



Managing Your Thesis – Queries and Tips

TOPIC

Finding and refining a topic

- Selecting a topic: can you define the research question? That is, can you succinctly describe in both written form and orally the aims of the thesis and explain why it is important and interesting? (One way of doing this is to participate in a 3 minute thesis competition. These are nationally run and they help individuals articulate what their study is about in a 3 minute time frame.)
- Do you have the skills and the data?
- Develop the theory or the model first.
- Identify the scope of your topic, what is “in” and what is “out”. Your PhD is not going to change the world. Be realistic. Your impact will be incremental.
- Combining disciplines gives strong research potential. However ensure that you have a good grasp on the other discipline: joint supervision in both disciplines, coursework.
- Present your work, to fellow students, supervisors, small groups, faculty, conferences. Saying it aloud requires you to think through the logic.
- Write: it is important to find your voice when writing up. Mind map your paper(s). Use diagrams if they are helpful.

Evolution of literature

- How best to manage the constant evolution of the literature. What if your topic is published by someone else, or an improved method is published, for example. See similar work by someone else as an opportunity, it doesn’t invalidate your work.
- This is a reason to use non-US settings, and self collected or developed databases.
- Subscribe to relevant data bases of working papers and conference presentations to stay abreast of research.
- Use Endnote. Summarise your papers and write your literature review early. You don’t need to include every paper written on the topic, be selective and focus on quality journals.

Managing topic development and literature/theory

- Identifying point of difference / contribution regarding topic development
- How to determine literature review is complete, ensuring key literature identified without becoming lost in ongoing literature review. Keep up to date with “cutting edge” literature.

- How to choose a theory to use, or how to combine different theories? Select one, compare and contrast. Remember there is no one right answer or correct method. Be consistent and careful. Talk to practitioners, what are their views?
- Combining theories, be careful with the levels. Eg institutional theory is macro, agency theory is micro. Can't just add them together.
- Strategies where available literature is not quite on point re topic. Extrapolating from existing theory and application to topic. Identify the body of literature that best fits research area. Also need to identify similarities and differences.
- Generalisability of literature across jurisdictions
- What lessons can you glean from existing literature and apply to institutional setting governed by topic.
- If topic is country specific need to make it persuasive and intrinsically interesting to different audiences. Need to understand jurisdictional uniqueness.

Research Design, Data and Results

- Before you start collecting any data, have a clear sense of what theory you are likely to use and a good knowledge of how it might inform your study.
- Identification of outcome indicators
- Proxies need to be empirically tractable whilst also ensuring construct validity.
- Access to case study subjects: personal contacts, faculty introductions, give them a value proposition, report back to them on your findings.
- If subjects are involved, the necessary ethics approval should be obtained before any fieldwork starts (and ethical aspects of the research should be discussed early on with the supervisor).
- What if the results are not significant? Its not critical to get significant results for the thesis, although papers are more publishable if you concentrate on the part of your story that is significant.
- To avoid the problem of the design not working, plan, pilot test, control, before running the analysis. After the analysis, redesign and redo, revise theory.

Writing

- Develop a conceptual schema or framework of how the whole thesis sits together.
- Keep old copies of drafts of chapters even if you are not happy with them. Take care to keep them in a secure place.
- Work out what needs to be in the paper(s) and what needs to be in the thesis.
- Be prepared to let go of material that you have already written, if it is no longer appropriate or needed.

RELATIONS

Getting feedback from supervisor

- Some supervisors may want to read to the whole thesis in one go rather than chapter by chapter.
- Meetings will be more frequent earlier in the candidature. In the last semester, stress and self doubt rise again.
- Advisable to establish expectations of both supervisor and candidate as soon as possible, regarding meetings, publications, etc.
- Candidate should take ownership of the thesis, and should be pro-active in managing the process, including the scheduling of meetings. They should take notes, document the content of the meetings, send notes to supervisors and establish next meeting date.

Managing your relationship with your supervisor(s)

- Listen to your supervisor. He/she may be right, even if you don't like the advice. Criticism helps you to improve.
- Issues of supervisor moving to another university. Can have a distance supervisor. Consider moving.
- Multiple supervisors may disagree, how to resolve it. Initiate a meeting with both supervisors together.
- Changing supervisor? How to find a new supervisor? Approach an expert by establishing a personal connection first.

MANAGING THE PROCESS

Publishing from thesis

- Good idea to "brown bag" your work at an informal research seminar in your school first, followed by conference presentations.
- Should you publish during your candidature? It may be department policy. Is it a distraction?

What is an examiner looking for when examining a thesis?

- A subject which is interesting, a literature review which is relevant, demonstration of expertise technically, articulation of conclusions and findings. Inconclusive findings are not a problem for a thesis (although they might be for a publication).
- Make sure that you address all of the comments that have arisen when the paper has been workshopped or sent to colleagues.

Finding time for PhD around requirements of teaching

- Focus on competent teaching and research excellence!
- Work on it every day, to keep it fresh. Read or write something every day.
- Work on your PhD first in the day, when you are fresh. Before you check your emails!

Motivation

Remotivate yourself when you lose focus, by looking again at what originally motivated you.

- PhD is an unstructured process compared to Honours or Masters. Need to be active, to set yourself deadlines, arrange presentations.
- Be organised with your time. Make research your priority. Set a timetable, and regularly work on your thesis, x hours per day or x days per week. Find the time when you are most productive for research, and find a quiet space to work.
- Its OK to take a break or a holiday during your candidature.
- For a full-time PhD, treat it like a full-time job, with regular hours and breaks. Limit the teaching that you do.

Building a research network

- Form a PhD circle, at your university, or outside.
- Attend conferences.
- Get to know visiting faculty.
- Present your work to your peers.