

# MPhil Thesis and Plagiarism

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- The responsibility for any opinions or errors rests with the author, and none of the views expressed in this talk reflects those of the faculty.
- Although the author has made every effort to provide as helpful and accurate comments as possible, students must consult and strictly follow the faculty guideline given in the Course Handbook (the Red Book). Any incorrect statement in this talk is superseded by faculty instructions found in the Red Book. The author appreciates any corrections.

# Aim of this talk

- Give basic advice on how to do well in MPhil thesis
- Two more lectures in Lent (1 hour each)
  - Eviews (how to get started)
  - STATA (also how to get started)
- This talk will discuss
  - timeline
  - choosing topic
  - how to write good academic papers
  - academic offense (plagiarism and Turnitin)
- This talk will NOT give details on
  - referencing styles (APA, Chicago, Harvard...)
  - English language, grammar, sentence constructions etc.

# Outline of MPhil thesis

Read **the Course Handbook** (hereafter, **the Red Book**) for MPhil Res, MPhil Econ, MPhil Fin&E available from faculty website (just click on hyperlinks here).

Must read the latest version online to double check:

- Key dates
- Marking guidelines
- Maximum 10,000 words. BUT...
  - **shorter the better**, the more concise the better.
  - **only quality matters**, never quantity (or speed)
- Equivalent of 2 modules!

- Until exams are over, many students focus on finding a good topic and good supervisor, but not much more.
- We weather and meet any deadlines related to MPhil thesis (but don't worry too much more) until exams are over.
- Most students start focusing on MPhil thesis straight after May exams.

# The most basic and important fact

You score most points for your creative thinking and your **unique contribution to the literature**. **Identify and clearly explain what your contributions are. Orientate everything in your paper around your contribution.**

**Maintain sharp focus on your contribution throughout your research and writing.**

Implications: your dissertation must be ...

- an **independent** piece of work
  - Do not collaborate with others (no unauthorized co-authoring)
- a **new and original** work
  - Do not commit plagiarism
  - No recycling (Do not re-use your own submissions from your previous course/degree)
  - Make the reader/examiner feel he/she is learning something new

# Choosing Topic

- **MPhil Res:** Link to your potential PhD topic/subject (although some PhDs work in area totally unrelated to their MPhil thesis)
- **MPhil Econ, MPhil Fin&E:** Choose a topic you will enjoy

Red Book says: the Faculty recognizes that

- the amount of **time available is limited**, and hence
- **what is expected is not unrealistically high.**

⇒ Important implications:

- Do not set an overly ambitious target of contribution. Set a realistic and manageable target, given the timeline
- Two common approaches for MPhil thesis are:
  - "Empirical investigations", or
  - "Applied theory"

But there are other possible approaches.



# Choosing Topic (ctd.)

A range of possibilities:

- **Economic / Econometric theory** (NOT recommended)
  - Likely to be difficult or time-consuming. May not have results before the deadline.
- **Freakonomics** (i.e. applying economic theory to nonstandard, non-economic context)
  - E.g. patterns of naming children, economics of drug-dealing business
  - A risky choice. You must establish links to conventional economics
- **Literature survey only**
  - Hard to do well because what is your contribution?
  - You must be very critical and analytical
- **Applied theory** (see the Red Book for guidelines)
  - 1 Choose a topical issue
  - 2 Do literature review. Survey existing theories, theoretical tools.
  - 3 Then modify them to fit the issue under consideration

- **Empirical investigation** (see the Red Book)
  - 1 Derive a testable hypothesis from a literature survey or existing theories, then
  - 2 Apply appropriate econometric methods to the relevant data.

Example topics from *Empirical Economics* journal:

- Relationship between early life circumstances and later life health and employment
- Long-run relationship of gold and silver

Benefits:

- A wide range of empirical topics to investigate
- You can contribute by **finding a new dataset**, or by **investigating new explanatory variables**
- You can demonstrate **data collection and econometric skills** (Jobs in policy analysis and finance value these skills.)

# Narrowing your topic, choosing your supervisor

Steps to take:

- **Step 1:** Choose area **you are good at.** (e.g. Metrics/Macro/Micro)
- **Step 2:** Look for a **good** supervisor in your area: check his/her academic reputation, then also must check their reputation as a supervisor.
  - Some supervisors are more hands on than others.
  - Some supervisors see you way more often than the faculty guideline, while some strictly follow the guideline.
  - Is he/she known to be organized?
  - Is he/she usually available? Responsive to emails?
  - Easy to communicate with?

What kind of quality do you seek in your supervisor? These factors can greatly influence your thesis outcome.

# How to choose your thesis topic and supervisor? (ctd.)

- **Step 3:** Skim-read your potential supervisor's papers and identify his/her research agenda. If you like his/her research agenda, go to Step 4. Otherwise go back to Step 2.
- **Step 4:** Decide on specific topic for your thesis. Discuss this with your potential supervisor identified above. Show enthusiasm and your interest in their research. Hopefully he/she will like you too - then you have a match.

**Set a topic you can actually do** (i.e. be realistic, don't set an overly ambitious topic). Purely theoretical topic is NOT recommended for MPhil thesis.

**For MPhil Res:** make sure your topic is aligned to your supervisor's research interest.

- A bible of academic writing: **“Politics and English Language” by George Orwell**. Many credible professors have read this at least once.
- **The introduction must identify and clearly state what your contributions are**
- You score most points on creative deep thinking and your unique contribution to the literature, **even when it’s very small**.
- **Be explicit about the weaknesses - clearly state the limitations of your analysis** implied by core assumptions, data availability etc.
- **Paper length: the shorter the better**. Be concise.

**Continuing to PhD?** Write using LaTeX (highly recommended). If you don’t know it, learn it now. (E.g. LyX, TeXnicCenter, WinEdt, Scientific WorkPlace)

To create a presentable draft, writing goes in 3 phases

- 1 write it up to the highest standard you can achieve in a short period (a dense period of concentrated work)
- 2 leave it and sleep on it for a few days
- 3 come back to it and rewrite, scrutinize, until you have a paper

You **zoom-in** to miniscule details in Step 1, **zoom-out** and forget about it in Step 2, and read your paper **as if it's someone else's** in Step 3.

# Writing well: sharp focus on your contribution

- **Orientate every part of your paper around your main contribution.**
- Do NOT write anything irrelevant or you don't really understand, just for the sake of writing or just because it sounds cool. **It's really easy for professors to tell when you're doing this.** (Read Orwell.)
- **You must own every word in your paper.** Thus always ask yourself for **each** sentence you write:
  - does this statement make sense,
  - is it accurate,
  - could it be simpler
  - could it be clearer,
  - is it necessary,
  - are all the words in it necessary?

(Read Orwell.)

- Do literature review mainly for the sake of your own learning. Do NOT write everything you reviewed.
- **BUT** if your literature review is too shallow, it can signal that you neglect other people's important contributions. **Some get corrections for missing important citations.** Reference important papers that are relevant to your contribution in order to
  - put your contribution into context,
  - reinforce the value of your contribution,
  - defend your approach
- Very good to reference recent papers (that are relevant). E.g. citations of 2013 papers can be impressive and show you keep up with the literature



Acknowledge whoever that has read your paper and gave you comments.

**Be hyper-cautious about criticizing other people's work** (incl. your supervisor, his/her colleagues, and other faculty members). Some academics take it very personal. Whenever you feel you have to criticize someone, make sure

- your statements are absolutely correct
- sound as professional as possible (i.e. try not to make other authors feel personal)

Courses on academic writing run by Cambridge U:

[www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/hr/ppd/information/graduate/training/](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/hr/ppd/information/graduate/training/)

Good books on writing skills and referencing:

- Writing Essays in English Language and Linguistics by Murray, N.
- Academic Writing : A Handbook for International Students by Bailey, S.
- Writing a successful research paper: a simple approach by Stanley Chodorow [electronic resource via Cambridge U library search]
- Writing essays: a guide for students in English and the humanities by Richard Marggraf-Turley [electronic resource via Cambridge U library search]

and many many more.

# Example steps: empirical investigation

- ① Chose your broad area, then narrow down to a specific topic
  - Use **literature review** to see what has been done before
  - Identify and **describe your contribution** to the literature (e.g. new data, new covariates, new instruments, new interpretation)
- ② Collect your data and **investigate data characteristics**
  - Check data length, empirical distribution, binary/discrete/continuous variable, cross correlation, autocorrelation, etc. etc.
  - Decide on estimation methods and approach
  - Identify and clearly state **methodological limitations**
- ③ Do empirical investigation
  - **Keep a comprehensive record of your results**
  - You can report **negative results**

# Example steps: empirical investigation

## Writing:

- Literature review: outline important earlier findings
  - Focus only on what is relevant for your contribution (no need to write a comprehensive literature review).
- Describe economic theory underlying your empirical model
  - No need to re-state the obvious. Take basic theory/formulae as known.
- Describe your data source(s) (details in Appendix)
- Describe your econometric techniques
- Describe your findings (including limitations and negative results)
  - relate important results to earlier literature
- Suggest interesting directions for further research

**Use published papers (that contain similar type of empirical studies) as a model example when you write**

**Plagiarism** = unacknowledged use of the work of others or your separate paper as if it is your own original material in the present paper

- plagiarism is regarded as a **VERY serious academic offence**
- Our faculty scrutinizes all dissertations using a software **Turnitin**. Turnitin shows
  - substantial matches to published work, or
  - evidence of unauthorized collusion,
- **If Turnitin gives these matches, students are summoned to an interview with the faculty members and a Proctor. Serious cases will be referred to the University Court of Discipline.**
- Those found guilty may be disqualified from the course or deprived of the degree

- Web-based software which finds matches to published or submitted material automatically
- The program will scan:
  - **Internet sources (including journals, working papers, technical reports)**
  - **Earlier submissions (i.e. dissertations, essays, etc) at participating institutions**
- Output = "Originality Report", highlighting all matches and giving:
  - Percentage matched to all sources
  - Overall percentage matched

Examples of innocent matches (detected by Turnitin) may include

- Standard phrases ("the representative consumers utility function")
- (Correctly done) references to published work, bibliographic material
- List of standard statistical tests (often found in tables of results)
- List of countries etc (often found when describing data)

Innocent matches will be identified and disregarded by the scrutineer

**The Red Book gives "The Golden Rule":**

"The examiners must be in **no doubt** as to which parts of your work are your own original work and which are the rightful property of someone else."

Plagiarism is a very serious academic offence.  
Hence correct referencing is very important.

- **MUST read the Red Book section:  
"Plagiarism and Correct Referencing in Essays"**
- Referencing styles and guidelines given by Cambridge U:  
[www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/students/referencing/](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/students/referencing/)

**Avoid doing anything that may appear to be a plagiarism. If in doubt, reference it.**



# Writing well: key to successful referencing

- Lots of referencing styles available (APA, Chicago, Harvard, etc). For MPhil thesis, choice of referencing style doesn't matter (I'm pretty sure). BUT choose...:
  - **a style designed for (or used in) journals (NOT any style found in textbooks)**
  - one style, then **be consistent** (i.e. stick to that style) throughout the paper
- You can choose a style used in our faculty's working paper series (CWPE): [www.econ.cam.ac.uk/research/cwpe](http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/research/cwpe)
- Best to use **credible sources only**.
- Whenever you use existing results, reference the source. **Put references everywhere as you write for the first time** (check correct reference format at the end)

# Writing well: key to successful referencing (ctd)

- Be helpful to the readers when referencing
  - If citing a small section of a book, **put in page number (or chapter or section)**. E.g. "see Harvey (2013, p. 102)".  
**Don't just reference the whole book.**
- **Don't put anything in bibliography without in-text referencing.**

**Continuing to PhD?** Use BibTeX to build up your reference list.  
Reference management softwares: JabRef (free), EndNote etc.  
Useful wikipedia pages to get started (follow hyperlink):

- "[comparison of reference management software](#)".
- "[BibTeX](#)"
- "[LaTeX/Bibliography Management](#)" (Wikibooks)

# How to avoid plagiarism (specifics)

If you are serious about avoiding plagiarism,

- **Do not "cut-and-paste" in principle. ALWAYS write your thoughts in your own words.**
- To put a direct quote (a phrase copied from another article),
  - put it in a new line,
  - put **quotation marks** around it, and
  - **put references as you write for the first time, before you forget.**
- To paraphrase material:
  - **still write it in your own words** (no cutting-and-pasting)
  - **put the reference immediately, before you forget** (e.g. "This condition is from Harvey (2013, p. 102).")

# How to avoid plagiarism: literature review

- Provide your own summary of others' work **in your own words**.
- **Do not twist others' work or phrases.**
  - Understand the points made by other authors accurately.
  - Your quotes should accurately reflect those points.
- Do not plagiarize someone else's literature survey

- You might wish to provide a detailed account of some underlying "textbook" material, including descriptions/restatement of...:
  - established theories
  - existing econometric techniques
  - a dataset

**Do in-text reference** (e.g. "Following the exposition of Harvey (2013, Ch.3), we define our model as..."), **and then insert reference in bibliography** ("Harvey, A.C. (2013). Dynamic Models for ..., ABC Press).

**Everything in bibliography must be referenced in the main text.**

# How to avoid plagiarism: self-quotation

If you want to refer to your own earlier work, or reuse data you collected earlier, you should,

- Reference or acknowledge the work as if it had been done by someone else. Examples:
  - "Ito (2012) found that "
  - "I am grateful to XYZ for supplying data on ..."