

A Strategic Guide to Writing the PhD kappe

Developed at the PhD programmes in Social Sciences
and Educational Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan University

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Bjerke

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Preface

This guide emerged from a shared concern. In recent years, both the PhD programme in Social Sciences and the PhD programme in Educational Sciences at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) have seen an increase in the number of dissertations receiving a conditional recommendation, commonly referred to as a "yellow light" outcome. This means that the dissertation must be substantially revised and resubmitted for reassessment by the evaluation committee before the candidate is permitted to proceed to the public defence. This trend prompted us to look more closely at what the evaluation committees were actually saying in their reports.

In the autumn of 2025, Steen conducted a systematic analysis of yellow-light committee recommendations from the PhD programme in Social Sciences. Around the same time, Annette and Kristin had independently carried out a similar analysis of committee recommendations from the PhD programme in Educational Sciences. Steen's findings were presented at two seminars that same autumn, one for supervisors and one for PhD candidates at the programme. Annette and Kristin presented their analysis with candidates and supervisors at several seminars and events. These presentations generated considerable discussion about what could be done earlier in the process to help candidates avoid these pitfalls. When comparing notes, we found striking similarities: the same recurring challenges appeared across both programmes. Crucially, these challenges pertained almost exclusively to the "kappe" – the integrative introduction – rather than to the individual articles. It became clear that these patterns warranted a joint response.

This guide is the result of that collaboration. Following the introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on advice for PhD candidates. The writing of this chapter was led by Steen, while Chapter 3, addressing supervisors, was led by Kristin and Annette. However, all three of us have read, discussed, and edited the document as a whole, and the guide reflects our shared perspective. We are grateful to the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education and International Studies at OsloMet for their support in making this work possible. We hope the guide proves useful – both to candidates and supervisors.

Oslo, 15 June 2026

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Abstract

This guide offers strategic advice for PhD candidates and supervisors writing the introductory synthesis – the *kappe* – of an article-based dissertation. It is grounded in a systematic review of 40 doctoral evaluation reports from the PhD programmes in Social Sciences and Educational Sciences at OsloMet, supplemented by insights from the broader research literature on article-based dissertations.

The guide is structured in four chapters. After the introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 focuses on six recurring areas of critique raised by evaluation committees and translates each into concrete best-practice recommendations for candidates. The six themes are: (1) Articulating Research Questions and Aims with Precision; (2) Contextualisation and Positioning Within the Research Field; (3) Developing a Coherent Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarity; (4) Ensuring Methodological Transparency and Rigor; (5) Discussing Findings and Articulating Contributions; and (6) Ensuring Coherence, Structure, and Overall Quality of the *Kappe*. For each theme, the guide describes the most common examiner critiques and offers specific, actionable strategies for addressing them during the writing process.

The third chapter addresses primarily supervisors. It focuses on two core supervisory challenges: helping candidates build a *kappe* that holds together as a coherent, integrated whole, not merely a sum of its parts, and guiding the *kappe* writing process from an early stage through to submission. The guide offers practical strategies for both, including guiding questions that foreground the connections between chapters, tools for "zooming out" while still working on individual articles, and advice on managing feedback and clarifying expectations.

The guide concludes with an annotated list of selected resources for further reading, in chapter 4.

Sammendrag

Denne guiden gir strategiske råd til ph.d.-kandidater og veiledere som skal skrive den innledende kappen til en artikkelbasert doktorgrad. Guiden bygger på en systematisk gjennomgang av 40 evalueringsrapporter fra kommisjoner nedsatt ved ph.d.-programmene i samfunnsvitenskap og utdanningsvitenskap ved OsloMet, supplert med innsikter fra forskningslitteraturen om artikkelbaserte doktorgrader.

Guiden er strukturert i fire kapitler. Etter introduksjonen i kapittel 1, følger kapittel 2 med seks gjennomgående kritikkområder som kommisjoner reiser. Hvert av kritikkområdene omsettes til konkrete anbefalinger for god praksis. De seks kritikkområdene er: (1) å formulere forskningsspørsmål, mål og hensikt med presisjon; (2) å kontekstualisere og posisjonere forskningen innenfor det aktuelle fagfeltet; (3) å utvikle et sammenhengende teoretisk rammeverk med begrepsmessig klarhet; (4) å sikre metodologisk transparens og grundighet; (5) å diskutere funn og artikulere avhandlingens bidrag; og (6) å ivareta sammenheng, struktur og helhetlig kvalitet i kappen. For hvert kritikkområde beskrives de vanligste kritikkpunktene fra kommisjoner, fulgt av spesifikke strategier kandidaten kan bruke gjennom skriveprosessen.

Det tredje kapittelet henvender seg primært til veiledere. Det tar opp to sentrale veiledningsutfordringer: å hjelpe kandidaten med å bygge en kappe som fremstår som et sammenhengende og integrert hele, og ikke bare som summen av enkeltartiklene, og å guide skriveprosessen fra en tidlig fase frem til innlevering. Guiden tilbyr praktiske strategier for begge utfordringene, inkludert veiledende spørsmål som synliggjør sammenhengene mellom kapitlene, verktøy for å «zoome ut» mens kandidaten fortsatt jobber med enkeltartikler, og råd om håndtering av tilbakemeldinger og avklaring av forventninger.

Guiden avsluttes med kapittel 4 som gir en kommentert liste over utvalgte ressurser for videre lesning.

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1 Introduction

The introduction to an article-based PhD dissertation, or the *kappe*, is far more than a simple summary of the articles. It is a distinct and critical piece of scholarship that synthesises, elevates, and contextualises the entire research project. A well-crafted *kappe* transforms a collection of individual articles into a cohesive contribution to knowledge. Conversely, a *kappe* that fails to achieve this synthesis is a target for critique by evaluation committees.

A key challenge for many candidates writing an article-based dissertation, is the transition from writing journal articles for specific disciplinary audiences to writing the *kappe*. This challenge reflects the fact that journal articles and the *kappe* involve fundamentally different rhetorical tasks: journal articles aim to make focused, well-delimited contributions to particular scholarly conversations, whereas the *kappe* serves a broader evaluative purpose. Its central task is to articulate coherence, integration, and an overall doctoral-level contribution across the dissertation as a whole. Writing the *kappe*, therefore, is not simply a matter of producing more or longer text, but of engaging in a qualitatively different form of academic argumentation.

While the article-based dissertation is no longer "new" in a Norwegian context, the article-based dissertation format in general, and the *kappe* genre specifically, is still unsettled internationally. For example, there is no agreed-upon term in English for *kappe*. An overview of the literature about this thesis format found over 20 different names in English (Nygaard & Solli, 2020, p. 6-7). Many of these terms, such as "summary," "synopsis," and "extended introduction," do not really capture that this text is expected to do more than "summarise" or "introduce." Thus, while the *kappe* is itself not a self-evident term, it is the one that has gained traction in a Nordic context. And, as this guide shows, there *are* some common expectations of the *kappe*. The goal of this guide is to describe what some of these expectations are to make the function and purpose of the *kappe* more concrete and actionable for PhD candidates and supervisors.

This guide is structured four chapters. Following the current chapter, chapter 2 is centred on the six most common areas of critique of the *kappe* identified in a review of 40 PhD evaluation reports (25 from the PhD programme in social sciences and 15 from the PhD programme in educational sciences at OsloMet). All these 40 reports, which were written between 2016 and 2025, concluded that the article-based dissertations had to be revised and resubmitted within three months – mainly because of shortcomings with the *kappe*. In fact, the evaluation reports indicated that the overall assessment of article-based PhD dissertations is driven less by the quality and publication status of the individual articles and more by the quality,

coherence, and analytical contribution of the kappe. Although the individual articles are the foundation of the dissertation, they are not always subject to the same type of detailed critique as the kappe always is. This feature underscores the central role of the kappe in the evaluation process.

By looking across reports where examiners articulate how the kappe does not fulfil its purpose, we have tried to synthesise some common areas that examiners point to. We provide examples of typical comments from examiners, but never in the exact wording used in the 40 analysed reports. This is to ensure anonymity. In doing so, we are hoping that PhD candidates and supervisors are left with a more concrete idea of what is expected of the kappe, and how these expectations can be met.

In chapter 3, we primarily address supervisors and offer reflections on the supervision of the PhD kappe. In particular, the chapter discusses the role of the different chapters in the kappe and how they connect to form a coherent whole and presents an argument for starting the work on the kappe early in the PhD process. In addition, this chapter raises questions about the role of supervision in the final stages of the PhD.

We have also included a final chapter with selected resources and further reading that we think might be of particular interest to both kappe writers and supervisors.

The guide's target group is PhD candidates and supervisors at the PhD programmes in social sciences and educational sciences at OsloMet (and, of course, other candidates and supervisors who can relate to the work carried out within these two programmes). It might also be of use for PhD candidates and supervisors in other institutions whose article-based dissertation traditions and guidelines are similar to those at our institution. Its purpose is to support both PhD candidates and supervisors in developing high-quality kappe texts by making explicit common challenges and expectations associated with article-based dissertations. By drawing on insights from evaluation reports, the guide aims to equip candidates and their supervisors with a framework for identifying and addressing potential pitfalls before submission. Ultimately, we hope this guide helps candidates develop coherent, analytically robust, and well-integrated dissertations – and helps supervisors strengthen the practices that make this possible.

2 Advice for PhD candidates

By understanding the common concerns of evaluators, you can strategically strengthen your kappe, ensuring it stands as a robust and defensible capstone to your doctoral work. When looking across the examiner reports from our two PhD programmes, we were struck by the remarkable similarity of examiner concerns. And when turning to the research literature on doctoral examinations, we found that also in other contexts, examiners share many of the same concerns (see e.g. De Vita & Begley, 2024 and Golding et al., 2014). In one way, then, there seems to be a large degree of agreement about the quality criteria and what examiners look for in a doctoral dissertation. However, the criteria are often articulated at a general level, which can make them challenging to operationalise. In addition, the criteria have rarely been discussed in terms of how they apply to article-based dissertations, and to the kappe specifically.

By a systemic reading of 40 reports across our two programmes, we grouped the issues raised in the reports in six themes. This guide explores these themes, each including a list of common areas of critique, with examples. The themes are:

- 1 Articulating Research Questions and Aims with Precision
- 2 Contextualisation and Positioning Within the Research Field
- 3 Developing a Coherent Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarity
- 4 Ensuring Methodological Transparency and Rigor
- 5 Discussing Findings and Articulating Contributions
- 6 Ensuring Coherence, Structure, and Overall Quality of the Kappe

Each theme ends with a list of best practice advice.

2.1 Articulating Research Questions and Aims with Precision

The research questions and aims/objectives are the foundational pillar upon which your entire dissertation rests. Evaluation committees scrutinise this section with exacting detail, as ambiguity or inconsistency here can undermine the coherence and perceived contribution of the entire work. If the reader cannot grasp precisely what you set out to investigate, they cannot evaluate how well you succeeded.

2.1.1 Common Critique: Vague, Inconsistent, or Misaligned Research Questions

Evaluation committees consistently identify issues with the formulation and presentation of research questions. These critiques highlight how even minor inconsistencies can create significant confusion about the dissertation's core purpose. Below follows a list of common areas of critique concerning formulation of research questions and research aims/objectives.

Inconsistent phrasing across chapters

Committees consistently penalise dissertations in which the research question(s) and purpose are formulated differently in various sections of the kappe. This suggests a lack of clarity in the candidate's own mind about the central inquiry.

Example: One evaluation committee noted that the purpose of the study was described in different ways across the dissertation (with clear consequences for how well the research questions and the purpose aligned). Another evaluation committee noted that multiple, slightly different versions of the research question appeared in different chapters of the kappe. This inconsistency made the final answer to the research question unclear.

Mismatch between main research question and empirical work

A critical flaw arises when the stated research questions do not accurately reflect the analysis presented in the articles. The kappe may promise a certain level of analysis that the articles do not deliver.

Example: A committee found it problematic that the main research question suggested a group-level perspective, while the empirical articles analysed individuals without connecting the findings back to the group unit as the core object of study. Another committee highlighted a weak connection between the overall aim of the study and the analyses conducted and called for a clearer overarching argument.

Overly broad or vague objectives

Objectives that are too general, such as "to explore theoretical and methodological approaches," are difficult to evaluate and weaken the focus of the research. They lack a clear, assessable promise to the reader.

Example: An evaluation committee criticised the main objective as being too vague and therefore challenging to evaluate or assess against concrete outcomes.

Unclear focus or scope

A lack of clarity in the research questions can create confusion about the dissertation's core argument and what it is truly investigating.

Example: One report noted that the research questions should be made less complex and reduced in number to more clearly support the overall aim of the dissertation. This comment reflected a concern that some of the questions were not sufficiently connected to the central focus of the dissertation, which could make it harder to present a coherent set of findings. Another report pointed out inconsistencies between the study's purpose, research problem, and the dissertation title, indicating a need for stronger alignment across these elements.

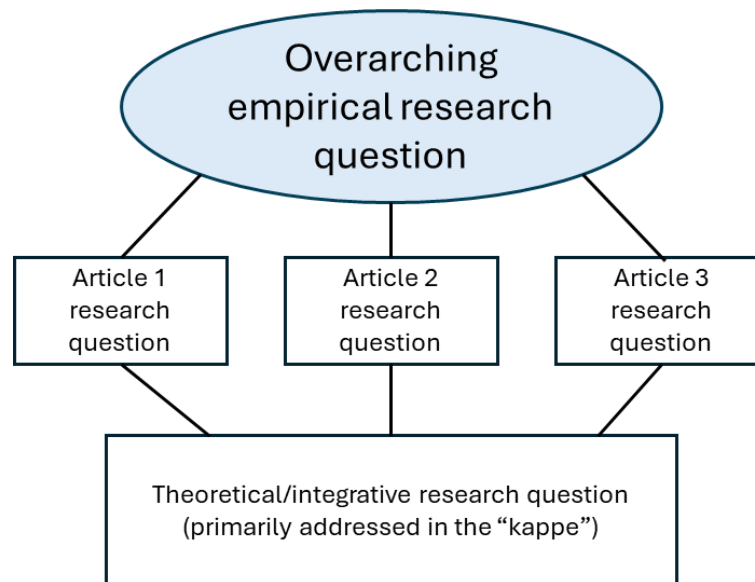
2.1.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Research Questions and Aims/Objectives/Purpose

Establish a single, overarching research question

Write down the final, precise wording for your overarching research question(s) and purpose. One alternative is to have one overarching empirical research question, with sub-research questions that are addressed in the articles, and one more theoretically oriented research question that is addressed in the kappe (see Figure 2.1).

Figur 2.1

Structure of research questions in an article-based dissertation with one overarching empirical research question answered by research questions in the articles and an addition theoretical question addressed primarily in the kappe.



Another alternative is to have one overarching research question and develop two to three sub-questions that can be answered by looking across the articles (see Figure 2.2). The latter option inserts sub-questions as a meso-level between the overarching question and the research questions in the articles. Each article has its own research question, and each article may contribute to answering all sub-research questions; the sub-research questions are therefore answered only through synthesis across articles. This adds a layer of complexity, and you need to keep track of what answers what and how the articles contribute to answering the sub-questions. The advantage of this approach is that the sub-questions can also serve to structure the discussion section in a way that ensures that you discuss across the articles, rather than discussing the articles one at a time.

Figur 2.2

Structure of research questions in an article-based dissertation with meso-level sub-questions addressed across the articles. (Note that not all articles necessarily have to address all the sub-research questions equally.)



There are of course many other ways to think about the relationship between the overarching research question and sub-questions. But the key here is to think carefully about how the research question(s) you ask in the kappe can help you synthesise across the articles. What can the articles, when taken together, help us understand or discuss?

Regardless of the model you choose, it is imperative that you use the exact formulations consistently throughout the kappe in the abstract, introduction, methods chapter, discussion, and conclusion. This simple act of discipline prevents the confusion highlighted by evaluators.

Conduct a consistency check

Create a simple two-column table to ensure that your research questions, aims/objectives, and empirical work are aligned. Here is an example:

Research question(s) and Aim(s)/Objective(s)	Answered by Findings in
Research question 1: How does X influence Y?	Article 1 (Findings 2.1, 2.3); Article 2 (Finding 4.2)
Objective A: To compare S in contexts 1 and 2.	Article 1 (entirety); Article 3 (Table 5)

This audit is a powerful tool because it forces you to move from abstract claims of alignment to a concrete, verifiable mapping of findings. It makes it impossible to hide gaps or mismatches from yourself, your supervisors, or your evaluation committee. This mapping can also be illustrated in a table or a model that you may choose to include in your kappe (but it can also simply function as a thinking tool for you when you write).

Refine research questions and aims/objectives/purpose for specificity

Replace vague verbs like "explore" or "investigate" with more precise, analytical verbs that promise a specific and achievable outcome. Use verbs such as "evaluate," "compare," "analyse the mechanism of," or "determine the relationship between."

With aims that are precise, consistent, and aligned with the empirical work, you establish a clear and solid foundation. The next essential task is to build upon that foundation by situating the project within its broader academic context, thereby demonstrating its necessity and originality.

2.2 Contextualisation and Positioning Within the Research Field

Effectively contextualising your research is a hallmark of mature scholarship. This involves more than a simple summary of previous studies. It is about demonstrating a deep understanding of the scholarly conversation your dissertation is joining. You must clearly show the current state of knowledge, identify a specific knowledge gap, and articulate precisely why it is important to fill that gap, how your work does it and moves the conversation forward.

2.2.1 Common Critique: Insufficient Grounding in the Scholarly Landscape

Committees frequently critique dissertations for failing to adequately position the work within the existing body of research, making it difficult to assess the project's novelty and contribution. Even when the literature review provides a descriptive account of the field, committees often note that it remains unclear what aspects are most relevant to the thesis, and that the review does not sufficiently serve as a rationale for the study conducted. Common areas of critique include:

Failure to identify the research gap

A common and serious flaw is the absence of a clear account of the current state of research. Committees expect a literature review that identifies specific and significant knowledge gaps, and an explicit statement of how the dissertation addresses one of them.

Example: One evaluation report noted that the dissertation lacked a sufficient review of relevant research literature, particularly with respect to identifying the current state of the field, existing research gaps, and the dissertation's positioning in relation to previous research.

Poor anchoring in a knowledge domain

Dissertations that draw from multiple fields without firmly anchoring themselves in a primary one can be seen as unfocused. This makes it difficult for the committee to evaluate the work's contribution to a specific scholarly community.

Example: A committee recommended that the research problem be more clearly situated within a defined academic field, noting that its connection to the main discipline was only implied and should be made explicit.

Superficial or narrow literature review

Literature reviews that are not comprehensive, are limited to a narrow geographical or disciplinary scope without justification or fail to engage critically with the cited studies are frequently criticised.

Example: One evaluation committee found the literature review to be too narrowly delimited because it excluded relevant studies from other fields and other countries without providing a clear rationale. Another committee noted that relevant fields were excluded from the literature review. Yet another pointed out that primary sources should be used.

2.2.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Contextualisation

State your contribution explicitly

Begin your literature review chapter with a direct statement that orients the reader. For example: "This dissertation contributes primarily to the field of [Specific Field] by addressing a gap in our understanding of [Specific Topic], which previous research has overlooked by focusing primarily on [Existing Focus]."

Justify your scope

Clearly define the boundaries of your literature review. State, for instance, that your review focuses on literature published in the last decade, or within specific geographical regions, or from particular theoretical streams. Crucially, you must provide a compelling academic rationale for these choices.

Move from summary to synthesis

Structure the literature review thematically around key debates, concepts, or controversies, not as a chronological list of author summaries. The goal is to synthesise the state of the art, identify areas of consensus and tension, and show how your own work intervenes in and contributes to these ongoing conversations.

What if one of your articles is a stand-alone literature review? In most cases, you will still have to write an additional literature review for the kappe. Usually, the overall research question discussed in your thesis will be broader and relate to a wider set of studies or strands of literature than a literature review published as an article. As always, keep in mind that your kappe is written with a different purpose and for a different audience than your articles.

Having firmly positioned the research in its field, you must then articulate the specific theories that will be used for the analysis, which is the focus of our next section.

2.3 Developing a Coherent Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarity

The theoretical framework should not be a disconnected chapter of definitions. It must function as the analytical engine that drives the entire dissertation, informing the research questions, shaping the methodology, and guiding the interpretation of

findings. Committees look for conceptual clarity and a demonstrated ability to apply theory in a sophisticated and integrated manner.

2.3.1 Common Critique: Underdeveloped or Disjointed Theoretical Application

Weaknesses in the theoretical framework can severely undermine the analytical depth and persuasive power of a dissertation. Committees commonly critique the kappe for:

Superficial treatment of theory

A common pitfall is presenting theoretical concepts without depth, nuance, or a critical discussion of their strengths and limitations for the topic at hand.

Example: One committee described the theory section as relatively superficial, noting it was more focused on abstract theorising of complex interventions than on using theory to understand the specific conditions being studied. Another committee noted that the presentation of different theoretical concepts was too descriptive, and that it was unclear how they contributed to the work that had been done.

Lack of conceptual definition and consistency

Key terms and concepts are the building blocks of your argument. Committees expect them to be clearly defined and used consistently throughout the dissertation.

Example: An evaluation report raised concerns about conceptual vagueness and the need for key concepts to be consistently and clearly defined. Another report criticised the interchangeable use of similar concepts without nuance. In the same vein, a committee pointed out that central concepts used in the dissertation title and research question were not sufficiently discussed.

Poor integration of multiple theories

Using concepts from different theoretical traditions can be powerful, but it requires a clear explanation of how they relate to, complement, or contradict each other. Without this, the framework can feel disjointed. At the same time, the use of multiple

theories or theoretical concepts requires clarification of their relative importance, specifically, which are foregrounded and which play a more background role.

Example: A committee found that multiple concepts were not consistently integrated or explained in relation to each other, requiring a stronger conceptual narrative. Another evaluation questioned the combination of theoretical perspectives from different epistemological positions without a discussion of the potential problems.

Weak link between theory and analysis

The theoretical framework must be actively used in the analysis and discussion chapter(s). It should not be presented in its own chapter and then effectively abandoned.

Example: One evaluation commented that it was unclear if a specific perspective was a theory or a "hallmark", and how different perspectives related to each other was unclear, making it difficult to see how they were applied in the analysis.

2.3.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Theoretical Clarity

Define and defend every key concept

For your own use, create a glossary that defines each core concept and explains its specific meaning and application within the context of your dissertation. Ensure these definitions are explicitly stated in the kappe. Make sure that terms used in your overall research questions are sufficiently defined and explained. Be careful not to use theoretical concepts as synonyms when they are not. While varying word choice and avoiding repetition is usually a good idea, this does not apply to your key concepts. Here your key goal is to be as consistent and stringent as possible.

Justify your theoretical choices

Do not simply present a theory; argue for it. Explicitly state why your chosen theory is the most appropriate analytical tool for answering your research questions, particularly in comparison to other plausible theoretical alternatives.

Map the theoretical connections

If using multiple theories or concepts, include a paragraph or subsection that explains the relationship between them. Are they complementary? Is one subordinate to another? Does their combination create a novel analytical lens that neither could provide alone?

Operationalise the theory

Demonstrate, particularly in the methodology chapter, how your abstract theoretical concepts were translated into concrete, observable, and measurable variables or into specific analytical codes used to interpret your data. This makes the link between theory and analysis explicit.

A robust theoretical framework provides the lens for your analysis. The methodology chapter must then explain the practical steps taken to conduct that analysis, our next topic.

2.4 Ensuring Methodological Transparency and Rigor

The methodology chapter must function as a transparent and defensible account of the research process. It is not merely a list of procedures but an argument for the validity and reliability of your findings. It should provide enough detail for the reader to understand, critique, and, in principle, replicate the choices you made from data collection to analysis.

2.4.1 Common Critique: Lack of Clarity and Justification in Methodological Choices

Committees frequently find methodological sections lacking in the detail and justification needed to fully evaluate the research. Below are common points of critique from evaluation committees:

Insufficient details on analysis

A very common critique is that analysis methods are often named (e.g., "thematic analysis") but not explained in sufficient details. This leaves the reader unable to understand how the findings were actually generated from the data.

Example: One evaluation report noted that the dissertation provided insufficient information about how theoretical constructs had been operationalised in the generation and analysis of the data. Another called for a more detailed account of the thematic analysis process, beyond the use of NVivo software.

Poor justification for methodological choices

It is not enough to state what method you used. You must argue *why* that particular method was the most suitable for addressing your specific research questions and reflect on the implications of this choice.

Example: A committee called for a stronger justification of methodological choices, asking for a more robust rationale for selecting a specific approach over other alternatives. Another committee missed a description of the connection between the dissertation's positioning within philosophy of science and choice of methodology and method.

Lack of transparency in data collection and sampling

Critiques often focus on unclear descriptions of participant recruitment, sampling strategies, or the context in which data was gathered. Without this information, the scope and limitations of the findings cannot be assessed.

Example: A report noted that it was unclear why specific institutions were selected for the study. Another report pointed out that while interview guides were included in an appendix, the actual search tasks and visual aids were not, making it difficult to fully understand how that part of the study was administered.

Insufficient reflection on researcher's role and bias

Particularly in qualitative research, committees expect a discussion of the researcher's positionality. This involves reflecting on how one's own experiences, assumptions, or relationship to the field might have shaped the research process and interpretation of findings.

Example: One committee noted the need for more transparency regarding the author's own position and experiences from the field and how this shaped the study. Similarly, another committee pointed to a lack of reflection

on how the researcher's own position may have influenced the validity of the study.

2.4.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Methodological Rigor

Provide a step-by-step account of analysis

Describe your analytical process chronologically and in detail. For qualitative analysis, this means explaining the stages of coding (e.g., open, axial), how initial themes were identified, how they were refined and consolidated, and how you ensured consistency.

Explicitly link method to research questions

For each major methodological choice, include a sentence that justifies it in relation to your research questions. For example: "A case study approach was selected because the research question requires an in-depth, contextual understanding of a bounded phenomenon, which this method is uniquely suited to provide."

Document everything

Use a methodological appendix to provide transparency without cluttering the main chapter. Include interview guides, survey instruments, observation protocols, consent forms, and examples from your coding scheme. This demonstrates a high level of rigor.

Write a positionality statement

For qualitative researchers, it is best practice to include a brief, reflective paragraph on your background, your relationship to the topic, and the steps you took to ensure analytical rigor and mitigate potential bias (e.g., peer debriefing, maintaining a reflective journal).

Once the methodology has transparently established how findings were generated, the discussion chapter must then articulate their meaning and significance.

2.5 Discussing Findings and Articulating Contributions

The discussion and conclusion chapters are where the value of the dissertation is ultimately demonstrated. These sections must move beyond a simple summary of results. It is the space for higher-order analysis, where you interpret your findings in light of your theoretical framework, situate them within the existing literature, and articulate the dissertation's specific, original contribution to knowledge.

2.5.1 Common Critique: Underdeveloped Discussion and Vague Contributions

This is a frequent and critical area of concern for evaluation committees. A failure to adequately discuss the findings and state the contribution can leave a dissertation feeling incomplete and underwhelming. Common areas of critique include:

Failure to elevate the discussion

The most common pitfall is a discussion chapter in the kappe that merely repeats or summarises the findings from the individual articles without synthesising them into a new, overarching argument that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Example: One evaluation report argued that the discussion did not sufficiently extend beyond the findings presented in the individual articles and called for a stronger synthesis across the work as a whole. Another report commented that the discussion was not sufficiently anchored in existing literature.

Weak articulation of contribution

A dissertation must, without ambiguity or hesitation, state its precise contribution to theory, method, and/or practice. Vague or absent claims of contribution are a major weakness that committees will not overlook.

Example: One committee called for a more developed conclusion and an articulation of key insights and contributions. Another said that it was unclear what theoretical contribution the dissertation made. Yet another found that the contributions and conclusions were missing altogether.

Vague or undeveloped implications

The "implications" section is often an afterthought, leading to suggestions for practitioners or policymakers that are generic, not directly derived from the research findings, or underdeveloped.

Example: A committee noted that the implications for practitioners were insufficiently developed, particularly given the study's pragmatist orientation.

Insufficient theorising of findings

A strong discussion uses the theoretical framework to interpret and explain the empirical results. A failure to do so misses a key opportunity to make a theoretical contribution.

Example: An evaluation committee, noting the richness of the data and theory, wanted to see further attempts of theorising, suggesting the candidate could have developed a model, framework, or a set of theoretical propositions based on the findings.

2.5.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Discussion and Contribution

Synthesise, don't summarise

Begin the discussion by directly answering your overarching research question(s). Do this by drawing evidence synthetically from across all your articles, rather than summarising each article one by one. Show how the articles, together, provide a comprehensive answer. If you have opted for an approach where you have developed sub-questions across the articles, make sure these questions are answered.

Use your discussion chapter as the organiser for your kappe

The key points in your discussion section should "talk back" to your literature chapter, your theory chapter and your findings chapter. Once you have worked out what your key points are, revisit your previous chapters to ensure that they frame these points well.

Frame the contribution explicitly

Do not make the committee guess your contribution. Include a subsection titled "Contribution of the Dissertation" or similar and use separate, clear paragraphs to state your study's theoretical contribution, its (if relevant) methodological contribution, and its practical or policy contributions. It can be a good idea to clearly categorise (e.g. empirical contributions, methodological contributions, theoretical contributions and the like) or list your contributions (first, this thesis.....second, it....., and finally it....).

Derive concrete and justified implications

For every recommendation you make for practice or policy, ensure it is directly and logically linked back to a specific finding from your research. Avoid generic statements and offer actionable insights grounded in your findings.

Return to the theory

Revisit the theoretical framework you established earlier. Discuss how your findings support, extend, challenge, or refine that theory. This is the hallmark of a strong theoretical contribution and demonstrates a mature engagement with the scholarly literature.

With the dissertation's contribution clearly articulated, the final task is to ensure all these strong individual components are woven together into a single, coherent document.

2.6 Ensuring Coherence, Structure, and Overall Quality of the Kappe

The kappe serves as the intellectual glue of the dissertation. Its quality is judged not only on the strength of its individual chapters but also on its logical flow, the seamless integration of its parts, and its ability to stand as a coherent and convincing scholarly argument in its own right. Structural flaws and a lack of cohesion can detract from even the most brilliant research.

2.6.1 Common Critique: Structural Flaws and Lack of Cohesion

Committees are sensitive to issues that disrupt the narrative flow and clarity of the kappe, as these signal a lack of care in the final presentation. Below follows a list of common areas of critique concerning the kappe's cohesiveness.

Lack of a clear "red thread"

This common critique refers to a kappe that feels like a collection of disconnected chapters rather than a single, unified argument that develops logically from introduction to conclusion.

Example: One committee recommended a clearer articulation of how the four articles contributed to the overarching research questions in order to strengthen the coherence of the dissertation.

Repetition and inconsistent terminology

Unnecessary repetition and the inconsistent use of key terms throughout the manuscript are common signs of a dissertation that has not been thoroughly edited as a single entity. These issues detract from readability and clarity.

Example: A report noted that the kappe contained unnecessary repetition, introduced terminology without sufficient clarification, and used inconsistent phrasing.

Poor integration of the articles and data

The individual articles and the empirical findings they contain must be woven into the main narrative of the kappe. Committees are critical when this integration is weak.

Example: One committee found it difficult to assess the dissertation's consistency and argument because quotes and references to the primary interview data were scattered throughout the introduction, theory, and earlier research sections, but were not systematically integrated into the discussion to build a cohesive argument. Another report noted that the insights from one article were not discussed at the same level as the others, disrupting the synthesis.

Formal and technical errors

Spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, inconsistent referencing, and formatting issues signal a lack of professionalism and can frustrate evaluators. Committees consistently point out the need for careful proofreading and language polishing.

Example: Several evaluation reports explicitly called for correcting writing errors, fixing reference mistakes, and undergoing a final proof reading.

2.6.2 Recommendations for Best Practice – Coherence and Structure

Outline the core argument

Write a one-page summary that outlines the logical flow of the paper from the introductory problem statement to the final conclusion. This exercise helps identify any breaks in the "red thread" and ensures each chapter logically builds on the previous one.

Be transparent

Look for explicit explanation/reflection on the choices you have made. Show that you are aware of the choices you have made and why.

Use signposting and transitions

Use clear transitional sentences and paragraphs at the beginning and end of each section to guide the reader smoothly through your argument. Explicitly state how the upcoming section connects to what has just been discussed.

Conduct a "search and replace" for key terms

Perform a final editing pass where you search for all your key concepts. Check that each one is defined clearly upon its first use and that the terminology is applied consistently throughout the entire document. Do similar searches for your aim/objective/purpose and/or problem statement and/or research question(s).

Professional proofreading

Engage a professional proofreader or, at a minimum, have multiple trusted colleagues read the final draft specifically to catch errors in language, grammar,

formatting, and referencing. A clean, error-free manuscript makes a profoundly better impression.

Carefully check references

Make sure all cited references are listed in the Bibliography, that references are formatted consistently with the same reference style, and that all references are complete and updated.

2.7 Final Comment

Addressing common points of critique discussed in this guide proactively during the writing process can significantly enhance the quality, clarity, and defensibility of a PhD dissertation. The kappe is more than a formality. It is your opportunity to frame your entire doctoral project and present a mature, cohesive, and impactful scholarly statement. By approaching its creation with the strategic awareness outlined here, you can ensure that your final dissertation fully reflects the years of work and intellectual rigor you have invested in it.

3 Advice for supervisors

Supervising candidates who are writing the kappe involves navigating a set of challenges that differ in important ways from supervision focused primarily on individual articles. As shown in chapter 2, examiner reports frequently point not to the absence of required chapters or formal elements, but to difficulties related to coherence, integration, and the articulation of an overall doctoral-level contribution.

This chapter is therefore organised around two intersecting areas for supporting candidates in the final stages of an article-based doctorate. First, it addresses how supervisors can help candidates build a coherent kappe in which its chapters and arguments are meaningfully connected. Second, it considers how supervisors can support the kappe writing process, as candidates sometimes struggle with motivation and stress at this stage of the PhD.

We identify some common challenges and suggest a few practical strategies. However, more than providing a check list or a template, we hope these suggestions can serve as a starting point for further discussion and idea-sharing among supervisors.

3.1 Helping Candidates Build a Coherent Kappe

While the PhD programmes in social sciences and educational sciences both provide templates that outline the expected structure of the kappe (typically including an introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, summary of articles, and discussion), these structural elements are, in themselves, relatively uncontroversial. What appears to be more critical than the presence of individual chapters is the extent to which they are meaningfully connected. As shown in chapter 2 of this guide, evaluation reports frequently point to recurring shortcomings within and between these sections. The six areas identified in chapter 2 of this guide are therefore also likely to be useful for most supervisors to identify key areas for supervision.

A strong kappe, then, is not simply a collection of separate chapters, but a coherent whole in which the different parts are clearly aligned and mutually reinforcing. Such alignment requires that the research problem, theoretical framework, methodological choices, analyses, and overall argument are consistently linked throughout the text.

For supervisors, this underscores the importance of encouraging candidates to move beyond treating chapters as discrete units, and instead focus on how each part contributes to, and supports, the overarching argument of the dissertation. Helping

candidates make these connections explicit is central to ensuring coherence and strengthening the kappe as an integrated scholarly contribution.

3.1.1 Practical Strategies for Supporting Coherence in the Kappe

Pose guiding questions that focus on connections in the kappe

The kappe should be written in a way that leaves none of the following questions unanswered for the evaluation committee.

- **Research problem.** What is the central, overarching question, and how does it shape the selection of theory, data, methods, and sub-questions?
- **Purpose.** What gap or need does the study as a whole address, why is it important to fill this gap, and how does this justify the research problem?
- **Empirical basis.** What material (data, phenomena, cases) is being examined, and how is it relevant to the research problem?
- **Theory and methods.** Which theories, concepts, and methods are used, and how do they enable the analysis of the research problem?
- **Research design.** How is the study structured, and how do the different parts of the thesis work together to support the overall argument? (Note these questions are inspired by the approach in Rienecker et al, 2013).

Encourage candidates to illustrate and explain how the articles contribute to answering the overall research question

What points can be drawn from each article to answer the overall question? Empirically? Theoretically? Methodologically? Ask the candidate to show this in a table or an illustration. This can help the candidate see what they need to emphasise from each article to demonstrate its place in the PhD project as a whole.

Encourage candidates to think of the Discussion chapter as the organiser

The discussion chapter is the part of the kappe that should most explicitly synthesise the overall project across the articles. Starting to think about what the key points are early on in the kappe writing process, can help the candidates make choices about other chapters as well. "If these are the main points I want to highlight in the

discussion chapter, what needs to be included in the literature chapter? Or what does the theory chapter need to do to frame these points?" While the discussion chapter is often written towards the end of kappe writing process, encouraging candidates to start the conceptual work of this chapter early and then using it as a structuring device can be useful.

Work with concept maps that may help provide a clear overarching idea for the dissertation as a whole.

Most article-based dissertations include articles written for different audiences that might require certain concepts or empirical material to be emphasised. As chapter 2 suggests, a kappe that includes too many concepts and directions may appear fragmented and incoherent. Encourage candidates to consider which concepts are the most important and which appear in a more supporting role. You can ask candidates to draw a conceptual map or hierarchy to visualise which concepts are most important and how they relate to one another.

Ask the candidate to prepare a short presentation

A presentation (e.g. powerpoint) can explain the connections between the research problem, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, and discussion. How and where are these connections made explicit in the kappe?

3.2 Guiding the Kappe Writing Process

Writing the kappe is not just a demanding rhetorical task. Towards the end, some candidates are tired of their project or struggle with motivation. In addition, for many candidates, writing the kappe takes a lot more time than they initially thought, and this can add to feelings of stress. Supervising a candidate who struggles not only with the content of the kappe, but with the writing process itself can be demanding. Below, we have collected a few ideas for ways that supervisors can work with the writing process.

3.2.1 Practical Strategies for Guiding the Kappe Writing Process

Discuss expectations for the kappe genre

Discuss the purpose and the rhetorical task of the kappe. Help candidates understand the kappe as a substantial writing task, not a technical add-on, or simply

"more" writing. Help them understand what examiners will look for in the kappe that the articles on their own do not accomplish. For example, use the examiners' comments in this guide as a starting point for discussion.

Early on, discuss guidelines for the kappe, ask the candidate to find and analyse some example kappes, preferably kappes that in some ways are similar to the candidate's project, in terms of approach, methods, or research field. Ask candidates to look for ways these examples synthesise across the articles and present an overall coherent argument. Identifying some examples, can make the kappe writing process appear more concrete and actionable.

Tasks that help the candidates "zoom out" while they are working on the articles

Often candidates are told that they should start writing the kappe early. But what does "starting early" mean in practice? If the job of the kappe is to "put the pieces together" as it were, doesn't that mean that candidates need to wait until all the pieces (i.e. the articles) are done? Ideally, yes. However, in many cases, not all articles are published before thesis submission, so most kappes are written partly in parallel with revisions or final stages of article-writing. While the bulk of the kappe writing should probably be done after the articles are more or less in place, there are concrete tasks that can help candidates with the conceptual work of the kappe while they are working on the articles.

First, encourage candidates to have a kappe document where they collect texts, ideas, thoughts that do not fit in the articles, but might be helpful as they start kappe writing. Often this initial kappe document is messy and contains many things that do not end up in the final version. Yet, such a document can help candidates keep track of decisions made along the way, providing a record of the process that serves as a useful starting point when writing the kappe.

Another practical way "to start early" is to ask candidates to have a document with a working title and a draft table of content of the kappe. The title and the table of content offer candidates a way to "zoom out" even when they are working with the details of the articles. They can serve as heuristic tools to keep an eye on the big picture while working with the details/pieces that are still in motion. In addition, this can allow the candidate to work at a conceptual level before investing time in drafting full chapters prematurely.

Clarify expectations about supervision at this stage

Many supervisors and candidates have meta-conversations about expectations for the working relationship between supervisors and the candidate at the start of the

PhD. We suggest that you revisit such conversations as the candidate starts getting close to the end of the PhD as well. What type of involvement can the candidate expect from you at this stage? How will you work with the kappe? What kind of feedback at what time are you able to offer? What is the role and responsibilities of any potentially co-supervisors or other sources of support at this stage?

A concrete tool is to make a planning document/timeline where you plan backwards. Set a date for submission (that still leaves a bit of leeway for delays), and plot in milestones, for example, noting any periods that you or the candidate are unavailable, etc.

Support candidates in managing and prioritising feedback

As submission approaches, candidates often receive input from multiple sources. In addition to supervisors and co-supervisors, the candidate might receive feedback from peers, participants in 80 % or final seminars, and the like. At this stage, feedback might be extensive, partly contradictory, and emotionally demanding. Supervisors can play an important role not by "fixing" the text, but by helping candidates interpret and prioritise what to act on and what to set aside.

One concrete strategy is to reserve a supervision session dedicated to discussing feedback. For example, you can ask the candidate to prepare a brief overview of received comments and suggestions and then discuss together (a) which changes are necessary (b) which would be desirable but not essential, and (c) which can be postponed or rejected. This approach can help the candidate maintain ownership of the dissertation and may also make the final stage feel less overwhelming. Discuss how (and who) will determine when the kappe is ready for submission

Sometimes candidates and supervisors have different perceptions of when the kappe is done. Sometimes, supervisors think it is ready before the candidate, and sometimes it is the other way around. Discuss how and who will determine when the kappe is ready. Open discussions are usually helpful even when opinions differ.

4 Selected Resources and Further Reading

Below, we include some resources and suggestions for those who would like to read further into the literature on article-based dissertations, doctoral examination, and supervision of article-based dissertations. A large research literature as well as many practical resources exist, and we have selected just a few that we find particularly useful. We have grouped and annotated the texts, so you have an idea of what each resource might help you with. Note that complete citation for the resources are included in the list of references.

4.1 Resources for PhD Candidates: Writing an Article-based Dissertation

Eriksen, Marianne Hem (2025). Ph.d.- håndboken - en dønn ærlig og stort sett praktisk støttespiller for deg som skriver doktorgrad.

- particularly useful for PhD candidates writing an article-based dissertation in a Norwegian (or broader Scandinavian) context, as it provides concrete guidance on genre expectations, terminology (e.g. *kappe/synopsis*), and structural variations specific to this tradition, while also highlighting the wide diversity of institutional practices and the importance of developing coherence across articles.

Merga, M. K. (2025). PhD thesis by publication in social science research: A practical guide.

- offers practical, step-by-step guidance on developing both the individual articles and the integrative synthesis (*kappe*), while situating these within the broader trajectory of doctoral research and publication. Note that it reflects an Australian context in which a "sandwich" model (with articles embedded between framing chapters) is more common than the typical two-part structure format (*kappe* + articles) that is typical in a Norwegian/Scandinavian context.

Nygaard, L. P., & Solli, K. (2020). Strategies for writing a thesis by publication in the social sciences and humanities.

- conceptualises the *kappe* as a text with a distinct rhetorical purpose and audience from the articles it brings together and emphasises the *kappe* as the

key site for demonstrating "doctorateness." It further supports this aim by outlining different ways of structuring the kappe and highlighting key aspects of the writing process involved in producing it.

Solli, K., Nygaard, L.P. (2022). Same But Different? Identifying Writing Challenges Specific to the PhD by Publication.

- examines writing challenges associated with this format by analysing 17 first-person accounts from doctoral writers who have completed article-based dissertations. It highlights three inherent areas: negotiating authorship and ownership, establishing coherence across stand-alone articles, and addressing multiple audiences and purposes.

Thesis by Publication (<https://thesisbypublication.com>)

- provides practical resources for doctoral candidates on key aspects of writing an article-based dissertation, including deciding whether to use the format, understanding what it entails, structuring the dissertation, and developing and publishing journal articles. It also addresses related challenges such as authorship, engaging with peer review, and linking individual papers into a coherent thesis, and includes examples of completed theses for reference. Note that it reflects an Australian context in which a "sandwich" model (with articles embedded between framing chapters) is more common than the typical two-part structure format (kappe + articles) that is typical in a Norwegian/Scandinavian context.

4.2 Resources for PhD Candidates and Supervisors on Doctoral Examination Processes

These studies are not specifically related to the kappe or article-based dissertations, but give research-based advice on what doctoral examiners look for.

Golding, C., Sharmini, S., & Lazarovitch, A. (2014). What examiners do: What thesis students should know.

- synthesises research on doctoral examination and identifies 11 examination practices and offers insight into how examiners read and judge doctoral dissertations.

Golding, C. (2017). Advice for writing a thesis (based on what examiners do).

- builds on the previous article to offer concrete writing advice.

Mullins, G., & Kiley, M. (2002). "It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize": How experienced examiners assess research theses.

- draws on interviews with experienced PhD examiners to examine how they make judgments about thesis quality, emphasising factors such as coherence, originality, and the overall contribution rather than perfection. It emphasises that examiners take a holistic, pragmatic approach.

4.3 Resources for Supervisors on Supervising Article-based Dissertations

Jägerskog, A. S., & Niemi, K. (2023). Utmaningar och angreppssätt i processen att skriva sammanläggningsavhandling inom samhällsvetenskap och humaniora.

- one of very few resources focused on supervising the kappe specifically. It is helpful because it turns abstract challenges into practical discussion prompts that can structure supervision across the entire PhD trajectory. See particularly the summary table on page 53 for an overview of what type of discussions might be useful at different stages. This article is in Swedish only, but an English-language version of this article is forthcoming.

Mason, S., Frick, L. (2022). Ethical and practical considerations for completing and supervising a prospective PhD by publication.

- shows that supervising an article-based dissertation requires engaging with the politics of scholarly publishing, including authorship norms, peer review practices, and structural inequalities, not just guiding writing and research

Thesis by Publication - Supervisors
(<https://thesisbypublication.com/supervisors>)

- offers a collection of practice-oriented reflections and resources that highlight key supervisory challenges, especially around co-authorship and publication, in article-based dissertations.

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