

Curtin

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Suggestions for Writing Your Thesis

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1. Introduction

Writing your thesis is not just a necessary task; it is a prerequisite to being granted your degree. Moreover, it is an integral and essential part of your postgraduate training. Writing itself is a creative process. It is often during the writing stage that ideas are generated and conclusions reached. In addition, the skills that you develop while writing your thesis, selection of material, critical analysis of information, assessment of ideas, and written communication, will be of value throughout your career, whether it be in academia or industry.

Writing a thesis is a substantial task and should not be taken too lightly. You will not have undertaken a writing task of such magnitude previously and, in most cases, it is unlikely that you will undertake a task of such magnitude again. Therefore, it is sensible to seek guidance as you plan and progress with your writing. You should seek individual advice from your supervisor, or other academic staff, and perhaps from fellow students or colleagues who have successfully completed their theses.

However, some general advice may be helpful, which is the principal aim of this booklet. It has been developed from a booklet supplied to graduate students at the University of Manchester, England. It contains *suggestions* about writing your thesis that are thought to be helpful by those who have written theses and those who have supervised postgraduate students. Having written a thesis myself relatively recently (1992), I hope that you will benefit from my experiences.

2. Requirements of the Thesis

- 2.1 There are formal general requirements of theses, as specified in the University's regulations and guidelines. Typically, an Honours thesis will demonstrate that the student is capable of undertaking quality research, an MSc thesis will embody the results of individual research, and a PhD thesis will embody the results of individual and novel research which makes an original contribution to scholarship. All theses should show evidence of a systematic study and an ability to relate the results of the research to the general body of knowledge in that subject.
- 2.2 To ensure a measure of uniformity, there are more specific formal requirements, which govern the length, format and presentation of theses. Find out these requirements at an early stage so that you can plan with them in mind. These are given in the University's regulations and guidelines, which are available from the Office of Research and Development. In many cases, each School has its own guidelines, which should be followed in conjunction with the University's guidelines.
- 2.3 Although there are formal general and specific requirements governing the production of theses, it is often easier to get an impression of what is required by reading recent theses in the same or a comparable discipline. It is much easier to emulate than it is to construct from a set of rules. However, you should beware of two pitfalls explained below.
 - a) Firstly, do not aim to produce a thesis identical in every respect to those produced previously. Your thesis should be highly individual; it should contain your ideas about your original work expressed in your own way. After all, it is your own work and a document by which you will be judged.
 - b) Second, do not assume that the likelihood of success is directly related to the length of the thesis. A thesis is read and not weighed! Your thesis should be long enough to clearly and

unambiguously report the results of your research and to discuss their significance, and no longer. Your examiners will quickly detect 'waffle' and padding and will not be impressed. There is a formal limit, set by the University, of 100,000 words allowed for a PhD, 50,000 words for a MSc, and approximately 30,000 words for an Honours thesis. Bear in mind too that a longer thesis will take longer to type and cost more to produce.

3. Anticipating the Writing

- 3.1 In one sense, preparation for writing your thesis begins as soon as you start your research. Being organised and keeping systematic records of your methods, results, analyses, conclusions and sources of information is a pre-requisite for efficient thesis writing. This can be achieved either by keeping a diary or series of short 'papers' explaining your work. It is usually difficult to recall the exact methods that you used, perhaps over two years ago.
- 3.2 During the course of your research, try to anticipate what you will need to produce as the final written account, and organise your records accordingly. Keep references to sources of information on file cards, or preferably in a computer-based bibliography, and ensure that you note all of the information that you might eventually require (for example, note final as well as initial page numbers of articles and places of publication of books). Always take a written note of important information; never rely on memory.
- 3.3 It is worthwhile to prepare and continually update a table of contents of your thesis. This can be coupled with a timetable of what you expect to have completed by a certain date. This creates a series of deadlines, which are very satisfying to meet.
- 3.4 Analyse the data thoroughly and think actively about the interpretation of information as you proceed with your research, not forgetting to consider the effects of data errors. Writing your thesis should involve making a synthesis of what you have already analysed and thought about. You should not start your writing with a set of 'raw' data.
- 3.5 If possible, start to do some writing as your research progresses. If there are unavoidable delays in your research (for example, waiting for data, equipment or materials), use this time profitably to draft sections of your thesis or to properly format your list of references. If you are required to produce interim reports (such as, for grant-awarding bodies), keep these reports and the material which you used to prepare them. These can ultimately be used in the preparation of your thesis.

4. Scheduling the Writing

- 4.1 Financial and other constraints may restrict the time available to you to complete your thesis. This time must be divided between conducting your research and writing your thesis. You, in consultation with your supervisor(s), need to estimate at an early stage how much time should be spent on each task. As the work progresses, it may be necessary to modify this estimate, but do not be tempted to continually set back the date at which you will start writing. Every week spent on more research is a week less available for writing. Typically, it takes between four and nine months to write a thesis, as some additional research may be required during the writing (it took me nine months to write up, which included a couple months of additional research based on ideas that occurred whilst writing).

2. In planning your timetable, work backwards. Set a target date for the submission of your thesis. Remember that even after you have submitted your thesis it will take time for your examiners to read the thesis and make their report. This is particularly important if you are going abroad after you have finished your thesis. Typically the examination process can take between two and six months, and sometimes more. Also, some examiners request that corrections be made, which will involve additional time after the return of the thesis.
3. Having set a target for the submission of your thesis, allow time for typing (if applicable), reading by your supervisor(s) and final checking. Proofreading itself is a substantial task, so make a realistic estimate of the time it will take. If your thesis will require photographs or illustrations, remember that these will also take time to produce, even if you have them prepared professionally. Even, if you are using a word processor or document preparation system to produce your thesis, this process can still take a considerable amount of time.
4. Consult your supervisor about when to stop the research and start the final writing. Try to make this a reasonably definite changeover; attempting to write a thesis "in your spare time" while continuing research is rarely effective.
5. Do not underestimate the time that it will take you to write your thesis. Remember that writing a thesis is a major task and that you are not necessarily experienced in this area. Simply ask other postgraduates who are currently, or who have just finished, writing their theses. Almost all will say that writing takes considerably longer than anticipated. It is unwise to assume that you will be quicker at writing than other postgraduates.
6. Allow some additional time for unforeseen circumstances. For example, during writing, it may become apparent that you should conduct some essential additional research or consult extra sources. This is more of a rule than an exception, so ensure that you have all relevant material available.
7. The University will require notice of your intention to submit your thesis a few months beforehand. This notice is required to allow the University to make preparations for the appointment of examiners for the thesis and, in some cases, the final title of the thesis must be approved. The appropriate forms are available from the Office of Research and Development and must be completed by your supervisor.

5. Consulting Your Supervisor

- 5.1 Consult your supervisor(s) regularly as you start the writing phase to discuss the overall structure of the thesis, and your proposed strategy for writing it.
- 5.2 Even when you are fully occupied with writing, try to maintain regular contact with your supervisor(s). You are not expected to operate entirely independently during the writing phase. Writing your thesis is an integral part of your training; guiding and advising you about writing is an integral part of supervision.
- 5.3 For creative activities such as planning and revising, many shorter consultations with your supervisor(s) are more effective than the occasional 'blockbuster' session. In long discussions, both you and your supervisor will grow tired and lose concentration and enthusiasm.

- 5.4 You should show sections, or preferably complete chapters with a reference list, of your thesis to your supervisor(s) at regular intervals. Do not spend a lot of time getting a section to its final form before showing it to your supervisor. If you have adopted the wrong approach or made mistakes, the time that you have spent revising this section will have been wasted.
- 5.5 Present drafts of your thesis to your supervisor in sections of reasonable length. Your supervisor will not wish to check your thesis a few pages at a time. On the other hand, he or she will not appreciate you offering them a huge section of the thesis to read in one weekend.
- 5.6 At the end of each discussion with your supervisor, make an appointment for your next meeting. Agree on what you will have written by the next meeting, and what you will discuss at the meeting. This will provide you with deadlines for completion of sections of the writing, and deadlines are excellent incentives. The University's regulations state that these meetings must be at least monthly. However, these should be more frequent during the writing stage. Finally, remember that the responsibility for meeting deadlines rests solely with you.
- 5.7 Your supervisor will inevitably be busy with other commitments. It is unreasonable to expect him or her to be always and instantly available. If questions about your thesis occur to you, make a list and raise the questions at your next meeting with your supervisor.

6. Planning the Thesis

- 6.1 As with all major tasks, an effective approach is to divide thesis writing into manageable pieces.
- 6.2 Do not produce a highly refined version of a small section of the thesis before progressing to other sections. The most efficient strategy is to produce a rough draft of the complete thesis before undertaking substantial revision and improvements. As you write later sections, you will want to add to, discard, or modify earlier sections.
- 6.3 The first step is to decide, in consultation with your supervisor, on the overall structure of the thesis. Decide whether it will be a sequential series of linked chapters, bracketed by a general introduction and a general conclusion, or a fully integrated thesis. One advantage of the former structure is that it facilitates the preparation of sections of the work for publication in journals. However, the research must have been modular for this approach to be effective.
- 6.4 Having made a provisional decision about the content of each chapter or each major section of the thesis, gradually make a more detailed plan of the sub-sections within each chapter. This will encourage you to arrange information systematically and to build up your arguments logically. In effect, what you are doing is to make a draft of the contents pages of the thesis.
- 6.5 Make a timetable for the completion of each of the sections of the first draft of the thesis. Bear in mind your overall timetable because continual revision will take considerable time.
- 6.6 Start a series of loose-leaf files and/or word-processor files, one for each section of the thesis. When you are writing any one section, ideas will be triggered which might be suitable for other sections. You will not want to get distracted by these ideas, but neither will you want to lose them. Instead, note them and store the note in the appropriate file to act as a memory trigger when you are writing that section.

7. Preparing the First Draft

- 7.1 Choose one of the sub-sections to start writing. Do not choose the opening section; you may want to open the introduction (and close the discussion) with some rather grand statements. These sections are best written when you have finished a draft of most of the rest of the thesis. Importantly, the abstract to the thesis should be the last thing that you write.
- 7.2 When you first start to write, you may have to overcome two barriers: One may be your inexperience of writing large reports. The other may be your relative lack of intimacy with academic material. It is difficult to overcome both of these barriers at once. If you have been undertaking some writing during the course of your research, you will have started to overcome the former barrier. Whether or not you have done this, it is sensible to start with a section of the thesis that will be relatively easy to write.
- 7.3 Start with a section of your thesis with which you are most familiar and which will be the most 'mechanical', and least academically demanding, to write. For example, if your research is experimental, consider writing one of the materials and methods sections; these are usually a straightforward, but detailed, account of what you did. Writing this sort of material will help you to overcome the barrier of expressing your ideas in written form. The completion of one section will both encourage you and give you some idea about whether you have set a sensible schedule for the completion of your thesis.
- 7.4 As you proceed, you will come to sections of the thesis which require more creativity and analysis. One approach to such sections is to write down the theme of the section and then note, as they occur and in any order, ideas, thoughts, examples, conclusions, and suggestions.
- 7.5 The above ideas can then be arranged into logical order within an overall framework. The form of the framework will depend upon the subject matter. It might be historical, describing the order in which facts were discovered or ideas evolved. It might reflect a progression of understanding, for example recounting the discovery, description and explanation of a phenomenon. It might be based upon a systematic classification of phenomena or ideas. However, try to avoid a list-like reiteration. A 'thesis' is a proposition that you are advancing. Your writing should be directed towards building up a logical and substantiated argument, not just towards accumulating information or presenting a diary of your whole research program.

8. Writing the First Draft

- 8.1 If you are handwriting the first draft, write on alternate lines and leave plenty of space in the borders. This will enable you to make alterations or corrections without re-writing. Write on one side of the paper only. This will allow you to add, delete or move sections by literal 'cutting and pasting'.
- 8.2 Do not write out the first draft of your thesis in full. Wherever possible use standard abbreviations. In addition, devise your own abbreviations for long or specialist words that you use frequently (see item 8.5). The principal requirement is that you should be able to read and understand what you have written.
3. If possible, aim to produce your thesis using a word processor or document preparation system. This will allow you to make, with minimal effort, substantial alterations to the text; to add, delete,

copy or move blocks of text. Using a word processor allows you to see and revise as many drafts as required and encourages you to gradually improve the thesis. Also, check that the word processor will be available to you at convenient times.

- 8.4 If you or your typist use a word processor, your work should be stored on floppy discs. Floppy discs are cheap, and computers and discs are not always completely reliable, so always keep at least two copies of your discs as a back up. This is essential, as I have heard too many horror stories of students losing whole chapters, or even a whole thesis, due to computer failures. Also, check that the quality of the printed output from the word processor will be acceptable to the University.
- 8.5 Most word processors have a 'find and replace' facility. This allows you to select a word and replace it throughout your document with another word or phrase. You can exploit this facility if you frequently need to use a long word or phrase. Invent an abbreviation for the word or phrase; *do not* use a single letter or a normal English word. Type this abbreviation at each point where the word or phrase is required. When you have finished a section of the thesis, execute the 'find and replace' facility to insert the desired word or phrase in place of the abbreviation. It is important to remember to use a space in the search; otherwise words that contain the abbreviation will also be changed.
- 8.6 If your thesis is to contain mathematical formulae, or special characters or symbols that are not available on standard word processors, bear in mind that scientific word processors are available, which contain an extended range of symbols. For example, the LaTeX document preparation system is available for a nominal charge over the Internet.
- 8.7 Whether you are handwriting, or using a word processor, be single-minded. If ideas are generated as you are writing, which will be useful in other sections of the thesis, do not get sidetracked. Note the idea, place the note in the appropriate file, and continue with the section which you are writing.
- 8.8 Unless you are using a word processor, do not copy out long quotations or formulae at the draft writing stage. Every time such material is copied by hand there is a chance of introducing transcription errors. Instead, make a careful and comprehensive note of where this material can be found. However, be extremely careful not to plagiarise and to properly reference the source.
- 8.9 If you get stuck on a particular point, leave a gap and continue with the rest of the section. Your aim at this stage is to start and maintain the flow of writing. These gaps can be completed later.
- 8.10 At the draft writing stage, do not be afraid of producing too much material. During revision it is generally easier to summarise or delete information than it is to add and integrate new information.
- 8.11 Remember that it is your aim to make a synthesis of the information, not just a precis. Avoid giving long lists of examples and leaving the reader to draw the general conclusions. For each point, either state the general principle and then illustrate it with an example, or give a few examples and draw them together with a general conclusion.
- 8.12 Start every chapter with an introduction and end it with a summary so the reader is reminded of the key points that you are making. This makes the thesis much easier to read in several sittings.

9. Developing Your Writing Style

- 9.1 It is a fallacy to think that academic writing should be pompous, contorted and complex. Your aim is to communicate your ideas to your reader clearly, not to impress your reader with obscure vocabulary. In academic writing, elegance comes from simplicity of expression and directness of style. Remember that some readers of your thesis may be relatively new to the subject area and will appreciate clear explanations.
- 9.2 Aim for a style that is clear, accurate, comprehensive but concise. Do not use a long word or phrase where a shorter word or phrase will do. Avoid superfluous words; they distract your reader and lead to grammatical errors. Common grammatical errors include qualification of absolutes (for example, "absolutely perfect" or "conclusive proof") or tautologies (saying the same thing twice with different words). Avoid long, contorted sentences. Short sentences are easy to read and understand, and make for the clearest thesis.
- 9.3 Use words with precision and care. If necessary, use technical terms. For non-technical English, avoid jargon and words and phrases that are commonly used wrongly. For example, "viable", "vital", "literally" and "virtually" have precise meanings. If in doubt about the exact meaning of a word, check it in a dictionary.
- 9.4 At times it will be necessary to use a similar form of expression several times. To avoid exact repetition, use a thesaurus of synonyms to stimulate ideas for alternative methods of expression.
- 9.5 It is essential that your argument or discussion is expressed logically. There is a close link between grammar and logic, and so it is important that you write a style that is grammatically correct. Be especially careful about the use of conjunctions (such as, "and", "but", "thus", "however" or "hence"). For example, "thus" is used when the point to be made is supported by preceding argument; "however" is used when contradictory evidence is to be introduced.
- 9.6 In general, it is preferable to write in the passive, impersonal mood rather than in the active mood. For example, "Smith (1988) has shown that ..." is the active form; "it has been shown that ... (Smith, 1988)" is the more preferable passive form. Frequent use of the active mood tempts the writer to produce a monotonous list. The passive mood keeps the attention on the evidence or ideas, and facilitates the construction of arguments. However, there may be a few occasions when maintaining the impersonal mood leads to grammatical contortions. For example, it is better to say "In my opinion ..." than "In the opinion of the present writer ...".
- 9.7 Distinguish carefully between levels of certainty. Proven facts, theories, hypotheses and opinions must not be confused. Just because information is published, it does *not* mean that the argument is proven. With quantitative data, distinguish between statistically significant and non-significant results, and for significant results, state the level of significance. Avoid errors of logic such as claiming proof based on the absence of evidence to the contrary.
- 9.8 Despite the above example, always try to write a thesis in the third person. A thesis that starts most sentences with I or we is tedious to read. You should also note that most published research papers and textbooks are written in the third person because of this convention.

10. Revising the Drafts

- 10.1 Do not expect to be able to produce a good writing style at your first attempt. Even experienced writers have to revise and re-revise their initial attempts. Good writing is rarely the product of inspiration; more usually it is the product of generations of revision, correction and improvement.
- 10.2 Revision is best done some time after you have finished writing the first draft. Effective revision needs a fresh view on what you wrote first time. It is very easy to overlook errors when proofreading one's own work. In any case, you should be aiming to produce a first draft of the whole thesis before you start any major revisions.
- 10.3 Revision will involve addition, re-arrangement and removal of material. For each section, consider whether you have included sufficient detail and whether you have provided enough examples to illustrate your argument, or whether you have given too much detail and too many examples. Consider whether the material is presented in the right order to build the argument logically.
- 10.4 Revision will also involve improving the way in which the information is communicated. Having revised the content, you can now concentrate on your style of writing. As you revise, consider whether ideas have been expressed clearly, and whether the language used is appropriate. Also, consider whether there are unnecessary words or phrases that can be removed without changing the meaning.
- 10.5 Clear expression, good grammar and correct spelling are very important. These matters are your responsibility only. You should not expect your supervisor to re-write major sections of your thesis. Similarly, you should not expect your typist to correct misspelling. After all, the thesis will be judged as your work, so this should be the case.

11. Checking the Final Draft

- 11.1 The text will require checking for a number of different aspects. You will need to check that the logic of the arguments, the grammar, the spelling and the citation of the references are correct. It is more effective to check different aspects separately, that is to read through to check the logic and grammar, and then to read through again to check the spelling.
- 11.2 Most word processors have a 'spell-check' facility. This operates by automatically comparing each word in your document against an electronic 'dictionary'. You will need to confirm that the word processor is using an Australian English, rather than an English English or American English, 'dictionary'. In addition, the facility may not recognise specialist or technical words. Direct citations should be quoted verbatim in their original spelling; do not correct these. However, a spell checker will not locate incorrect words in sentences if they are correctly spelt as another word (see below).
- 11.3 Most word processors also include a 'grammar-check' facility. Exercise care when using this facility because the suggestions made are often difficult to interpret, or sometimes incorrect. A more useful application of the grammar checker is to identify correctly spelt words that are out of context but were not identified by the 'spell-checker'.

- 11.4 The citation of references must be checked carefully. Errors in the citations of references are the most common form of error in theses, which frustrates readers and examiners who may want to refer to this information themselves. Confirm that each reference cited in the text is given in the reference list, that it is cited in the correct form, and that the names and dates agree. As you read through the thesis, mark each reference in the bibliography as it is cited in the text. You can then check that every reference in the reference list is in fact used in the text. Additional items that are not cited as references should be placed in a separate bibliography. A useful approach is to use a word processor's search facility to find 19 or 000 in the thesis, then mark each reference in the bibliography as it is cited in the text.
- 11.5 If possible, ask someone else to proof-read your final draft. It is possible to become over-familiar with sections of your thesis and miss errors, which, to a new reader, are quite obvious. It is unreasonable to expect your supervisor to check these details.

12. Producing the Manuscript

- 12.1 Unless you have been using a word processor, or you are a reasonably proficient typist, you will require the thesis to be typed for you. When your thesis is ready for typing provide the typist with written instructions about the layout which is required by the University. Confirm that the typist will be able to complete your thesis; changing typists in the middle of typing wastes time and may mean that your thesis will contain different fonts.
- 12.2 If you need to use mathematical formulae, or symbols and characters, which are not available on a word processor or typewriter, leave a space and enter them in Indian ink or use 'rub-down' lettering (eg. Letraset) at a later stage. As long as the symbols are clear and tidy, this is quite acceptable. Alternatively, a mathematical word processor or the LaTeX document preparation system to prepare these symbols.
- 12.3 It is your responsibility to ensure that the layout of your thesis conforms to the University's regulations. Produce, or ask your typist to produce, a few pages of script in final form before proceeding. Check at this stage that the quality of the typeface and printing, and the format are acceptable.

13. Producing the Illustrations

- 13.1 Most theses require some form of illustration. Illustrations might consist of photographs (for example, of equipment or locations of surveys), diagrams (for example, of apparatus or procedures) or representation of data (for example, as graphs, histograms or charts).
- 13.2 Where photographs are needed, each copy of the thesis will require photographs. However, colour photocopies of photographs are usually adequate. Where line diagrams are required, good-quality photocopies of the original are also acceptable.
- 13.3 All figures (illustrations, tables and diagrams) should be numbered so that they can be referred to in the text. It is sensible to number figures sequentially within each chapter of the thesis, rather than sequentially throughout the whole thesis. For example, "Figure 2.3" would be the third figure in the second chapter. This method has the advantage that if figures are added or

removed at a later stage, it is not necessary to re-number all subsequent figures, only those in the same chapter.

- 13.4 Each figure should bear a number, title and legend. The legend should contain sufficient information for the figure to be understood without reference to the main body of the text. For example, it should include a key to any non-standard symbols used. However, keep the legend as concise as possible and do not re-iterate every detail given in the text.

14. Using References, Appendices and Footnotes

References

- 14.1 References serve a number of very important purposes. They allow you to credit the authors who originally made observations or proposed ideas. They indicate the historical order in which discoveries were made. Finally, they allow your reader to check on details, for example, experimental methods or precise quotations, which it is not appropriate for you to include in your thesis, by referring to the original source.
- 14.2 To fulfil these purposes, references are cited in a formal manner. In the main body of text the author(s) and the year of publication are given. References can be used in the active or passive form (see earlier). Avoid using the active form of references too frequently, or your thesis will become a list-like re-iteration of facts or ideas.
- 14.3 If there are many authors of one publication, the names of the third and subsequent authors need not be given in the text. The form to use in this case is "Smith *et al.* (1988) ...".
- 14.4 At the end of your thesis, in the reference list, you should give more details of the sources of information. There are several different formats that are used throughout the literature because each journal has its own regulations. Likewise, the University, and some School's, has its own regulations too.
- 14.5 Journal titles have standardised abbreviations, and you should use either the correct abbreviation or the full title of the journal. There are books in the library which give lists of standard abbreviations for journals. As you undertake your research, store your references on file cards or in a computer-based bibliography in the form which you will finally require. This will enable you to become familiar with the University's guidelines and standard journal abbreviations. Moreover, this will save you rewriting the reference list.
- 14.6 References given in the form above should be arranged in alphabetical order. If the same author has published two or more different articles in the same year, distinguish between them by referring to them, in the text and in the reference list, as "Smith (1988a)", "Smith (1988b)". If the same author has published papers over several years, list these in chronological order.
- 14.7 Some journals use a numbering system for references (for example, *Survey Review*). References are then given in full in a numbered reference list. This has certain advantages for published work (for example, it saves space). However, it is very inconvenient for theses. Insertion or deletion of one reference means that all subsequent references have to be re-numbered, both in the text and in the reference list. Since you may well cite the same reference in different places in your thesis, this re-numbering can become a major task.

Appendices

- 14.8 Appendices are used to provide details which are important but which, if included in the main body of text, would disturb the flow of ideas. For theses which report the results of experimental work, appendices might be used for details of experimental techniques, composition of complex solutions, details of procedures, lists of abbreviations, tables of data, or print-outs of computer source code.
- 14.9 In some cases, material that is suitable for appendices might be more effectively summarised then placed as tables or charts within the main body of the thesis. Such tables should be treated as a figure; that is they should be numbered and clearly titled.

Footnotes

- 14.10 Footnotes are used frequently in theses in humanities-based disciplines, for example, where long citations are needed. In theses for science- and engineering-based disciplines, footnotes are best avoided. If the detail is essential to the argument, include it in the text. If it is not essential, leave it out.
