

**Postgraduate  
Workshop:  
Writing and  
presenting a  
Research  
Proposal  
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## **“Begin with the end in mind” – Steven Covey**

- Nervous?
- Good news – writing a passing dissertation is not about earth-shaking research, perfection or any other unattainable goal.
- It’s about completing a good research-based work, and presenting it in a well-structured and well-written manner in a reasonable amount of time

## **Three predictive factors towards completion or not**

1. Goal: time + focus
2. Process: what to do, how to do it and when to do it
3. Discipline

## **Planning**

- “Winning can be defined as the science of being totally prepared” – George Allen
- “To fail to plan is to plan to fail” – Robert Wubbolding

## **Benefits of planning**

- Break a large and intimidating piece of work down in small, clearly achievable tasks
- Correctly order tasks
- Right amount of effort to each task
- No necessary tasks are forgotten
- Create deadlines

## **What is a Research proposal?**

## Research Proposal

- Document that outlines how you propose to undertake your research project
- Crucial stage or milestone in the research project cycle or process
- Outlines your thinking about your research problem
- What you wish to study and How it should be done

## Research Proposal

- Project planning document
- **The more thought you have put in => The better developed, organised and logical the proposal**
- Forms the working relationship with you and your supervisor
- Undertake the study according to the guidelines in proposal

## **Title of the study**

- Choosing a topic rationally, not emotionally, will greatly increase your chances of finishing and passing your dissertation on time (Hofstee, 2006: 13).

## **A short descriptive title**

- Succinctly define problem to be investigated;
- avoid generalisation, abstraction, vague metaphors - be concrete, specific, exact;
- title: subtitle only where strictly necessary (e.g. case study);
- avoid academic clichés: “analysis of/ study of/ investigation into ...”;
- remember: title must direct potential researcher to your topic.

## **Background to the study**

### Introduction

- Main purpose

To position the study relative to the existing literature available on the topic and to establish its contribution as well as the importance thereof.

- Secondary goals

Serves as a “shop window” to the research and “sells” the study to a potential reader; stimulates attention, interest, desire and action – on the part of the reader to engage with the research topic

## **Research problem statement**

- Within the topic that you have chosen, there has to be a problem that you will investigate – it helps to put the problem statement as a question, and then explore and explain further (Hofstee, 2006: 85).
- Research questions are used when not enough is known about the problem to allow a thesis to be convincingly argued (Hofstee, 2006). See later slides for Research questions.
- Depending on the specific study and/or where required by supervisor you might only need research questions.

### **Background and outline of the research problem:**

- detailed explanation of research problem;
- briefly establish the context of the research;
- pose the research question/ problem/ hypothesis (state what the dissertation will deal with);
- amplify and refine research problem;
- remember: research topic should be formulated as a question, not as a descriptive account;
- postulate your hypotheses.

### **Rationale of the study**

- You need to explain why your research will be worth doing.
- Your literature review will support what you write here, but it is important to describe the rationale/significance of the study already here.
- The theoretical and/or practical significance should be outlined.

## **Research questions**

Key questions to be asked:

- these are the questions essential for consideration of the main topic;
- they should display, in logical order, all the sub-parts of the research topic;
- clarity is all-important: reduce all you want to discover to a series of specific questions;
- questions should be formulated in terms of the research design and analysis of data to be employed;

## **Research questions - continue**

- proposed study should be directed toward suspected alternatives rather than toward a scanning of 'interesting' findings;
- avoid a 'fishing' approach to research (collecting material, applying a number of techniques 'to see what will come out');
- hypothesis form is employed when state of existing knowledge and theory permits formulation of reasonable predictions about the relationship of variables;
- key questions determine and anticipate the theoretical framework.

## **Aim and research objectives of the study**

### **Overall aim**

- Orientates the reader;
- Problems and issues more broadly framed in philosophical/ social terms;
- General questions in a larger context;
- Evidence of larger social/ philosophical significance of project;
- Test of whether proposal has imagination.

## **Research objectives**

- The specific research objectives that will guide the research;
- You need to make it clear what you want to achieve with your study.
- SMART

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- Purpose = to provide a synthesis and critical evaluation of relevant literature that serves as conceptual background to the specific objectives/research questions that guided the study and/or to the specific hypotheses or conceptual model tested in the study.
- “Means to an end” (Perry et al. 2003: 660) in that it provides conceptual support for the specific issues investigated in the study. It should primarily focus on literature that is directly relevant to the study’s specific purpose and objectives.
- Use sub-headings to create a logical structure for the literature review section.
- Avoid summarising sources on a source-by-source basis, i.e. integrate the literature.

## Preliminary literature study, and reasons for choosing the topic

- a sentence that link with the rationale for the research project;
- any research project must show its lineage from background of existing knowledge, previous investigations, contemporary practice;
- your proposed study should be inserted into a line of inquiry and a developing body of knowledge;

### **Preliminary literature study, and reasons for choosing the topic**

- identify significant prior research: explain whether these questions have been asked before, whether related questions have been asked, and what answers have been obtained - i.e. outline, evaluate and synthesise current state of critical/ theoretical debate;
- identify limitations of past/ current research, and explain your point of entry into the debate (identify gaps/ misinterpretation/ errors/ contradictions/particular critical or theoretical problems);

### **Preliminary literature study**

- how you will build on past strengths while overcoming limitations;
- identify potential outcomes of your research and the importance of each;
- spell out key assumptions of research project;
- be explicit about limitations of research project: “This research will not.,.”
- explain why your proposed research is worthwhile and necessary;
- explain what original contribution your research will make to knowledge.

**You can use the funnel method of structuring a literature review**

## Preliminary literature review STRUCTURE

- 2.1 Introduction (Scope and structure)
- 
- 2.2 Overview and ..... (Broad theory base)
- 
- 2.2.1 The global, African and South African.....
- 
- 2.3 Your study..... a logical group of works (books, articles, etc.)
- 

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

- Principal theories upon which the research project will be constructed (these will be the basis for your research design):
- theoretical framework is guide to writing the entire research plan (will determine literature review, selection of sample, methodology, techniques for data analysis);
- clearly outline the theory/ model/ perspective/ conceptual framework(s) within which you will investigate the problem/ test the hypotheses;

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS**

- if the theory is new, clearly explain it in detail, defining relevant terms and providing examples;
- if the theory is established, explain why and how its application to this research problem is appropriate and useful for providing answers;
- select an appropriate research design, e.g. Principal theories upon which the research project will be constructed (these will be the basis for your research design)

## **Conceptual framework for the study**

- Depending on your study and specific relevance of available theories you might want to develop a conceptual framework – consult with your supervisor.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- The purpose of the research methodology is to describe the steps that you will follow in the execution of the study in enough detail to allow others to
  - i) understand exactly will be done and why,
  - ii) evaluate the appropriateness of the methods, and
  - iii) enable others to replicate the research.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- The methodology section will also provide justification for the methodological choices made and demonstrate that these choices aligned with the current “best practice” principles that apply to the specific methodology and methods used.
- The details to be described in this section will depend on the specific research approach (methodology) and methods that you will use. Grewal and Levy (2007) suggest that it is best to err on the side of detail and complete explanations when writing the methods section.

## Research design

- an empirical study using primary data (survey, experiment, case study, programme evaluation, ethnographic study);
- an empirical study using/ analysing existing data:
- text data (discourse analysis, content analysis, textual criticism, historical study) numeric data (secondary data analysis, statistical modeling)
- a non-empirical study: philosophical analysis, conceptual analysis, theory building, literature review (Mouton, 2001)

## Target population

Data collection methods (including selection of cases)

### Research instruments

- identify the techniques, methods, instruments that you will use for measurement;
- Specify which tests/ scales/ questionnaires you will use and which procedures;
- Explain why they are appropriate for your research question;
- Discuss the reliability and validity of specific instruments and procedures and of entire method (will the results be replicable? generalisable?).

### **Analysis of the data**

- Explain how you will analyse your data (what statistical method? is the sample sufficiently large to enable detection of differences?);
- The method of analysis is important: there are generally accepted methods in a field
  - apply known techniques accepted as valid before embarking on untried methods of analysis.

### **Delineations/scope of the study**

- Delineations explain exactly what you will be responsible for by stating very explicitly what falls inside your thesis statement and what outside of it.

### **Ethical considerations**

Each doctoral/masters research proposal should submit (as appendices):

- Consent Forms where applicable
- Where applicable research instruments

- **BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCE LIST**

### Inner focus

- Courage
- Patience
- Resilience

- “Hard times, that’s all we hear ‘round this way....
- Good times ‘Just round the corner’, so they say -  
W.C. Handy