

*4 steps to design
your outline*

One of the most challenging phases of the writing process is probably the outline of your thesis. Actually everything is interesting, important, worse to be told. The problem is that you cannot tell everything. You will lose yourself and, by the way, get your reader lost. Less is more. Rather concentrate on one specific goal and keep your goal in mind while choosing what to leave apart and what to focus on.

This article aims to help you to design clear chapters breaking down the huge "mountain" thesis using a very simple but efficient technique which consists in 4 steps.

Your thesis will consist in an introduction, a conclusion and several chapters (if you write a thesis on articles, you can apply this method to design your article as well. Replace the word "chapter" with "section").

STEP 1

Before you start designing your outline, ask yourself 4 essential questions which will help you to tailor your plan. Write down your answers, in order not to forget them afterwards.

- What is the main goal of your thesis?

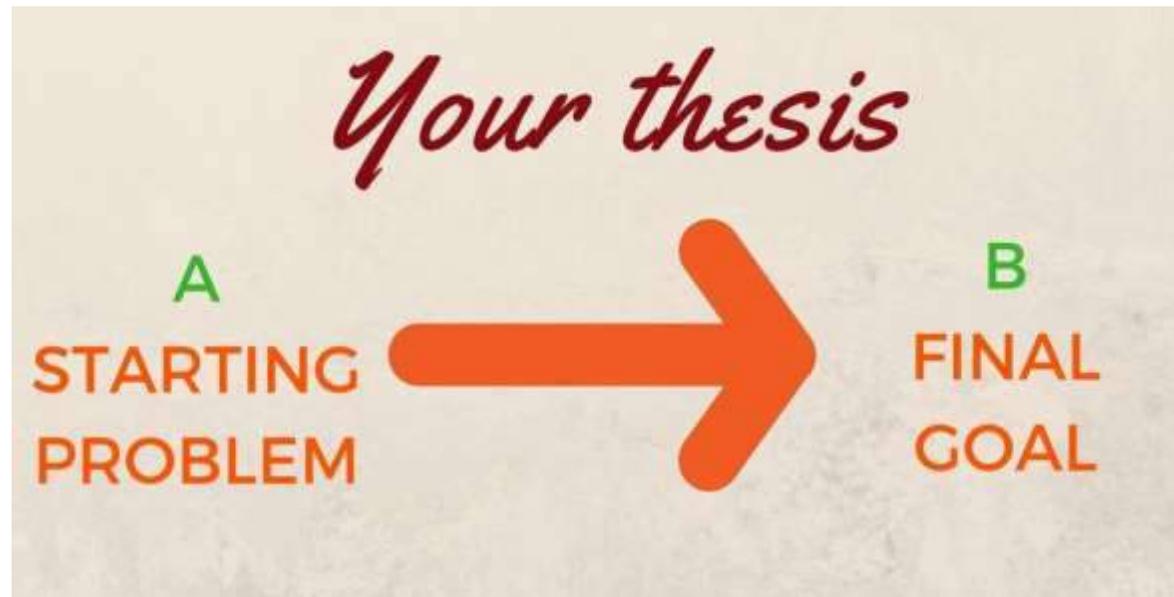
Make sure it is a SMART goal



- Who are the addressed readers? Be as precise as possible.
- What is the message you want to convey? The message is one sentence, the one your readers will retain after finishing your text.
- What is the starting problem of your research? A problem is a fact (e.g. an observation, a lack, a contradiction)

STEP 2

Then decide what is going to happen between the beginning (the starting problem) and the end (the goal). Write them down on a whiteboard or on a big sheet of paper, so will you get a good overview:

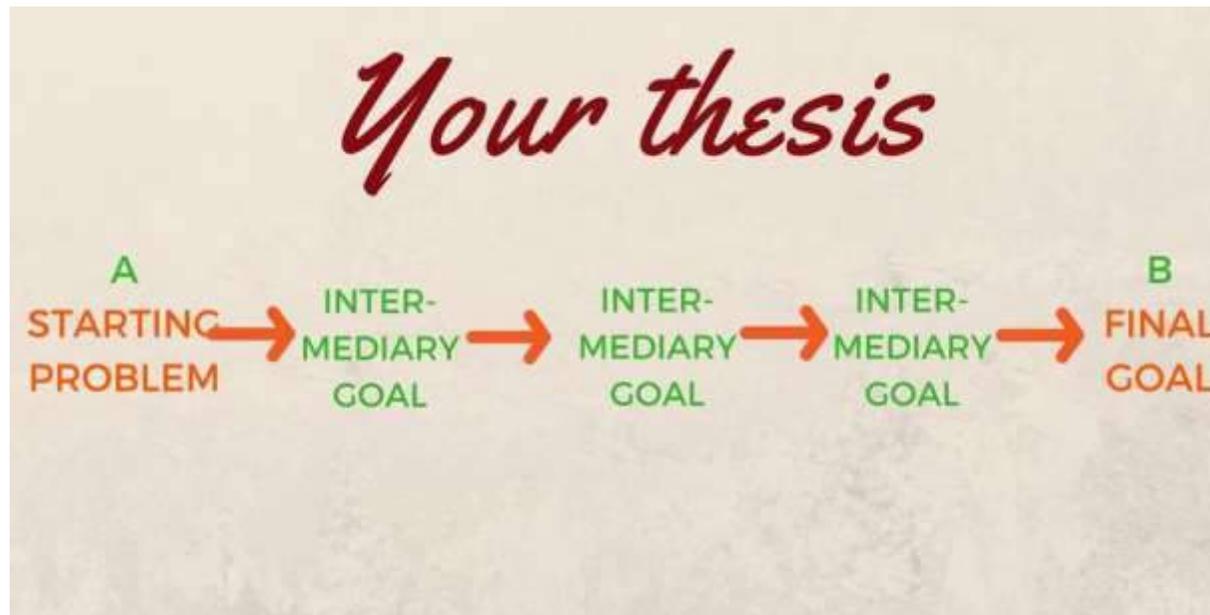


STEP 3

Write the intermediary goals which will lead to the final goal.

Make sure each of them is a SMART goal itself.

Perhaps you will have more than 3, the picture is just an example.



STEP 4

Each of these intermediary goals represents one chapter. Use following questions to design each chapter.

- What is the goal of this chapter?
- How is this goal related to the final goal of your research?
- What is the link between this chapter and your thesis research question?
- What are the starting questions for this chapter?
- What is the main idea (one idea, the one you would write in bold if it was possible) of this chapter?
- What is the outline for this chapter?

A tip: Use pieces of paper (one answer, one piece of paper). You will be more likely to experiment and to play with different options than if you list up everything in your computer.



CONCLUSION

Use the questions for the chapter introduction to prepare the outline of your thesis. Answering them will help you to decide how to structure each of your chapters, breaking down the huge "mountain" thesis.

If you structure your chapters this way, you ensure the coherence of your chapter:

- You will avoid being off topic.
- You will ensure the necessity of the chapter by considering the main goal of your thesis.
- You will ensure the links between chapters.
- You can easily verify if information is missing, or if a given idea is inconsistent with the topic of the chapter.

Once you are happy with your structure, write it in your computer and send it to your supervisors. Avoid starting to write without their agreements. In case they would disagree with your outline, it will be much easier to modify it then to rewrite the whole text.

I wish you a successful work !

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Dr Martha Boeglin and the website www.scriptoria.org.

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If you don't know me yet : My name is Martha Boeglin, Dr Phil.



As a trainer for scientific writing,

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