How to write a terrible MSc thesis. A guide that no one should follow

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Authors note: Although ridiculous sounding, I have at some point seen ALL of these in real MSc theses over the years. Just not all in the same thesis. Thankfully…

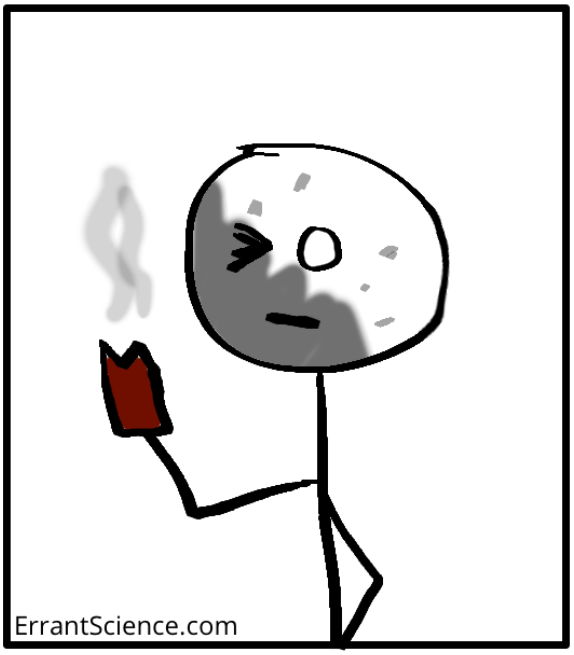
Abstract

This is going to be the first thing any examiner reads, so be sure to set the tone well here. For example, the rest of your thesis is likely to be riddled with typos so be sure that the abstract has plenty too - you don't want to give the examiner a false expectation.

Now many people say that an abstract should be a brief outline of the work and the conclusions from the thesis. I always feel that this gives far too much away. No-one wants to read a book where the plot is all spoilt in the first few pages. Be as obscure and vague as possible to ensure that you don't give anything away.

Introduction

Much like the abstract, it's very important you don't give away too much too early. Examiners love to be kept guessing when marking a thesis. So in the introduction you want to spent several pages detailing a range of techniques all seemingly as unrelated as possible, with little to no indication as to why they are important. Wait until the very last paragraph of the introduction before revealing your project aims and purpose.



This contains so much sarcasm that even a fictional sarcasm detector couldn't measure it

The introduction is also where you'll be looking to prove your knowledge of the area. This is often referred to as the literature survey. However, examiners want to see how much knowledge you've retained without looking at books or wikipedia. The more books or papers you cite, the more they'll think you spent all your time looking up things you really should have known.

If you do need to use any sources, then be sure to show the examiner that you only need a quick reminder by referencing wikipedia or just 'google'. Books and papers are long and hard to read - the examiner won't be impressed if you had to waste valuable time reading them.

If you really need to use references, then at the very least be sure to hide this and make the referencing as impenetrable as possible. Try switching styles mid-paragraph and even where possible, reference the wrong text.

Materials & Methods

Now as an MSc project, you don't have a lot of time and you're probably coming in to a project that already has some existing code or methods. It's from here that you will then add your own methods. However, examiners hate boastful students and so you want to be sure to be as oblique as possible about which methods you developed and which were provided for you. You want to give the impression that some work was done but you don't want to make a fuss about who did it. This way the examiners will feel you are being modest and are bound to give you more marks for not trying to upsell your work. If you think someone could clearly identify the work you did then you need to rewrite it and add a little more doubt.

But that's not to say you should be too descriptive. Remember that science is a business and you need to show that you can be trusted with sensitive information. Examiners don't want to see you openly giving away all your intellectual property and know-how in an easy to read thesis. They want to see you explain your methods as sparsely as possible to prevent anyone stealing your genius ideas.

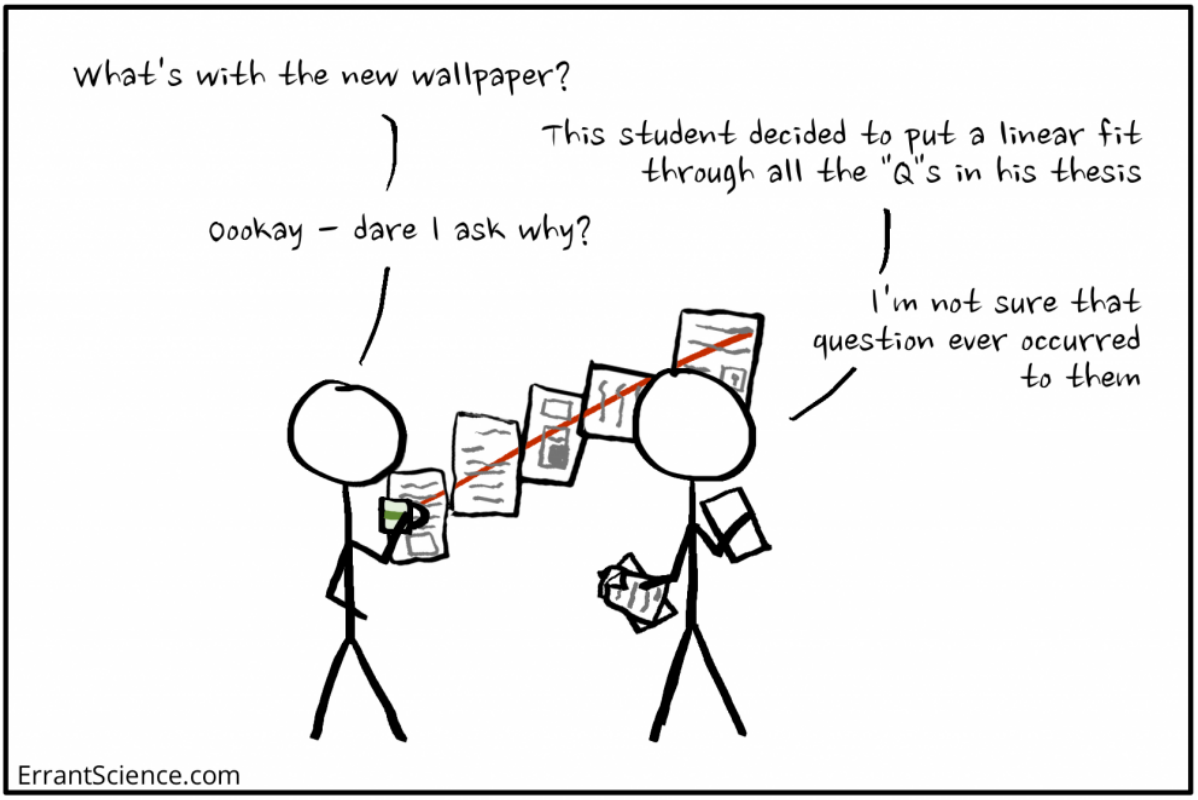
Results & Discussion

In most marking schemes this is the place that gets the most marks. Showing you can analyse and present your data is really the core of a thesis. But with marks come the opportunity to lose marks. The easiest way through this minefield of a section is to be brief and concise. Give the examiner as few opportunities to take marks away as possible. Wordy, in-depth explanation of results will only provide opportunities for the examiner to disagree with you.

When you do have to eventually describe the text, try to stick to certainties. You don't want to get lost in speculation about what the data might show. Writing detailed descriptions of your graphs is really the most you need to aim for, and don't be shy about telling people how "pointy" or "flat" the data is - crack out the adjectives and upgrade those dull descriptions to "very pointy" or "really flat".

Speaking of graphs and data, these too need plenty of consideration. Your exciting descriptions are nothing if you don't have something to describe. Although, don't get too hung up on what they show as the examiners are really just looking for some data, it doesn't need to be relevant. Even graphs so poorly scaled you can't see the features will do, just the mearest existence of a wiggley line on something that looks like a graph is enough to convey the work you've done.

Analysing this data further can be tricky too but provided you always stick to the old favourites of applying a linear fit and p-values, examiners will be pleased that you've shown willingness. In fact, the only time you shouldn't add a linear fit is if the graph already looks like it would fit a straight line - that would just be patronising to the examiner.



Sometimes it's okay NOT to add a linear fit

Conclusions

Here is your opportunity to really put everything in to its relevant context. But you don't want to make things to easy, every good story has an air of doubt about the ending leaving the reader wanting more. So when you write about your conclusions, it's best not to link any of them back to the original aims or objectives. This will leave the examiner always wondering if those questions have been answered. This will make them far more likely to want to pass you and then examine your PhD thesis to find out the twist ending.

Now that you've spent most of the thesis talking about your work, the conclusion is also a great place to talk about how the project has affected you personally. Be sure to include some notes about how it's made you feel and how you think this will impact your career. As an examiner, it's easy to loose focus on the person and it's always nice to hear about their hopes and dreams.

Appendices

In the thesis you may have not been able to quite fit in all the data you collected over your 3-6 month project. In fact, you probably didn't even manage to talk about it all in the main body of the text. Well, examiners love nothing more than reprocessing your data in its entirety to draw their own conclusions. Be sure to include every scrap of code or data in the appendices with little or no explanation or labelling. If your appendix isn't twice the length of the actual thesis then you've not added enough superfluous unused data.