

The Structure of a Research-Creation Thesis

**A structural guide for graduate students
in art, design, media, music, and performance**

Introduction: Reading for Structure

Research-creation theses are frequently described as hybrids. This designation suggests plurality and convergence but it does not clarify how such projects are actually assembled. Hybridity does not explain how practice and writing are sequenced, how evidence is recognized, or how a committee is meant to read the relation between creative output and a written argument.

For students, this vagueness creates a tangible uncertainty. This hesitation does not stem from the lack of material or ideas but from the lack of structural orientation. Where does artistic output belong? What should enter the written document? How much of the theory is doing productive work? What counts as valid knowledge when research unfolds through making?

This guide approaches research-creation theses as constructed objects. It considers how they are assembled and how they are made coherent toward evaluation. Rather than proposing a template, I attend to recurring structural motifs.

The observations here come from the examination of twenty research-creation theses and dissertations in art, design, media, music, performance, and art education accessed through repositories from Western University, York University, and

Corcordia University. These projects vary widely: some are philosophically dense; some are studio-led; some are community-engaged. Taken together, this range of approaches reveals recurring structural tendencies.

In assessing these projects I focused less on stylistic tone or conceptual focus—which vary greatly between authors—and more on the structural functions of the texts.

Most importantly, a strong research-creation thesis must be able to orient its reader, define the terms of its inquiry, account for its methods, situate its use of theory, and establish how creative work operates as knowledge. A strong thesis stages relations between inquiry, process, and reflection. Its strength lies in how those relations become intelligible.

Orientation and Positioning

Every thesis needs to establish a position or orientation, but in research-creation the reader cannot rely on familiar genre expectations. The reader cannot assume what kind of object they are encountering because the relations between artwork, process, and argument are not conventionally standardized. A project may resemble a philosophical argument, a studio or performative investigation, a design study, or a community collaboration, but the knowledge generated

is often not reducible to any one of these and may operate as several at once. As a result, these projects do not conform to a single structural formula.

In many of the theses I examined, this uncertainty is addressed early on. They do not over-explain their approach but situate the reader from the outset. This often happens through a short framing motion in the opening pages. Sometimes the orientation appears in an introduction or a preface. Sometimes it is articulated in a concise methodological orientation of how the research is carried out.

What matters most is not the format of this positioning but its function. The reader comes to understand what kind of engagement the project invites. The position should establish whether the artwork is the primary research site, a parallel output, a testing ground, or a demonstration. When this relation is left unspecified or implicit, committees may turn to conventional expectations, defaulting to reading the project as a traditional thesis with a creative supplement rather than seeing how knowledge is produced through creative work.

When the role of the creative work is identified, the project becomes easier to process and interpret on its own terms.

Framing the Inquiry

Not all research-creation theses rely on a statement of formal research questions. Some are organized around a cluster of problems, tensions, or fields of concern. Still, the most coherent projects articulate the drive behind their inquiry in ways that activate decisions and limit the scope. Research-creation projects often expand as new materials, references, or directions emerge. Not everything that informs a project needs to appear in the thesis. Delimitation is not a loss of rigour but a way of recognizing what the inquiry can actually sustain. Choosing what to leave out is as much a research decision as choosing what to include. Once a project's scope is determined, the shape of its inquiry becomes easier to discern.

A project concerned with sound, for example, may pursue how listening augments space, testing this through composition and installation while drawing on concepts from sound studies or phenomenology rather than posing a single question. A community-engaged project may allow its inquiry to become defined through collaboration, where the terms of investigation are negotiated in relation to participants and informed by relevant social or pedagogical frameworks. The research unfolds across practice, concepts, and reflection rather than condensed into a single question.

When research is conducted through practice, substantive questions are inseparable from the process of making. They cannot be resolved through literature review alone. A question about sound requires listening and composition. A question about participation requires direct encounters. A question about virtual space requires construction of simulated environments.

Some projects are problem-driven, responding to representational gaps, ethical dilemmas, or disciplinary constraints. These projects need to define their conceptual stakes clearly. The reader should be able to understand what is at issue and why the work matters currently.

A pattern visible in weaker theses is the posing of research questions or drives that emerges in passing but then disappears. The inquiry fails to determine structure and does not guide what is included or emphasized. In well-developed projects, the driving concerns resurface through the organization of chapters, reflections, and framing choices.

A research-creation thesis does not need a multitude of questions. What it needs is inquiries that remain active and that necessitate the work of practice.

Methodology and the Construction of Evidence

Methodology in research-creation does not simply describe the approach or how research is undertaken. It establishes how evidence grounded in inquiry comes into being. It explains how process becomes articulated as new knowledge. The focus here is less on what knowledge is produced than on how inquiry is carried out and integrated in practice.

Across the examined theses, strong methodologies specify what counts as evidence. This may include studio iterations, process logs, rehearsals, workshops, interviews, audience responses, or reflective writing. Some projects make their iterations visible through careful record-keeping. Others document encounters or how materials are altered through the work. Some treat diaries or letters as forms of research documentation in their own right.

Effective research-creation projects have procedural visibility. The reader can trace how decisions were made in order to then be able to see how method, theory, and knowledge intersect. Knowledge appears as something that accumulates through activity rather than as something already determined or articulated through theory alone.

In many research-creation theses, writing is not simply a record of what has been done but a site where the project is rethought. Revision plays an important role as it often reshapes the

inquiry itself by remodelling relations, adjusting claims, or shifting emphasis. In this sense, writing as a process becomes part of the research itself.

Some projects invoke practice-as-research without showing how practice is tracked or interpreted. But when process disappears, claims to knowledge tend to lose their basis.

Methodology in research-creation makes experimentation accountable by allowing a reader to trace how the work was developed, tested, and reflected upon.

The Function of Theory

Theory is present in most research-creation theses, though it is positioned and used differently depending on the project. It can do the work of orienting the project, justifying it, complicating it, or sometimes acting as contextual background. The issue is not the amount of theory, which can vary greatly depending on aims and research questions, but how it functions to support the overall project.

For some projects, theory operates as a lens, as it provides concepts that allow the author to identify what is happening in practice. Phenomenology might be useful for articulating perception. Feminist theory might frame relation and situated knowledge. Media theory might be used to conceptualize mediation or interface. In such cases, theory makes description more precise. A project concerned with

the moving image, for instance, might draw on phenomenology to distinguish duration, attention, and perceptual thresholds in ways that ordinary description or an explanation of practice alone cannot.

In other cases, theory operates as an account of practice. The writing does not simply apply theory to artworks but uses theory to describe and interpret practice itself as a mode of thinking. Practice becomes a site where theory is able to test or reconfigure its concepts. For example, a studio project grounded in process philosophy may use its own iterations to think through ideas of emergence, relation, or indeterminacy.

There is also a mode where theory is neither a lens nor an object of critique but an operative framework. Here theory functions like a set of commitments that determine how practice is undertaken. The project proceeds from within a theoretical orientation, acting out its principles and putting its concepts into practice. A project informed by posthumanism, for example, may treat nonhuman agency as a working assumption, shaping material choices, authorship, and modes of attention from the outset.

Problems arise when theory accumulates without practical consequence. Long theoretical sections that do not shape decisions or interpretations tend to read as distanced from the project. They demonstrate literacy but fail to signal necessity.

Well-integrated theses make it possible to see

precisely what theory is doing and how it is being utilized. The reader is able to trace how concepts inform decisions, expand descriptions, or substantiate claims. Theory becomes part of the project's working apparatus.

Creative Work within the Thesis

A research-creation thesis typically extends beyond the written document. The artwork exceeds what can be written about it. Coherent theses recognize this extension and build their structure to account for documentation, process, and presentation.

This extension becomes visible in concrete structuring choices. Some theses dedicate a chapter to the creative work, treating it as a primary site of inquiry rather than an illustration. Others weave documentation and reflection throughout, allowing the work and the writing to develop in tandem. Some place substantial documentation in appendices while maintaining a clear conceptual link in the main text. No single format is correct because every project demands a different constellation of variables, but in each case the role of the work is articulated and specified rather than assumed.

The reader is often directed toward exhibitions, performances, sound works, digital projects, or installations. The thesis situates the conditions under which the work is encountered, whether

in exhibition, performance, or documentation. It may describe spatial arrangements, durations, or modes of interaction so that the reader understands what kind of engagement the work involves.

As with theory, the concern is not with quantity but with function. Documentation and description situate the work for a reader who may not encounter it directly, establishing what kind of experience the work enables and how that experience relates to the inquiry.

One effective strategy is to allow the writing to move between perspectives. It can speak from within the process of making, from the conditions of presentation, and from the position of a viewer or participant. This oscillation prevents the work from becoming opaque, overdetermined, or redundant.

Problems may arise when the creative work is treated as self-evident. Examiners may not share the creator's familiarity with the work or the logic behind its development. Without this positioning, the relation between the artwork and the claims remains uncertain.

Documentation Practices

Documentation is sometimes treated as secondary, yet it plays a crucial structural role in many research-creation theses. It records evidence of process, iteration, and encounter. It also demonstrates the

accumulation of work over time.

Documentation may include process photographs, diagrams, screenshots, rehearsal notes, scores, consent forms, or instructions for participation. In digital and performance-based work, it often serves as the only stable record of ephemeral events.

Documentation tends to be most effective when it is used selectively. Images and records clarify a process or support a claim, but they also guide how the work is interpreted as research rather than illustration. Their placement formulates how the inquiry becomes intelligible to the reader.

Documentation also reveals how a project unfolds over time. Iterations, adjustments, and experimental diversions are made visible. This temporal dimension strengthens the sense that knowledge emerges gradually and durationally.

Documentation demands balance between representation and analysis. When too much documentation overwhelms interpretation or analytic framing, this can obscure rather than support inquiry.

It functions as more than proof of work. It acquires meaning when it participates in the inquiry itself, supporting how claims, concepts, and observations are developed.

Authorial Positioning

Research-creation often foregrounds the maker in order to specify the position from which the inquiry unfolds. This is not about personal narrative or identity but about defining perspective and establishing the conditions of inquiry.

In culturally grounded or community-based projects, such positioning clarifies how the researcher stands in relation to participants, materials, or histories. It signals responsibility, limitations, and accountability. In studio-led work, it demonstrates how experience informs research-creation without collapsing the project into a personal reflection.

Across the examined theses, authorial stance varies widely. Some adopt a more intimate position. Others are more stylistically restrained. The register of the writing needs to align with the method and the claims of the project. Speculative work may require a different voice than community-engaged practice. A materially-driven inquiry may call for less self-narration than socially-situated research.

If positionality is foregrounded, it is most effective when it does not centre the self and indicates how the author's standpoint shapes perception and inquiry. Although personal narrative can be grounding for the research, it cannot take the place of analysis. Experience becomes research only when it is examined, contextualized, or brought into relation with concepts and questions.

Structure and Sequence

Structure is does not only function as a container for content. The order in which ideas and materials appear influences how relations are drawn between parts and how the inquiry becomes gradually and increasingly more coherent. In research-creation, sequence often carries methodological meaning because it reflects how thinking emerges through making.

Among the theses examined, there were several recurring structural patterns. Some follow a recognizable academic arrangement with contextual framing, method, case studies, and reflection. Others interweave practice and theory so that conceptual discussion and documentation appear through an alternating movement. Some organize chapters around thematic constellations rather than arguments. Some incorporate documentation such as letters, scripts, notebooks, or dialogic writing when these elements are integral to the development of the inquiry.

There is no prescribed structure for a research-creation thesis; the chosen structure reflects the character of the project and the nature of the research questions at hand. In effective structures, the arrangement of sections arises from the inquiry's development rather than from a prefabricated academic format.

Iterative projects often return to the same question under different conditions, allowing variation to accumulate productively. Partici-

patory projects tend to move between interactions and reflection, showing how knowledge emerges through relation. A design-oriented or technical inquiry often moves from prototype to test to revision, allowing conceptual claims to be examined through material decisions.

Complications can arise when structure and method move in different directions. Cyclical inquiries can feel constrained in strictly linear formats. Fragmented projects can become difficult to navigate when the principles linking their parts are not made explicit. The reader should be able to maintain a sense of how different parts relate and inform one another.

In research-creation, structure does tangible conceptual work; it is about the sequencing of conceptual and practical integration. It becomes a record of how thought moves between making and reflection, so that connections emerge as part of the inquiry rather than appended afterward.

Common Pitfalls

Looking across the theses examined, certain structural difficulties recur. These issues rarely stem from lack of ability. More often they arise from a confusion about how research-creation incorporates multiple forms of work. When the relations between different forms of research or work are not made clear, projects tend to lose conceptual force

and coherence of legibility.

Practice or creative output without analysis: Making alone does not constitute research. When reflection and framing are minimal, a thesis can read as a portfolio rather than a presentation of critical inquiry.

- **Theory without adequate integration:** Dense theoretical passages that do not inform decisions, interpretations, or methods can feel detached from the project's movement.
- **Methodological vagueness:** Referencing practice-as-research without showing how practice is documented, tracked, or interpreted weakens the project's claims.
- **Unarticulated fragmentation:** Experimentation in thesis structure or writing form can become difficult to navigate when readers are not shown how disparate parts are connected.
- **Documentation excess:** An abundance of images or records does not in itself strengthen a thesis. Documentation supports inquiry only when it is positioned in relation to it.

Conclusion

Across the twenty theses examined, no single model shows a dominant trend. Some are poetic; some are technical; some are pedagogical; some are philosophical. Their diversity reveals recurring structural functions that allow research-creation to function as inquiry rather than as mere production.

What distinguishes effective theses is not style, scale, or discipline but the structural articulation of relations. Making, reflection, theory, and documentation should be made to inform one another. When these relations remain implicit, the project risks dispersal or misinterpretation.

A research-creation thesis should not be viewed as a display of artistic work but as a demonstration of how practice produces thought. Its task is to show how new knowledge is produced through process, decision, interpretation, and analysis.

A practical insight emerging from these examples is the question of whether a reader is able to trace how the project's parts connect, why they appear where they do, and how they contribute to the inquiry. When those relations are rendered perceptible, experimental work can enter discourse as a generative contribution to knowledge-making investigation.