

## Exploring Master's Dissertation Writing Common Weaknesses: an analysis of Interviews with Examiners

استكشاف نقاط الضعف الشائعة في كتابة مذكرة الماستر: تحليل المقابلات مع المناقشين

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**Abstract:** Writing a research paper is seen as an extremely hard and challenging task for non native learners of English language. Accordingly, this study aims at investigating the common writing deficiencies found in EFL Master's dissertations at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. For this purpose, ten internal examiners are asked for their consent to be interviewed. The interview focuses on the criteria that the examiners identify as indicators of weakness in dissertations writing and the recommendations that they can suggest. The findings show that while it is evident that examiners put great emphasis on the research paper format, significance of the research topic, presence of key items in the abstract and necessary moves in the introductory section, relevance of literature review, consistency of the methods adopted and the ability to interpret the data gathered, four common indicators of Master's dissertation writing weaknesses are highlighted: the lack of alignment between the dissertation elements, inadequate academic writing style, poor paraphrasing and the absence of critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Dissertation writing, academic writing weaknesses, postgraduate students, examination process, interview method.

### المخلص:

كتابة بحث تعتبر مهمة صعبة للغاية. غالبًا ما يُنظر إليها على أنها مشكلة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية. لذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى كشف نقاط الضعف الشائعة الموجودة في مذكرات الماستر للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في جامعة ابن خلدون بتيارت. ولهذه الغاية، تم طلب موافقة عشرة مناقشين داخليين لإجراء مقابلات معهم. تركز المقابلة على المعايير التي يحددها الفاحصون كمؤشرات ضعف في المذكرات والتوصيات التي يمكن اقتراحها لمعالجتها. تظهر النتائج أنه في حين أن الفاحصين يركزون بشكل كبير على تنسيق ورقة البحث، أهمية موضوع البحث، وجود العناصر الرئيسية في الملخص والتحركات الضرورية في القسم التمهيدي، انسجام الدراسات السابقة، اتساق الأساليب المعتمدة والقدرة على تفسير البيانات التي تم جمعها، أربعة مؤشرات مشتركة لضعف مذكرة الماستر تم إبرازها: عدم التوافق بين عناصر المذكرة، عدم كفاية أسلوب الكتابة الأكاديمية، ضعف إعادة الصياغة، وغياب التفكير النقدي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة المذكرة، مشاكل الكتابة الأكاديمية، طلاب الدراسات العليا، عملية المناقشة، طريقة المقابلة

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## 1. Introduction

It is repeatedly put that academic writing is at the heart of higher education. Students, at graduate degree level, are asked to write a long piece of writing to a deadline, whether it is a dissertation or a thesis, and they are assessed on that. Assessment is made by examiners who usually prepare a written report to say whether the dissertation or the thesis meets the required standards for the award of the degree and provide feedback to help the candidates improve their end product and close the gap between the current and desired performance. This starts right from the preliminary sections which have to be written in an acceptable format, followed by a convincing introduction, relevance of literature review, consistency of the methodology, data presentation, analysis and interpretation to the reference works that must be rich and pertinent.

Even there may be universals of writing, many non native students of English language find themselves struggling to cope and in need of clear straightforward guidance when it comes to writing such kind of effective academic research papers. Among the questions they may have to wrestle with are: what may be a judicious choice of a topic? What relevant literature should be reviewed? How can it be organised? What sample is to be selected? How can results be presented? How can a clear alignment between the research questions, the attainable objectives, existing literature and the choice of the methodological techniques be established? What writing conventions should be adopted? and many other question related to academic research writing. Obviously, to provide initial answers to these and others, they turn first to their supervisors whose own ever-increasing workload sometimes prevents them from being able to offer the level of support necessary and, consequently, students can be left fending for themselves, often surprised to find that meeting the writing requirements for academic research papers in English is much more difficult. In the worst cases, this can lead to anxiety and failure.

Relevant to this, the present study attempts to reveal EFL Master's dissertation writing common weaknesses through interviewing examiners so that some possible recommendations can be suggested to address them. In doing so, initially, it is crucial to review some pertinent studies on writing academic research papers and the importance of the examination process.

## 1. Writing Research Papers

Researchers should be clear why they are writing and whatever the reason is; it is useful to think about the probable readers of their research papers. More specifically, dissertations or theses have as their main purpose the communication of research findings and have as their target audience the research community with its own language, its own conventions and even its own rules of writing.

A good research work may be the outcome of well conducted research and careful writing. An integral part of any research process is writing but it is important to be aware that research process and writing process are closely related. Students who are embarking on the writing of research paper need to understand the processes to follow before and after writing it, and the strategies that may help to convert their research into a well-written and appropriately structured paper. According to José António C. Santos and Margarida Custódio Santos (2015), the research process is divided into three stages, each including several steps. Stage one is choosing and defining. In this stage, the fundamentals of research: topic, research problem, objectives, hypotheses and methods are selected and defined. Stage two is about assessing and analysing data. It is empirical as well as analytical, and it deals with data collection, processing, analysis and interpretation. In this stage, hypotheses are tested, and conclusions are made. Stage three deals with communicating the research findings to the target audience or the scholarly community. As a matter of course, in this stage, drafts of the research findings need to be transformed into a well written paper.

Converting drafts of research findings into a well-written structured paper may seem also an overwhelming task initially, but approaching the task methodically can ease the process. Academic research papers generally follow a standard format which is essential to ensure that research writing does meet the necessary standards. This format, with its many variations, provides a convenient template that is based on a strict order of discrete sections (Abstract/ Introduction/Literature review/Methodology, etc.). To use the words of Blackwell and Martin (2011), paper format or framework shows precisely the information that needs to be included, and the order in which it should be presented in each section. In short, if we take a pause and think a moment, it is imperative to stress that successful papers are rewritten, that is, as Murray (1968) put it, writing is rewriting. Rewriting may not just be about correcting and proofreading, but about reseeing the first words and determining whether or not they do the job required.

Writing is not seen as the end product of the research, but as a fundamental part of it. Elizabeth Henning et al. (2010) do not view writing as an externalisation of mental activity, but a direct performance of such activity. Put simply, writing is not viewed as a representation of a writer's thinking, but as a process of thinking that uses written language to perform what goes on in the mind of the author. The language style of academic writing matters therefore, it should be precise, impersonal and objective. It is necessary to pay close attention to some of the problems of writing that arise out of the nature of language itself, this may cover, for example, how to navigate through some conventions of formal and informal language and how to use the very particular technical language appropriate to some disciplines. For Gerstein (2013), the target audience should be able to read and understand research papers without much effort; hence, it is of great value to adopt writing conventions and strategies that help increase the likelihood of approval and acceptance of academic research papers.

## **2. Examination of Dissertations and Theses**

Research to date on experienced examiners' reports on Master's dissertations and doctoral theses has addressed a number of key questions. These questions include the following: What steps do examiners go through in the process of assessing Master dissertations and theses? What standards do they apply for research papers assessment and recommendations? Are these standards based on institutional conventions or on their own understanding of what is required for academic research writing? and what do examiners' final report consist of?

Though examiners are expected to evaluate the work of the candidate with nothing more than the text of the research paper, it is found that due to varying perceptions of standards and criteria regarding approval and disapproval of dissertations and theses, comments on the candidate's work are often inconsistent and decisions reached can be problematic (Albertyn et al. 2007). Of direct relevance to this claim is that examiners from various disciplines may not share the same view as to what steps and criteria to follow in the process of assessing Master's dissertations or theses, and therefore there has been a call for the training of examiners (Cryer and Mertens 2003; Denicolo 2003; Powell and McCauley 2003 cited in Albertyn et al. 2007). Similar findings reveal that the process of examination itself is in need of examination (Powell and Green, 2003). In the same line of thought, Lessing (2008) asserts that the examination of dissertations and theses is not a process to take lightly and examiners need proper guidelines and training to make their assessment valid and reliable.

Furthermore, even though the examination guidelines are most often made available to the examiners, they may also vary with regard the way they approach their own reports writing. According to Kumar and Stracke (2011), experienced examiners usually do a dual task when writing their reports. The first task is to make a summative assessment where a decision is made about whether or not the academic research paper meets the standards established by the discipline for the award of the degree. The standards listed as assessment guidelines are generally those developed by boards of researchers such as the one developed by the American Psychological Association (APA). The publication Manual of the APA has played an important role in the establishment of reporting standards for the last half century (The JARS group, 2008). It has provided a useful checklist that examiners can use to evaluate the content of the research paper and promote the highest degree of decision accuracy in assessment. The requirements highlighted in the most recent edition of the Manual are available on this site [www.apasyle.apa.org](http://www.apasyle.apa.org). The second task is to provide formative assessment and feedback so that to assist the candidate to close the gap between the current and the desired research paper. Kumar and Stracke (2011) continue saying, recent studies argue that examiners' assessments are in fact considered feedback on the work in progress.

We may reach a conclusion that the examination process could be subjective in the absence of explicit consensus about the required standards of assessment; and a clear understanding of the steps the examiners have to go through to make their judgments about the quality of the candidate's work, but we still need to emphasise the importance of the examination process to safeguard the standards of Master's and doctoral qualifications (Johnston, 1997).

### **3. Research Methodology**

In view of the aim of the current study, the following two questions are addressed:

1. What do examiners indicate about the most weaknesses of EFL Master's dissertations writing?
2. What recommendations can be suggested to address these common weaknesses?

This study adopts the method of semi-structured interview, by which the questions are asked in ways that fitted with the manner in which the interview is progressing. The sampling is a purposive one. Ten internal examiners from Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret are asked for their consent to be interviewed. It is made clear to them that the interest of this study is in the examination process of Master's

dissertation and their experiences are important since they all have both PhD and supervisory expertise. Fortunately, contact with the interviewees has been made easily since the interviewer is one of their colleagues.

The development of the interview schedule is aligned with the aim of the present study. It is divided into four main sections. The first section is devoted to broad generalizations about the examination process, while the other three sections are dedicated to these topics, namely: the assessed areas in dissertations with illustrative comments, common indicators of dissertation writing weakness and suggested recommendations. The data obtained is analysed using a qualitative approach as it presents descriptive data in words.

Ethical considerations are taken through all the present study steps. We take into consideration the principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of the purposive sampling.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

##### **4.1. Broad generalizations about the examination process**

This section presents descriptive data related to broad generalizations about the examination process, including mainly: the availability of the report examination guidelines, formal training and final report organization.

With regard to the respondents' answers, the guidelines for the preparation of EFL Master's dissertation report examination are not made available to the participants in this study. Moreover, they are not trained to examine postgraduate research papers but gained their expertise through experience. They follow their own self-developed guidelines and therefore they vary with regard the way they approach their final written reports in terms of length and depth. Examiners' comments come in slightly different formats, organized according to a set of APA assessment criteria, presenting thoughts in a short text referring to writing problems most often only by page numbers.

#### 4.2. Assessment areas

This section is dedicated to the major assessed areas the examiners evaluate in Master's dissertations. Since this needs further exploration, the interviewees are asked to illustrate their answers with comments.

There are not many conflicting responses to this question, the majority of the interviewees mentioned that they make critical comments about the areas they believe they are the standards for Master's dissertation acceptance. The key areas that receive considerable attention from them include:

<b>Major assessed areas</b>	<b>Illustrative comments</b>
<b>1. Paper format</b>	All the components of a dissertation (the acknowledgments, table of contents, abstract, the general introduction, review of literature, the data collection methods and procedures chapter, the general conclusion, list of references and appendices)
<b>2. Research topic (title)</b>	Context, originality and significance
<b>3. Abstract</b>	Clarity, presence of key items and alignment with the content of the dissertation.
<b>4. Necessary moves in the general introduction</b>	Consistence with the research topic and adequate language style ( <i>research aims</i> : clear and consistent with the research topic/ <i>research questions</i> : attainable and aligned with the research aims / <i>hypotheses</i> : well stated and testable)
<b>5. Literature review</b>	Clear presentation, relevance to the research topic, good paraphrasing and referencing(citation)
<b>6. Methodology</b>	Ethics, reliability, validity and consistency with the subject (research design: appropriate and systematic/ Sampling: representative and well described)
<b>7. Findings</b>	Data analysis (clear presentation, accuracy and consistency in percentages), critical interpretation, alignment with the research aims and adequate language style.

**Table 01:** Major assessed areas of Master's dissertation with illustrative comments

### 4.3. Common indicators of Master's dissertation weakness

At this point, it needs to be noted that both section two and section three seem inseparable; one prompts the other. But, this section, in particular, focuses on what constitutes an ineffective EFL Master's dissertation, that is to say the qualities of dissertation writing student researchers do not perform effectively and have the most trouble with. The multiple answers provided by the interviewees are ordered in a manner that we think they may be of direct interest to student researchers.

All the examiners being interviewed expect and want a Master's dissertation to be approved, and they are unwilling to recommend a fail. But first impressions matter, as they start reading the candidate's work, they will quickly make up their mind whether it is likely to be high or low quality. They feel annoyed and get distracted by research paper errors, and therefore they favour to read a well conducted dissertation with careful writing.

As clearly stated by the interviewees, among many indicators, the lack of alignment between the dissertation elements, inadequate academic writing style, poor paraphrasing, and the absence of critical thinking are the common factors that can indicate Master's dissertation writing weakness. A look at the entire results of the interviewees' responses to each item, ranging from 'the inadequate academic writing style to the absence of critical thinking', reveal that: the lack of alignment between the dissertation elements (10 interviewees/all the interviewees), inadequate academic writing style (10 /all the interviewees), poor paraphrasing (8 interviewees), and the absence of critical thinking (7 interviewees). The details of the results obtained for this section show that:

<p><b>The lack of alignment between the dissertation elements</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-No interconnection between the research topic and the research questions,</li> <li>-No alignment between the research questions, the hypotheses and the formulated aims of the study,</li> <li>- No alignment established between the literature review and the research topic,</li> <li>-No clear alignment between the research aims and the choice of the research methodology (sampling and instruments),</li> <li>-No interrelation between the obtained data, the formulated research questions and the aims of the study</li> </ul>
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	(data collected, analysed and interpreted do not clearly meet the research aims and by implication do not answer the research questions)
<b>Inadequate academic writing style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The use of long, unclear and indirect sentences</li> <li>- The use of too informal, vague, subjective and not carefully structured wording;</li> <li>-The use of excessive adverbs and judgmental adjectives</li> <li>-The use of incorrect grammar, spelling and punctuation</li> <li>-Typos, repetition and wordiness</li> </ul>
<b>Poor paraphrasing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Te organization of ideas into incoherent argument</li> <li>-The use of incomplete statements with unoriginal meaning</li> <li>-The use of many unnecessary quotes</li> <li>-Uncited authors (no referencing= plagiarism)</li> </ul>
<b>The absence of critical thinking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Writing unclear and merely descriptive literature review (having only a catalogue of the literature is not challenging to read)</li> <li>-The inability to critically analyse and interpret the findings</li> </ul>

**Table 02:** Common indicators of Master's dissertation weakness

#### **4.4. Suggested recommendation to address dissertation common weaknesses**

To continue the foregoing analysis of the data gathered; this is the last question that needs an answer: what recommendations can be suggested to address these common indicators of dissertation writing weakness?

The interviewees stress again their willingness to have a good read and their annoyance by the common factors that can indicate writing weakness as well. Hence, they propose that student researchers should do a thorough revision and proofreading to remove distracting errors before submission. It is also recommended that universities

should engage Masters' students more in study days, seminars and workshops on dissertation writing techniques and the examination process.

## 5. Discussion of the Findings

This study is initially motivated by the need to respond to the sense of examiners' expectation to have a good read and student researchers' willingness to have a passable well written dissertation. Given that, it investigates the common indicators of Master's dissertation writing weakness from the examiner's assessment perspective. The findings reveal that the examiners have identified 'the lack of alignment between the dissertation elements, inadequate academic writing style, poor paraphrasing, and the absence of critical thinking' as the common factors that can indicate Master's dissertation writing weakness. Of importance, student researchers should provide clear evidence that they have addressed alignment between all the elements of their final product. They should also think about their probable readers, and utilize the most adequate academic writing style so that their papers can be read and understood easily. Furthermore, based on the findings outlined above, candidates have to look for effective paraphrasing strategies to avoid plagiarism and create a good impression right from the first chapter, not forgetting that they need to show their contribution and critical thinking throughout all the chapters of their Master's dissertations.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on this claim ‘ if you know your reader, you can write a better dissertation’ (Golding, 2017), this study offers guidance for writing an effective dissertation, free from indicators of weakness, based on applying what it presents about the way examiners read a Master’s dissertation, the criteria they identify as indicators of weakness and the recommendations suggested.

We acknowledge that the small sample size recruited in this study may not allow for any generalization, notwithstanding, we believe it can help graduate students make their dissertations interesting and convincing for examiners.

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Mohamed HEMAIDIA. Amina ABDELHADI, (2021 **Pour une approche par les tâches dans l'enseignement-apprentissage de français en Algérie** Développement des sciences sociales14(01). Algérie: Université du Djelfa. 1-12