

A Strategic Guide to Writing the PhD "kappe"



*Developed at the PhD program in Social Sciences,
Oslo Metropolitan University*

January 2026

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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.

This guide is structured around the six most common areas of critique of the "kappe" identified in a review of 25 PhD evaluation reports at the PhD program in social sciences at OsloMet. All these 25 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".

The guide's target group is PhD candidates and supervisors at the PhD program in social sciences. Its purpose is to equip candidates and their supervisors with a framework for identifying and addressing these potential pitfalls before submission.

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. To that end, the guide will explore six core themes, each including a list of common areas of critique, with examples. The themes are:

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

Each theme ends with a list of best practice advice.

Theme 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.

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 RQs and research aims/objectives:

- **Inconsistent phrasing across chapters:** Committees consistently penalise dissertations in which the research question 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 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 RQ 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 family-level perspective, while the empirical articles analysed individuals without connecting the findings back to the family unit as the core object of study.

- **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 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 central research questions can create confusion about the dissertation's core argument and what it is truly investigating.

Example: One committee wrote: "The research questions should be simplified, refined and perhaps reduced in number to ensure they align directly with the dissertation's aims. Currently, some questions lack a strong connection to the main focus of [the dissertation], which creates potential challenges in unifying the findings"

Recommendations for Best Practice – RQs and Aims/Objectives

1. **Establish a single, overarching research question:** Write down the final, precise wording for your overarching research question(s) and purpose. A good suggestion is to have one overarching empirical research question, with sub-RQs that are addressed in the articles, and one more theoretically oriented RQ that is addressed in the "kappe". 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.
2. **Conduct a consistency check:** Create a simple two-column table to ensure your RQs, aims/objectives, and empirical work are aligned.

RQ(s) and Aim(s)/Objective(s)	Answered by Findings in:
<i>RQ1: How does X influence Y?</i>	Article 1 (Findings 2.1, 2.3); Article 2 (Finding 4.2)
<i>Objective A: To compare S in contexts 1 and 2.</i>	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.

3. **Refine RQs and aims/objectives 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 research aims that are precise, consistent, and perfectly 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.

Theme 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.

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. 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: An evaluation stated pointedly: "Here, a review of relevant research literature...is particularly missed; where is the research front, what research gap(s) exist, and how does the dissertation position itself in relation to this?"

- **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 candidate "Anchor the research problem firmly within a specific knowledge domain," noting that its relationship to the primary field was only implicitly suggested and needed to be explicitly addressed.

- **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 found the literature review "unnecessarily strictly demarcated" because it excluded relevant studies from other fields and other countries without providing a clear rationale.

Recommendations for Best Practice – Contextualisation

1. **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]."
2. **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.
3. **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.

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.

Theme 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.

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.

- **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 noted "conceptual vagueness" and the need for key concepts to be "consistently and clearly defined." Another report criticised the interchangeable use of "low income" and "poverty" without nuance. Similarly, a committee pointed out that central concepts like "home" and "normal" 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.

Example: A committee found that multiple concepts were not "consistently integrated or clearly 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.

Recommendations for Best Practice – Theoretical Clarity

1. **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".
2. **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.
3. **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?
4. **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.

Theme 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.

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

Example: One evaluation noted that "information [was] missing on how the candidate has operationalised the various theoretical constructs...when generating and analysing the datasets." Another wanted more detail on how the thematic analysis was conducted beyond the mere mention of using 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.

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.

- **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: An evaluation 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.

Recommendations for Best Practice – Methodological rigor

1. **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.
2. **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."
3. **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.
4. **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.

Theme 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.

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: An evaluation offered a pointed critique: "The discussion is not lifted to a new level beyond the articles, and the author to too small a degree takes a meta-position to her collective work."

- **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 with clear articulation of key insights and contributions." Another noted that it was "unclear what theoretical contribution the dissertation collectively made."

- **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 found that the "implications for practitioners are surprisingly vague, especially given the pragmatist approach behind the research."

- **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, noting the richness of the data and theory, stated, "we would have liked 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.

Recommendations for Best Practice – Discussion and Contribution

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.

Theme 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.

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: An evaluation recommended the candidate clarify and strengthen "the connection between the overarching research questions and the four articles, thereby ensuring a more explicit coherence."

- **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 committee noted that the "kappe" "suffers from some repetition, unclear terminology at first use, and 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 evaluation 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.

Recommendations for Best Practice – Coherence and Structure

1. **Outline the core argument:** Write a one-page summary that outlines the logical flow of the "kappe" 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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.

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.