

My foolproof formula for the General Discussion Chapter of your thesis



Students doing postgraduate studies, e.g., Honours, Masters, and Ph.D.s, usually need to deliver a final thesis at the end of their candidature. I assist many students with staying on track with their theses, and with thesis planning and review.

I am very conscious that many students don't have the financial means to access this sort of personalised support, so I am passionate about finding ways to provide free and accessible advice and guidance where I can.

One of the things that consistently seems to cause a lot of stress during thesis writing is the final **General Discussion Chapter**. This chapter is the culmination of the thesis and students are often feeling a little lost as to what exactly to include here. They are often concerned about it being repetitive and overstating aspects they have already covered in previous chapters: and this is a valid concern.



It's important to stand back a bit here and note that it is very rare for the General Discussion chapter to be published as a journal article. This is not the case for the preceding body/data chapters, which generally are intended for publication as standalone papers. Even the opening General Introduction of the thesis is sometimes published in the form of a literature review.

So, what does this mean? Well, this means that the only people that are really ever likely to read the General Discussion chapter are as follows:

- your supervisors
- your thesis examiners
- future highly engaged postgraduate students trying to work out how to write their own discussion chapter – haha!
- your mum! (and anyone else you've roped in to reading the damn thing!)

And, let's face it, all that really matters here is what your thesis examiners think of the General Discussion chapter! This is somewhat liberating to realise.

With this in mind, I have come up with a basic "Discussion Formula" to ease this stress and make writing the General Discussion nice and straightforward, while also ensuring that you nail what the thesis examiners are expecting and looking for. When you use this formula approach, you can think of it as a "plug and play" exercise – yay!

For this to work, you first need to start doing some brainstorming. You can start this at any stage of your candidature. A lot of ideas are going to be swirling around in your head throughout your candidature, and at the end this usually becomes all-consuming! Fun times!

You want to be brainstorming items for two specific lists:

- **LIST A: What are your unique contributions to knowledge?**
- **LIST B: What are you worried about?**



Let's unpack both of these a bit more...

LIST A: What are your unique contributions to knowledge?

Remember that for a Ph.D. to be awarded, for example, you must demonstrate that you have made a new and original contribution to knowledge. This is what a Ph.D. is defined as! So, we really want to make sure you drive home exactly how you have done this. Make your examiners' job easy!

When brainstorming for **LIST A**, ask yourself the following:

1. *In what ways have you made a new and original contribution to knowledge?*
2. *What do we now know that we didn't know before?*
3. *What is now possible, as a result of this work?*

LIST B: What are you worried about?

It is never a good idea to try and 'hide' anything when it comes to research and writing a thesis. No thesis, no project, no study, is ever perfect. And research is never really finished – it's just a springboard into more research! When doing your brainstorming for **LIST B** you



want to be upfront about any perceived shortcomings. And in fact, you will see below that we are actually going to turn them into nice, big, fat, positives!

Ask yourself the following when making **LIST B**:

1. *What do you wish you had more time to do?*
2. *What is missing?*
3. *What doesn't make total sense, and therefore needs more research?*
4. *What are the remaining "holes"/gaps?*
5. *What might your examiners be thinking as they read through the thesis?*

Once you have **LIST A** and **LIST B**, you can write the General Discussion using my nifty formula, which goes like this:

1. **Opening paragraph (no heading required):** restate main question of thesis, followed by specific aims from thesis Introduction, then provide overview of techniques used to address aims and, finally, a single sentence or two outlining what 'answer/s' you found to your main question.
2. Write a series of paragraphs based around **LIST A** – one paragraph for each of your **LIST A** points with its own specific **bolded heading**.
 - Outline how each **LIST A** point was arrived at and it is really good if you can show that this conclusion was arrived at in more than one way/in multiple chapters – this shows high level synthesis of ideas and will make the examiners really happy!
 - Link back to chapters explicitly when discussing key points, e.g., “As a result of this thesis, we now know that xxxxx (Chapter 2) and that this is due to xxxx (Chapter 3)”. You can have as many paragraphs here as you have points in **LIST A**, but aim for at least 3 if you can.
3. **Future Directions (as bolded heading).** This section can have sub-headings in *italics*. Each sub-section will be based around **LIST B**. See what we are doing here? We're turning any perceived 'shortcomings' into the much more exciting and palatable 'future directions' #winning!
 - So, if you have 3 big "holes"/unanswered questions in your thesis, you can turn these into 3 italicised subheadings.
 - When you expand on each, aim for an underlying vibe of positivity and excitement 😊
4. **Concluding remarks (as final bolded heading).**
 - Restate briefly what you found as key takeaways in your thesis from point 2 in the formula above). “In summary, this thesis has...”
 - Then remind us again why your work is new/novel/a key contribution to knowledge.
 - Finish up with the main finding of your thesis, as it relates back to your original question in the thesis Introduction.



That's it! You're done! Usually, when following this formula, the Discussion chapter ends up being just 6 or so pages, which is a good thing. You can get straight to the point and stop overthinking it.

Now your supervisors, examiners (and your mum – haha!), will wrap up their reading with complete certainty that you have made an original contribution to knowledge and an appreciation for all of the exciting possibilities that have now opened up as a result of all of your hard work! Well done!

If you found this helpful, and you have the means, please consider buying me a coffee to say thanks, via my Ko-Fi page: <https://ko-fi.com/janinerix>

You can find more of my ideas and resources @ www.janinerixlearningsolutions.com

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