

This is an extract from the Division of EASS Handbook for Research Students

## **Chapter 6**

### **Notes on the research proposal**

#### **Format**

The basic guidelines for the format of a thesis proposal in the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia are as follows:

#### **Word Length**

Masters by Research	3,000 words	maximum
PhD	4,500 words	maximum

#### **Cover sheet specifying**

Student address

I/D number

Award

Provisional thesis title

Supervisors' names

Date of submission.

#### **Chapter headings**

Introduction or topic statement

Contents

Field of thesis

Focus of thesis

Thesis topic

Explication of thesis topic

Review of literature/artefacts

Methodology and methods

Resources (optional)

Ethical issues

Special features

Bibliography

Research program or timetable

Appendices.

**Note: These are guidelines rather than strict requirements. Provided that all the relevant information is included, you are free to vary the format to suit your own preferred style.**

The following pages give more detail on each section of the proposal.

## **Introduction or topic statement**

A statement (300-700) words which 'walks' the reader up to the topic of the thesis. It may include one or more of the following aspects:

- the context of the research
- the significance/importance of the research
- your own interest/involvement in the research issue.

Note: By the time you get around to formulating your thesis topic you should already have read widely in the field or surveyed appropriate artefacts. It is unwise in the extreme to attempt to formulate your topic precisely before having read or looked widely. It is this literature, cultural material or data which demonstrates what has already been done by other scholars, researchers and artists, and the sorts of issues which are identified by other writers (not necessarily always scholars writing in academic texts and journals) and the academic and practitioner community. This literature thus provides the indispensable backdrop to your research.

## **Field of thesis**

A very brief (2-10 words) statement of the broad field of study within which your research is located (e.g. Curriculum Theory, Aboriginal Community History, Forensic Psychology, Contemporary Visual Art Studio Practice).

## **Focus of thesis**

A brief statement (10-50 words) of the focus of the study within the broad field (e.g. Uses of Literature in Urban Aboriginal Communities, Historiography in Architectural History, Digital Painting).

## **Thesis topic**

A succinct (preferably single sentence) statement of the research topic

## **Explication of thesis topic**

A brief (20-200 word) statement which explains/clarifies the thesis topic and its importance/relevance/significance. If artefacts are to be included this statement should be expanded to include a succinct statement of the nature of the artefact/s to be created or produced (e.g. a group of paintings, a documentary film or a resource package), and the relationship between the written and artefact components of the thesis.

## **Review of literature or artefact**

The literature review or/and artefact survey in a research proposal is an overview of the body of work on your topic that identifies some of the key writers and practitioners and their works. It consists of a concise (1000 word) discussion of:

- how the research topic relates to and is informed by current research, knowledge or academic argument in the topic/area chosen
- how the research could make a contribution to knowledge
- how a 'gap' is discerned in the literature, which you intend to fill.

The review consists of a series of concise and dense analyses of the works chosen. In constructing these, remember that you are not presenting a sequence of detailed reviews of particular works. Your intention is to bring the reader - who is presumably interested in the contribution you are making - up to date. This interested reader needs to know the point from which you are starting your research. What is the state of play? What are the important works that have preceded? What is the latest study? Who have been the most recent or important critics in this area?

## Ways of organising your review

Reviews need to have a coherent, logical and meaningful structure. How you organise the literature into useful groupings will depend very largely on your own research topic. Some structures you could consider are:

a chronological sequence if the idea is to trace the history of the development of the issues contained within your topic. This structure, however, is not particularly common.

around a series of themes directly related to your topic and introducing the reader to the various writers (and works) who have contributed to the thematic ideas.

by setting up a polarising of orientations, positions or perspectives on the topic. Note, however, that such polarising will seldom truly reflect the debates in the scholarly community if they are set up as contradictions with no one occupying a position between the extremes.

- by moving from more broad to more narrowly focussed studies of the field according to the methodology used to investigate the topic. Thus you could distinguish, e.g., between more philosophically and more empirically oriented research and show what researchers from these two approaches are saying.

## The literature/artefact review versus the bibliography

You obviously cannot cover all of the published material or artefacts you have consulted. Select the most significant in your field of study, and those relevant to your specific topic of research. The others can be included in the bibliography you write as part of the proposal. Note that the bibliography should not be simply a list of references you have actually cited, but an indication of the width and depth of your reading.

## Notes on artefacts

Students whose theses are to include or refer to artefacts (an option for certain awards) may include a review of artefacts usually, but not always, integrated into their literature review to form a single coherent review. These artefacts may be well known and previously published, or newly found/created. The length of this segment may be adjusted according to the length of other components in the proposal, but should not normally exceed 1000 words.

If including this component in your thesis, you may be opting to conduct research in order to produce some artefact (e.g. an educational film) that you believe is necessary and will make a significant contribution. Thus, as indicated previously, your task is to demonstrate that you are familiar with the artefacts related to your topic and to justify the need to develop some new artefact.

Conversely, your thesis may be totally written, but be concerned with artefacts which have only been recently discovered, or which have been overlooked in the past (as, for example, in the case of cultural artefacts by neglected groups or individuals). In either case your chosen

artefacts might not have been published, or if so, quite inadequately analysed and interpreted.

Artefacts referred to in a review should be listed as per standard museum cataloguing techniques. Where they are already published, the most authoritative source (e.g. a recent catalogue raisonné from a major museum or leading scholar) may be used; similarly, if the objects are unpublished, a similar format would apply, which in summary form would be as follows:

- first line: artist or maker
- second line: title of work in italics (including attributed title in brackets) plus date of work (including estimated date if precise date unknown)
- third line: medium plus dimensions, height before width before depth, in cms
- fourth line: collection or where found
- further lines may be added if applicable, e.g. Inscriptions: details of inscriptions on front of back of work
- provenance: history of ownership of artefact (applicable for example to works of art)
- notes may also be added, generally of a factual (non-interpretative) character.

## **Conducting a literature search and developing a search strategy**

For beginning researchers one of the major problems is being able to identify what literature is available on your topic. Your most valuable resources are your Division's librarians (if you are enrolled as an internal student or an external student living in Adelaide), the Distance Education librarians (if you are enrolled externally and live out of Adelaide), and your supervisor/s. See Contacts Page for details.

### **Information collection**

There are a variety of approaches to locating studies relevant to your topic. None of these should be used as the only source of information. You should use a range of methods to collect a representative unbiased coverage of the field, for example:

- Scan journals in your field to access current thinking
- Use databases which index journals, books, conference papers, and research reports. These databases may be in print, online or CD-ROM format
- Follow up citations from the reference lists and bibliographies in works consulted
- Consult bibliographies prepared by others
- Check relevant web pages to follow through leads for information
- Communicate with professionals and students in your field of research. This could involve university classes, professional meetings and conferences and Internet newsgroups.

### **Record keeping**

Keep annotated records of what you have read or consulted in a computerised file. This is essential when you are referring back to your research. There are sections in a number of books on the research process which describe how to keep such records (see Appendix B).

### **Searching strategies**

To search you need to know:

- some of the key writers and practitioners in the field
- the key journals
- the key concepts in use
- relevant professional associations or government departments (which may provide useful contact personnel or publications)

## Referencing

Many theses in the Arts and Humanities include a bibliography utilising the author/date (Harvard) system of referencing for the research proposal. However, different conventions and standards are used across subject areas. It is essential that you clarify the required disciplinary standard with your supervisor.

## Methodology and methods

**Note: Methodology does not mean method, but the governing philosophy behind the methods employed.**

Research methodology (and action plan) is the heart of your proposal. It makes explicit how you plan to conduct your research (and develop your artefact). Never lose sight of your thesis topic. It is remarkably easy to develop your research and project plans and discover that in the process your topic has undergone a subtle or substantial transformation. When this happens your proposal could

contain inherent within it two or three distinctively different theses. The art is to write up your research plans in such a way that you can convince your readers that if you succeed in doing what you plan to do you will also achieve the purpose implicit or explicit in your research topic. Please, however, do not write this up as if no other researchers had written about the orientation, methodology/ies and techniques you plan to use. You need to reference your discussion.

The foundation of your thesis will be in the research you have conducted. Thus a core part of your proposal needs to describe and justify your methodology (i.e. your general orientation and/or particular methodology within this orientation) and your techniques (i.e your methods for selecting your data sources and for collecting and analysing the data). Ideally your research methodology and techniques should flow naturally and logically from your statement of your topic. That statement, as we have seen, should ideally contain key words or phrases which provide clues about the research methodology.

From the outset bear in mind that behind you lies a rich tradition of research. People have described and argued about research at all levels from the broad 'paradigmatic' orientations to the nitty gritty details of how to construct surveys or conduct interviews. It is expected that researchers at your level are literate not only in the subject matter of the research but also in research methodologies and techniques. Thus, as you discuss your methodology and techniques, make reference to this literature on research. This means making reference to those other researchers whose approaches you are replicating, adopting, adapting, modifying or rejecting.

This section of your proposal should contain reference to both methodology and methods. It might comprise, therefore, a concise discussion of some of the following as may be relevant:

### **Research orientation**

This section encompasses the basic theory/ideology informing your research design. It is particularly useful to indicate and justify the general orientation to or philosophy of research out of which you will be working in your research. Some key words here are empirical, empiricist, quantitative, qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological, ethnographic, critical, feminist, post-structuralist, post-modernist.

It is usually highly undesirable and irritating to read proposals which justify a particular orientation by presenting a brief summary of the so-called 'paradigm wars'. It is far more appropriate to justify your own orientation by showing how it is most suitable for your own topic or by showing how and why it is the prevailing approach taken by other researchers on the topic.

To engage in a robust argument for your particular orientation will be necessary only if you are breaking with tradition in some significant way, synthesising seemingly contradictory orientations or working out of a genuinely novel orientation which has no solid precedence in the research literature.

Remember also to identify (and reference) those other researchers whose writings have helped to characterise it and lend it credibility in the community of researchers.

### **Research methodology**

This section encompasses a statement and justification of your particular methodology or methodologies - such as empirical, interpretive, critical, reflective practice, survey, case study, ethnography, critical policy analysis - and an indication of the key exponents of this approach which you plan to criticise or follow.

Any solid research orientation typically has a number of distinct methodologies within it. If at all possible it is important to identify the particular methodology/ies which you will be using to construct your research. Some key words include experimental, quasi-experimental, ethnographic, case study, policy analysis, educative research, action research, etc. None of these distinctive methodologies

have a single, standard form. There will be a number of reflective variations on the basic theme. It is important that you show that you are aware of these variations and that you justify the particular approach/es which you will be adopting/adapting/modifying.

Again, as you discuss, identify and justify your basic research orientation it is important that you do so with reference to other researchers who have contributed to the development of your selected methodology/ies.

## Research paradigms

Research is a disciplined way of investigating and knowing *about* something, but one in which *how* we know what we claim to know is made as plain as possible. Following careful data-gathering, analysis and writing, the results of most research projects are published, usually in government and institutional reports and academic books and journals. These are then read by other researchers, who reflect upon them, and in turn write their own critical responses, based on their own research. The process of publication and response creates a sort of formal 'conversation' between experts.

A similar if (usually) less formalised process occurs in the work of artists or architects, with influences from or more latterly the 'appropriation' of others' work forming a conversation which can last for centuries and span quite different cultures. The work of artists and architects is shown ('published') in various ways, and does not just reflect evidence of research but embodies it as an immanent quality of the work concerned. The work itself is a research statement, not just the evidence of the 'real' work done prior to the artefacts produced.

'Conversations' of written research were also commonly carried out over many years, and often over great distances. So the scholarly apparatus of references, bibliographies, and the various ways of arguing accepted in each discipline evolved as a way of ensuring that all opinions advanced are 'grounded' in some kind of open, mutually acceptable evidence and method.

The publication of this research also allows for the cumulative advance of knowledge, as the published results of research are read, criticised, refined and incorporated into the collective knowledge available in any particular field. Intellectual honesty, openness, and a willingness to test your interpretation against the expert knowledge of others, are amongst the best features informing this tradition of scholarship and research.

## Information sources

A number of issues may need to be addressed under this heading. These include identifying:

- **the sources of information.** It is particularly important to identify your sources of primary information (documents and/or people).
- **your selection criteria.** If you intend to collect data from a sample of documents and/or people, then it is important that you clarify and justify the criteria in terms of which you will select your sample. It is particularly important that you do this if you intend to claim a valid generalisability of your conclusions.
- **access to information sources.** If your primary data sources are public documents, then little needs to be said. The moment you start dealing with private (or confidential) documents ethical issues are raised about how you will obtain consent to have access to the documents and how you will negotiate confidentiality issues. Where your informants are human subjects you need to show how you will negotiate access to institutions (such as schools or workplaces) and/or individuals.
- **when the data will be collected.** Sometimes the timing of collecting the data will have no material bearing on your research. At other times it will be crucial when the data is collected. If the timing of your data collecting has a significant bearing on the research outcomes you need to indicate this.

## Data collecting techniques

“Collecting” here is not limited to the technical strategies you will use to get hold of your primary research data but needs to be expanded to include how you will collect, record, validate and store the data.

The word “techniques” is used here to refer to those particular technical data collecting, recording, validating and storing strategies you will use.

Where your primary data sources are public documents it will not always be particularly productive to describe your data collecting strategies. Where you are dealing with private documents it may be necessary to do so. It will always be necessary to do so when your informants are human subjects.

Your techniques for collecting the data from human subjects needs to be clearly spelt out and this includes discussing your strategies in the light of what other researchers have learned from their experiences. Strategies here include, among other things, surveys, structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, observation, participant observation, journaling, dialogue, video recording. Where you are using more standard and controlled strategies such as surveys and structured interviews it is highly recommended that you attach copies of your questionnaires or interview schedules as appendices to your proposal.

Your techniques for recording data from human subjects need to be identified and discussed in the light of the research literature. There are many ways in which data can be recorded including subjects providing written responses, audio recordings, video recordings, field notes and journals.

How you propose to validate your data needs to be described in the light of the experience of other researchers. What techniques you use will be strongly influenced by the nature of the data, but they can include various statistical tests, triangulation strategies, providing informants with opportunities to edit interview transcripts and/or field notes, etc. It is important that you demonstrate how you will ensure the accuracy, reliability and validity of

the data on which your analysis will be based. The university's policy on the storage of research data can be found at:

http: [www.unisa.edu.au/orc/ethics/datastorage.htm](http://www.unisa.edu.au/orc/ethics/datastorage.htm)

## Data analysis techniques

This is often the most difficult section of the proposal to write. This is partly because it all seems so far ahead and it is difficult to judge precisely what sort of data you will obtain. It is also partly because outside of researchers who use statistical strategies to analyse quantitative data there is not a long and strong tradition of researchers actually detailing their strategies of analysis. Things have begun to improve, however, as more and more qualitative researchers have begun to detail how they go about categorising and coding naturalistic or interview data, doing discourse and policy analysis etc. You need to become familiar with the literature that is relevant to your topic and which deals with the process of analysing the data. This familiarity will certainly make it easier for you to get and communicate a reasonably clear idea of what it is you will do with your data once you have collected it and how doing this will help you achieve the purposes implicit or explicit in your research topic.

## Research limitations

Any piece of research has its limitations. A whole host of factors contribute to this. What limitations you see in your research need to be identified and acknowledged. Under this heading you can discuss such issues as:

- the generalisability of your research findings

- how isolating your particular topic from its total context might skew your findings
- how your methodology and techniques limit the conclusions you are able to draw
- how your time and resource constraints limit the scope of your research
- how your research purpose sets defined limits to what can be expected from it.

The purpose in discussing the limitations of your research is not to underplay its value and significance. It is rather to assist you in being more specific about its value and significance by not making any unrealistic or inappropriate claims.

## Theses including artefacts

This section relates only to those students whose proposed thesis is to include artefacts. Such students need to detail their proposed plans of action to produce their artefacts.

The steps you will take to produce a finished artefact/s for examination is subject to almost infinite variation. But what is expected of you is that you try to anticipate the moves you will have to make. This may include any one or more of the following:

- identifying any specialised resources you will need
- identifying any technical skills you will need to acquire and how you will acquire them
- identifying any skilled support personnel you will need, how you will enlist their support and whether they will receive any payment for their services (e.g. actors, artists, film crew, editors, designers architects etc.)
- a time-line for producing your artefact/s.

## Resources

You need to include a statement that you have access to the resources necessary to conduct research (literature, research situations, expertise, equipment).

It is not necessary to detail all the resources you will need for your research and, if relevant, your project. Nor is it necessary to spell out your access to what should be seen as routine resources in the modern research environment.

Proposal review panels will need reassuring that you have access to resources which they might reasonably regard as problematic. This could entail reassuring them about things like:

- your ability to undertake the travel that might be implied in your proposal
- your ability to meet the costs of any high expenditure items in your proposal
- your access to any highly specialised technical facilities indicated in your proposal
- your ability to acquire any technical expertise on which your research depends.

The sorts of questions which panels will consider include:

- Is the scope and level of discussion of the orientation, methodology and research techniques appropriate for the particular award?
- Is the scope of the research appropriate for the particular award?
- Are there any major discussions of the orientation, methodology or techniques which have been omitted?

- Is the methodology consistent with the statement of the topic and will it enable the purpose of the research to be achieved?
- Is it really clear what data is to be collected and how it is to be collected, recorded, stored and validated?
- Is it as clear as could reasonably be expected how it is proposed to analyse the data to achieve the specific purposes of the research?
- Is the research manageable within the time frames?
- Is the plan for developing the artefact/s adequate and appropriate?

If the answer to any of these questions is not an unqualified 'Yes' then what amendments should be made?

In the case of artefact production, an indication of the methods and techniques of production, and any specific research involved therein:

- the information or data sources (an indication of what/who are to be your chief sources of information, the grounds on which you have selected them, how you propose to gain access to them)
- data collecting techniques (a concise statement of how you plan to collect, store and retrieve your data from your selected sources/informants, and how you plan to validate the information - including an indication of the key exponents of the data collecting techniques you plan to use)
- data analysis techniques (a brief statement of how you plan to organise, analyse and present your data - including an indication of the key exponents of the data analysis techniques you plan to use)
- limitations (a brief statement of the limitations of the research - e.g. its generalisability).

## **Ethical considerations**

This section discusses your proposal in terms of both general ethical conduct in research and human research ethics if applicable. For details see Chapter 4: Doctoral candidate milestones and requirements.

Note: While there is no obligation to obtain official ethics clearance before submitting your research proposal, your Supervisor may suggest that you do so.

## **Special features**

Any special features which need to be taken into consideration such as joint research, disabilities, travel or other questions.

## **Bibliography**

A selected bibliography citing the key authors and works related to the research topic and methodology cited in the proposal.

## **Research program or timetable (Action plan)**

A succinct (and necessarily provisional) outline of what you propose to have produced every three months, including artefacts where relevant.

## **Appendices**

Attach any relevant appendices such as:

- Thesis structure/ chapter headings (provisional)
- Research instruments (surveys, interview schedule, analysis charts etc.)