

Script: formatting your text - headings and the automatic table of contents

When it comes to examination of your thesis, after all the hard work you have put into it, you want this document to be the most professional-looking piece of work you have ever produced: neat, error-free, and able to communicate to your examiners the depth of your efforts in doing and writing about your research.

There are many different tools and tips for formatting and laying out your thesis document in a professional, neat way, and this short video, and the next one in this section of the website will show you a few of these, and explain why formatting and laying out your document professionally is quite important at this level. This video will look at headings, and generating an automatic table of contents.

In a document the length of an MA or PhD thesis, or honours long essay, you will need to use headings as ‘signposts’ to guide your reader through your argument. This is a key point: headings actually communicate meaning. They indicate the level of importance of certain sections of the thesis, and also the relationship between sections of the thesis. There are thus different heading levels, and it is useful to understand what these are and what they say to your readers, so that you can use them effectively to create structure and meaning in your own writing.

First level headings are main headings, like Chapter One, Chapter Two and so on. Second level headings would then be used for the main sections of the chapter, such as Introduction, Conclusion, and so on. Third level headings would then be for sub-sections within the second level sections, and fourth level headings for further sub-sections. We wouldn’t recommend going further than 4 levels of headings, as this can get rather fiddly and confusing, especially with the numbering. Look at this example from a recent PhD thesis to see what the different levels look like.

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The chapter headings are level one headings here, and the headings numbered 1, 2, 3 and so on are level two headings. Those numbered 3.1, 3.2 and so on are level 3 headings, and finally those numbered 6.1.1 and 6.2.1, for example, and level 4.

Now I will show you how to create headings in Microsoft Word, and how to use these to generate your own Table of Contents, that can be updated as you edit your document. I am using a Macbook, but I will include notes for a PC. In both cases, I am referring to Word 2010. If you have a later or earlier version, you may need to click around to find these tools, but the principles I will explain will be roughly the same, so you can adapt them according to your software.

In Word, on the Home tab, you will see these buttons:



You will be using these to set up your four levels of headings.

Under Heading 1, right click, and then select Modify. You can then choose and set out your preferred font, font size, and style (bold, italics, underline). You repeat this step for headings 2 to 4. I will demonstrate here:

Chapter One: Introduction

1. The context for the research

1.1 The university

1.1.1 Student bodies

The key with using headings is to think carefully about the relationship between the sections and sub-sections of your chapters: assigning heading levels should not be arbitrary. If you make every section a level 2 heading, for example, you tell your reader that all these sections have equal importance. Yet, there may be parts of these sections that should be sub-sections, or parts of a larger section, and should therefore have a level 3 heading. Structure communicates meaning, and thesis writing is all about creating and communicating your meanings clearly to your readers and examiners.

These are tools that will help you do this, and save you a lot of time and effort, but they cannot create the structure or meaning for you: you will still need to work that out before using the tools to make your final thesis neat, and well laid out, so that it is more readable and presents your hard work in the best possible light.