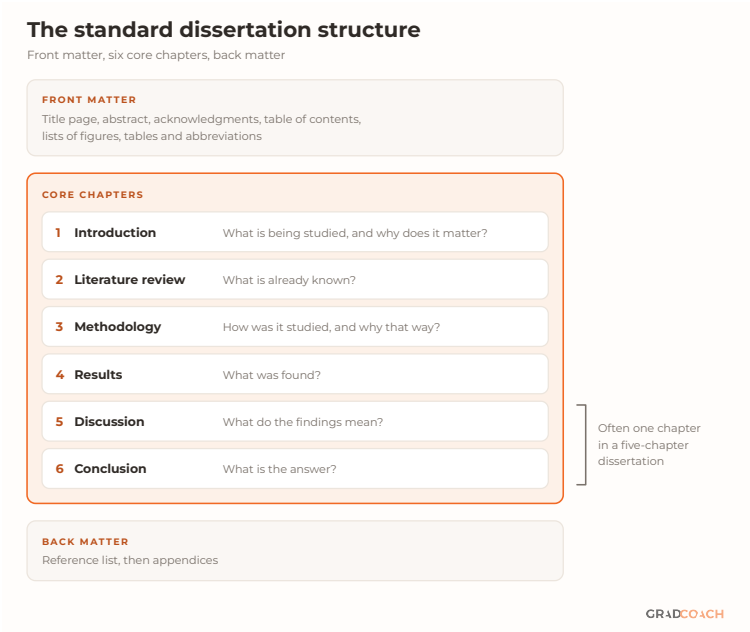


Figure 1. The conventional structure: front matter, six core chapters and back matter.

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The six-chapter layout in Figure 1 is the fullest conventional form. The University of Westminster presents introduction, literature review, methodology, results or findings, discussion and conclusion as the typical structure in the sciences and social sciences (University of Westminster, 2025b, Structure section). Other descriptions give five chapters, combining two of these, as Valdosta State University's guidelines do (Section 6.1). Mason and Merga (2018, p. 140), for example, describe the conventional doctoral thesis in Australia, which follows the United Kingdom model, as "most often an introduction, literature review, research methodology, findings and discussions, and conclusion chapters", a list that appears to combine the findings and the discussion in one chapter. Section 6 returns to these variations.

The order of the chapters is not arbitrary. It follows the research process that lies behind every dissertation: a research question is identified, the existing literature is reviewed, a study is designed and carried out, and conclusions are drawn that answer the question.

These four steps map onto the six chapters as follows. The introduction presents the research aims and questions. The literature review sets out what existing research says about them. The methodology chapter explains how the study was carried out, the results chapter presents the findings, and the discussion interprets them. The conclusion answers the research questions as far as the findings allow. The research question therefore runs through the whole document: it is set up in the introduction and answered in the conclusion, and each chapter in between should contribute to moving from one to the other.

Because structures differ between institutions and disciplines, the first source to consult is the program's own handbook or formatting guide. The dissertation guidelines published by Valdosta State University, for example, present their outline as "guidelines only" and ask students to agree on the elements of the dissertation and their order with the dissertation chair and committee (Valdosta State University, n.d., opening section). Where a program prescribes no structure, the conventional layout is a reasonable default, and it is used at master's as well as doctoral level, as the master's thesis in Section 7.1 shows (Barnes, 2019). Some institutions set the same thesis requirements for both levels: the University of Calgary's formatting guidelines apply equally to master's and doctoral theses (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 3).

3. The Front Matter

The front matter is everything that comes before the first chapter. It carries none of the research, but it is the first part of the document that an examiner reads. The University of Calgary's guidelines list the preliminary pages in this order: title page, abstract, preface, acknowledgments, dedication, table of contents, and lists of tables, of illustrations and figures, and of symbols and abbreviations. The acknowledgments, the dedication and the list of symbols and abbreviations are optional, and the lists are required only when they apply (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 7). Other institutions use a different order, as the examples in Section 7 show.

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3.1 Title page

The title page usually gives the title of the dissertation, the author's name, the degree and institution, and the date of submission. Its layout is normally prescribed in detail: Calgary's guidelines, for example, specify the capitalization, spacing and wording of each element and limit the full title to 240 characters (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 8). The title itself is where the author has most freedom. A clear title is specific and is linked to the research questions. It often names the broad area of the research, the specific focus or context of the study and the methodology. From the invented title "A qualitative study of how newly qualified nurses build professional confidence on night shifts in small rural hospitals", for example, a reader learns the topic, the setting and the method before opening the document.

3.2 Abstract

The abstract (an executive summary in some programs) gives a reader the whole project in brief and must make sense on its own. Calgary requires the abstract to state the problem, the method of study and the general conclusion, with relevant keywords, in no more than 350 words (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 9). The University of Westminster's guide describes abstracts of 250 to 300 words that summarize the aims, the methodology, the reasons for the research and its importance, and what or who was studied, together with the main findings and the conclusions. Because the abstract summarizes the finished work, the guide advises writing it after the rest of the dissertation is complete (University of Westminster, 2025a, Abstract section). The position of the abstract also varies: three of the four theses in Section 7 place it directly after the title page, and the fourth places it after the table of contents and the lists of tables and figures.

3.3 Acknowledgments and other preliminary pages

The acknowledgments thank the people and organizations that supported the project. Calgary treats the page as optional and names the people usually mentioned: the supervisor and committee, sources of grant support, fellow students, laboratory colleagues and family members (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, pp. 7, 9). Some universities require further preliminary pages, such as a declaration of originality, a statement of committee approval or a preface. Calgary, for example, requires a preface and lists a dedication as optional (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 7). Among the four theses in Section 7, one includes a declaration, one a statement of committee approval, one a preface and two a dedication. At Calgary, the preface of a manuscript-based thesis explains which parts of the thesis have already been published (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 9).

3.4 Table of contents

The table of contents lists the items in the dissertation in the order they appear, with their page numbers, and is followed by the lists of tables and figures (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 10). Calgary requires its headings to match those in the body of the text, including capitalization and punctuation (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 10). The University of Westminster recommends generating the table with the word processor's automatic feature rather than typing it, since a typed table must be corrected every time

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the page numbers change (University of Westminster, 2025b, Table of Contents section). Where the table runs to several pages, showing one fewer level of headings usually keeps it readable without making it less useful.

4. The Core Chapters

The core chapters report the research, and they are where the examiners judge it. This section describes them in the conventional six-chapter order.

4.1 Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction sets out the research from the beginning, without assuming that the reader has seen the abstract. According to the University of Westminster, it may contain the topic and why it is of interest, background information and the main debates in the field, the scope of the research and what the literature has not yet addressed. It may also contain the aim and the research question or hypothesis, the approach and the methods or research design, and an outline of the structure of the dissertation (University of Westminster, 2025b, Introduction section). Some programs also expect a statement of significance and definitions of key terms, both of which appear in Valdosta State University's outline (Valdosta State University, n.d., Chapter 1 section). Some dissertations also include a list of assumptions, as the Purdue dissertation in Section 7.2 does (Huang, 2019, p. 27). In Westminster's guide, the introduction normally takes about 10% of the word count (University of Westminster, 2025b, Introduction section).

Because the introduction summarizes later chapters, it is usually revised once they are written. Valdosta State University's guidelines are explicit on the point: "Parts of Chapter 1 summarize your Chapters 2 and 3, and because of that, Chapter 1 normally should be written after Chapters 2 and 3" (Valdosta State University, n.d., Chapter 1 section). A reader who finishes the introduction should know what is being investigated, why it matters and how the study will proceed.

4.2 Chapter 2: Literature review

The literature review analyzes existing research on the topic, mostly journal articles, scholarly books and reports. It does more than summarize: Westminster's guide describes it as both summary and synthesis, usually organized by topic. The review moves from general background and concepts to what can and cannot be found on the specific focus of the study, and it identifies the gaps in the literature that the research aims to fill (University of Westminster, 2025b, Literature Review section). By the end of the chapter, the reader should be able to see the gap, how the research question fits within it and what other researchers have done (University of Westminster, 2025b, Literature Review section). A theoretical or conceptual framework, where the study uses one, is often presented at the end of this chapter; Valdosta's outline places it there, while noting that it may appear in Chapter 3 instead (Valdosta State University, n.d., Chapter 2 section).

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4.3 Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter explains how the study was carried out and why it was carried out that way. Westminster's guide expects it to show how the research design addresses the research question. The guide also expects it to set out the reasons for the choice of methods, the practical details of the research (how, what, why, when, who and where) and the limitations of the approach (University of Westminster, 2025b, Methodology section). Detail and justification matter equally. A dissertation is, among other things, a demonstration of research competence, and the methodology chapter is where the author shows that the methods suit the question and were applied properly. A reader should be able to tell what was done, with whom, when and for how long, and why each design decision was taken.

4.4 Chapter 4: Results

The results chapter presents the outcome of the analysis. In a quantitative study this usually means the characteristics of the sample, the descriptive statistics and the results of the inferential tests. In a qualitative study it usually means the themes or categories identified, each supported by extracts from the data. Westminster's guide advises reporting the key findings rather than everything that was collected, presenting them honestly and objectively, and leaving their interpretation for the discussion (University of Westminster, 2025b, Results section).

That separation does not suit every study. In Valdosta's guidelines, results are generally reported in Chapter 4 and interpreted in Chapter 5, but the guidelines add that this "is not possible for some modes of qualitative research, where analysis and interpretation are closely intertwined". Even then, the interpretation in Chapter 4 should stay at a low level, with the overall interpretation reserved for the final chapter (Valdosta State University, n.d., Chapter 4 section). Some programs combine results and discussion in a single chapter, as the Australian layout quoted in Section 2 appears to do.

4.5 Chapter 5: Discussion

The discussion interprets the results, above all in relation to the research questions and the existing literature. Westminster's guide lists the tasks involved: synthesizing the findings, interpreting them, stating explicitly how they answer the research question or whether they support the hypothesis. The list continues with comparing the findings with earlier research and theory, critiquing the study's methodology and limitations, assessing its contribution and implications, and recommending further research (University of Westminster, 2025b, Discussion section). What is discussed depends on the methodology: a quantitative study might discuss the relationships found between variables, and a qualitative study its key themes and what they suggest. The essential questions are what the results show about the research questions, and whether they agree or conflict with earlier studies and why.

4.6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

The conclusion returns to the beginning. It explicitly answers the research questions set out in the introduction, even if this repeats points made in the discussion, so that the examiners do not have to assemble the answers themselves. The University of Westminster advises that the conclu-

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sion should introduce no new ideas, data or direction, should link back to the introduction, and usually takes 5% to 10% of the word count (University of Westminster, 2025b, Conclusion section).

Bunton (2005) analyzed the concluding chapters of 45 doctoral theses across a range of disciplines. Most of them restated the purpose of the study, consolidated the study's place in its research field, recommended future research and set out practical applications, implications or recommendations. A minority, which Bunton calls field-oriented, focused more on the field than on the thesis itself, and the structure of the conclusions varied between disciplines (Bunton, 2005). In practice, a conclusion chapter usually states the answers to the research questions, discusses the implications of the findings for practice, policy or the field, and acknowledges the limitations of the study and what they mean for future research. Acknowledging limitations is part of demonstrating research competence: it shows the examiners that the author can identify the weaknesses of the work.

5. The Back Matter

The back matter supports the chapters without adding to their argument. It normally consists of the reference list and the appendices.

The reference list contains every source cited, in the citation style the program requires, such as APA or Harvard. Terminology varies here too. A bibliography, in the usual sense, also lists works consulted but not cited; Westminster's guide, however, uses the term for the list of works referred to in the dissertation, in Harvard style unless a module leader specifies otherwise (University of Westminster, 2025b, Bibliography section). Calgary allows any approved style provided it is used consistently, and treats "bibliography" and "references" together as the list of sources drawn on (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 11). Reference management software reduces errors in a long reference list, since it formats entries automatically.

The appendices hold supporting material, such as survey instruments, interview guides, ethics approval letters and additional tables. Westminster's guide places the main results in the body of the dissertation and the supplementary material, such as less significant results or interview transcripts that would interrupt the main text, in the appendices. Each appendix has its own number and title and is referred to at least once in the text (University of Westminster, 2025b, Appendices section). Material that the examiners must see to follow the argument belongs in the chapters, not in an appendix. Whether appendices count toward the word limit varies between institutions and should be checked.

6. Variations on the Conventional Structure

Paltridge (2002) identified four main kinds of thesis in his sample: the simple traditional thesis, the complex traditional thesis, the topic-based thesis and the compilation of research articles. The conventional structure described above is Paltridge's simple traditional thesis. In a complex traditional thesis, as Paltridge and Starfield (2023) describe it, introductory chapters are followed by several empirical studies and a concluding chapter that draws the discussion together. Table 1 summarizes a different set of four: the structures that a student is most likely to meet, which are the six-chapter, five-chapter, paper-based and thematic dissertations.

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Table 1. Four common dissertation structures and what changes in each.

Structure	What changes	Where it is described
Six chapters	Results, discussion and conclusion each have a chapter	Westminster's "standard" structure for the sciences and social sciences
Five chapters	Discussion and conclusion share the final chapter, or results and discussion share one	Valdosta State University's dissertation guidelines; apparently the Australian thesis described by Mason and Merga (2018)
Paper-based	Several papers sit between an introductory and a concluding text	Calgary's manuscript-based thesis; theses by publication in many countries
Thematic	Chapters follow themes or arguments rather than research steps	Westminster's thematic structure, mostly used in the humanities

In all four structures in Table 1, the dissertation normally still opens by setting up its question and closes by answering it. What changes is the middle.

6.1 The five-chapter dissertation

A five-chapter dissertation combines two of the six conventional chapters. In one version the discussion and the conclusion share the final chapter. Valdosta State University's dissertation guidelines outline a five-chapter dissertation ending in "Chapter 5 Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations" (Valdosta State University, n.d., opening section), and the Purdue dissertation in Section 7.2 follows the same pattern. In the other version, the results and the discussion share a chapter and the conclusion stands alone; this appears to be the usual Australian layout quoted in Section 2 (Mason & Merga, 2018, p. 140). Where the final chapter carries both the interpretation and the conclusions, it needs time and words for both. The Valdosta guidelines observe that this chapter "is often the weakest one in the first draft". This is partly because students reach it exhausted and rushing to meet a deadline, and partly because it requires a change of mindset: the earlier chapters narrow the focus, and the final one must broaden it again (Valdosta State University, n.d., Chapter 5 section).

6.2 The paper-based dissertation

A paper-based dissertation replaces the middle chapters with a set of papers, published or prepared for publication. The format has many names. Mason and Merga (2018, p. 141) note that there is "no consistent application of terminology", and Paltridge and Starfield (2023) list, among others, thesis by publication, publication-based thesis, articles-based thesis, manuscript-style dissertation and compilation thesis. As a rule, the papers are accompanied by a narrative text that explains how they relate to one another and to the overall doctoral project (Nygaard & Solli, 2021, as cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2023), although Paltridge and Starfield (2023) found some United States examples with little or no such text. The University of Calgary describes most of its theses as taking the form of a traditional thesis, a manuscript-based thesis or a hybrid of the two, and notes that "both formats need introduction and conclusion chapters" (University of Calgary, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2023, p. 4).

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Paltridge and Starfield (2023), drawing on earlier accounts of the format, describe two arrangements. In a sandwich-style thesis, the papers appear in full as chapters between substantial introductory and concluding chapters. In a two-part thesis, an introductory narrative comes first and the papers, or summaries of them, follow it. Their analysis of 101 theses by publication in the humanities and social sciences also found different preferences in different countries. The United States examples were all prospective, with the papers written during the degree for inclusion in the thesis, while in the United Kingdom most were retrospective PhDs by published work, which collect work already published. Canadian examples, all in education, resembled those from the United States, and in Australia both kinds were found, with prospective theses predominating. They also report a Canadian study of 1,373 education dissertations at five universities in which 184 (13.4%) were manuscript-style (Anderson et al., 2021, as cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2023).

The number of papers is a matter for the program. Mason and Merga (2018) analyzed 165 theses by publication in the humanities and social sciences from Australian universities. The theses contained between one and 12 publications, "an average of 4.5 publications per thesis, and a mode of 4 publications" (Mason & Merga, 2018, p. 146), which in the authors' view makes the term "three paper thesis" a misnomer in the Australian context (p. 148). The authors caution that their sample is not representative of all theses by publication in Australia, and the figures describe one country and one broad field.

6.3 The thematic dissertation

A thematic dissertation organizes its chapters around themes or arguments rather than the steps of the research. In Westminster's description, "a thematic dissertation is often structured like a long essay" in the humanities. It has an introduction, a literature review that may be folded into the introduction, a sequence of theme chapters and a conclusion (University of Westminster, 2025a, Structure section). Each theme chapter presents analysis and discussion of one theme (University of Westminster, 2025a, Theme Chapters section) and has its own short introduction and conclusion (Cottrell, 2014, as cited in University of Westminster, 2025a, Theme Chapters section). The structure is long established. Paltridge and Starfield (2020) compared the first doctorates awarded at English-medium universities with recent ones from the same institutions and found continuity in the humanities, where both early and recent theses were topic-based. Qualitative findings chapters in other fields sometimes borrow the idea, organizing the findings by theme or by level of analysis rather than under a single heading such as "Results", as the business thesis in Section 7.4 does.

With this range of structures in use, a student needs to establish which one the program expects before planning the chapters. Alongside the handbook (Section 2), recent dissertations from the same department are a useful source, and where the two disagree, the supervisor or advisor is the person to ask.

7. Four Published Tables of Contents

A generic layout cannot show how much real theses vary. This section presents the tables of contents of four completed theses, each openly available in its university's repository (three of them under a Creative Commons license). Each table shows the chapter level only, with the page num-

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bers as printed. Chapter titles are given in sentence case with their punctuation standardized, and keep their original spelling.

7.1 Six chapters: a master's thesis in education

Barnes (2019) studied teacher professionalism and the role of the new teaching standards in New Zealand for a Master of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Her thesis follows the conventional layout chapter for chapter (Table 2), and its first chapter says so: "The report is structured into chapters that set out a review of literature, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion" (Barnes, 2019, p. 2).

Table 2. Table of contents of a six-chapter master's thesis (Barnes, 2019).

Chapter	Title	Page
1	Introduction	1
2	Literature review	4
3	Methodology	22
4	Findings	33
5	Discussion	63
6	Conclusion	80
7	References	86
–	Appendices A to E, from the focus group questions to the teaching standards	93

The page numbers show that the chapters are not meant to be equal. The introduction runs to three pages and the findings to thirty, and the space each chapter takes indicates where the weight of the study lies. Sketching a chapter list with approximate lengths early in planning makes this balance visible before drafting begins.

7.2 Five chapters: a doctoral dissertation from Purdue

Huang (2019) surveyed undergraduates' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching for a PhD in agricultural sciences education and communication at Purdue University. The dissertation uses the five-chapter structure (Table 3).

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Table 3. Table of contents of a five-chapter doctoral dissertation (Huang, 2019).

Chapter	Title	Page
1	Introduction	14
2	Literature review	31
3	Methodology	60
4	Results	81
5	Conclusions and recommendations	131
–	References	156
–	Appendices A to D: the questionnaire, two ethics approval letters and the survey invitation	200

There is no chapter called "Discussion". Chapter 5 sets out five numbered conclusions, followed by implications for practice, the limitations of the research and recommendations for future research, so the work of interpretation takes place within that chapter. The front matter differs from the conventional order as well: the abstract follows the table of contents and the lists of tables and figures.

7.3 Paper-based: a doctoral thesis from Calgary

Esmail (2020) studied the relationship between health technology reassessment and knowledge translation for a PhD in community health sciences at the University of Calgary. The thesis is manuscript-based. Its preface explains that the "body of work includes two publications and two manuscripts that are currently under review" (Esmail, 2020, p. iv), corresponding to the first four chapters (Table 4).

Table 4. Table of contents of a paper-based doctoral thesis (Esmail, 2020).

Chapter	Title	Page
1	Introduction	15
2	A scoping review of full-spectrum knowledge translation theories, models, and frameworks	40
3	Is there a knowledge translation theory, model, or framework suitable for health technology reassessment? Results from an international survey	127
4	Characteristics of knowledge translation theories, models and frameworks for health technology reassessment: Expert perspectives through a qualitative exploration	155
5	Summary	189
–	References	198
–	Appendices A to I, most labeled with the chapter they support	217

Each middle chapter is a study in its own right (a scoping review, then a survey, then interviews), with its own abstract, and the chapter titles read like the titles of journal articles. The thesis still opens with an introduction, itself published as a paper, and closes with a summary chapter that

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sets out the key findings, strengths, limitations and implications for future research. These two chapters turn a set of papers into a single dissertation, and they deserve as much care as the papers themselves.

7.4 Two analysis chapters: a doctoral thesis in business

John (2023) examined corporate governance reform in Nigeria in a qualitative PhD at the University of Lincoln, in the United Kingdom, awarded through the Lincoln International Business School. The first three chapters follow the conventional opening. Two analysis chapters then take the place of a results chapter and a discussion chapter (Table 5).

Table 5. Table of contents of a doctoral thesis with two analysis chapters (John, 2023).

Chapter	Title	Page
1	Introduction and overview	1
2	Literature review: Theoretical foundation and context	20
3	The methodology	74
4	Institutionalisation: Bureaucracy and corporate governance	143
5	Institutionalisation: Normalisation and corporate governance	216
6	Summary of the thesis and conclusion	293
–	References	313
–	Appendices	336

The two analysis chapters are organized by level. Chapter 4 examines the reforms at the higher, system level of the Nigerian corporate governance field, and Chapter 5 examines lower contextual levels and how individuals engaged with the reforms. Together, in the thesis's words, they "move progressively from description to explanation" (John, 2023, p. 143). Each presents and discusses its own findings. Where an analysis falls naturally into levels, stages or themes, findings chapters built around those divisions can be clearer than a single results chapter, and the choice is worth discussing with the supervisor early.

8. Conclusion

The structure of a dissertation follows the research process: a question, what is already known about it, a study designed to answer it, and the answer. The conventional layout expresses that process as front matter, six core chapters (introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion) and back matter, and each chapter has one main task within the argument. Institutions and disciplines change the middle of this structure. A five-chapter dissertation combines either the discussion and conclusion or the results and discussion. A paper-based dissertation replaces the middle chapters with papers framed by introductory and concluding text, and a thematic dissertation organizes its chapters around themes or arguments. None of these variations normally removes the opening chapter that sets up the research question or the closing

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chapter that answers it. The structure a student should use is the one the program expects, established from the handbook and recent dissertations in the same department, and checked with the supervisor; within it, every chapter should do its one job.

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