6 The First Few Pages

Task 6.1

Have you read any other PhD theses in the course of your research?

If so, when you were deciding whether a particular thesis was <u>relevant to your work</u>, which parts of the thesis did you read?

Write in the numbers 1, 2, 3 etc. next to the parts listed below, to show <u>the order in which you would read them</u> to decide whether it was worth reading the whole thesis.

NB: One of the parts listed is not normally part of a thesis.

Title	**Abstract**
Contents	**Acknowledgments**
Introduction	**Literature review**
Methodology chapter	**Data discussion chapter(s)**
Conclusion	**References**
Appendices	**Index**

At the beginning of his section on Writing Up, Silverman (2000) emphasises the importance of 'the first few pages':

> If you follow my advice and devote most attention to your data analysis chapters, then you may tend to treat these beginnings as routine matters, speedily disposed of. However, <u>the impression you create at the start of your dissertation is very important </u>and the writing of the first few pages should never be regarded as…a triviality"
>
> (2000: 221, underlining added)

Task 6.2

Who do you want your thesis to impress?

Who do you need to impress most – or, perhaps, first?

What sort of impression do you want to create with your 'first few pages'?

The Title

*Titles should catch the reader's attention while properly informing them
about the main focus of your research* (Silverman 2000: 222)

Some students keep to the thesis title they composed in their first year of research; others change their title towards the end of their research, when they know precisely what their final thesis will be.

The title for your thesis is only 'fixed' from the point when you send in an *Intention to Submit* form to your College office (see the copy on page 79). You do that at least two months before you expect to submit the thesis, to allow the College time to find and invite two academics to act as Examiners of your thesis. The title that appears on your thesis has to be the same as in your *Intention to Submit* form. However, it is possible for the Examiners to recommend a change of title at the oral examination, for example, if they feel you should give greater emphasis to a particular aspect of your work.

Task 6.3
Here are two versions of a PhD thesis title. One was the student's working title and the other her final title. Which one do you think was which – and why do you think that?

Early-stage French as a Foreign Language in Taiwan: a case study involving L2 oral proficiency, motivation and social presence in synchronous computer-mediated communication

Early-stage L2 oral proficiency development in synchronous CMC

Task 6.4
Have a look at the six thesis titles below. Comment on format, punctuation (including capital letters) and use of abbreviations

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1. *Front desk talk: A study of interaction between receptionists and patients in general practice surgeries*

2. *Developing interactional listening strategies in a foreign language: A study of two classroom approaches*

3. *Classroom discourse and participation in an English for Specific Purposes context*

4. *Noticing tasks in a university EFL presentation course in Japan: Their effect on oral output*

5. *Extensive reading and L2 development: a study of Hong Kong secondary learners of English*

6. *Systematising EAP materials development: Design, evaluation and revision in a Thai undergraduate reading course*

Title writing task
Is your current title a 'single' title, like number 3 above, or it a two-part title with a colon, like the others? Write it out as a two-part title. Then ask another student to suggest any improvements or corrections. See whether you think they would enhance your title.

The Abstract

Some books on academic writing say that the Abstract is often what the student writes last, in reporting their own research. But in the case of a PhD thesis, the Abstract has to be submitted some weeks ahead of handing in the thesis, so you will probably find yourself making changes and adjustments to your thesis text *after* you have sent in the Abstract.

It is worth taking time and trouble over the Abstract because, for many potential readers of your work, it will be on the basis of your Abstract that they decide whether or not to read the whole thesis.

Classically, a full abstract contains the following elements:

- **B**ackground   the key background information in brief
- **P**urpose   the principal aim and scope of your research
- **M**ethod   concise summary of the method(s) you used
- **R**esults   the main findings of your study
- **C**onclusion   the overall conclusion and/or recommendations

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Task 6.5

Check the thesis abstract below. Has the student included all five classic Abstract components? Write in **B**, **P**, **M**, **R** or **C** against each sentence.

The original text was set out as four paragraphs. Mark the places where you think the student divided it.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the potential benefits for language development of the inclusion of *Focus on Form* (FoF) tasks in a university EFL oral academic presentation course in Japan. Previous work on FoF activities suggests that they can help learners to notice divergences between their spoken output and the target language, and to reconsider their hypotheses about the target language, and that this process might lead to subsequent improvements in their output. While the majority of previous research involves FoF that is controlled by the teacher, this study examines how the students noticed and reflected on language without the teacher's direct assistance. In addition, sociocultural theory looks at ways in which cognitive development arises from social interaction. This study adopted this approach in identifying ways in which the students made language gains. The students were asked to note down any new language they had noticed and, working from transcripts of their recorded presentations, to collaborate in groups in scrutinising their own oral output and correcting any mistakes they found in it. Recordings of their discussions were also included in the noticing data. Meanwhile, recordings of the students' oral output, as represented by a series of class presentations, were made in order to see whether there was any development in the use of the form that the students attended to during the

noticing tasks. An analysis of the data revealed that the students noticed more language forms as they became more practised in the noticing tasks. In general, they focused their attention on a wide variety of forms, although there was a degree of variation at the individual level, and there was evidence that group tasks resulted to more noticing than tasks completed alone. Tracking the students' spoken English over seven months revealed improvements in the vocabulary and grammar forms the students had focused on. As regards sociocultural theory, the thesis also shows how elements of 'dialogic interaction' in the students' collaboration helped enhance their knowledge and use of English. These include contributions from a more capable peer (although expert roles switched even within a single discussion), collective scaffolding, and the achievement of intersubjectivity. The study suggests that students are able to notice language form and make language gains through form-focused elements in task-based instruction. In particular, group work within such a framework might benefit language learning, both in terms of the amount of noticing it promotes, and of the effects of collaboration, from which learners can gain new insights into the second language.

The key to writing an effective abstract is to have a clear focus on being <u>concise</u> and selecting only the <u>most salient</u> details of your research. There is always a word limit or a space limit. As you will see on the next page, the *Intention to Submit* form for PhD theses at Edinburgh requires you to type your Abstract into roughly half a page - or around 300 words, depending on your paragraph breaks.

(When the time comes, check the *Intention to Submit* form for your College to make sure it is still the same).

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

<div style="border:1px solid">

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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See the Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees available at:
http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/academic-services/policies-regulations/regulations/assessment

Name of Candidate:		*UUN*	S
University email:			
Address :			
Post Code:			

Degree Sought:		No. of words in the main text of Thesis:	
Title of Thesis:			

Insert the abstract text here - the space will expand as you type

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The Contents Pages

Task 6.6

Does anybody actually read the Contents Pages?

What are they for?

What do you think is their most important purpose?

Task 6.7

On the next two pages are single-page extracts from the Contents of two theses. Do you think one is better – in the ways you have mentioned in Task 6.6?

The Contents Pages

The Acknowledgments

The Acknowledgments are the most personal part of your thesis, where you have the opportunity to express your gratitude to all the people who have helped you over the three or more years you have spent on your PhD research. Obviously, your Acknowledgments will not be assessed and you will not be failed on the basis of what you write there. However, from a socio-cultural perspective, there are certain constraints on what is appropriate.

Task 6.8
Examples A-C were quoted in an article on cultural expectations in academic writing (Bloor & Bloor, 1991) and come from international Master's students' dissertations. Read them and see whether, in each case, you think anything about what the student has written is inappropriate. (Or do they seem OK to you?).

A. *I owe a debt of gratitude to (NAME), my supervisor whose perspicacious advice and guidance has enabled me to carry out this arduous study. Her amazing zeal is only matched by her wondrous teaching skills and impressive learning.*

B. *I owe a great deal of my work to my wife, who is only a nurse and scarcely knows English nor teacher training, but did her best to collect materials and send them to me.*

C. *The work of writing this dissertation has been a cooperative venture and I am grateful to (NAME of friend), who helped me a great deal.*

Task 6.9
It is not only non-native writers who can find it difficult to strike the right stylistic note. Below is an extract from a US student's Acknowledgments. What do you think of his choice of content and language?

Before you read it, check that you understand the meaning of the word 'insane'.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the ten exemplary school library media specialists who helped with this research for their participation. I would like to thank the members of my committee for their extreme patience in the face of numerous obstacles. I would like to thank my fellow doctoral students—those who have moved on, those in the quagmire, and those just beginning—for their support, feedback, and friendship. I would like to thank the staffers at CLIS and in the HCIL for the "noms" and the last minute favors. I would like to thank the new assistant professors for sharing their dissertation woes, and a glimmer of hope for post-dissertation normalcy. I would like to thank my friends, especially the "Usual Suspects," for accepting nothing less than completion from me. I would like to thank my insanely large / largely insane family for taking the blows and giving me a chance to thrive.

http://hdl.handle.net/1903/9915

Task 6.10 – and lastly…
It is <u>usual</u> for a PhD student to thank their supervisor. Do you think it is <u>necessary</u>? What might be the consequences of not including her/him in the Acknowledgments?