Writing the Conclusion Chapter: the Good, the Bad and the Missing

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1.1 Introduction

The conclusion of a research thesis reaffirms the thesis statement, discusses the issues, and reaches a final judgment. The conclusion is not a summary; it is a belief based on your reasoning and on the evidence you have accumulated. This is the place to share with readers the conclusions you have reached because of your research.

The conclusion attempts to carry the examiner or reader to a new level of perception about the thesis. A summary of what you have said in the thesis is not satisfactory. After all, the reader will hardly need reminding of things just read. The nature of the study can dictate overall content of the conclusion. However, it should particularly reaffirm the thesis statement and seek to offer answers to the questions raised in the research and justification for the approach used by the study as well as pathways forward.

1.1 The Purpose of a Conclusion

The purpose of a conclusion is to tie together, or integrate the various issues, research, etc., covered in the body of the thesis, and to make comments upon the meaning of all of it. This includes noting any implications resulting from your discussion of the topic, as well as recommendations, forecasting future trends, and the need for further research. The conclusion chapter or section seeks to:

1. tie together, integrate and synthesize the various issues raised in the discussion sections, whilst reflecting the introductory thesis statement (s) or objectives
2. provide answers to the thesis research question (s)
3. identify the theoretical and policy implications of the study with respect to the overall study area
4. highlights the study limitations
5. provide direction and areas for future research

2.0 the Good

The content of a good conclusion chapter

The conclusion should:

- be a logical ending synthesizing what has been previously discussed and never contain any new information or material
- It must pull together all of the parts of your argument and refer the reader back to the focus you have outlined in your introduction and to the central topic and thereby create a sense of unity.
- be very systematic, brief and never contain any new information. It should be preferably less than or equal to about 5 pages for a dissertation and 15 pages for a PhD thesis.
- add to the overall quality and impact of the research.

The Conclusion chapter is more than just a summary of the chapters or data you have presented in the main thesis or dissertation. Along with providing a synthesis of the key findings and argument projected by the research, it should make a stand regarding the
thesis statement. To do this effectively requires that the conclusion is developed with a clear structure, each section providing a specific insight into the study. Hence, the conclusion should be able to stand on its own and provide a justification and defense of the thesis.

2.1 The structure of a good conclusion chapter
The conclusion must have a clear structure that is able to hold the attention of the examiner and provides a convincing sequence of the how the project is able to unequivocally and rigorously identified sound knowledge that can inform theory and or policy. Almost like a thesis on the study, it should have a beginning (introduction), a middle section (synthesis of empirical finding as answers to research questions), theoretical and policy implications and an end (future direction and direction of further research).

2.2. The Introduction of a good conclusion chapter
The conclusion chapter should have a definitive introduction which draws the attention of the reader to the thesis statement upon which the research was conducted. The introduction should restate the research question that the study set out to answer and clearly justify the necessity of such a course. There is also the need to establish the context, background and/or importance of the topic. Conversely, this section must indicate a problem, controversy or a gap in the field of study. In doing this it is proper that the research questions are outlined and the key objectives of the study.

Secondly, the introduction of the conclusion, just like those of the discussion chapters should provide a map of how the chapter has been structured. It should therefore provide a pictorial sequence of the issues to be discussed and how the section will end. This allows the examiner the opportunity to know what to expect and strong grounding for the research coverage.

Strategies for developing a good introduction
Content and structure of the introduction:
- Begin with a sentence that refers to the main subject of discussion in the dissertation or thesis
- Indicate the importance of the subject discussed
- Restate the research questions as presented in the introduction chapter
  Doing this reinforces the importance of the study and its findings.

Example 1:
The study was set out to explore the concept of Sustainable Livelihoods and has identified the nature and form of livelihood diversification in Ghana, the reasons and motivation for diversification, the type, the extent, resources required for diversification and the role and impact of intervention on the household economy and well-being. The study has also sought to know whether livelihood diversification can result in effective poverty reduction, particularly in small farm households. The general theoretical literature on this subject and specifically in the context of Africa is inconclusive on several vital questions within the diversification discourse. The study sought to answer two of these questions:
  1. Do rural households diversify for survival or accumulation?
  2. Does rural household diversification reduce risk effectively?

2.3. Empirical Findings
The discussion under this section should provide a synthesis of the empirical findings from the study with respect to the individual research questions. Provide evidence and synthesis of arguments presented in the body to show how these converge to answer the research question, and or study objectives. Don’t summarize! This can be done by including a brief summary of the main finding in the different chapters that these points seek to provide answers to or the specific research question being addressed in the conclusion. It is bad to
simply repeat earlier arguments that were in your thesis. Instead, show your reader how the points you made and the support and examples you used fit together. Pull it all together for them. Do this systematically for all the different research questions of the dissertation or thesis. Then, you may give a brief summary of your argument and identify the main reasons/causes/factors that relate to the questions you have. If there are two or more parts to the question, be sure to include responses to each part in your conclusion.

**Example 2:**
The main empirical findings are chapter specific and were summarized within the respective empirical chapters: (State the titles of your empirical chapter). This section will synthesize the empirical findings to answer the study’s two research questions.

1. Do rural farm households diversify for accumulation of wealth or survival?
   a. **Savings and capital outlay are significantly small:** “nearly all households in the study feel that diversification only enhances their ability to survive and serves as a source of insurance against indebtedness. Nevertheless, the need for borrowing and asset smoothing is still recurrent”.
   b. **Persistent lack of security:** The majority of households highlighted the lack of income security as a factor that caused them to diversify, but they still do not enjoy any security.
   c. **Financial & labour scarcity:** Many of the sampled households depend on traditional herbal clinics, for no other reason than that they are far less expensive than the orthodox medical treatment. This pattern cannot be an indication of accumulation, especially when individuals cannot provide for their basic necessities of life in spite of their diversification.

2.4 Theoretical Implication
This section provides the contribution and or implications of these syntheses with respect to the research questions and how they may impinge on existing theories or understanding. In this section you attempt to briefly argue how your findings could influence further understanding or application knowledge in the subject. Whilst you should not attempt to under estimate existing positions and views on such subjects, it is critical that you present a modest position of how your work has contributed to existing understanding of concepts that has been investigated by the project. In cases where your findings differ from those of others, it is useful to indicate possible reasons for such variation. Moreover, it is equally important to acknowledge the views of others who share similar positions as those identified by your research. In a nut shell, show how your finding differ or support those of others and why.

**Example 3:**
The theoretical cases for diversification therefore needs to be revisited in order further understand the livelihood dynamics of the rural poor and how it can be made more sustainable.

The sustainable framework suggests the achievement of accumulation from diversification within the rural economy (Carney 1998). It is however, noted from this study that such a benefit is not likely for most rural households with the obvious alternative of survival being the more probable outcome of diversification.

This pattern is consistent with that presented by Carswell (2000) but contradicts that of Whitehead and Kabeer (2001). Diversification therefore does not necessarily offer pathways out of poverty as suggested by Reardon (1997).

This pattern could be use at these sections, picking one theoretical contribution after the other in a sequence and discussing them briefly.
2.5 Policy implication
In identifying the policy implications of the findings of the research you must present a brief synthesis of the policy relevance of key findings from your study. It is expedient that you mention the main theoretical understanding on which your research has been based, how your study is positioned with this theoretical framework and how your work could influence the debate with this discourse. In this regard, it would be appropriate to posit how your findings may affect practice in that field of study in future.

**Example 4:**
One particular policy program with extended theoretical underpinnings was the Structural Adjustment Program of which Ghana has been hailed as an icon of success by the World Bank (Horton et al. 1994). However, evidence from several studies, including Bryceson (2000, 2002, 2004) and this thesis, seems to point to the fact that rural communities have still not recovered from the negative shocks of adjustment.

This study has used empirical findings to show that the current Poverty Reduction Policy is not making the anticipated impact. The theoretical arguments for this justification suggest the need for policy review which will enable diversification to work for the poor and more especially the rural household economy (Kinsey 2002).

2.6 Recommendation for future research
Additional elements that may be added include recommendations for future action and speculations on future trends. When discussing the need for future research:

- Outline your plans regarding further research of the topic or aspects of the project that has not been covered in the present study but is considerably worthwhile to investigate in the near future.
- You can provide such an outline in bullet points and provide a brief explanation for each of the research statements.
- Keep this simple and short, a maximum of one page in the case of a PhD thesis and less than half a page for dissertations.
- This tells the examiner that you know your field of study and are thinking ahead of the present challenges and considering future patterns, variations and trends.

Pointing to areas of further research shows evidence of awareness of the research area you are working in. No doubt while you were researching your topic, in some areas, you found more questions than answers.

**Example 5:**
The scale of this debate is therefore extensive and multifaceted even at the local level. To generate achievable policy strategies and development targets with regards to diversification, there is need for more case studies at the local level to allow further assessment of local dimensions of the subject. Exploring the following as future research strategies can facilitate the attainment of this goal:

2.7 Limitation of the study
- In the case of an empirical research it is important to identify the various limitations which were encountered during the sampling, lab work, data collection and analysis stages of the research or project.
- However, the limitation should end on a positive note to show how they worked together to provide focus and strengthen the empirical results.
Some supervisors and examiners would prefer that this section is included in the section on limitation in the methodology chapter. It is important to consult your supervisor on this and also accept the suggestions of the examiner in such a situation.

This could also be combined with the section on future research – demonstrating how future research could ‘fill in the gaps’ or build on from this research, recognizing and responding to the limitations.

Example 6:
The study has offered an evaluative perspective on an important national development policy program, and was conducted in a rural environment through sampling farm households. As a direct consequence of this methodology, the study encountered a number of limitations, which need to be considered.

2.8 Conclusion of the conclusion
Finally, it is a good idea to add a sentence or two to reinforce the thesis statement which was used in your introduction. This shows the reader that you have done what you said you would do and gives a sense of unity the thesis. It is particularly important to graceful exit. Make sure your ending has as ending. The final two or three paragraphs are as important as any others. You could talk about the overall significance of the study, the subject in general, and how it is important to know about it, how it can contribute to "the body of knowledge with the areas of study ", or maybe world view. Make the reader feel that it has been worth his or her while to read the thesis and that the area of study has advanced with your work.

- It is important to end the conclusion chapter (in the case of dissertations and thesis) with a very short paragraph as a conclusion
- This section serves as the capsule for the overall conclusion of the study and should therefore be very concise and precise.

An excellent strategy is to highlight what has been presented as the norm or standard point of view and how your work has proved otherwise or provided evidence in support of this view.
- This is often related to the research questions, thesis statement or title.
- It can also be a statement this emphatically states beyond doubt, how invaluable the research is to the research area in question.
- This paragraph should always have a positive connotation in the case of a positive question and a negative stance in the context of a critique.

Example 7:
In spite of what is often reported about the benefits of sustainable livelihoods and livelihood diversification in theoretical and policy debates, livelihood diversification in practice has only offered some solution to the prevailing and persistent household vulnerability and deprivation in Southern Ghana, even amongst diversified households. The benefits of diversification have been shown to be neither comprehensive nor do they seem to be sustainable in the long-term.

Generally, although a short pithy quote is sometimes recommended as being able to spice up your conclusion, the concluding paragraphs should be in your own words. Try to avoid direct quotations or references to other sources at this stage.
Characteristics of a good conclusion:

**Structuring your paragraphs**
Use writing conventions to make ideas clearer:
1. Sequencing points: *First, second, third, fourth… finally OR lastly*
2. Contrasting ideas: *In contrast; on one hand …; on the other hand; …whereas …*
3. Adding emphasis: *Not only … but also …*

**Use of linking sentences**
Link the thinking between your paragraphs within each section
Link the thinking across sections
Keep your ideas as writer clearly distinguished from thoughts of cited literature sources.
Note the progress of your argument at each stage: *in summary; clearly; one of the most noteworthy (significant) issues to consider; it is interesting to note that…*

3.0 The Bad:
The conclusion should not:
- just ‘sum up’
- end with a long quotation
- focus merely on a minor point in your argument
- introduce new material

**Indicators of bad conclusion chapters: please beware!**
Beginning with an unnecessary, overused phrase such as "in conclusion," "in summary," or "in closing"

Although these phrases can work in speeches, they come across as wooden and trite in writing.

Stating the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion

Introducing a new idea or subtopic in your conclusion

Ending with a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes

Making sentimental, emotional appeals (out of character with the rest of an analytical paper)

Including evidence (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should be in the body of the thesis

3.1 Four kinds of bad conclusions
1. The "That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It" Conclusion. This conclusion just restates the thesis and is usually painfully short. It does not push the ideas forward. People write this kind of conclusion when they can't think of anything else to say.
2. The "Sherlock Holmes: Conclusion. Sometimes writers will state the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion. You might be tempted to use this strategy if you don't want to give everything away too early in your thesis. You may think it would be more dramatic to keep the reader in the dark until the end and then "wow" her with your main idea, much like a Sherlock Holmes mystery. The reader, however, does not expect a mystery, but an analytical discussion of your topic in an academic style, with the main argument (thesis) stated up front.
3. The "America the Beautiful"/"I Am Woman"/"We Shall Overcome" Conclusion. This kind of conclusion usually draws on emotion to make its appeal, but while this
emotion and even sentimentality may be very heartfelt, it is usually out of character with the rest of an analytical thesis. A more sophisticated commentary, rather than emotional praise, would be a more fitting tribute to the topic.

4. The "Grab Bag" Conclusion. This kind of conclusion includes extra information that the writer found or thought of but couldn't integrate into the main thesis. You may find it hard to leave out details that you discovered after hours of research and thought, but adding random facts and bits of evidence at the end of an otherwise-well-organized essay can just create confusion.

4.0 The Missing
Relating the Conceptual framework to the overall conclusions

- It is critical to relate the answers and findings of the study to the conceptual framework upon which the study was designed or based.
- If the study developed an alternative framework, then it is expedient that a relationship is drawn between the key findings of the research and how it was informed by the new framework.
- This relationship is often missing in several thesis and dissertations. Where existing frameworks have been criticised and modified, the conclusion should indicate a justification for this in relation to the findings generate as a result of such exercise. Projecting the research framework in the conclusion also represent a level of intellectual awareness and capability which indicates ones ability to formulate and operationalise frameworks and theories.

5.0 Conclusion
The conclusion is where you can make the strongest case for yourself as an academic. In this respect, it is the most important part of your thesis; this is where you really show yourself. The conclusion chapter should be able to stand on its own, like a paper on the study. It should have a beginning, middle, and an end. Take as much care with it as you have with the other parts of the thesis. Conclusions are often the most difficult part of a dissertation or a thesis. Many students perceive they have nothing else to say after having written a laborious thesis. It is therefore important to know that the conclusion is often what the examiner or reader remembers best and should project the best of your work. This is your final statement about the thesis, thus it must have a great impact on the examiner.

Sources

Strategies for Writing a Conclusion. Literacy Education Online, St. Cloud State University <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/conclude.html> [Accessed on 24th May 2006]

Conclusion Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, Hamilton College <http://www.hamilton.edu/academic/Resource/WC/SampleConclusions.html> [Accessed on 24th May 2006]

Go to the library and look at past theses – read the introduction and the conclusion chapters, and think about what makes a good conclusion.