

The 'three papers' PhD thesis: a guide for the perplexed

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1. Introduction

This short guide introduces the idea of a PhD thesis consisting of 'three papers' as an alternative format for writing-up the results of three years' PhD research. It compares and contrasts the conventional PhD thesis with the 'three papers' model, highlighting the main differences between them. It then suggests a rough timetable for producing a 'three papers' thesis in three years. Finally, it provides answers to some frequently asked questions.

2. The conventional PhD thesis

The conventional PhD thesis has (typically) the following elements.

1. Introduction and outline of the problem
2. Literature review of subject area
3. Background to study population or area
4. Methodological chapter(s)
- 5-7. Results chapters (usually 2 or 3)
8. Conclusion and implications for policy and/or further research

The total number of chapters is usually about eight, and the total length approaches 300 pages of A4 (at roughly 250 words per page, double spaced, this comes to 75,000 words, which is the maximum normally allowed under Faculty regulations). This total does not include appendices, which can be added and which can be of unlimited length.

3. The 'three papers' model

Under the 'three papers' model, a PhD thesis consists of three separate, publishable, papers. The papers should be of normal journal article length (say, between 5,000 and 10,000 words). The three papers are each free standing (in the sense that each can be read and understood independently) but should be on related themes. The three papers are normally preceded in the thesis by a short introduction to the overall topic, which may contain essential background information. There may also be a general literature review, but this is not necessary.

Therefore, the 'three papers' PhD thesis looks like this:

1. Introduction and background to the general topic area.
2. First paper.

3. Second paper.
4. Third paper.
5. Conclusion and implications for policy and/or further research

The total number of chapters is thus usually five, and the total length approaches 150 pages of A4 (a maximum of about 35,000 words). As with the conventional PhD thesis, appendices of unlimited length may be added, but these appendices are commonly appendices to each paper, rather than appendices to the thesis as a whole.

This means that the typical ‘three papers’ thesis is only about half the length of the conventional thesis. Several examples of completed (and successful) ‘three papers’ theses may be seen in the collection in the seminar room of the Department of Economics.

4. Planning your work under the ‘three papers’ model

The schedule of work under a ‘three papers’ model is fairly straightforward. Assuming three years’ full-time study, then you should aim to have:

your first paper finished by December of your second year,
your second paper finished by December of your third year, and
your third paper finished by September of your third year.

In other words, you have 15 months to write your first paper, 12 months for your second paper and nine months for your third paper. This timing allows for the fact that you produce results more quickly as you go on, because you do not have to spend so much time cleaning your data, doing background reading, and so on.

5. Upgrading

If you choose to do a ‘three papers’ thesis, the upgrade occurs at the same stage of the PhD process as with the conventional thesis (i.e. during the summer at the end of your second year). Following the timetable above, this means that when you are upgraded you should have completed the first paper, and have written a substantial draft of the second paper. Accordingly, the ‘mini-thesis’ you submit prior to upgrading should consist of:

a draft of the introductory chapter,
the completed (final version) of your first paper,
a draft of the majority of the second paper,
an outline of what the third paper will be.

Apart from the format of the ‘mini-thesis’, the upgrading procedure for a ‘three papers’ thesis is the same as that for a conventional thesis.

6. Some frequently asked questions

Q. Do I have to do a ‘three papers’ thesis?

A. No. It depends on the research project you are pursuing. Some research projects are

better written up in the conventional way. This might be the case, for example, where the analysis is very lengthy or complex, and you are unlikely to get any substantial results until well into your second year.

Q. At what stage must I decide whether my thesis is to be a ‘three papers’ type or a conventional type?

It makes sense to decide this by about May or June of your first year, shortly after you have written your detailed research proposal.

Q. Do the papers have to be published before I submit my thesis?

A. No. None of them need be published. All that is required is that they be *publishable* in a refereed journal. Of course, if any of them are published or accepted for publication, this is fine, and will be taken by your examiners to be *prime facie* evidence of publishability.

Q. Do I have to have submitted the papers to a journal before my viva?

A. No. You can, of course, submit them as soon as you wish, and you might get valuable feedback from referees which enables you to improve them before your viva, but you are not obliged to submit any of them before then. Indeed, you are not obliged to submit any of them ever! If the examiners are convinced that they are *publishable* and constitute a substantial original contribution to the field, which has been correctly executed and well presented, then you should get your PhD.

Q. What if the papers are jointly written with my supervisor(s)?

A. There is no hard and fast rule here. However, the PhD thesis must be substantially your own work. Therefore, it is usual for you to be the main (first-named) author on any paper which has been submitted for publication or published in joint names, and which you wish to include as one of the three papers in your ‘three papers’ thesis.

Q. What if the papers are multi-authored?

A. This is more difficult to justify. The point is that you have to be able to convince the examiners that the PhD thesis represents your own work. If you are submitting as part of your thesis a paper that has been (apparently) written by, say, six authors of which you are only one, then it is hard to argue that it is substantially your own work. For, if so, then the individual contributions of at least some of the other five authors must have been fairly insignificant, and probably insufficient to justify their being named as co-authors of the paper. Now, this does not mean that you cannot include such a paper as part of your ‘three papers’ PhD thesis, but it should be *in addition to* three papers which you have written yourself, or which have been written by yourself and your supervisor(s), with you as the first-named author. This brings us directly to the next question.

Q. Can I have more than three papers in my ‘three papers’ thesis?

A. Of course, you can have as many papers as you like. Be careful, though, that your papers are of sufficient depth to warrant a PhD. A lot of short descriptive papers are unlikely to be as convincing in a ‘three papers’ thesis as a smaller number of seriously analytical and original efforts. Your first priority is to have three good meaty papers which form the core of your thesis. After that, you can consider including additional papers.

Q. Where do I put the literature review in a ‘three papers’ thesis?

The ‘three papers’ thesis involves jettisoning some conventionally held ideas. One is that a PhD thesis needs a section headed ‘literature review’. This is not the case. Academic journal

articles normally contain a brief review of the relevant literature, and each of your three papers should therefore contain one. But the form of this literature review will be that appropriate to an academic journal article, not the comprehensive 40-page effort characteristic of the conventional PhD thesis (the kind of thing which starts with a discussion of the Roman antecedents of the statistical models in question). If you feel that you *must* have a chapter headed 'literature review', then you can include one, and it should go after the introduction and before the three papers. In the Department of Economics seminar room there is at least one example of a successful 'three papers' thesis with this additional chapter.

Q. In a 'three papers thesis' where do I put background information about the context of my studies?

A. Sufficient background information like this should be incorporated within each of the papers so that each paper can be read and understood independently. A 'three papers' thesis does not need a separate chapter setting the context of empirical work. This is an advantage, since it discourages lengthy descriptions of the form: 'country X is bordered in the north by countries Y and Z' and 'in the year 1250 the barbarians invaded my study area'.