FIRST DRAFT OF A THESIS

A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Educational Research

From research proposal to a complete first manuscript

Includes

Chapter structure • drafting strategies • sample paragraphs • tables and figures • citation guidance • revision checklist • supervisor feedback log • viva preparation

Illustrative study used throughout: “Mobile Learning Use and Study Engagement among Grade 9 Students in a Selected Secondary School in Bangladesh.”

This is a learning template, not a ready-made thesis. Adapt the structure to your institution’s handbook, supervisor’s instructions, ethics approval, and actual research data.

How to Use This Guide

A thesis first draft is a complete but unfinished version of your research report. Its purpose is to put the study's logic, evidence, methods, and conclusions on paper so that you and your supervisor can identify what needs correction. It does not need to be perfect, but it should be coherent, honest, and sufficiently complete to review.

• **Follow your institution first.** Required chapters, word limits, referencing style, margins, and submission rules vary.

• **Write from evidence.** Do not invent participants, results, quotations, statistics, references, or ethics approval.

• **Use placeholders transparently.** If something is not ready, mark it clearly, for example: [ADD APPROVED SAMPLE SIZE].

• **Keep a versioned copy.** Save dated drafts and maintain a separate list of questions for your supervisor.

• **Protect participants.** Remove names and identifying details from examples, notes, tables, and quotations.

Key principle: A first draft is not a final submission. It is a working manuscript designed to receive constructive feedback.

1. What a Thesis First Draft Contains

A thesis normally has three broad parts: preliminary pages, main chapters, and end matter. The exact structure depends on whether the work is a dissertation, thesis, project report, or journal-style study.

Part	Typical contents	Drafting note
Preliminary pages	Title page, declaration, approval page if required, acknowledgements, abstract, contents, lists of tables/figures, abbreviations	Use your university template; some pages may be added only after approval.
Chapter 1: Introduction	Background, problem statement, purpose, objectives, questions/hypotheses, significance, scope, definitions	Explain what the problem is and why it matters.
Chapter 2: Literature Review	Concepts, theories, empirical studies, synthesis, research gap, conceptual framework	Compare and evaluate sources; do not simply list summaries.
Chapter 3: Methodology	Design, setting, population, sample, instruments, validity/reliability or trustworthiness, procedure, analysis, ethics	Describe what was actually done or what is planned, according to project stage.
Chapter 4: Findings/Results	Participant profile, findings organized by question/objective, tables, figures, themes	Report results before interpreting their meaning.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion	Interpretation, comparison with literature, implications, limitations, conclusions, recommendations	Link conclusions directly to evidence and objectives.
End matter	References, appendices, instruments, consent forms, supplementary tables	Every in-text citation must match a reference-list entry and vice versa.

2. Before You Start Writing

2.1 Confirm the study's central logic

Write one short sentence for each item. If the sentences do not connect logically, refine the proposal before expanding the chapters.

1. Problem: What educational issue needs investigation?

2. Purpose: What will the study try to understand, describe, compare, or explain?

3. Objectives: What specific tasks will answer the problem?

4. Questions or hypotheses: What will the data answer or test?

5. Methods: What data and analysis are suitable for answering those questions?

6. Contribution: What useful knowledge, practice, or decision might the study support?

2.2 Gather your working materials

• Approved proposal and supervisor comments.

• Institutional thesis handbook or formatting template.

• Ethics approval and permission letters, where applicable.

• Final or current versions of questionnaires, interview guides, tests, observation schedules, or other tools.

• Data files, codebook, field notes, transcripts, analysis outputs, and a record of any data cleaning.

• Reference library with full bibliographic details and notes about each source.

2.3 Create a master outline

Make a document with every required chapter and subsection before drafting paragraphs. Under each heading, add 2–5 bullet points describing the evidence or argument that belongs there. This reduces repetition and reveals missing sections early.

3. A Practical Drafting Order

You do not have to write chapters in the order in which readers see them. Many researchers find it easier to draft the methods and results first, then write the introduction and abstract after the argument is clearer.

Step	Drafting task	Why it helps
1	Create headings and a chapter outline	Shows the full structure and missing pieces.
2	Draft Methodology	The study procedures are usually concrete and easier to document.
3	Draft Results/Findings	Builds the report around the actual evidence.
4	Draft Literature Review and Discussion	Connects the study to existing knowledge and interprets the findings.
5	Draft Introduction and Conclusion	Makes the opening and final claims consistent with the completed work.
6	Write Abstract and front matter	Summarizes the finished draft accurately.
7	Check citations, tables, appendices, and formatting	Improves traceability and presentation.
8	Submit to supervisor with specific questions	Makes feedback more focused and actionable.

4. Chapter 1 — Introduction

4.1 Background of the study

Move from the broad educational context to the specific issue your study investigates. Use credible sources to support factual claims and show why the issue matters in the selected context.

Useful pattern: broad context → specific educational concern → what previous evidence suggests → local context → reason for the present study.

4.2 Statement of the problem

State the problem precisely. Distinguish an observed concern from a research gap: a concern is something that may be happening; a research gap is what existing knowledge has not adequately answered. Avoid claiming that no research exists unless your review supports that claim.

Illustrative wording: “Digital learning resources are increasingly available in schools, but access alone does not show how students use these resources or how their use relates to study engagement in a particular school context. The present study examines reported mobile-learning use and study engagement among Grade 9 students in one selected secondary school.”

4.3 Aim and objectives

Aim: the broad purpose of the study. **Objectives:** specific, achievable tasks that guide data collection and analysis.

Illustrative objectives:

• To describe how frequently Grade 9 students report using mobile devices for learning.

• To describe students’ reported study engagement.

• To examine the relationship between reported mobile-learning use and study engagement, if the chosen design and data support this analysis.

4.4 Research questions and hypotheses

Questions should align with objectives and methods. A descriptive question may ask how frequently a behavior occurs; a relationship question may ask whether two measured variables are associated. A hypothesis is appropriate when the study is designed to test a specified prediction.

4.5 Significance, scope, and definitions

Explain who may benefit and how, without promising outcomes the study cannot guarantee. State the boundaries: location, participants, variables, time period, and design. Define technical terms operationally—for example, how “study engagement” is measured in this particular study.

Chapter 1 quality check

• The problem is specific and supported by evidence.

• The aim, objectives, questions, and methods are aligned.

• The study’s boundaries are clear.

• Claims about importance are realistic.

• Terms are defined consistently.

5. Chapter 2 — Literature Review

5.1 Search and organize the literature

Use relevant scholarly databases, library catalogues, academic journals, books, and trustworthy reports. Record the search terms, date, inclusion criteria, and source details. Prefer original research and authoritative sources that directly relate to the question.

5.2 Move from summary to synthesis

A weak literature review reports one study after another without showing relationships. A stronger review groups research by themes, methods, findings, disagreements, and limitations.

Source / theme	What the source contributes	How it relates to your study
Study A: access to digital learning	Reports patterns of device access in its setting	Helps describe context; may not measure engagement.
Study B: student engagement	Explains behavioral, emotional, or cognitive dimensions	Helps define the outcome and choose indicators.
Study C: mobile learning outcomes	Examines links between mobile learning and outcomes	Compare design, sample, measures, and limits before drawing parallels.

The entries above are illustrative categories, not real citations. Replace them with sources you have actually read.

5.3 Identify a defensible research gap

A gap may concern a population, context, method, variable, contradictory findings, or a practical question not adequately answered. Explain the gap using the literature you reviewed; do not use “no study has ever…” as a shortcut.

5.4 Theoretical or conceptual framework

Define the theory or concepts that guide the study. Explain how the concepts relate and how the framework influences the research questions, instrument design, analysis, and interpretation. Include a diagram only if it genuinely clarifies those relationships.

Literature review paragraph formula

Topic sentence → evidence from multiple sources → comparison or critique → implication for the present study. Paraphrase in your own words and cite the original source. A citation does not replace analysis.

6. Chapter 3 — Methodology

Methodology should be detailed enough that a reader can understand how the study was conducted and assess whether the procedures fit the research questions.

Section	Questions to answer
Research approach/design	Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods? Descriptive, correlational, experimental, case study, etc.? Why is it suitable?
Setting and population	Where was the study conducted? Who was eligible?
Sample and sampling	How many participants were included, how was the number determined, and how were participants selected or recruited?
Instrument(s)	What did the questionnaire, interview guide, test, or observation schedule measure? Include key sections and scoring rules.
Quality of measures	What evidence supports validity and reliability, or qualitative trustworthiness? Report actual procedures, not intentions presented as completed work.
Procedure	What happened, in what order, and during what period? Who administered the tools?
Analysis plan	How were data coded, cleaned, summarized, compared, or interpreted? Name methods appropriate to the design.
Ethics	What consent, permission, confidentiality, risk-reduction, and data-protection procedures applied?

Important: If data collection has not started, describe the planned method in a proposal or planned-methods draft. Do not write future plans as if they already happened. If the thesis reports completed research, use accurate past tense and document deviations from the original plan.

7. Chapter 4 — Findings / Results

7.1 Organize results by research question

Begin with a brief description of the analyzed sample and any exclusions or missing data that affect interpretation. Then present results in the same order as the objectives or research questions. Use neutral language and avoid explaining causes in the results section unless your institutional structure combines results and discussion.

7.2 Tables and figures

Give every table or figure a number and descriptive title. State the sample size, units, category definitions, and any relevant notes. Explain the main pattern in the text rather than repeating every cell.

Illustrative table: reported learning frequency	Number of students	Percentage
Rarely	12	20%
Sometimes	24	40%
Often	18	30%
Very often	6	10%
Total	60	100%

All numbers in this table are fictional and demonstrate formatting only. Do not use them as research findings.

Example of objective reporting: “In this illustrative dataset, the largest group selected ‘Sometimes’ (24 of 60 students, 40%).” Report only patterns supported by the actual dataset.

7.3 Qualitative findings

For interviews or observations, present themes that answer the research questions. Explain how themes were developed and support them with short, anonymized quotations or specific observations when appropriate. Do not invent quotations or imply that one quotation represents all participants.

7.4 Report statistics accurately

Name the analysis used, provide the relevant statistic and sample size, and report uncertainty or effect size where appropriate and required. A statistically significant result is not automatically important, causal, or practically large. Do not select only results that support your expectations.

8. Chapter 5 — Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

8.1 Discussion

Interpret what the findings mean in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and previous studies. Explain whether results agree with, extend, or differ from earlier work. Offer plausible explanations carefully and distinguish evidence from speculation.

8.2 Conclusion

Answer each research question directly and summarize the main evidence. The conclusion should not introduce new data, new citations that change the argument, or claims broader than the design permits.

8.3 Recommendations

Recommendations should follow from the evidence and be directed to a clear audience—for example, teachers, school leaders, policymakers, or future researchers. Make each recommendation realistic, specific, and proportionate to the study’s limitations.

8.4 Limitations

Discuss limitations openly: sampling constraints, self-report bias, missing data, instrument weaknesses, time limits, or restricted generalizability. Explain how each limitation may affect interpretation. Honest limitations improve credibility.

Finding	Cautious interpretation	Proportionate recommendation
Students report varied use of mobile learning	Frequency alone does not establish learning effectiveness	Explore which learning activities students use and how teachers guide them.
A relationship is observed between two measures	Association does not establish cause and effect	Conduct a stronger follow-up design before making causal claims.

9. Abstract, Title, and Preliminary Pages

9.1 Title

A strong title is clear, concise, and accurately identifies the topic, population, and context when useful. Avoid vague titles and claims such as “the impact” when the design only measures association.

9.2 Abstract

Write the abstract after the main chapters are stable. In one concise paragraph or the format required by your university, state the problem/purpose, design, participants, tools, analysis, principal findings, and conclusion. Include only results that actually exist.

Abstract template: “This study examined [purpose] among [population] in [context]. A [design] was used. Data were collected from [sample and method] and analyzed using [analysis]. The findings showed [main verified findings]. The study concludes [evidence-based conclusion] and recommends [practical implication].”

9.3 Front matter and end matter

Prepare the title page, acknowledgements, contents, lists, references, and appendices according to institutional requirements. Generate the table of contents from actual heading styles when using word-processing software, and update it after editing.

10. Academic Writing and Referencing

• **One paragraph, one main idea.** Begin with a clear topic sentence and develop it with evidence and reasoning.

• **Use precise language.** Prefer “was associated with” over “caused” unless the design justifies a causal claim.

• **Paraphrase properly.** Change the structure and wording while preserving the source’s meaning, and cite it.

• **Quote sparingly.** Use direct quotations only when the exact wording matters and follow citation rules.

• **Track every source.** Keep author, year, title, journal/book, volume, pages, DOI or stable URL as applicable.

• **Follow one style consistently.** APA is common in education, but use the style your institution requires.

• **Avoid fabricated references.** Verify every reference against the original source or a reliable bibliographic record.

Example of a general APA-style journal reference format (formatting model only): Author, A. A., & Author, B. B. (Year). Title of article. *Title of Journal, volume*(issue), page–page. https://doi.org/xxxxx

Do not leave citation placeholders such as (Author, Year) in a submitted draft unless clearly flagged for supervisor review. Replace them with verified references.

11. Using Tables, Figures, and Appendices

• Mention each table or figure in the text before or near where it appears.

• Use readable labels, consistent decimals, and clear units.

• Avoid 3-D charts or decorative graphics that make comparisons harder.

• Provide a note for abbreviations, scoring, missing values, or adapted measures.

• Include only appendices relevant to the study, such as approved instruments, participant information sheets, consent forms, or supplementary analysis.

• Do not include identifying participant data or confidential records in appendices.

12. Common First-Draft Problems

Problem	Why it weakens the thesis	How to improve it
Objectives and results do not match	The report does not answer its stated purpose	Create an objective-to-result alignment table.
Literature review is a list of summaries	No synthesis or clear gap emerges	Group sources by theme and compare their methods and findings.
Method is too vague	Readers cannot evaluate the study	Add setting, sampling, instrument, procedure, and analysis details.
Results are interpreted as causes	Claims exceed what the design supports	Use cautious language and discuss alternative explanations.
References are incomplete or invented	Readers cannot verify the evidence	Check each in-text citation against the original source.
Drafting and formatting happen simultaneously	Time is spent polishing text that may change	Prioritize completeness and logic, then polish formatting.
Supervisor comments are applied inconsistently	Errors recur or revisions conflict	Maintain a feedback log and mark each comment resolved, partly resolved, or queried.

13. Worked Example: Aligning the Thesis

The following miniature example shows how the parts of a study should connect. It is a planning illustration, not a claim about real participants.

Research question	Evidence needed	Possible analysis	Where reported
How often do students use mobile devices for learning?	Responses to frequency items	Counts and percentages	Results: descriptive findings
What is the reported level of study engagement?	Responses to engagement measures	Score summaries, according to the instrument	Results: engagement profile
Are learning use and engagement associated?	Paired measures from eligible participants	Appropriate correlation or other justified analysis	Results, then interpreted in Discussion

The exact analysis depends on measurement level, data quality, assumptions, sample size, and the approved research plan. Ask a qualified supervisor or statistician when unsure.

14. A Manageable Four-Week Drafting Plan

Week	Main goal	Deliverable
1	Confirm structure; assemble materials; draft methodology and chapter outline	Full outline plus a credible methods draft
2	Analyze the data and draft results/findings	Results organized by objectives with checked tables or themes
3	Complete literature synthesis, discussion, and conclusion	All main chapters drafted
4	Draft introduction and abstract; verify references; revise for alignment and formatting	Complete first manuscript ready for supervisor feedback

Adjust the schedule to your deadline, data readiness, and supervisor’s availability. A four-week plan is an example, not a universal requirement.

15. First-Draft Self-Review Checklist

■ The title accurately describes the study.

■ The problem, aim, objectives, questions, and methods align.

■ The literature review synthesizes verified sources and explains the gap.

■ The methodology reflects what was actually done or clearly labels what remains planned.

■ Ethics, consent, permissions, and confidentiality are described accurately.

■ Every result is traceable to the data or analysis.

■ Tables and figures are numbered, titled, and explained.

■ The discussion compares findings with relevant literature without overstating them.

■ Conclusions answer the research questions and recommendations follow from evidence.

■ Limitations and unexpected findings are acknowledged.

■ All citations and references are cross-checked.

■ Appendices contain appropriate supporting materials and no unnecessary identifiers.

■ The document follows the university's format and naming rules.

■ Unresolved questions and placeholders are clearly marked for review.

16. Supervisor Feedback Log

Date / section	Supervisor comment	Action taken	Status / question
_____	_____	_____	Open / revised / ask
_____	_____	_____	Open / revised / ask
_____	_____	_____	Open / revised / ask
_____	_____	_____	Open / revised / ask

17. Questions to Ask Your Supervisor

• Does the chapter structure match departmental requirements?

• Are the research questions sufficiently focused and answerable?

• Is the literature review analytical enough, and is the research gap defensible?

• Is the sample and analysis appropriate for the questions?

• Are any claims too strong for the design or data?

• Which revisions are essential before the next draft, and which can wait?

• What referencing style, word count, and formatting rules must I follow?

18. Common Viva or Progress-Meeting Questions

1. What is the central problem your thesis addresses?

2. What is the research gap, and how did you establish it?

3. How do the objectives connect to the questions and analysis?

4. Why did you choose this design and sampling strategy?

5. How did you address instrument quality and research ethics?

6. What are the most important findings, and what evidence supports them?

7. How do your findings compare with previous studies?

8. What are the main limitations, and how do they affect the conclusions?

9. What is the practical or scholarly contribution of the study?

10. What would you change if you conducted the study again?

19. Final Advice

Aim for a first draft that is **complete enough to review, honest about uncertainty, and coherent from question to conclusion.** Do not hide missing work behind polished formatting. Label unfinished sections, keep an evidence trail, and ask for targeted feedback. Revise the argument before spending too much time on cosmetic details.

Before submission, replace all illustrative content with your actual topic, verified sources, approved methods, and genuine findings. If your study has not yet collected data, do not fabricate a Results chapter; instead, follow your institution's rules for a proposal or planned thesis.

Appendix A — One-Page Chapter Planner

Chapter	Three questions to answer before drafting
Introduction	What is the problem? Why does it matter? What exactly will this study answer?
Literature Review	What is already known? Where do sources agree or disagree? What gap remains?
Methodology	What was done? Why is it appropriate? How can readers assess its quality?
Results/Findings	What does the evidence show for each objective? Are the tables/themes accurate?
Discussion/Conclusion	What do the results mean? What can be concluded? What should happen next?

Appendix B — A Simple Draft File Structure

A clear folder system reduces lost work and makes supervision easier:

• 01_Proposal_and_Approvals

• 02_Literature_and_Reference_Library

• 03_Instruments_and_Pilot

• 04_Raw_Data_RESTRICTED

• 05_Cleaned_Data_and_Analysis

• 06_Thesis_Drafts

• 07_Supervisor_Feedback

• 08_Final_Submission

Store raw participant data securely and limit access. Do not upload identifiable or sensitive research data to services unless permitted by your institution and consent/ethics arrangements.

Further Reading and Reference Support

For authoritative guidance, consult your university's thesis handbook and library resources first. Depending on your topic and methods, useful starting points include:

• American Psychological Association (APA): Publication Manual and official APA Style guidance for citations, tables, and academic writing.

• Creswell and Creswell: research design texts covering quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches.

• A methods textbook recommended by your department for educational research, measurement, sampling, and analysis.

• Your institution’s research ethics policy, consent guidance, and data-protection requirements.

Bibliographic details and editions should be checked through your library before adding any book or website to the final reference list.