



Preparing your academic work for submission

After years of work, long nights and missed vacations, it is almost time to submit your PhD or master's research findings for examination – or that journal article for peer review.

You've finished a full draft and are generally happy with the content. Now you need to go back through your work to check the clarity of your argument and the consistency of your language, and to correct any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, academic conventions, and referencing.

Finding errors in your own writing is surprisingly difficult – your work is so familiar that your eyes no longer see it clearly. Getting these things right, however, gives reviewers or examiners a good initial impression and allows them to focus solely on the quality of your work. A word of warning. It is highly likely you will need several read-throughs with a specific focus for each task. This can be time consuming and tricky to manage, and it is easy to get distracted.

So, what exactly do you need to look at? Look at our checklist to help you feel confident that you have covered all the bases.

How do I check my dissertation, thesis, or article before submission?

Make sure you understand the expectations.

Read through your university's thesis¹ guidelines (or submission guidelines of the journal you are interested in submitting to) and create a checklist of things to look for. They may specify a particular referencing style, an exact font or font size, a way of numbering chapters, sections and sub-sections, or a variety of English (e.g. Australian, UK, US). They may also specify the sections required in the Front Matter of a thesis or article, and in what order they should appear (e.g. Title Page, Table of Contents, Abstract, and Acknowledgements). Spend some time understanding Microsoft Word styles and the navigation panel to help your 'big picture' structure, consistency and clarity shine through.

Check that you have a clear organisational structure in your dissertation, thesis, or article, and that it is applied consistently. If you are using Microsoft Word, make sure that Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3, and Normal styles are set up correctly. The Normal style may be Times New Roman 12 (depending on the university or journal), with or without an indent at the start of each new paragraph. Heading levels also need to be set up correctly, e.g. **Chapter 1 Introduction** (Heading 1), **1.1 Background** (Heading 2), **1.1.1 Terminology** (Heading 3). Your headings should appear when you open the Navigation Pane, which is a useful way to move around a very long document and a quick way to check that you are using Heading styles correctly. Using Heading styles will also enable Word to create a Table of Contents that includes all the heading levels you have used, along with their page numbers.

Get to grips with headers and footers – how they link and how they are generated.

For a dissertation or thesis, it is normal to number the Front Matter pages in Roman numerals from the second page onwards (ii, iii, iv), while Chapter 1 onwards uses Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3). Some universities or journals require a running head at the top of each page (e.g. the chapter number and title, or just the chapter title). Universities or journals may also require different running heads on odd and even pages. If the running head changes with each chapter, you will need to check that each one is correct – do the headers refer to the right chapters, for example? If different running heads are required on odd and

¹ This guide uses the terms 'thesis' and 'dissertation' interchangeably – 'dissertation' in the US sense, and 'thesis' in the UK sense – both meaning 'an extended piece of original research at doctoral level'. In the UK, 'dissertation' is also used, but refers to a bachelor's- or master's-level research report, called a 'thesis' in the US.

even pages, you will need to check that this is applied consistently throughout the document.

Familiarise yourself with Microsoft Word’s cross-reference feature.

This feature will help you make sure all of your cross-references are correct. It ensures that any updates you make to the numbering of your figures and tables, or section numbers, can be easily updated in the cross-references. Nevertheless, they still need to be checked as errors can occur. Don’t forget to update all of your cross-references, and your Table of Contents, List of Figures and List of Tables, as Word does not update them automatically.

Check the logic of your thinking.

Read through your article or thesis and check that the argument flows logically. At this stage, don’t worry about grammar and spelling errors, unless they make your writing unclear. Does each paragraph follow on smoothly from the previous one, and does it follow a logical order (e.g. topic sentence, supporting sentences, examples)? Does each paragraph support your overall claim?

Read through with a special focus on consistency in terminology.

Check your key words and technical expressions and make sure that they are used consistently. When you first introduce a key word, you may want to highlight it, either by using ‘single quotes’, or “double quotes”, or by using *italics*. Once you have introduced the term, there is no need to keep highlighting it like this. However, if later in the thesis you want to draw attention to the term as a concept, you may want to use quotes or italics again. Be consistent with the highlighting method you use.

Run a grammar and spelling check.

Work through your document and correct any items flagged by your spell checker (e.g. the one in Microsoft Word). Make sure that the checker is using the right language for your thesis (e.g. US English, UK English).

Check your in-text citations and use a reference list manager with care.

Check that each in-text citation is in the correct format (e.g. author, year if you are using APA), with a page number for all quotes, and check that each citation is in the reference list, and that the spelling and year information match. Check that your reference list is correctly laid out for each type of source (e.g. in APA, italics are used for book titles and

the names of journals, but regular text is used for journal-article titles). These conventions can be rather complicated, so using a reference list manager, such as Endnote, Mendeley or Zotero, is highly recommended. If you do use a reference list manager, make sure that all of your entries are complete and correct, as the manager works with what you give it and may reproduce errors that you have made.

Check punctuation around quotations.

Punctuation varies in UK and US English. Whichever you use, make sure they are consistent (either single or double quotation marks throughout). Quotes within quotes are an exception – use single quotes if the outside quotes are double, and double quotes if the outside quotes are single. There are also different conventions in UK and US English regarding placement of commas and full stops (periods) following quotes. For example:

- Smith (2024, p. 23) argues that “proofreading is vital” (UK)
- Smith (2024, p. 23) argues that “proofreading is vital.” (US)
- “Proofreading is vital”, in Smith’s view (2024, p. 23). (UK)
- “Proofreading is vital,” in Smith’s view (2024, p. 23). (US)

Be correct and consistent in the punctuation convention you use.

If you are submitting an article to an American journal, or a dissertation to an American university, it is probably a good idea to use US punctuation and spelling conventions. These kinds of things may seem small and unimportant, but they all contribute to the impression that you give your reviewer or examiner – all part of establishing your credentials as a researcher.

Check your tables and figures captions and notes.

Make sure captions are clear and in a consistent format and that numbers are correct (e.g. Figure 2.1 *Key concepts in the literature*). Also make sure that each figure or table is discussed in the text. If you are using Word, it is a good idea to set up a multilevel list that numbers your chapters and sections. This will then enable you to insert captions that include the chapter number (1.1, 2.1, 3.1), which is often a university requirement. If you enter the chapter and section numbers manually, the caption will not be able to pull in the chapter number automatically, and you will have to add it manually, which is not recommended as it is more likely to lead to errors. Make sure the captions are placed in the right place (e.g. above the figure or table in APA), and that explanatory notes are formatted correctly (e.g. using the word ‘*Note:*’ placed below the table

or figure in APA). A quick way to check all of your figures and tables is to do a search within your document for the words ‘figure’ and ‘table’. This will highlight the figures and tables, and the cross-references to them, making the job of checking them so much quicker.

Do another check specifically for errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Remember that grammar and spelling checkers do not find all the errors, and they are sometimes incorrect, so you will need to check manually too. This check is probably the most time consuming and challenging one, so here are some tips to help you manage the process:

- **Pace yourself and take breaks:** In a long document, proofreading is a time-consuming process, and you may quickly become tired and therefore more likely to miss errors. It is a good idea to only do, say, a chapter a day, and to have a good break between main sections.
- **Read slowly and carefully:** It’s a good idea to read the text aloud as this will help you notice errors or awkwardness in sentence structure. For example, it might help you realise that your sentence has no verb (fragment error), or that a sentence is too long and needs to be broken down to make it clearer.
- **Some proofreaders read ‘backwards’,** starting with the final paragraph and moving up through the document. This helps take your attention away from the ideas and argument and makes focussing on the detail of each sentence a bit easier.
- **Search for a common error throughout the whole document** and fix all instances of the error. For example, if you find that you often confuse ‘there’, ‘their’ and ‘they’re’, you could use the ‘Find’ function to locate each use of these words in order to double check if they are spelled as intended.
- **Do a PDF check:** Once you are happy with your proofreading, convert your document into a PDF. This will give you a good idea of how well your document is formatted. Note down any formatting errors that you see, then go back to the Word document and correct them before creating your final PDF.

Check again, one final time.

Every time you make an edit to your text, you run the risk of adding an error. For this reason, you should run a final grammar and spelling check, and do a final check of the formatting –

margins, page numbering, fonts, heading styles and numbering, running headers. Refer back to the checklist you created based on your university, or journal, guidelines.

Walk away. You have done the best you can.

Good luck with the examination or review process!