

A totally comprehensive, all-inclusive, fool-proof thesis writing guide*

(*exceptions may apply)

Last update: February 3, 2020 by NW

One of the most annoying aspects of thesis writing can be to get the Harvard specified formatting right and wrangling with Microsoft word. The goal of this guide, along with the thesis template, is to make things slightly less painful.

At the time of writing, all thesis guidelines from GSAS can be found here:

<https://gsas.harvard.edu/degree-requirements/dissertations/formatting-your-dissertation>

Study this website and triple check your work prior to submitting your thesis to the online system after your defense. If anything is off, the system will either flat out reject your thesis or someone from the thesis office will make you fix things. Save yourself the headache if you can!

Note: make sure to update/delete anything that's highlighted in yellow in the thesis template (except for the table of contents and figure/table lists, which will update once the section headings are updated)

Business end of the thesis

Before you get into your actual project on "page 1" of the thesis, there are a number of things that come first (title page, abstract, table of contents, etc.). These things, annoyingly, have a different pagination, namely lowercase roman numerals, except on page i-ii. It took me forever to get that to work, so do yourself a favor and just use my template for that.

I have left all my section headings for these preliminary pages in place in the template.

The table of content as well as the lists of figures and tables come with an auto-create feature if used properly:

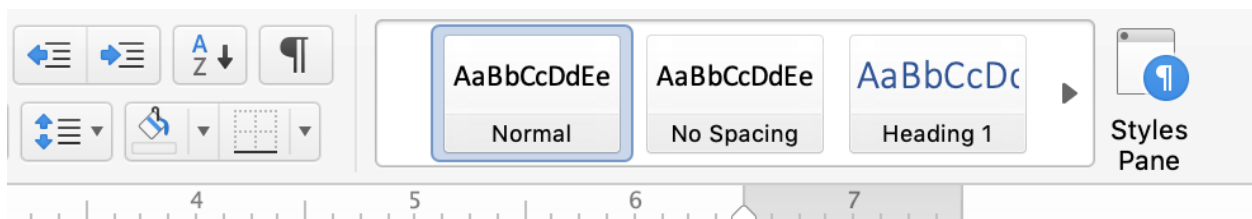
- To get Word to automatically create you a table of contents, use the pre-programmed headings from the Microsoft Word styles pane (see details below). You can then update the table of contents by right clicking and selecting 'Update Field'. And voila, it updates!
- For the lists of tables and figures, use the caption function (see below) to label each table/figure. To then update the lists, again right click and select 'Update Field'.
- Fun fact about your table of contents and lists: If you click on any of the items, Word will take you to that section/figure/table.

Meat of your thesis

Depending on your project(s), this part may look different. Odds are you will need an overarching introduction and discussion. In my thesis, since I only worked on one project, I then had a large results section and a methods section. Your thesis may have multiple chapters, each of which could be a separate results section, a paper you have authored, or something completely different. How you split up your text here should be between you, your PI, and your committee. Regardless of your thesis structure, these guidelines still apply.

Section headings

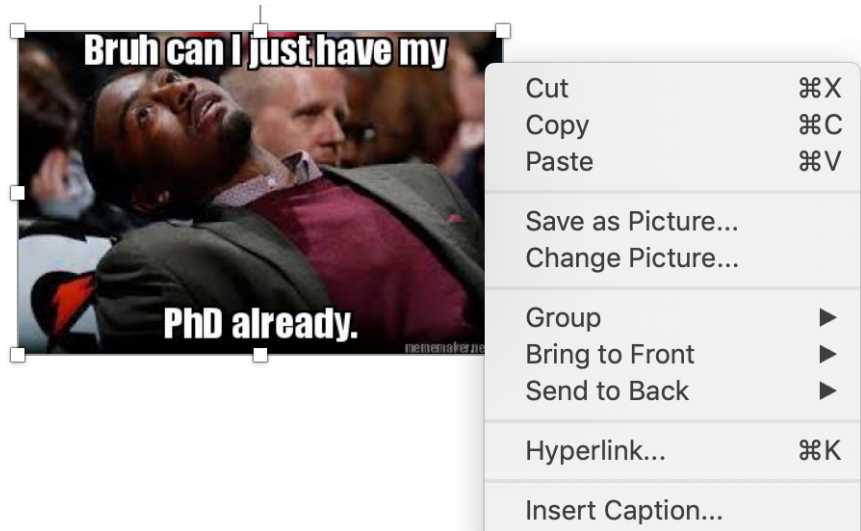
For your section (or chapter) headings, as well as sub-headings you would like to have in your table of contents, use the styles pane. In order of decreasing broadness, use headings 1, 2, 3, etc. For non-heading text, use the 'Normal' style. The built-in Table of Contents for Word recognizes these headings styles and uses those to make the table.



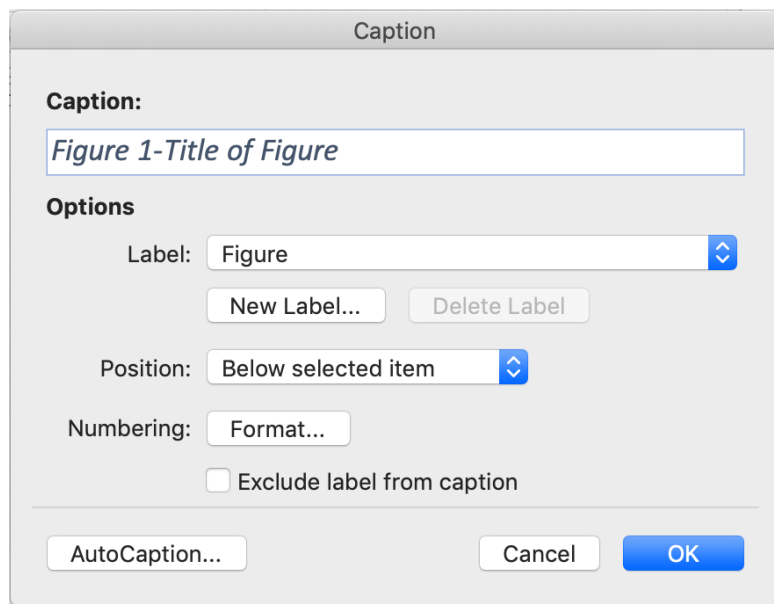
By right clicking on a particular heading, you can modify the pre-set font/size of that heading to whatever tickles your fancy.

Figures/Tables (and Equations)

These two objects follow similar rules, so I've grouped them together here. GSAS requires you to place your figures/tables as close as possible to where you first reference them. To add a caption (which you must have), right click on the image and select 'Insert Caption...'



A window pops open, which will automatically number your figure. As this is the first one, it's been named 'Figure 1-'. I manually typed in 'Title of Figure' after that. Hit 'OK', and you'll get your figure caption. Keep positioning as 'Below selected item' and make sure the label is set to 'Figure'.



After hitting 'OK', you'll end up with a caption textbox under your figure. At this point, I did a few things:

- 1) I selected the figure and the caption textbox, right clicked, group → group. DOING THIS MIGHT BE THE EASIEST WAY TO AVOID FRUSTRATION DOWN THE ROAD. Word has this horrible habit of moving objects around if text is added before and/or after. By grouping the figure and caption, you will at least ensure they will always be together. (Another trick I've heard of, but never used, is putting the figure itself into a textbox, which will prevent unwanted movement)
- 2) Right click the grouped object, Wrap Text → Top and Bottom. This may be a personal preference, but that's how I like to have my figures be in the text.
- 3) Add the actual caption. As shown in the example below, I use the caption style (see section headings above for instructions on style pane) for the title of the figure and normal style for the actual text. Make sure you hit enter after the title line to ensure the title and caption are not linked. As with the table of contents, the List of Figures option goes through and searches for the 'caption' style. Therefore, by only having the title be caption style, only the figure title will show up in your list of figures.

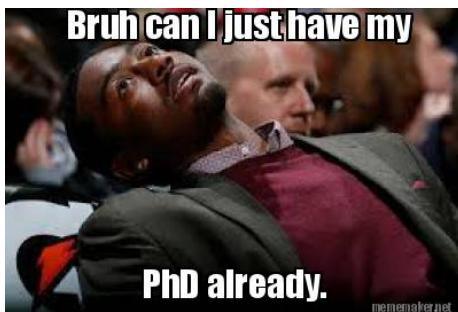


Figure 1- Title of Figure

The figure title has the 'caption' style, while the actual caption has 'normal' style.

Note that in my template thesis, I changed the 'caption' style to be a bit more prominent.

Tables work similarly. For tables, the label should be above (GSAS requirements). When using the caption function on a table, you may need to switch label to 'Table' and positioning to 'Above selected item'. I didn't have to group tables and table captions as Word makes it easier to work with those.

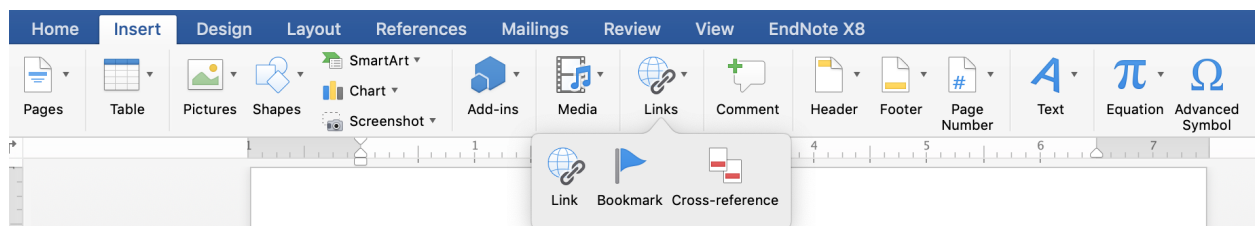
If you have equations, same deal applies.

Linking figures/tables to text

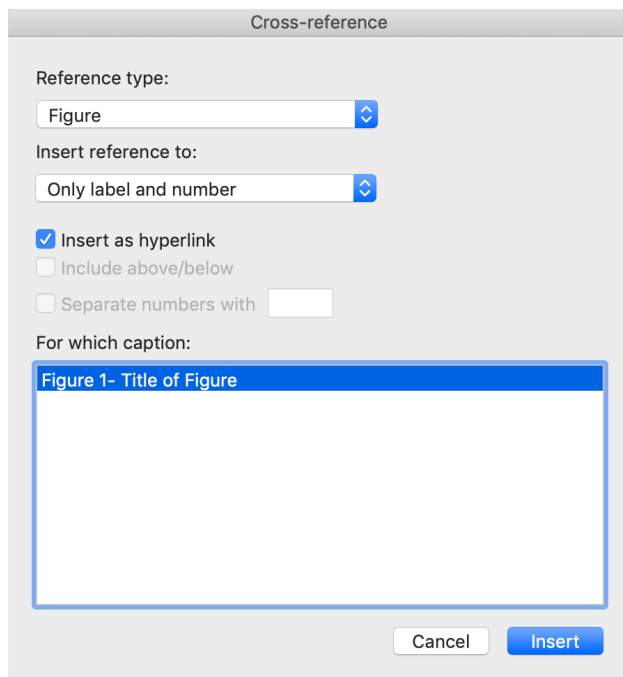
You will undoubtedly be referencing figures/tables in your text. And more likely than not, as you write, you'll be changing the number of a figure or table. One nice feature of the caption command is that if you add a new figure between figures 7 and 8, it will automatically number the new figure as figure 8 and renumber all figures after the new one appropriately. You can also do that for any figure references in the text.

I have referenced my first figure here → (Figure 1). Let's take a look at how to do that.

Place your cursor where you want the reference to be. In the 'Insert' pane, Links → Cross-reference. (Figure 1).



In the window, make sure you have the right 'reference type' selected (in this case 'Figure'). In the 'Insert reference to' box I always chose 'Only label and number' for simplicity. Then finally, pick the figure you'd like to reference (here there's only one, but you'll end up with lots of things in this box).



Once you have your figure cross-referenced, you can do a few things with it:

- Simply copy and paste your reference if you need it again. Word also transfers the formatting.
- You can add 'A', 'B', etc. after if you are only referencing a particular panel.
- If you needed to, you can click on the reference and Word will take you to that figure.

Again, same deal for tables and equations. Just make sure to adjust the 'reference type' as needed.

Now for some quirks.

Quirk 1: While adding a new figure updated the figure numbering, it did not automatically update the cross-references (At least that was the case when I wrote my thesis). BUT, fear not, there is a workaround. Select your entire document (command + A) or just the body of text affected, right click, and click 'Update Field'. (Save your document before you do this, just in case).

Quirk 2: If you remove a figure and caption, Word does not automatically renumber things to fill the gap. Use the same select all and update field trick as in Quirk 1 above.

References note

- Maybe it was just my computer, but at some point, adding references became very slow. As with cross-references, you can copy and paste in-text citations and retain their properties of linking to the bibliography.
- Command + A, right click, update field will also update all of the references in case you move text around or otherwise create gaps in the numbering (if you choose to number your in-text citations).

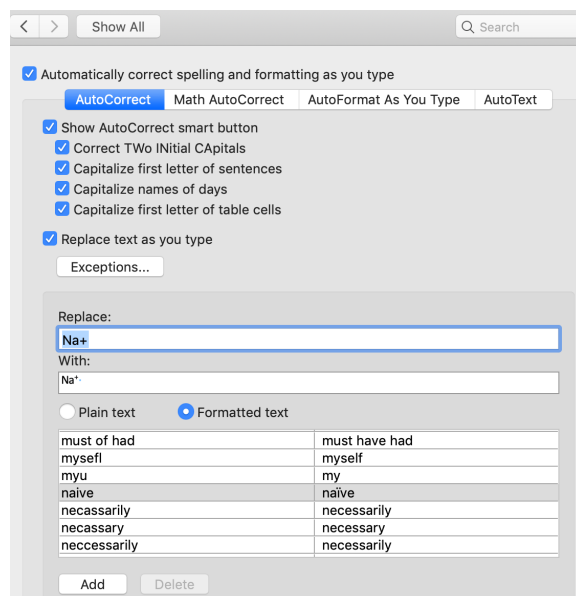
AutoCorrect

You can specify things to autocorrect. For example, by simply typing 'Na+' you can get Word to spit out 'Na⁺' without having to individually superscript all of them. This would also work for subscripts or abbreviations (e.g. txn → transcription).

To set that up this AutoCorrect, type what you want the final, formatted text to look like. For simplicity, add a space after that text. Then highlight it (including the space, otherwise your cursor ends up in the superscript after the autocorrection finished:

Na+

With the text highlighted, go to Word → Preferences... (or hit command + ,) → AutoCorrect.



The dialog box will already have filled in the 'With:' box with the proper formatting. Make sure to check 'Formatted text' option and fill in your 'Replace:' entry, specifying what your input will be (in this case 'Na+'). Then click 'Add' and you're good to go.

Concluding thoughts

- Double and triple check you followed all of the GSAS requirements.
<https://gsas.harvard.edu/degree-requirements/dissertations/formatting-your-dissertation>
- When everything is done (after saving), select your entire document (command + A), right click, and click 'Update Field'. This should fix any inconsistencies that may have come up during editing. I recommend saving before you do this, just in case Word crashes. This is a step that Word tends to do anyway when exporting to a PDF, so you might as well manually do it first and then double check that no formatting was messed up (figures are still in the right order, captions are by figures, no awkward breaks, etc.).
- After exporting to PDF, make sure no formatting was messed up (see point above). It may take a few rounds of back and forth to make sure things are all set.
- Check GSAS requirements one more time (or twice, up to you)

The draft I submitted to my committee already followed all of the GSAS requirements. After you defend, you will receive a 'Dissertation Acceptance Certificate' (aka a DAC). A scanned copy of that, FOLLOWED BY A BLANK PAGE, will need to be added before your thesis before you can upload it into the system.

When uploading your thesis, you have the option of adding an embargo, which will prevent the University from making it public for a year. This will allow you to get publications out that may still be in the pipeline. Not that it matters, cause who reads these things anyway, right?