

DOCTORAL STUDY

Preparing a PhD Research Proposal

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Updated December 2020

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Introduction

Good luck. If you are reading this guide you are considering applying, or may have already applied, to undertake a programme of doctoral research. Embarking on a PhD project is one of the most intellectually exciting and – ultimately – rewarding challenges of academic study at a university. But it can often be an intensely frustrating process, and there will be times when it will require a fierce commitment and a willingness to persevere with your research regardless of the obstacles you encounter along the way. In hindsight, you will most likely view many of these obstacles as (steep) learning curves on your intellectual journey, which have enhanced your capacity for critical thinking and critical writing. Knowing this is scant comfort, however, when you are struggling to construct a coherent and logical structure for your project, to nail down a compelling research question that is carefully situated within existing scholarly literature and yet still has the potential to yield surprising results and original conclusions, or to develop a methodological framework that closely aligns with your research objectives while allowing you to ask (and answer) the big questions that most interest you.

The first place to start in preparing for doctoral study is with your research proposal. The most useful way to think about this is to consider your proposal a ‘blueprint’ for your research project. In short, it should outline *what* you will do in your doctoral research, *why* this is an important subject to study, and *how* you will achieve your research objectives.

In most cases, PhD research proposals go through multiple iterations. The first iteration of your research proposal – the one you submit as part of your application to undertake doctoral study at a university – will already go through several drafts before it is ready to be submitted, a process that should ideally take place in consultation with your prospective supervisor or supervisors. A good PhD research proposal, submitted as part of an application for doctoral study, will usually require several months of careful and critical thinking and planning on your part. It will entail an extensive preliminary survey of relevant scholarly literatures that broadly relate to your area of interest, and close reading of key works that directly relate to your proposed topic. You will already need to begin to think creatively about how to situate your PhD thesis – and the specific central research question you plan to investigate – within this existing scholarship. To make the task even harder, you will most likely need to relearn some of what you think you know about how to conduct a literature review. The standards for a good PhD literature review are much higher and you are expected to assemble relevant works in a more creative and distinctive way than in previous academic study. You will be expected to demonstrate a greater depth of knowledge and a more precise understanding of the core concepts, problems, issues, and debates that you plan to engage with in your thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL INGREDIENTS

Key points to include

1. Set the scene, draw the readers into the subject area.
2. Define your research question.
3. Critically review the literature, asking what has been written that addresses your question, or might help in answering it.
4. Explain your methodology: How will you go about answering your question in a way that provides a plausible answer?
5. Sketch any preliminary hypothesis you might have.
6. Provide a chapter outline of the thesis.
7. Provide a monthly timeline for the research and writing.

Arriving at a research question

1. What is your area of interest?
2. What is the nature and extent of the literature in your area of interest?
3. What questions are authors of existing literature asking of the area of interest?
4. Are they asking all of the interesting questions? If not, what are they missing?
5. Of the questions they are asking, are they reaching compelling answers?
6. Of the new and neglected questions, and the old poorly answered ones, which question or questions most interest you?
7. Does this question have a no-brainer answer?
8. Is this question researchable in the period of a PhD?

Interesting research questions

The most interesting research questions do not – or do not only – identify a gap in the existing literature and aim to fill it ('gap-spotting'), but seek to challenge the conventional wisdom in the existing literature. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2013: 6-7) observe, 'If interesting theories are those that challenge the assumptions of existing literature, *problematization* of the assumptions underlying existing theories appears to be a central ingredient in constructing and formulating research questions.... gap-spotting tends to *under-problematize* the existing literature and, thus, reinforces rather than challenges already influential theories'.

General tips

- The central research question should serve to 'operationalize' the broader research objectives for a particular project.
- The central research question for a PhD thesis must be explicitly and clearly articulated, and should be formulated *as a question*.
- A good research question will be ambitious and will not have an obvious answer, but will not be *too ambitious* to research in the period of a PhD.
- The analytical framework and methodological design for a thesis should be organized around the goal of addressing the central research question.
- Once it has been clearly defined, the research question should help to set the borders for the literature review, and discussion of theoretical perspectives.
- Avoid asking standard 'off-the-shelf' research questions based on already influential theories. As Alvesson and Sandberg suggest (2013: 113), '...a key criterion for *problematization*... is to go beyond the application of a particular approach'.¹

¹ See Jörgen Sandberg and Mats Alvesson (2011) 'Ways of Constructing Research Questions: Gap-Spotting or Problematization?', *Organization* 18(1): 23-44; Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg (2013) *Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research*. London, Sage.

FORMULATING A HYPOTHESIS²

Not all PhD theses explicitly articulate and test a hypothesis or set of hypotheses, nor do they need to. However, doctoral candidates sometimes err by presenting a statement of their hypothesis that is not in fact a hypothesis but is either a normative assertion or is a statement which simply lacks plausibility. If you choose to design your doctoral research around a set of hypotheses, these will often take the form of ‘if x, then y’ causal statements, and must be based upon logical reasoning that is both clearly explained and carefully contextualised within the scope of your doctoral research and existing academic debates related to the topic.

The characteristics of a ‘good’ hypothesis are the following:

1. Hypotheses must be *empirical* statements not normative assertions.
2. *Generality* – being able to explain a general phenomenon.
3. *Plausibility* – there must be some logical reason for thinking that a hypothesis might be confirmed.
4. *Specificity* – the concepts used in a hypothesis must be carefully defined.
5. A hypothesis should be stated in a manner that corresponds to the way in which the research intends to test it (it should be *consistent with the data*).
6. A hypothesis should be *testable* – there must be some evidence that is obtainable and that will indicate whether the hypothesis is correct.

Hypotheses for which either confirming or nonconfirming evidence is impossible to gather are untestable.

² Janet Buttolph Johnson and Richard A. Joslyn (1995) *Political Science Research Methods*, 3rd Edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Chapter 3: ‘The Building Blocks of Social Scientific Research: Hypotheses, Concepts, and Variables’.

STRUCTURING A PHD RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The process of preparing and structuring a PhD research proposal is always intellectually challenging, often frustrating, and usually difficult, but it is also exciting as you embark on the initial stages of a major new scholarly investigation. Preparing a research proposal typically involves a prolonged period of ‘reading around the topic’ to immerse yourself in the relevant academic literature – and, importantly, the main contemporary or historical scholarly debates – that relates to your proposed subject for doctoral research. It also involves extensive research into appropriate research methods that will help you to investigate and answer your central research question, as well as consideration of potential alternative methods and larger methodological, epistemological, and ontological issues that you may need to discuss in your proposal to explain why the methods you are proposing to employ are the most suitable for your line of inquiry. The central research question itself must be articulated explicitly and succinctly in your proposal.

A typical structure for a good PhD research proposal includes the following elements:

Cover page

- Name
- E-mail address
- Student ID (if currently enrolled at Warwick)
- Title of the research project
- Prospective supervisors

Section content

- Abstract (250-300 words)
- Introduction/Central Research Question
- Background/Context for the Research
- Literature Review
- Theoretical Framework
- Research Methodology
- Research Contribution
- Conclusion/Summary
- Appendix 1: Chapter Outline
- Appendix 2: Monthly Timetable for the Project
- Bibliography

THE ROLE OF A PHD SUPERVISOR

The relationship you build with your supervisor(s) is important as a source of support and advice. However, your supervisor is not a teacher in the traditional classroom sense, whereby you can sit back and rely on received wisdom from a lecturer at the front of the room. Rather, it is more helpful to think of your supervisor as a mentor for your early-career development as a scholar, and as a crucial source of reflexive feedback, advice, and guidance from an experienced scholar who has – literally – ‘been there and done that’.

Your supervisor will perform different roles at different stages of your doctoral development, which will often range from providing professional advice on your early research project design through to encouraging you to become active in broader research networks as you develop as a scholar, encouraging you to keep on track with your research schedule in the middle and final stages of the PhD, and providing guidance on the final examination process and the subsequent search for a job.

Remember the following pieces of basic advice about PhD supervision:

- *Supervision styles differ.*
There is no ‘one right way’ to supervise someone’s doctoral research, although there are some standard ‘dos’ and don’ts’, and some supervisors will play a more active and direct role than others.
- *Supervisors are not perfect.*
Supervisors have the benefit of experience and hindsight (often from things they might have done differently if they could redo the PhD themselves), and for this reason you should listen to their advice although you are not necessarily required to follow it.
- *Clarify expectations at the start.*
Discuss your mutual expectations with your supervisor, agree an explicit schedule and key goals, and do your best to meet agreed deadlines and objectives.
- *Take responsibility for your research project.*
A PhD is an *independent* research project. You will receive guidance, advice, training, and skills during the course of your studies to help you achieve the PhD, but responsibility for putting in the effort required to design, implement, and complete a PhD rests with the student.

- *Get involved and be active.*
Take the initiative in scheduling supervisory meetings, seek information and advice beyond your supervisor, and ensure that you are aware of and attend important conferences, workshops, and seminars.

Doctoral writing

This advice applies to all doctoral writing from the initial submission of a PhD research proposal through to draft thesis chapters, conference papers, and journal article manuscripts.

- *Only submit completed drafts.*
A draft need not be the final, Nobel prize-winning version, but half-finished drafts should not be submitted to your supervisors.
- *Submit drafts on time.*
If you agree to submit a draft by a certain date, make sure you do your best to keep to this deadline. Let your supervisors know at the earliest opportunity if you may miss an agreed deadline, explain why, and discuss whether a later deadline is needed. Remember to be realistic when setting deadlines: it is far better to set a later deadline than to gain a reputation for tardiness.
- *Allow sufficient time for a draft to be read.*
If you wish to receive reflective and insightful comments from your supervisors, submit a draft to them at least one week (if not two) before you would like to receive comments. Do not submit a draft the night before a scheduled meeting and expect to receive quality feedback on your work.
- *Aim for professional presentation of your work.*
My own preference is for all draft writing to be submitted in the following format:
 - Include your name and the title of the draft on the first page, as well as the date of submission and the word count.
 - Organize your writing in different sections with sub-headings.
 - Use justified text with an appropriate/consistent font size and line spacing.
 - Include page numbers.
 - Include a full list of references.
- *Use a consistent referencing style*
In-text references are generally preferred (e.g.: Smith, 2000: 256), for simplicity and because they save words. Avoid extensive footnotes/endnotes – when necessary, keep explanatory footnotes succinct and to a minimum.
- *Treat each thesis chapter draft as if it is a journal article submission.*
Include an introduction that: (a) sets out the broader context for the content of the chapter and draws the reader into the topic; and (b) outlines the basic

structure of the chapter and the overall point of the chapter. Also include a succinct summary to conclude the chapter, which emphasizes the key points from the chapter and links these in to succeeding chapters and the overall thesis, and make careful use of sub-headings for sections as signposts for the content that will follow.

- *Fully proof-read, edit, and spell-check your drafts.*
It is embarrassing to read a PhD draft chapter that includes basic spelling errors that can be picked up by any spell-check in MS Word, so be sure to make proper use of the spell-check and grammar-check function. Avoid ambiguous or grammatically incorrect writing by thoroughly proof-reading your drafts before submission.

Further resources

Research design

- Alvesson, Mats and Jorgen Sandberg (2013) *Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research*. London, Sage.
- Beach, Derek and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (2012) *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bradburn, Norman M., Seymour Sudman, and Brian Wasink (2004) *Asking Questions: The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design*, Second Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dunleavy, Patrick (2003) *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Elster, Jon (1989) *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gerring, John (2016) *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goertz, Gary (2020) *Social Science Concepts and Measurement: New and Completely Revised Edition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, Janet Buttolph, H.T. Reynolds, Jason D. Mycoff (2015) *Political Science Research Methods*, Eighth Edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Mosley, Layna (ed) (2013) *Interview Research in Political Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Good writing

- Bleiker, Roland (2020) *Writing Strategies for Social Science: Tips from 30 Years of Practice*. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63eOYfYnUiQ>.
- Broome, André (2020) *Academic Writing: A Basic Survival Guide for Students*. Available online at: https://warwick.ac.uk/andrebroome/academic_writing.pdf.
- Strunk, William and E.B. White (2000) *The Elements of Style*, fourth edition. New York: Longman.
- Thomas, Francis-Noël and Mark Turner (2011) *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*, Second Edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Turabian, Kate L., et al. (2018) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 9th Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.