

Extract from

Constructing a Good Dissertation

**A Practical Guide to Finishing
a Master's, MBA or PhD on Schedule**

Erik Hofstee

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The precise statement of any problem is the most important step in its solution.

– Edwin Bliss

FOUNDATION 4

THESIS STATEMENTS

This book will be mentioning ‘thesis statements’ a lot. Having a good thesis is central to the way that this book proposes you construct your dissertation. It’s the easiest and most reliable way to create a good academic work. This chapter explains in detail what a thesis is, why you should have one, and the dangers of not having one. It will also show you how to craft a good thesis statement that plays to your strengths.

WHAT A THESIS STATEMENT IS

Your thesis is the central argument of your work. A ‘thesis statement’ names that argument. The dictionary definition of a ‘thesis’ in the sense that it is used here is:

- A hypothetical proposition, especially one put forth without proof (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., 2000)
- An unproved statement put forward as the premise in an argument (Anthony Lewis, *WordWeb Dictionary*. Princeton University, 2004)
- a: A position or proposition that a person (as a candidate for scholastic honors) advances and offers to maintain by argument; b: a proposition to be proved or advanced without proof (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*)

Once you have identified a problem, you develop a thesis about it. You take a stand about the problem or hypothesise a solution to the problem. A thesis is an assertion that you put forward as being (supposedly) true. That is where you stand, and only the facts – that’s where your research enters – should move you from there. Your research will provide you with the facts and evidence with which to check, test or argue your thesis.

A thesis is a guess, an unproven assertion that you will investigate in your dissertation. A thesis can be argued with evidence, or (sometimes) it can be empirically tested. If it can be empirically tested, it is generally referred to as a 'research hypothesis'. In either case, you are forced to take a clear position regarding the problem that you have identified, and to either argue for that position, considering the evidence for and against, or to develop a way of testing it.

Unless the project tackled is very large or has several different facets that need to be investigated in order to come to a conclusion, it is not usually necessary to break a thesis down into several research hypotheses. From the perspective of dissertation writers, it is nearly always better to work with a thesis that requires only one assertion to be argued or tested. If you break your thesis into several research hypotheses you will need to check or argue them all. You will have to come up with a method and a conclusion for every one. And that, inevitably, is a lot more work. If you plan carefully, this should usually not be necessary for a dissertation.

THE ROLE OF A THESIS IN AN ACADEMIC WORK

Essentially, your entire dissertation is the story of your thesis. Once you have identified and named a problem, you'll take a stand regarding it. That's your thesis. Your dissertation should then unfold from the explaining of your thesis, to the reviewing of the secondary literature relevant to it, to the developing of a method to investigate it, to the presentation and analysis of findings regarding it, to your conclusions about it.

That applies to both the humanities and the sciences. If you can name a problem, or something that you want to argue or find out more about, you should be able to guess a solution or an outcome. Alternately, you should be able to formulate a position to argue.

A thesis statement allows researchers to *precisely* define what they will investigate. By naming and delineating a thesis it becomes possible to devise a method to investigate it. That, in turn, will lead you to the knowledge you were after. Your thesis statement is a device that allows you to focus on your problem and develop a way to address it. It prevents your dissertation from meandering all over the place, directionless.

A thesis statement is also a contract with your readers. Your part of the contract is to formulate and delineate the thesis statement, and then to investigate it. You promise to consider it in its entirety, in a reliable manner, and to come to a conclusion about it. The reader's part of the contract is to evaluate your work *only* according to the criteria laid down in your thesis statement and method.

A thesis statement gives you clear boundaries and a clear reason to do what you do. Whenever you do anything in your dissertation, the reason should always be

‘because it is necessary in order to assess my thesis statement’. Looked at that way, deciding what should and shouldn’t be in your dissertation is easy. All you have to consider is whether it is relevant to your thesis or not. You should not do anything that is not relevant to your thesis; it is outside your area of responsibility and you don’t have to worry about it. A good thesis focuses you, your arguments and your research.

It may initially seem a little clumsy to formulate your research in terms of a thesis statement, especially in the humanities. For example, if you’re going to write a biography about John Smythe, the great painter, it sounds contrived to have a thesis statement along the lines of “The facts of the life of John Smythe can be recovered and written as a biography.” But give it some thought: Why would you want to write a biography of John Smythe? Is your thesis not perhaps “The experiences in John Smythe’s early and middle life played a central role in preparing him for the contribution he made to the development of religious art in the fourteenth century”? That is the great advantage of a thesis statement – it forces you to be precise about what you are investigating.

A thesis statement will automatically force you not to write a merely descriptive dissertation, which is a thing to be avoided at all costs. A descriptive work is hardly ever a good choice for a dissertation: It is difficult to establish clear boundaries, research methods become a problem (what exactly is being investigated?), and originality can easily become an issue, to name but a few potential pitfalls. Besides, what will you conclude if you don’t take a stand? And the headaches that come with trying to structure a descriptive dissertation are probably more than you want to deal with, especially given that writing with a thesis statement comes with a built-in structure.

The purpose of academic work is to come to *new* knowledge: new knowledge about the world around us, new theories about why it is as it is. A good thesis statement, upon being carefully considered, should lead you to just that. This does *not* mean that it needs to be an original thesis in order to lead to new knowledge.

You can have a thesis statement that others have investigated before you, or that is very similar to that of others. As long as you apply it in different circumstances, or use a different method or data to test it, you will still arrive at new knowledge. If, for example, previous work has tested the thesis statement that “Church membership provides single mothers with support networks that allow them to advance their careers in corporate South Africa”, you may decide to test that same thesis statement using only single mothers without a matric certificate and come to very different conclusions (or the same one, for that matter). In either case, it leads to new knowledge.

DEVISING A THESIS STATEMENT

You may already have an idea of what you want to do your dissertation on. If so, good. If you can turn that into a good thesis statement, don't bother with this section. Do bear in mind though – there is an almost infinite number of possible thesis statements. At this stage in your dissertation, you are not yet committed to any one. The thesis statement you choose will go a long way to determining how long it will take to complete your dissertation, how difficult it will be, and how good an academic work it will be. So stay open to the possibility of other thesis statements that might serve your primary purpose better – that of getting a good dissertation finished and passed.

The first place to look for potential thesis statements is in yourself. Look around you at work – what problems are there? Can you think of a way of turning one of them into a thesis statement? (Don't be silly and point out problems that no one wants pointed out or investigated. Politics are everywhere...).

Look also at your previous academic work. Have you identified any unsolved problem there? Can you turn it into a good thesis statement? If you find something, you will probably find two other things as well: You'll be interested, and you'll most likely have some other preliminary advantages, such as a strong foundation in the secondary literature or a nice big set of raw data. Such advantages are not to be taken lightly. Whatever you have that a dissertation needs can save a lot of time.

Also have a chat with your supervisor/s. Let them know about your background and areas of interest and ask them if they have any suggestions on what might be worth investigating that matches your interests and strengths. Brainstorm a little before you do this though; the more you give them to work with, the better they will be able to help you. They know their field, but they don't necessarily know you.

The second place to look for ideas is the library. Make a short list of keywords about things that you find interesting or suspect may make for a good dissertation, and type them in your library's index to journals. Search either under subjects or titles. Limit your search to the last two years or so and you'll get a veritable flood of article titles. Print the titles out, read them over, and see if anything gives you ideas. Don't bother reading the articles just yet; you only need to generate ideas. The ideas don't even have to engage the articles directly – the articles are just seeds to help you grow your ideas. If you find something that seems promising, investigate a little further: Get a couple of articles about it, read them and, if it still makes sense, get more information.

Dissertations are built around identifying problems, making arguments, and coming up with possible answers. That makes them a good place to look for ideas. Look through *Dissertation Abstracts Online*, which is a subject, title, and author guide to more than 1,8 million abstracts from *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *American Doctoral Dissertations*, *Comprehensive Dissertation Index* and *Masters Abstracts International*. If you can't search online, your library almost certainly has a subscription to a hard copy of *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Use past dissertation titles just as you would article titles, as seeds from which to grow ideas.

Dissertations offer another possibility too, in their Suggestions for Further Research sections. If you find a number of recent dissertations in an area you are interested in, the suggestions they make can be an absolute gold mine. Not only can they often be easily turned into good thesis statements, but you also get a more or less complete bibliography of relevant works, a literature review to help you get started, and some relevant background information. Academic work builds on what has gone before. As long as you acknowledge any and all borrowings, you do *not* have to reinvent the wheel. Be warned though: Not all dissertations are of equal quality. It is foolish to rely too heavily on any one, or even several; they are usually works by junior researchers who are learning the tricks of the trade. But they can be extremely useful starting points.

Wherever you get your ideas from, don't be afraid to bend and twist possible thesis statements to make them fit the criteria for good thesis statements that *you* can test successfully. Thesis statements are grown – only seldom do they fall complete and perfect from the heavens. If you find something won't work, identify exactly what stops it from working, and then try to rephrase it so that it will work. Set yourself up for success, not failure. Listen to the views of others, but don't rely on them against your better judgement.

Try conceptualising your thesis statement as a marriage: Once you've committed, you must be true to it; changing it is, like a divorce, unpleasant, messy, difficult and often expensive. You want to get it right the first time, so take the time to consider it carefully, otherwise trouble down the road is assured. On the positive side, when you have a good thesis statement, it will be your North Star: If you follow it faithfully, it will guide you home safely.

Investigate *all* possible concerns *before* you commit, because nearly everything you do later in your dissertation is influenced by your choice of thesis statement. Consider your own strengths and weaknesses and plan around them. If statistics is not your strength, don't choose a thesis that is best tested or argued with a method that requires a lot of statistical analysis. If you have ready access to certain data, or a pool of people to survey, craft your thesis statement to take advantage of that. Subject to the criteria specified in Figure 1–5 on page 26, *you* get to formulate your dissertation. That's too big an advantage not to take seriously!

SOME POINTS TO REMEMBER

- A thesis statement can't simply name a topic or a problem that you've identified. It must take a stand about something. It must give you something to argue, to test, to probe, to prove.

For example: “A model describing the consumer behaviour of adolescent boys in South Africa for marketing purposes” is *not* a thesis statement. You can’t prove or disprove it. You can’t argue it either; there’s nothing to agree or disagree with.

One *can* argue for or against “The consumer behaviour of adolescent boys in South Africa can be effectively described in a five-phase model for marketing purposes.” Either it can or it can’t, or it can but only subject to certain conditions, and so on. A thesis statement makes it possible to investigate the matter.

- The arguable or testable stand taken in the thesis statement *must* be one that a person knowledgeable in your field could challenge, or argue for or against. If there is no room for disagreement about your thesis, it’s not worth investigating. The answer is generally accepted, and there is no reasonable basis for questioning it. If a knowledgeable person can question your thesis, it becomes interesting to find out more about the matter. That’s where research, analysis and argument come in, and that’s the start of finding new knowledge.
- A thesis statement cannot be expressed as a question. It is a *statement*, an assertion about something, not a question about something.

For example: “Do public servants resign their posts because they earn too little in public service?” is *not* a thesis statement. Both “Low earnings is the primary reason for public servants to resign their posts” and “Low earnings is not the primary reason that public servants resign their posts” *are* thesis statements. Both need elaboration: Which public servants, specifically? What are ‘low earnings’? But all that can be taken care of. It’s what the elaboration, definition of terms, and delineation of the thesis statement serve to do in the introduction to your dissertation. The important thing is that there is now a clear stance taken, one that can be investigated.

- It worries many dissertation writers that they may end up proving their thesis wrong. But that’s nonsense. Your thesis statement is a device (a trick, if you like) that allows you to formulate a tightly focused study that will lead you to some non-obvious conclusion. You don’t have a stake in the outcome. You have a major stake in how you get to the outcome. Reality is not going to change according to what your initial guess was.

It doesn’t matter at all whether you prove your thesis statement right, wrong, or anything in between. Initially it is only a best guess; you don’t know the answer and that’s why it’s worth investigating. You’re not going to be judged on whether you have a crystal ball to look into. You’re going to be judged on whether you investigated a worthwhile issue in a reliable manner and came to a well-substantiated conclusion about it.

Note that, whether you phrase a thesis statement one way or the *exact* opposite, if you use the same method and data to test it – and both will be equally applicable – you will arrive at the same knowledge. Take the example above, about low pay

being the primary reason for the exodus of public servants from government employ: Whether you set out to prove that it *is* the primary reason or that it is *not*, the conclusions you arrive at are not going to change. Either study will reveal the reality of the matter, and that's exactly what you want. If it was worth knowing in the beginning, it's still worth knowing, regardless of whether the thesis statement was proved right or wrong.

- Try to avoid having a thesis statement that predicts something that may or may not happen in the future. The future hasn't happened yet and that makes it extremely difficult to come to firm conclusions about. Only if you can make a prediction and then put a method in place to see whether your prediction is correct, is a thesis phrased in the future tense recommended. That pretty much comes down to designing an experiment. Then you can actually make the future happen, and so come to a firm conclusion. But if your thesis statement is something like "The value of the rand five years from now will be double what it is today against the US dollar," at best you will be working with probabilities. At worst you'll have only speculation. Both are a lot less convincing than facts.

When you're happy with what you have, discuss your potential thesis statement/s with your supervisor. Thesis statements should *always* be approved by your supervisor before you start your work. The best way to go about this is to make several, and choose the best. If, when discussing one with your supervisor, you find that you can't agree or the changes suggested by your supervisor are not to your liking, rather present another that you *are* happy with. This is much better than working on a study that either you or your supervisor does not believe in.

CRITERIA FOR GOOD THESIS STATEMENTS

Not all thesis statements are equal. There are good ones and awful ones, and every imaginable kind in between. Because they are so important to your work, having a good one is vital. From the perspective of this book, a 'good' thesis statement is one that will allow you to complete a passing dissertation as quickly and painlessly as possible. That means that it must lead to a solid piece of work *and* that it must serve your particular needs and circumstances.

In order to achieve this, you should be able to answer with a Yes all the questions in Figure 1–5 (on page 26) about your thesis statement. None may be compromised on, with the exception of the last two, though it is highly recommended that you get a Yes for at least one of them. If any of the others has a No answer, figure out a way of making it into a Yes or, if you can't, move on to another thesis statement. It takes a bit of creativity and a good deal of common sense, but keep at it and you will arrive at a good, doable thesis statement that plays to your strengths. And with that you will have the basis for a good dissertation that you can achieve in a realistic amount of time.

Figure 1-5. Criteria for good thesis statements

Is the thesis statement you are considering:	Yes	No
● a <i>single</i> thesis statement that a reasonable person in your field could agree or disagree with?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● an unambiguous assertion?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● worthwhile (significant)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● explicitly limited in scope and tightly delineated?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● feasible in terms of availability of primary sources?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● based on theory (does it have a theory base)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● testable by <i>you</i> (methods)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● doable in a reasonable amount of time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● representative of your area of interest (optional)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● in synergy with your career goals (optional)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Single Thesis Statements

Check carefully: Sometimes a double thesis can take a bit of thought to spot, but you need to know about it now, before you go and do your research. If your thesis statement implies two different things to check or argue, rather write two dissertations and get two degrees. You might as well, because you're going to have two methods, two body sections, and two conclusions and so on. And that will only be the beginning of your woes. Double thesis statements all too often lead to bad dissertations that don't come to any worthwhile conclusion and are a nightmare to structure and read.

Unambiguous Assertions

Your thesis statement sets up your readers' expectations about your work. You definitely want to be on the same page as your reader on this one. Readers must understand *exactly* what you mean to investigate or argue – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing different. Good thesis statements are very, very clear. There is no room for misinterpretation, nuances of meaning or anything else. Don't be coy. Good thesis statements use precise words and are not afraid to take a clear stance.

If you want to test how unambiguous your thesis statement is, write it on ten index cards, give those to friends and colleagues and ask them to write below it what they take it to mean – and what they take it to imply. If they don't all agree, you have a problem.

While the thesis statement must be crystal clear and completely unambiguous, you don't have to squeeze all its implications into the one sentence. You should be able to name the core of your thesis in one sentence, but you will have explanatory paragraphs below it where you will expound on exactly what you mean. Most of the first chapter of your dissertation is, in fact, dedicated to explaining, from various angles, exactly what you are going to do and why it's worth doing. The problem statement, research objectives, definitions of terms, research questions, delineations, limitations, even the explanation of the anticipated significance of your work, are all examples of this.

Worthwhile (Significant)

The classic test to find the significance of a thesis statement is to read it, and then imagine somebody saying, "So what?" Your answer is the significance of the work that your thesis statement leads to. The significance of your thesis statement is important because, all things being equal, the more significant your thesis statement, the more impressive your work will be.

Note, incidentally, that 'significant' is *not* a synonym for 'difficult'. If, for example, a researcher who works in a tuberculosis clinic in a rural area notices that a large number of patients are not finishing their course of treatment after release from the hospital, and are consequently being readmitted or dying, she'd probably want to stop that from occurring. So she makes a thesis statement to the effect that "Patient compliance in completing their medication programmes can be significantly raised in Ruralville's TB clinic through the implementation of a mentorship programme." Testing the thesis would not be terribly difficult: Upon release from hospital, a control group of patients could be monitored according to current follow-up procedures, while a second group could have their medicines delivered to them daily by a mentor who watches them take it. All the (safety) procedures and necessary bells and whistles would be described in her method chapter.

If the programme succeeded, it would be highly significant: The researcher would be responsible for saving many people's lives (practical significance) and for establishing a principle that could probably be exported to similar environments (theoretical significance). Yet the thesis statement was simple. If the programme doesn't succeed in raising compliance rates appreciably, well, that's good to know too. Now an adapted version or something else can be tried. The results of the study, though less significant, are still worthwhile.

Your work does not have to be hugely significant in order for you to get your degree: Academic work is incremental. If your work is highly significant, so much the better. But don't compromise your primary goal in order to increase the significance

level beyond what it needs to be, or beyond what can be easily tackled. There are thousands upon thousands of dissertations in the world, and thousands upon thousands of academic books and articles are published every year; only rarely does any one of them have a major impact.

Limited in Scope

Good thesis statements limit the scope of what they investigate very explicitly. This is vital. You need to investigate your thesis statement in its entirety or your examiners will have a legitimate gripe with you. You should try to reduce the scope of your dissertation as much as you can *while retaining the significance* of it. If your dissertation is sufficiently significant, there is no practical reason to broaden it.

Limited scope is not less impressive, but much easier. Thesis statements that deal with focused problems lead to dissertations with reliable conclusions that actually get completed. The inverse is also true: Broad, imprecisely defined theses lead to never-ending stories that lack focus, compromise on quality, and come to vague or badly substantiated conclusions. So: Make a thesis statement that is tightly focused, and then delineate it very carefully.

If you have any suspicion at all that your thesis statement may be too broad, it almost certainly is. Try to break it down into two or (preferably) more separate thesis statements. If those still meet all the criteria for good thesis statements, you've successfully narrowed your thesis statement and you've given yourself a choice.

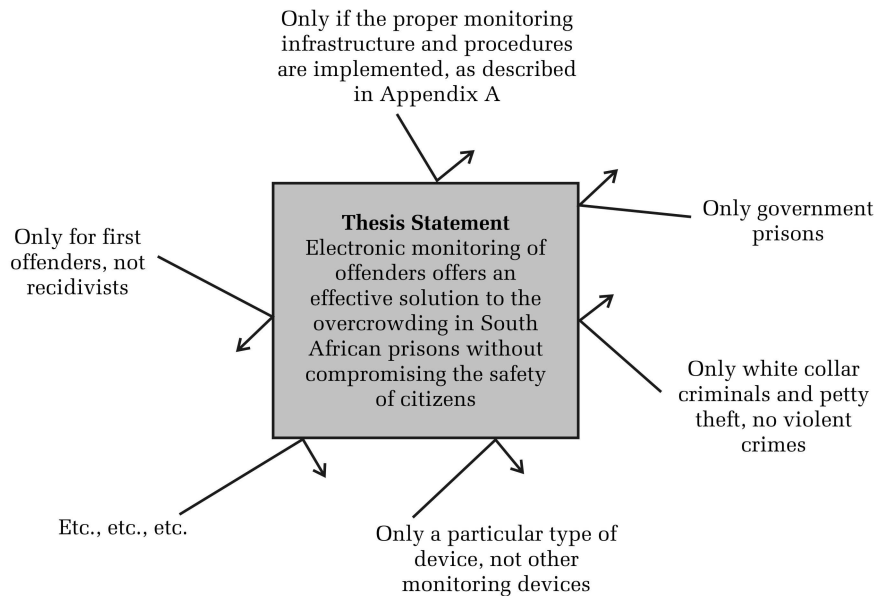
There is a world of difference between testing "South African businesses need a new management paradigm in order to remain competitive in the global economy" and "South African paint manufacturers who have nurtured a strong black middle management component have raised the productivity of their factory employees above that of their competitors." The first is far too vague to argue properly in a dissertation; the second is quite easy to come to a reliable conclusion about. The first leads to speculation; the second to new knowledge. Consequently, the conclusions from the second one will be more valuable than those of the first, regardless of whether the hypothesis is proven to be true or not.

When you fine-tune your thesis statement with delineations, try to avoid redoing what has already been done, and focus on the original in your research. It limits the work you need to do, and it covers your back very effectively without reducing the significance of your work. You will deal with what has been done by others in detail in the literature review anyway.

Explicit delineation protects you from the criticism of "Why didn't you do A, B or C?" To understand how this works, consider the diagram below. You are responsible for

everything inside the box; everything outside the box is outside your area of responsibility. The better you define the box, the safer you are.

Figure 1-6. Delineating the thesis statement



People get stuck all the time because they do not delineate. As they work, they realise that more and more is relevant, and it all spirals out of control. Delineation protects you from this. You *can't* create a new field all on your own – you don't have the time, and it won't make getting your degree any easier. What you do will be a contribution to existing work, and you need to define that contribution.

Feasible in Terms of Primary Sources

You can have an excellent thesis statement that meets all the criteria listed but, if you can't get the primary data to make a convincing argument, you can't do the dissertation. Taken a step further, the easier it is for you to collect the data you need, the sooner you will be able to complete your dissertation. The better the quality of the data you use, the more reliable your conclusions will be. What data you need obviously depends on your thesis and how you choose to consider it, but you will need *some* form of data.

Occasionally an institution will allow dissertations to be written without the collection of primary data, especially at master's level, but many do not. For doctoral dissertations it is highly exceptional that you will be allowed to work exclusively with secondary sources.

The collection of primary data can be a major headache in the writing of dissertations, so it often pays to work backwards. If you have – or can easily get – a nice collection of data that is just waiting to be analysed, you might ask yourself what new information you might derive from it that would make a good dissertation. Turn that into a thesis statement and, if it meets all the other criteria, you're done – with a considerable time saving into the deal.

If you find that you can't get the data you need, or that it will be very difficult, time-consuming, or expensive to get it, don't throw away the potential thesis statement right away. First consider carefully whether you could test it in some other way than you initially planned, using different data. If that won't work, consider bending the thesis statement. If you have or can get data to test the new version of the thesis statement, problem solved. If neither works, or if the compromises that you are forced to make are too big, then you need a different thesis statement.

Theory Base

A theory explains why something is as it is or does as it does (or at least, provides a possible explanation or explanations). If you can't come up with a theory base that relates to whatever it is that you want to do, then the chances that it will work at all are slim.

You will have to look in the work of previous scholars to find a theory base for your work, and you are expected to review their publications in your literature review. If you can't find any, you will also find it pretty much impossible to write that literature review, and to defend your choice of thesis statement. So check the secondary literature *before* you commit to your thesis statement. Have a chat with your supervisor about this one. He or she will be solidly grounded in the theoretical literature pertaining to your work. (See The Literature Review in Part Two for more about the theory base.)

Testable by You (Methods)

You can have an excellent thesis statement that meets all the other criteria but, if you can't devise a good way of testing it – one that will lead to *reliable* results – there is little point to posing the thesis statement. Similarly, in the humanities, if you can't construct a rational argument backed up by evidence, don't pose the thesis. In both cases your conclusions will be suspect. In neither case will your readers be impressed with your work. You need to give readers a good reason to believe, or at least consider carefully, whatever it is that you argue. And the only way you are going to do that is by having a good method.

The amount of thought that you give your thesis statement and your method of testing it will go about 70% of the way towards determining how long your dissertation will take, how good it will be, and your level of frustration while doing it. (How much thought you give to structuring your work is the other big one.) So consider potential methods *carefully* before you commit to any thesis statement.

Doable in a Reasonable Amount of Time

Check all potential thesis statements for things that may slow you down in your work or jeopardise the entire project. If you need funding from an external agency, be sure that you can get it. If you need data from somewhere, the same applies. If you need to monitor a group of people or a situation for a period of time, make sure it's feasible. And so on, all the way to the supervisor you may be assigned if you commit to a particular thesis statement. You don't need to take a risk. Take your time, weigh the pros and cons of any potential thesis statement, and don't be afraid to jettison one that has too many potential problems. It's much quicker to come up with a new, good, thesis statement than it is to try write a passing dissertation with a flawed one.

Area of Interest/Synergy with Career Goals

If your thesis statement includes your area of interest or career goals, you will probably get more done, enjoy the work more and, almost certainly, create a better dissertation. It's not essential but, if you make your dissertation either your passion or saleable, it'll help.

If you intend to develop a saleable product through (the implications of) your work, it's a good idea to see where the ownership of the intellectual property lies beforehand. You probably don't want to hear that the university has a claim on the proceeds of your work because you used their resources in developing it. Also bear in mind that dissertations are nearly always openly published and freely shared among researchers. If you want to work on a patentable idea or something you want to keep under wraps, a dissertation is not the best place to do so.

- ☛ It is risky to make your immediate career prospects dependent on finishing your dissertation. It is all the more risky if you attach a specific date to the completion of the dissertation. In other words, dissertations for long-term career enhancement are fine, but to count on completing a dissertation by a certain date in order to reach a short-term career goal – a promotion, perhaps – is risky.

If your supervisor is also interested in your investigation, you'll get better ideas, more stimulating feedback and probably more time, all of which are good. But a word of warning is due here too: Do not compromise your own interests and end up working on something that you don't believe in just because it interests your supervisor. You may end up hating what you do, which is worse than getting an average amount of attention from your supervisor. Also be careful of doing something that your supervisor wants done, possibly as part of a larger research project that he or she may be doing. Sometimes this type of arrangement can work quite well, but you do run the risk of becoming an extension of your supervisor. If it turns into a situation where the supervisor runs every aspect of your dissertation, tensions and conflict can be expected.

CONCLUSION

For many people, formulating their dissertation in terms of a thesis statement is uncomfortable. It nails down solidly what the dissertation will do and leaves no room for escape clauses or the hedging of bets. It's also a new way of thinking, one that requires effort. It *is* work, but it is work that pays off. It takes skill to formulate something so precisely. But like all skills, it gets easier with practice.

There are ways to write a passing dissertation without using a thesis statement. Dissertations can be formulated around problem statements, research objectives or research questions. This book, however, is written on the premise that you will choose to use a thesis statement, and a good one at that. Having a good thesis statement will make your work much easier to do, will keep you focused, and ensure that you arrive at a conclusion worth reading, one that pertains directly to what you set out to investigate. It also guarantees a structure for your dissertation and limits the amount of work you need to do. A good thesis statement, well worked out, leads to good dissertations. A bad thesis statement, or none, all too often leads to a bad dissertation, or none.

POTENTIAL THESIS STATEMENTS

The space below is for you to use for writing and tweaking thesis statements that you are considering using. Make as many copies of this page as you need until you arrive at a thesis statement that you like, that is doable for you, and that meets all the relevant criteria listed above. If you have an idea and it does not meet the criteria, then either adjust it so that it does meet them, or else discard it and repeat the process with another potential thesis statement.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.
