

The ‘synopsis’: one size fits all?¹

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In this essay, a doctoral candidate describes his initial searching process on how to write the synopsis for his dissertation and how this was influenced by the lack of a tradition as has been established for monographic dissertations. Most of the text is written by Frode Haara, but this note includes comments from Kari Smith, the supervisor, in italics, together forming a reflective dialogue. Comments from the translator Jan Vermaat are in footnotes.

Introduction

In September 2009, I had come to the stage of my doctorate job that it was time to start work on the synopsis. I had been a fellow student since 1 January 2007, with funding from my employer Høgskulen in Sogn og Fjordane (HiSF) and admission to the PhD educational program at the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Bergen (UiB). Here written guidance was available on writing an article-based doctoral dissertation. This work should consist of three articles for publication in peer-review-based journals, as well as a synopsis.

Through my affiliation with the Faculty of Psychology at UiB, I also joined the Western Norway Graduate School of Educational Research (WNGER). This research school was a joint project of UiB, Bergen University College (HiB), Norsk Lærerakademi (NLA), Stord / Haugesund University College (HH) and HiSF, with administrative and academic management at UiB. Within this research school, active participation of the PhDs in seminars was a key principle.

In September 2009, HiSF hosted such a seminar, and the participants were challenged to contribute a post related to our doctoral thesis. The status of my progress at that time was that I had one of my three articles accepted and two had just been submitted for peer review. I had begun to toy with the idea of starting work on the synopsis, but did not really have anything that I thought interesting for the research school seminar. I discussed this a little with my supervisor (coauthor Kari Smith) and she challenged me to remain close to what I was busy with at the moment. Among the ideas I presented to her was also a future-oriented topic: What is a synopsis in a doctoral dissertation and how should it be? In an attempt

¹ This is an ‘actively revised’ translation after a first round with Google Translate by Jan Vermaat from a paper in Norwegian, which appeared in UNIPED (2011) 34: 79-86. Interestingly, the software alternately translated ‘kappe’ literally as throat, jacket, capping, cape, cloak hood, or gown or similar. I stick to synopsis. Lovely examples of machine translations are: ‘The cloak will lift and discuss ethical issues at work’, or ‘The cloak should be nothing more than a summary or a summary (actually: noe mer enn sammendrag eller oppsummering).’ This accidental poetry made the translation actually fun to do. I have tried to stay as close as possible to Frodes text, although I found him pretty ‘wordy’ in places. Here I tried to restrain myself, but I have still repeatedly shortened the text. This is compensated by my foot notes.

to elucidate these two questions, we agreed that precisely this would be a valuable exercise for myself and my fellow PhDs and supervisors in the research school.

In Norway, the monograph has been the traditional form for a doctoral dissertation. The use of a system with a number of articles, and an associated synopsis, is relatively new. Using a synopsis - both in structure, guidance and priorities related to work with a dissertation - is therefore yet without a widely accepted template have been established. A professor with ample experience in guidance of PhD candidates (invited as lecturer at the seminar) told me: "We have no tradition of writing a synopsis and its guidance and as a supervisor I experience this now as challenging in relation to my own guidance. And I'm not alone." This means that both supervisors and doctoral candidates must make choices without having a tradition to fall back to.

In the following, I tried to compile my presentation into a coherent text, which actually shows how I tried to approach the task of writing a synopsis. In addition, my supervisor, Kari Smith, has submitted her comments (in italics). This also provides a supervisor's perspective on starting on the synopsis.

Synopsis - some attempts at definitions

A basically easy way to get an impression of what a synopsis is meant to be is to see what educational institutions in Norway that offer doctorate have written down as their interpretation. Here are some examples of definitions I found (all online material is retrieved in the period 5-14 September 2009).

Former School of Business and Administration in Bodø (HNB) (2008)

If the doctor chooses to an article-based thesis, a synopsis (kappe) must be written, which represents an independent effort, which will document the whole of the dissertation and summarize the issues and conclusions presented in the articles. The summary of the thesis should not only summarize but also synthesize the issues and conclusions presented in the articles in an integrating scientific perspective, thus documenting the coherence of the dissertation. A summary must be included of the thesis's contribution to the research field - both practical and theoretical. The synopsis will also explain the methodological choices used in the articles, in addition to what is explain in the separate papers.

University of Oslo (UiO) (2009)

The final work on the synopsis should be carried out towards the end of the doctoral thesis. However, the synopsis should also serve as an outline for the work so that an overall perspective is available early in the work process. At the same time, it is natural that the synopsis is modified along the way in relation to how the shape and content of the articles evolve.

1. The synopsis will summarize and synthesize the issues and conclusions presented in the separate papers so that the dissertation appears as a whole. The synopsis will present the results of the individual papers in such a way that their 'internal coherence' relationship is visualised. The synopsis can thus help shaping connections between individual findings and can invite to discussions at a more theoretical level. Complexity and nuance shall be discussed in the light of methodological, science-theoretical and theoretical issues².

² Personally, I would not ask my PhD student to seriously consider the full bearing of this sentence too much. What a job!

2. The synthesis must contain necessary theoretical and methodological assessments related to doctoral work. The synopsis will also explain where concepts or elaborations on different themes are found in the dissertation.
3. The synopsis will highlight and summarize the thesis's contribution to the relevant research field.
4. The synopsis will discuss ethical issues of relevance for the work.
5. The synopsis shall contain updates when necessary. This may be necessary when major changes have occurred after publication of one or more individual papers.
6. The synopsis must be written by the doctoral student alone.
7. The synopsis should normally have a range of between 60-70 pages.

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) (2009)

The dissertation can be delivered as a major collective work (monograph) or as a collection of articles. If it consists of a collection of articles, it should normally be 3-5 papers in addition to a compilation (synopsis).

After having thought over these three examples, I still wondered what a synopsis was meant to be in practice. Is it supposed to be a summary? A compilation? A synthesis? An overview? A digest? Is there any difference between the terms used? Some quick dictionary checks³ offered several explanations.

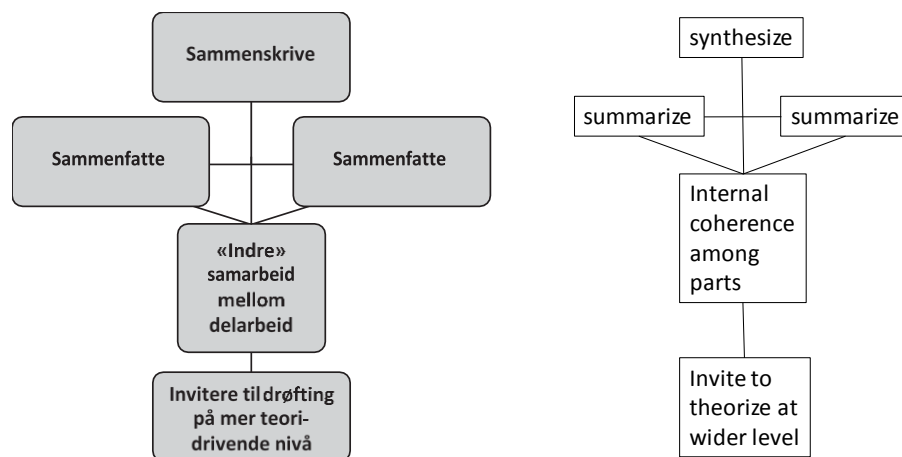


Figure 1. An attempt to visualise the form and function of the synopsis. Left the original Norwegian, right and English interpretation.

The function of the synopsis

Because I still lacked an unambiguous conception of the meaning of a synopsis, I changed focus from definition to function. I therefore recaptured the above seven concrete points in UiO's guidelines. By re-reading these with a functional view, both the shape and content become more concrete. The synopsis should be more than a summary. In a purely visual sense, therefore, the synopsis should be seen as a compilation of the project, where compilation can be interpreted to include summary, compilation and overview of the independent articles that are part of the dissertation project. The compilation requires the visualization of (possible) "internal" relationships among the articles, thus inviting discussion of the

³ I do not repeat and try to translate the words and their explanation he reproduced in Norwegian here, it is too language-specific to be useful, and anyone can check a dictionary. It is not funny either.

research results against the theoretical basis of the dissertation at a level beyond the theoretical basis⁴ of the individual article. The synopsis invites to discuss the independent research results in relation to each other and in context, but also in relation to the theoretical basis chosen for the entire dissertation project. This I have visualized in Figure 1. I then tried to project this conception of what a synopsis should be and how it should be constructed upon the structure of five paper-based theses that had already been approved. The five theses that I compared came from 4 different disciplines (natural sciences, sport, pedagogics and anthropology). I allow myself to re-order the suggestions from UIO into a structure for a synopsis.

1. Introduction to problem (s).
2. Review. Place your own work in the field of research and thus refine the focus on your own work.
3. Theoretical perspective and central concept. What's needed beyond what's in the articles?
4. Methodology. Method selection, selection.
5. Main findings.
6. Meta Reflection. Discussion.

I think it is necessary to see the role of the synopsis in relation to the doctoral thesis in its entirety, and, in the light of a comprehensive understanding, to plan the synopsis before we begin to discuss it as a separate part of the dissertation. A doctoral thesis based on three articles is different from a monograph, but it should still be genuine in its research within a chosen topic. Therefore, it is necessary to begin with the theme of the study, and the theme itself must be significant and embedded in one (or more) theory (s). The dissertation poses an overall problem, and in the course of the dissertation the candidate will find the answer to the overall question. Previous research on the subject has been presented, and the dissertation presents the methodological choices that have been made to investigate the overall question. This is common to all doctoral dissertations, as I see it. In an article-based dissertation, the overall question is based on three (or more) questionnaires that are highlighted in the three articles the thesis contains. But they are all directed at the overall question and help to highlight the thesis's theme. Each article is an independent unit within the thesis theme, but it is important to clarify how each article is part of the search for answers to the overall question. The dissertation requires a discussion of findings that highlight the overall problem statement and clarify the significance of the dissertation in developing new knowledge about the subject.

As a summary of my thoughts around the synopsis' structure, it is possible to list the words I have written in bold italics in the text and describe the dissertation:

- *theme*
- *theoretical basis*
- *overall research questions*
- *previous research*
- *Methodical choices*
- *sub-problems (articles)*

⁴ Somewhat like I argued before in footnote 2, I see little difference between these two theoretical bases. Such a sentence sounds great, but is more easily written down than thought through in concreto when you start to project it unto the reality of your own thesis. The subsequent sentence largely is a repetition.

- *Discussion related to overall problem*
- *significance as knowledge development*
- *The thesis's limitations and new research needs*

More technical parts of any scientific work come in addition, and Frode will include them in the next section.

In my subsequent comparison of five approved synopses, I found the following structural elements:

- Preface / acknowledgments
- summary
- List of articles related to the dissertation (references)
- Introduction (point 1 above)
- Location of the research done (point 2 above)
- Theoretical approach that underlies the research done (point 3 above⁵)
- Methodological approach, including ethical considerations (point 4 above)
- Introduction of articles that are summarized and synthesized in the cloak (point 5 above)
- General discussion and conclusions (point 6 above)
- Implications
- References
- Any attachments

This relatively primitive mapping process shows that - as I already suspected - there are some common features, both from the supervisor's and the candidate's point of view⁶. After all, presumably, several people have been involved in the design of UiO's guidelines, and all the five dissertations I compared had different supervisors.

The lists presented above may assist the candidate as checklist and suggest a structure that seems to be agreed upon among supervisors, and members of the review committee. I am afraid that such lists can quickly become too detailed and used technically so that there is no room for variation and creativity. Therefore, I am opposed to a centrally controlled template, while at the same time it is important for the candidate to have some guidelines. After all, the quality of the dissertation depends more on content than on structure.

Hi! You cannot just find yourself a synopsis!

With the acceptance of a commonality in the perception of what a synopsis should contain and how it should be built up, the following question came to my mind: Is it just okay to simply fill in the structure of an already existing synopsis from my field of study? This question can be met with both positive and negative arguments:

- Yes, you can because it is becoming a standard template for how a synopsis should be built up; Wholeness and coherence are covered this template.
- No, you cannot because the adjustments that necessary to cover your research work in the best possible way is not simply pasted from previous synopses. The specific form and content of your own

⁵ Personally, I am not sure whether one should be rigorous about the sequence 'problem statement – previous research – theoretical background – research questions' Frode and Kari take different positions here. Neither of them uses the word hypotheses

⁶ Should these differ, actually?

research work should be guiding the development of your synopsis.

- My own conclusion: the candidate himself must make choices and customize the template. This may involve addition or removal of elements in the structure of the synopsis.

Final

After completing my mapping process, my supervisor and I agreed that it was worth inviting others in the form of a post for discussion at the seminar. I finished my presentation containing a "hardly" draft outline of my coat. It looked very similar to the template visualized above. This original draft outline did not stand during the writing process, instead it changed in line with the development of the content. But the challenges met and choices made through this process prompted me to establish a framework. Furthermore, the initial work on a draft synopsis opened up for good discussions with my supervisor, as well as clear advice on how to build the cloak, both by safeguarding my dissertation project as good as possible and by preventing a continuous challenging of the framework of the synopsis. I delivered my thesis for evaluation in December 2010. It was a long process from the first awkward attempt to set up a credible framework to the final delivery-ready version. I went through a number of reviews that included moving large sections and toning down some too outspoken headlines. My synopsis was turned upside down, torn apart and sand-papered until it finally felt as a coherent product which corresponded to the template, while I kept the necessary room for adaptations to my research work. In this process, the supervisor was an important support and discussion partner.

Currently, there appears a need to enhance such guidance skills, both for master and PhD level. This can be done through the establishment of a supervisor network, competence-building seminars and conferences. The UH network Vest (which consists of UiB, HiB, HSH, HiSF and Holdskuld i Volda (HVO)) has acknowledged this need. Also at the National Research School for Teacher Education (NAFOL) the content of guidance at Ph.D. level is a priority area. The discussion whether a synopsis should have an official standard structure should be part of such guidance training. If so, then the question will remain whether such a template really suits everyone.

The challenge for the supervisor is to assist the candidate in writing a dissertation that represents the knowledge the candidate has gained while working on the subject, whilst also ensuring that the work meets formal requirements in terms of quality and structure. It is a balance between breakthrough work, creativity and formal academic frameworks and requirements. This also applies to the synopsis and its structure. I would warn against having strict formal, often technical requirements that inhibit new forms of presentation of knowledge development and progress. It is the supervisor's professional judgment that must be used in fostering a new generation of researchers who dare to be pioneers in their field whilst at the same time respecting the profession's norms and frameworks.

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