

The University of Sydney
Faculty of Health Sciences Graduate Studies Committee
Guidelines for Candidates & Markers
Masters Research Thesis
Version 1b, amended 27/8/2002

General Comments

1. The guidelines are based on the work of Biggs (1999), and follow a hierarchical taxonomy of mastery. A summary is given below.
2. A masters thesis is expected to develop a reasoned argument based on the analysis of qualitative or quantitative data, or on theoretical exposition. It should convey a sense of *progression* in the development of the argument. An acceptable pattern in a quantitative thesis **could** include a series of small studies, or a pilot study followed by a larger study, or a phase in which measuring instruments are developed or validated prior to a larger study, or one large study. An acceptable qualitative thesis might show evidence of refinement of observational methods as a result of reflection on the technique or, in interviews, an ongoing analysis which led to progression in the focus of questioning. An acceptable theoretical thesis might examine a variety of existing viewpoints.
3. Commenting on themes common to thesis examiners' reports across many disciplines *The Australian Universities' Review*, 1995, 38(2), p 14 says –
"Examiners look for clarity in aims, coherence in approach, critical depth, perspective and originality. They are annoyed by poor spelling, language which obscures, literature reviews which are mere descriptive lists, unsubstantiated claims, and unwarranted or unrecognised assumptions."

The Committee commends these comments to students and markers.

Using the Guidelines

1. The final mark is for the integrated whole, not a simple summation of the parts. The grid columns are designed to give general guidance to markers and students. ***Please follow their spirit rather than their rigid letter.***
2. Some columns in the grid sheet may be inapplicable to some theses. Some may be applicable, but of lesser importance than others. Column 5 (Presentation) should be accorded lesser importance in all cases. Markers and students should use their common sense in deciding which columns are most applicable to a particular thesis.

Biggs' s Stages

- Prestructural:* A stage characterised by the lack of any coherent grasp of the material. Isolated facts or skill elements may be acquired.
- Unistructural:* A stage in which a single relevant aspect of the material or skill may be mastered.
- Multistructural:* A stage in which several relevant aspects of the material or skills are mastered separately.
- Relational:* A stage in which the several relevant aspects of the material or skills which have been mastered are integrated into a theoretical structure.
- Extended Abstract:* The stage of 'expertise' in which the material is mastered both within its integrated structure, and in relation to other knowledge domains, thus enabling the student to theorise about the domain. This stage is sometimes known as 'helicopter vision'.

- Reference:** Biggs, J. (1999). What the student does: teaching for enhanced learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*. 18 (1) 57-75.

Guidelines for Candidates & Markers - Masters Research Thesis

GRADE	Introduction/Literature Review	Research Plan/Design/Proposal	Results	Discussion/Theoretical Analysis	Presentation
High Distinction 85-100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review of literature is comprehensive ▪ Shows a high level of abstraction & reflection ▪ Student is able to relate material to other knowledge domains ▪ Review critiques well, and may resolve, theoretical and/or empirical problems ▪ May show evidence of creative or innovative conceptualisation ▪ Discussion is integrated into a logical, coherent whole ▪ Creates a sense of mastery of literature and relevant technical issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Design elegantly addresses research aims ▪ Sense of imaginativeness in choice of methods ▪ Awareness of methodological pitfalls ▪ Choice of materials and subject selection are appropriate and are properly justified within the viable scope of the study ▪ Explanations of procedure and analysis are detailed, clear, complete & ethical ▪ Flows logically from issues raised in Introduction/ Literature Review ▪ Setting-out follows acceptable conventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation is as succinct as possible, ▪ All relevant information is presented ▪ All relevant analyses are clearly presented ▪ Outcome of research aims/ questions/ hypotheses is clearly explained ▪ Results follow a reasoned sequence which shows abstract and reflective understanding of the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High level of abstraction & reflection displayed ▪ Reconceptualisation of ideas occurs ▪ A sense of mastery of issues is created ▪ Information is generalised beyond the immediate context ▪ It creatively combines new with old conceptions, based on evidence ▪ Implications of research are discussed imaginatively ▪ Uses limitations of existing knowledge to suggest new possibilities ▪ It locates inquiry in a larger context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation is orderly, clear and aids understanding in all sections of the report ▪ Where appropriate, sections and sub-sections are used and are logically ordered ▪ Expression is clear ▪ Complex arguments are structured in an orderly way
Distinction 75-84	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review is reasonably comprehensive ▪ Evidence of abstraction and reflection ▪ Some attempt to relate material to other knowledge domains ▪ Review identifies and attempts to resolve theoretical puzzles ▪ Essential content within the domain is successfully integrated 	Criteria are those for HD except that - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual sections are excellent, but the sense of logical continuity is uncertain OR ▪ one section is abbreviated OR ▪ a significant but solvable (non-fatal) problem exists OR ▪ the plans are technically perfect, but are pedestrian and lack elegance 	Criteria are those for HD except that - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The report is unnecessarily wordy OR ▪ expression is occasionally unclear OR ▪ one or two aims/questions/ hypotheses are not fully dealt with OR ▪ a minor flaw exists in an otherwise insightful interpretation OR ▪ the report is rather unimaginative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It explores all necessary content ▪ It argues well and clearly within issues but does not make higher-level abstractions ▪ Minor omissions/errors flaw otherwise compelling argument ▪ Sense of mastery of issues is uncertain 	Criteria are those for HD except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A notable number of trivial errors occurs OR ▪ some inappropriate conventions are followed OR ▪ one section is flawed
Credit 65-74	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review identifies and defines major issues ▪ Clear arguments are developed within at least some major issues ▪ Argument is strong on some issues but integrative analysis is unconvincing ▪ Technical issues treated competently 	Criteria are those for D except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Several sections lack detail OR ▪ moderate but solvable flaws exist in the research plan OR ▪ one research aim is not well met OR ▪ setting out is somewhat flawed 	Criteria are those for D except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The report lacks some key details OR ▪ the report is needlessly repetitive OR ▪ some aims/questions/ hypotheses are treated inadequately OR ▪ one or two non-fatal errors occur OR ▪ the report is confused in places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual issues/outcomes are argued clearly and thoroughly BUT integrative abstraction is absent ▪ There may be several minor flaws in argument ▪ Arguments tend to lack imagination ▪ A sense of the larger context is missing 	Criteria are those for D except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Occasional large but non-fatal OR more frequent but minor errors occur OR ▪ layout is a bit confusing but is comprehensible
Pass 50-64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review identifies some major issues ▪ Comments are essentially descriptive ▪ Minimal critical analysis is attempted OR analysis is shallow OR analysis is somewhat confused ▪ Main focus is on concrete issues ▪ Lack of integrating argument ▪ Some technical expertise revealed ▪ May have non-major factual errors 	Criteria are those for CR except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ all/most sections lack some details OR several significant but solvable flaws exist in the research plan OR ▪ only some research aims are fully met OR ▪ setting-out lacks logical continuity, though most major issues are covered OR ▪ no analysis plan is reported OR 	Criteria are those for CR except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The report is totally unimaginative OR ▪ Some lesser aims/questions/ hypotheses are not reported OR ▪ Setting-out is moderately unclear OR ▪ Several non-fatal errors occur OR ▪ Trivial inconsistencies occur OR ▪ No attempt is made to justify 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arguments are correct/mostly correct but are rather limited in scope OR ▪ There is little evidence of imagination OR ▪ The effects of limitations of existing evidence/knowledge tend to be missed OR ▪ Some conclusions are missed AND ▪ Some minor errors in logic occur OR 	Criteria are those for CR except that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is little coherence between sections OR ▪ There are frequent non-fatal errors OR ▪ Layout is quite confusing OR ▪ It is generally sloppy

GRADE	Introduction/Literature Review	Research Plan/Design/Proposal	Results	Discussion/Theoretical Analysis	Presentation
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no imagination whatsoever is displayed 	several reported outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some key issues are ignored 	
<p>Fail</p> <p><50</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review skips or skirts essential issues Poor understanding of key concepts Isolated issues dealt with adequately but no evidence of synthesis Creates a sense of fragmentation and incoherence Comments are largely or entirely descriptive May contain serious errors of fact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The plan is fatally flawed OR The plan does not address key aims OR Major sections are omitted entirely OR Setting out is so eccentric that the plan is incomprehensible OR The plan involves clear violation of the standards of ethical research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key aims/questions/hypotheses are not reported OR Major conclusions are obviously wrong OR Serious inconsistencies appear in the report OR The candidate clearly does not understand her/his/its research OR Fudging or hiding results is noted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The candidate appears to lack a coherent grasp of the material OR Major issues are not addressed OR Arguments are absent or illogical OR Expression is incomprehensible OR Flaws in existing knowledge or evidence are completely ignored OR Arguments are a clear distortion of existing knowledge or evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is incomprehensible OR Major errors occur in key sections OR Key sections are absent OR There is evidence of plagiarism