

What should be included in a master's thesis exposé in sociology?

An exposé serves as a blueprint for your master's or doctoral thesis, providing a clear outline for each step in the process, as well the questions you plan to address. It should show that you a. have a clear research question; b. can argue its relevance; c. know the scientific and academic debate your proposed research question is embedded in; d. have a plan to address your topic in a sound theoretical and methodological way; e. are realistic about the amount of time and effort you will need to invest to realize your goals; f. have clear idea about what you expect to achieve with your thesis. Your finished exposé can also serve as the basis for the introduction to your thesis, given that both are constructed very similarly. For a master's thesis, an exposé of 4-6 pages is sufficient (without outline and references); for a doctoral thesis, the exposé should have the exact same construct, but it should go into more detail and consist of 6-8 pages (without outline/time table and references).

The Structure of the Exposé

1. Statement of the problem
2. State of the art
3. Research question
4. Methodology
5. Rough outline/time table
6. References

1. Statement of the problem

When conceptualizing the exposé for a master's thesis, the statement of the problem and the research question function like two ends of a funnel. The statement of the problem is generally broader and more encompassing than the research question. A selection process takes place between the statement of the problem (point 1) and the research question (point 3), which serves to narrow and focus the exposé's topic and is to be presented in a transparent manner.

The primary goal of the statement of the problem is to contextualize the planned work within the given discipline, as well as to clarify its relevance in relation to current academic research and discussions. The statement of the problem can be pieced together from several different sources. It can be a scholarly question currently receiving attention in academic literature, or a topic you feel is not being adequately addressed, as well as one which you simply find fascinating and wish to pursue further. The topic can be an intuitive one, which you may wish to

call into question, or counterintuitive in nature, thus serving to contradict preconceived notions or assumptions.

There are no set methodological rules or guidelines regarding the exposé's problem. There are, however, certain cases one will want to avoid: you should steer clear of making your topic either too broad, or too narrow. The topic should not be so specific and specialized that little literature is readily available, while it is also better to avoid current events, as to ensure that there is an existing academic debate one can draw from. In the end, the topic should be of interest to you and intrigue you, but topics which one identifies with too personally or emotionally are better avoided, in order to be able to maintain a relative distance to the subject matter and scientific objectivity.

2. State of the art

Another way of testing a topic's relevancy is by familiarizing oneself with the current state of the academic research. By conducting a thorough review of existing literature, you will be able to develop a firm grasp of the material and be able to subsequently map the different lines of existing academic work relevant to your topic. Becoming familiar with previous and current approaches to your topic will also offer you a solid theoretical foundation to build upon, thus allowing you to benefit from the work of others and avoid having to start from scratch or "reinvent the wheel". It is upon this basis that you will develop your own research question, after having identified gaps or inadequacies in the existing literature. The following questions will help you with mapping out the current state of the research:

1. Was your particular research problem/topic a focus of previous academic research?
2. What are the most important positions in the scientific debate regarding your selected topic? (pro and contra)
3. Can you identify the deficits and points of criticism in the existing literature?
4. What is the contribution you intend to provide to the existing research?

3. Research Question

With the knowledge gained from points one and two, one can now undertake formulating a precise, limited and concrete research question. This brings you to a very important step in the process, namely the conceptualization of the exposé. The "conceptualization" refers to the defining of the most important concepts and terms, as well as showing their relations to each other. At this point, you will formulate questions and hypotheses related to your topic, as well as assumptions relating to the possible results of your study. When formulating your research question, precision is key, as is setting clear boundaries regarding which elements are absolutely necessary to your study and exactly what can and will be investigated.

4. Methodology

Academic work requires the controlled application of methodology. If you plan on carrying out your own empirical inquiry, the selection of a particular methodology will have to be justified both

in terms of content as well as practicality. Social science methodologies vary greatly; there are qualitative as well as quantitative methods, case studies and comparative analyses. There is also a distinction between carrying out secondary and primary analyses; the former employs data gathered in previous studies, but analyzed anew in light of the study's research question, whereas the latter utilizes primary data gathered through surveys or questionnaires, for example. The selection of a particular methodology is also dependent on the availability of appropriate materials and data, such as pre-existing empirical studies on a particular topic, interviews or primary documents.

5. Rough outline/time table

For larger research projects, such as a master's or a doctoral thesis, it is very useful to develop a schedule, listing each step in the process along with the amount of time you plan to spend on each step. It is not a bad idea to develop a rough outline while writing your exposé, in order to begin bringing structure to your work. This includes developing a common thread in your exposé by using the research question and the selected methodology to think about how you to plan to proceed in answering the research question you have selected.

6. References

The list of references should include all the works referred to in the exposé (no more!). Please choose **one** academic quotation style and stick to it.