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# Exegesis in industrial design theses in Malaysia

## Keywords

creative arts  
research higher degrees  
content structure  
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research article  
intellectual property

## Abstract

*The study examined content structuring of final year project reports and theses in design and formulate a conceptual model of the content structure of the exegesis to accompany creative work. The study involved analysis of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency's specifications for design as a sub-discipline of creative arts and the theses writing guidelines of two Malaysian universities offering creative arts academic programmes. The results showed recommendations on the conventional social science thesis structure with some space for the design processes. In addition, the analysis of eleven creative arts theses revealed*

*confusion on the content structuring and student weaknesses in amassing research findings to contextualize the creative work. Based on the results, a conceptual model of creative arts exegesis with separate chapters for 'Proposed final product and human factor issues' and 'Intellectual property documentation' was formulated and validated by creative arts lecturers. The exegesis model which builds in design processes and research processes would resolve issues on unclear expectations in creative arts students' theses and elevate the significance of the creative work.*

## **Introduction**

Much of the research on academic writing has been on research articles because of the 'publish or perish' culture. The research article is a genre with recognizable discourse features (content structuring and language), particularly the IMRAD structure or 'Introduction, Materials and method, Results and Discussion' which is used in medical scientific writing (Sollaci and Pereira 2004) and other science disciplines. The IMRAD structure is used not only for theses but also for research articles. The IMRAD structure is evident in the manuscript part of thesis-by-article which is an alternative given by some universities (e.g., McGill University 2022; Nyaard and Solli 2021; Polytechnic University of Catalonia n.d.). The extensively researched components of a research article are the abstract (Hartley and Sydes 1995) and the Introduction (e.g., Ankomah and Afful 2019; Duenas 2008; Kanoksilapatham 2005; Swales 2004; Ting 2013). Research on the structure and rhetorical strategies of the Method (Lim 2006) and the Discussion/Conclusion (Hopkins and Dudley-Evans 1988; Joseph and Lim 2019; Ting 2010, 2011; Yang and Allison 2003) have shown differing levels of compliance with conventional structures, depending on discipline. As various disciplines may have variations in the content structure of theses, academic writing and formatting (Azlan et al. 2018), it is important that students familiarize themselves with the academic writing guidelines that are in place. Ting's (2006) analysis of research reports written by teacher trainees revealed frequent misfits between the content and section headings, revealing that it is difficult for novices to learn the conventions of the academic communities of practice. University students have difficulties to produce good academic writing, particularly in project papers (Abdul Hamid et al. 2012). The arts/humanities are separated from social science/science in some academic cultures, but this article uses a dichotomy between science and social science, where arts/humanities (including creative arts) are categorized under social science.

The difficulty of creative arts students in writing their thesis is potentially great but we found little research about the phenomenon based on our extensive literature search. Examples of creative works are music compositions, novels, art works, dance and painting. Bean (2008) viewed reports of creative projects as distinct from academic or scholarly writing in other disciplines. Berridge (2008),

a creative arts postgraduate student, wrote about her difficulty of writing a Ph.D. thesis without clear guidelines about expectations and having to adapt the guidelines of a traditional Ph.D. thesis. Berridge's (2008) publication revealed that the subject matter of creative arts may not fit neatly into traditional thesis structures such as the IMRAD. The lack of clarity on creative arts thesis may adversely affect timely completion of the research higher degrees (Mann and Fletcher 2004). The difficulty is compounded by the 'diversity of naming practices for these relations [components of a thesis], institutional variation in guidelines and expectations, and fundamental functional roles for the respective components' (Paltridge et al. 2011: 242). An example of the diversity of naming practices is the Introduction section which is variously referred to as the problem statement, research problem and background.

The void in studies on theses in the creative arts may stem from the lack of recognition to 'practice-based' and 'practice-led' in the performing arts and design discipline (Gray and Malins 2004). For instance, the visual and creative approaches and methodology that are specific to industrial design research are visualization, photography, video, sketching and three-dimensional modelling (Gray and Malins 2004). Industrial design is classified as a sub-discipline of creative arts in Malaysia (Malaysian Qualifications Agency 2011). The skills to produce sketches and illustrations, as well as the process of developing designs is sometimes regarded as research that is not concrete.

Since the 1990s, there has been an ongoing debate on the thesis in creative arts, particularly whether art or creative work can be recognized as research (Mann and Fletcher 2004; Perry and Brophy 2001). Evans et al.'s (2003) study was on the type of projects that could be classified as Ph.D.s in the creative arts, defined as research that contribute to the field through the production of a creative work that makes a significant, original contribution to knowledge in a field. The perception that creative work does not count is so strong that the academic research is often considered as necessary to legitimize the creative work (Arnold 2005).

Because of the absence of a framework specific to the creative arts thesis, social science and humanities frameworks have been used as the benchmark for theses in Malaysia (Rahman and Majid 2017). In the sciences, the IMRAD model is used (Sollaci and Pereira 2004). In the social science model, a thesis consists of the Introduction, Literature review, Methods, Findings and discussion, and Conclusions (Oxford Brookes University 2022). Compared to the science model of thesis structure, the additional chapters in the social science model are the Literature review and the Conclusion chapters. Both the science and social science models of the thesis structure do not allow the distinctive nature of creative arts to be shown. For example, creative arts theses need to present descriptions of the proposed product and validation, human factor issues and intellectual property documentation. Creative arts theses document practice-based research, which Candy defines as: