

Writing a coherent integrative chapter is crucial for a successful PhD by publication



*In a recent Impact Blog post, Jørgen Carling outlined the reasons why he feels the [PhD by publication](#) is a good model for doctoral candidates to choose. Here, prompted by the relative scarcity of supporting resources available, **Pirjo Nikander** and **Nelli Piattoeva** offer advice for any prospective PhD-by-publication candidates looking to plan the writing of their integrative chapter. Crucial to convincing the readership (and examiners) of the scientific value of the PhD, the integrative chapter is more than a simple “mopping-up” activity at the end of a research project, and deserves careful attention and planning.*

A PhD by publication usually consists of a set of papers published in peer-reviewed academic journals or edited volumes, plus an integrative chapter. This format of [PhD completion is gaining prominence across the social sciences](#), and doctoral candidates can find ample advice on [academic writing](#) for completing and publishing individual journal articles and chapters. Paradoxically, however, there is a scarcity of resources, advice, or guidelines on how to write the integrative chapter, or synthesis, as it is sometimes called. This is unfortunate as the integrative chapter plays a crucial role in convincing the readership (and examiners) of the scientific value of the PhD, in demonstrating that an original and coherent argument is being developed, and that a solid contribution to existing literature on a timely research question is made.

The individual publications are often, at least to some degree, the result of collaborative or joint work. This means that the integrative chapter becomes *the* space in which the candidate should expand on, elaborate, and convincingly bring together key findings and contributions while also demonstrating his/her individual scientific expertise.



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Herein lies the key challenge for the PhD candidate. Somewhat experienced in article writing as a genre, the candidate now needs to adapt to a new genre required by the integrative chapter, and to embark on writing it independently. We argue that this stage of the PhD by publication is not a simple or mechanical “mopping-up” activity at the end of a research project.

Rather, it deserves careful attention and planning on behalf of the doctoral candidate and the supervisors due to its key role in building the whole of the thesis, and its significance in the examination process and viva voce. It also requires zooming out of the individual publications to the broader significance and evaluation of findings by using the published articles as data and material.

In our view, the integrative chapter or synthesis calls for a different way of writing that treats the earlier completed publications as data to work with. This means seeing the integrative chapter as a meta-text, and echoes the method of “writing as a way of ‘knowing’” that helps discover new aspects of the topic and the author’s relationship to it (see Richardson’s “Writing: A Method of Inquiry”, in the [Handbook of Qualitative Research](#), 2000).

Any successful completion of a PhD by publication requires thorough planning. How can I divide my research agenda, research question, and sub-questions into concrete milestones and tackle them in separate publications with independent profiles? What dataset(s) should I use to produce solid evidence in each publication? Writing a thesis outline for the entire work, the integrative chapter included, is therefore crucial.

The thesis outline can help to frame one’s field, research questions, and the separate contribution and role of each publication and the synthesis in a way that takes into account the wider international community and literature from day one.

Perhaps a “things to consider” list may best help any prospective PhD-by-publication candidate to plan the writing of the integrative chapter or synthesis? Here’s what we think such a list might look like:

1. Study the institution- and field-specific rules and expectations concerning the PhD by publication, and what, if anything, they say about the genre of the integrative chapter.
2. Go through completed, good-quality doctoral theses in order to see how others have approached the integrative chapter. Do not take them as best practice at face value, but rather compare and contrast, as simply copying one style can lead to a vicious circle of bad practice.
3. Talk with your supervisor(s) about the integrative chapter early on in your supervisory relationship. What is their view on the genre, do they have any examples or guidelines you might wish to follow? Supervisors also vary in terms of what kind of support and feedback you can count on at the phase of writing the integrative chapter.
4. Keep the synthesis/integrative chapter “on the back burner” throughout your PhD. While working on the individual articles, take notes on aspects that cannot fit therein and write a draft version of the synthesis as you go on. Your notes may often have to do with your methodological choices or theoretical background that the journal article word limits do not allow for. Keep a research diary to remind you of any choices made along the way.
5. Make sure you have enough time to write the integrative chapter in a way that does not simply cut and paste from the existing publications. Cut and paste is easily interpreted as self-plagiarism, so make sure you can develop and elaborate your message further and beyond the individual publications.
6. It may be useful to treat the integrative chapter as a meta-text or meta-narrative in order to highlight a number of its central tasks. The chapter builds a case or niche for your research, while reiterating and tying together the theoretical and methodological choices made throughout.
7. Make sure to showcase and demonstrate the “[golden thread](#)” that ties the individual papers or articles together, what the logic and links between them are, and how together they help you to provide evidence and answer your research questions and objective(s).
8. Revisit the results reported in the individual papers, showing how they shed light on the research subject that is somewhat larger and more complex than its distinct parts presented in the papers.
9. Write the integrative chapter in a style that induces potential audiences to read the publications, and guides future readers in how to approach and evaluate the individual papers.
10. Make sure to state the theoretical, practical, and methodological strengths of your work, your reasons behind your methodological choices, and the benefits of the data and evidence you have produced. In doing this, also discuss what is left outside the scope of your analysis and interpretation, and the limitations caused by the choices made. We call this approach the “spotlight technique”, and it can be used throughout the integrative chapter. What is centre-stage, what is the spotlight on through methodological and data choices? What is left outside the spotlight, in the shadows? What are the questions you do not, and cannot

answer?

In most cases, the integrative chapter is written last and retrospectively. Careful planning, writing draft versions, taking notes, and listening to advice along the way will make for a smoother transition to this writing stage. It might be helpful to imagine the integrative chapter as a textual map that helps walk readers through your PhD research.

Using tables and visualisations to document the research questions, data, and key findings and to explicate your publications' role in addressing, using and discussing these always helps. The chapter should open up the logic and structure of the whole, and explain what to look for, and where.

Ideally, the author of the PhD integrative chapter or synthesis takes a step back from her or his research, adopts a mature, reflective, and evaluative stance, and introduces the work, its findings, merits, and restrictions to the reading academic audience in a way that entices them to continue reading through the publications as well. In the end, writing the integrative chapter can mean learning to master a new genre, appreciating the room for manoeuvre it provides, and enjoying every minute of it.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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