Choosing to Write the Paper Format Thesis
Heather M. Morris, RN, MN, and Graham Tipples, PhD

ABSTRACT
Graduate students today may be faced with the option of writing either a traditional format thesis or a paper format thesis. In contrast to the traditional format in which the text body consists of four or five chapters, the body of the paper format thesis can be comprised of an introductory chapter, two or more papers written as publishable manuscripts, and a conclusion. In this article, an overview of the paper format thesis is presented and contrasted with the traditional format thesis. The description of the paper format thesis is followed by its advantages and disadvantages for writers and readers. It is by weighing all possible pros and cons, as well as considering one's individual situation, that the graduate student will be able to decide which format of thesis to write.

Anyone who has ever completed a thesis requirement for nursing graduate studies can appreciate its significance in helping them develop the knowledge and skills required for planning, implementing, and evaluating a research project. For many nursing graduate students, completion of the thesis represents the final stage of years of hard work. The purpose of writing a thesis is "...to provide an opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes requisite to scholarly conduct in designing, undertaking, and completing an independent research investigation" (University of Alberta, Faculty of Nursing, 1995, p. 1). Graduate nursing students involved in this process face numerous questions prior to developing and writing their thesis. One such question is the style of thesis they plan to write and submit. Two different styles of theses are the traditional format and the paper format. Some may argue that the choice between formats only exists for PhD students who are engaged in a larger research project for their dissertation. Still, the paper format thesis may be offered as an option to the graduate student completing a thesis/master's program.

The traditional format thesis is usually comprised of four or five chapters which make up the body of the thesis. These are the:
- Introduction.
- Literature review.
- Design methodology.
- Findings.
- Discussion/conclusions and recommendations.

This text body contrasts quite substantially with the body of the paper format. The following is a short description of how one university describes the body of the paper format thesis (University of Alberta Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, 1994).

The body of the paper format thesis forgoes the four or five chapters of the traditional style thesis and replaces them with an introductory chapter, a grouping of two or more papers, which are written in the style of publishable manuscripts and a concluding chapter. The introductory chapter summarizes the relevant information pertaining to the entire project and provides a general overview of the papers to follow. Then the reference list for the introductory chapter is included. Next are the subsequent papers with their respective reference lists. Finally, a concluding chapter provides an overall discussion with conclusions of the entire thesis, relating the earlier papers to one another. A separate reference list is included for this final chapter. An essential distinction is the importance of the appendices which follow. Here, the author may include any information not included in earlier papers (e.g., details about research methods, supplementary tables, graphs, or charts).

A concern of some students and faculty is the variety of papers that may be included in a paper format thesis. The solution to this concern can vary among universities or even among faculty members at the same university. The first possible scenario occurs when numerous research findings result from a single research project. Each paper can focus on a specific aspect of the larger project. A second scenario is when a student wishes to report the results of research in one paper while discussing some aspect of the methodology (e.g., development of a new tool, results of validity/reliability testing in an already developed tool) in another paper. A third method is to present one's literature review as the first paper, followed by subsequent papers describing specific results of the research project.

In a search of the literature on this topic, no discussion articles or published studies on paper format theses were found. Thus, details on the varieties of paper for-

April 1998, Vol. 37, No. 4

173

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Advantages of the Paper Format Thesis

Publication of one’s work in peer-reviewed journals is critical to success as a nurse researcher. Publishing is important in securing employment and obtaining grants and scholarships. It is essential for supporting one’s application to PhD programs and post-doctoral work. Publishing is also important for sharing research results with other members of the nursing community. Often with master’s level work, research results are not disseminated to the rest of the nursing community but rather are housed only in local libraries. It is through publishing that nurses have the opportunity to enhance the body of knowledge for the profession and ultimately bring about change in nursing practice (Yasko, 1986). Having the papers from a thesis already in “publishable format” is a great advantage to graduate nursing students who wish to pursue a research career.

Although writing a thesis in the paper format may appear to be more time consuming than the traditional format, it need not be. An example is the student who uses the literature review as the basis for one of the papers in the paper format thesis. Because the literature review is written as part of the proposal development, one of the papers for the thesis is nearly or actually complete by the time writing of the thesis is undertaken. Graduate nursing students must also consider what their plans are after graduating and the time available for converting a traditional format thesis into publishable papers. In the case of master’s degree students who go directly into PhD programs, they may not have as much time to convert their traditional thesis into an article. Similarly, nurses who do not further their academic education but choose to work full-time following the completion of their master of nursing degree may have difficulty when work and family responsibilities compete for their time. When the publication of research findings is delayed for this length of time, findings may become outdated, or others may publish similar findings first.

Another advantage of the paper format thesis is the critical input provided by one’s committee members. Their support and guidance in writing a paper for publication may not be available to the same extent if one chooses to write a paper some time after graduation. The graduate student who prefers having as many individuals as possible proofread their manuscripts prior to sending them to a journal may find the paper format thesis ideal.

Finally, some students and faculty believe that writing a paper format thesis is an excellent learning experience in itself. As part of writing any thesis, graduate students learn the process of seeking out the journal(s) in which they would like their work published, adapting their writing style to fit the style required by the journal, submitting the manuscript, and making the required revisions for the manuscript to be accepted. This can be a daunting experience for nearly everyone the first time, and doing so within a supportive academic environment no doubt makes the process easier. As well, if portions of the paper format thesis have already been submitted for publication prior to completion of the thesis, students are in a stronger position to defend their thesis because some of their work has been peer reviewed.

In addition to these benefits of the paper format thesis for the writer, there are a number of advantages for the reader. First, committee members may find it easier to read a thesis that is organized into several papers, assuming the information presented in the papers is not overly repetitive. The paper format thesis can be comprehensive and of excellent quality but at the same time be much more succinct than the traditional format. This, of course, eases the workload for committee members who may be pressed for time to read a very long and sometimes tedious traditional format. The smaller size of the paper format thesis is a second advantage because the sections describing the methods, results, and discussion of the research project are more closely situated physically than in the traditional style thesis. As a result, when reading the discussion section of a particular paper, the reader is more likely to remember earlier information. This eliminates the need to review earlier introductory information pertinent to the current discussion.

A third advantage for the reader is the option to read only one section or one paper at a single sitting. This allows committee members to read the thesis more easily over a period of time. It also saves other readers the time and frustration of reading through an entire thesis. Finally, the initial readers of the thesis in most cases are the committee members overseeing the research project. Faculty members who promote the paper format thesis among their students may benefit from increased publications resulting from co-authorship.

In summary, there exists a number of advantages for the writer and reader alike in deciding to write a paper format thesis. Likewise, there exist a number of disadvantages for students who are considering the option of a paper format thesis.

Disadvantages of the Paper Format Thesis

Critics of the paper format thesis argue that this format does not save time in writing a thesis. In fact, the paper format thesis may take a long time to write for a number of reasons. First, the student must learn to adapt their writing style to the particular journal(s) chosen for publication. If a student is accustomed only writing according to one particular style manual, changing to an alternate writing style may be time consuming. A related problem occurs when a student submits different manuscripts to more than one journal, possibly requiring the need to learn a number of different writing styles. This process could become confusing and tedious for any student.

A second disadvantage of the paper format thesis results from the restrictions encountered in writing papers for journals. In writing the traditional format thesis, students are at liberty to write in a manner that feels more natural to them and they do not have to worry as much about page limitations. The potential problem of excluding research findings is a
third disadvantage in relation to paper format theses. There may be pertinent information that does not specifically fit into any one of the papers (e.g., an in-depth discussion of the research methodology). The solution to this problem is to include such information in the appendix of the paper format thesis. However, some may argue that this breaks up the continuity of the paper. Another disadvantage for a student writing the paper format thesis may be that some supervisors are not familiar with this style. Paper format theses remain relatively uncommon, and without the support of faculty and other students familiar with this format, it would be difficult to write this style of thesis.

Finally, the student who decides to write the paper format thesis must remember there is no guarantee that the papers will be accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Competition to publish research in some of the most respected nursing journals is fierce. If students choose to write a paper format thesis for the sole purpose of having their work published in such journals, they may be disappointed if they receive a rejection letter. Whether a rejection letter arrives before or after the thesis defense, the student may feel confused, sad, and frustrated. The misconception that the thesis is truly completed after writing a paper format thesis may not hold true in this case, and the student may be back to revising the paper(s) for subsequent submissions.

There are some disadvantages for the reader as well. Some people have voiced concerns that this style of thesis is not a "smooth read" but is disjointed because of the numerous papers which make up the body. Another disadvantage for the reader is the potential for repetition. The reader may tire of seeing key information from the literature review or the methodology of one study repeated in more than one paper.

A final disadvantage of the paper format thesis is that most people are familiar only with the traditional format thesis. As a result, the average reader may be confused with such differences as more than one reference list, a number of papers which may be quite different from one another, and a more substantial appendix section containing information which may be overlooked. As paper format theses become more commonplace, however, the above-mentioned disadvantages may become less of a problem for writers and readers alike.

**Conclusion**

The decision to write a paper format thesis depends on a number of factors. Time, support from faculty, and a student's own career plans contribute to whether a graduate nursing student will choose this style. Specific details pertaining to the thesis defense and expectations as to whether papers only have to be written, need be submitted, or need to be accepted for publication to graduate will vary according to department and university policy. In addition, there is the question of who has the overriding decision about what thesis format the student will undertake (e.g., supervisor, committee, student). It is important to state that not every university accepts paper format theses, nor does every university hold the same policies regarding this alternative form. Although guidelines for writing the traditional format thesis can be obtained from a university's faculty of graduate studies, written guidelines for the paper format thesis are often nonexistent. To date, it appears no articles have been published on the paper format thesis.

With the shift toward non-thesis-based master of nursing degree programs, the paper format thesis may be an issue faced only by doctoral students. Nevertheless, the paper format thesis may remain a possibility for those nursing faculties that have retained the thesis requirement at the master's degree level. In any case, it is imperative that students wishing to write a paper format thesis have a clear understanding of their department's expectations regarding this format. Most important, if a graduate student has the choice between writing a paper format thesis or a traditional format thesis, all implications must be considered to satisfy the individual's particular situation. Then, and only then, can graduate students feel confident that they have made the decision that is right for them.

**References**

