WRITING A PhD THESIS

Your choice of topic for research is likely to be influenced by such factors as:

- ***Relevance***: its perceived relevance to the academic department(s) in which you are studying;
- ***Supervision***: the availability of tutors/supervisors within the department(s) who are interested in the topic and their willingness to supervise such a thesis;
- ***Interest***: your existing knowledge of that topic and the strength of your desire to learn more about it;
- ***Competence***: your likely ability to employ the proposed methods of data gathering and data analysis;
- ***Scale***: the feasibility of completing the study within the time and resources available.

Proposing a Topic

For a research degree such as a MPhil or PhD/DPhil, you are usually expected to provide a formal research proposal. Indeed, your acceptance for a research degree may depend on the submission and approval of such a formal proposal as part of your application. Such a proposal needs to include the title (even if this likely to be provisional), a clear explanation of the academic (rather than personal) importance of the topic with reference to existing published research in the field, an outline of a proposed methodology for data-gathering and also for analysis, and a provisional schedule for key stages in the work tied to dates in the calendar.

Theoretical Framework

A *theoretical framework* often features as an early section in a thesis. In a theoretical framework you would include an outline of existing theories which are closely related to your research topic. You should make clear how your research relates to existing theories. How does your own research relate to such framings? You should make your own theoretical assumptions and allegiances as explicit as possible. Later, your discussion of methodology/approach you use should be linked to this theoretical framework.

Reviewing the Literature

Academic theses at all levels in the social sciences typically include some kind of 'literature review'. It is probably more useful for students to think of this, as examiners usually do, as a 'critical review of the literature', for reasons which will be made clear shortly. The literature review is normally an early section in the thesis.

Students are normally expected to begin working on a *general survey* of the related research literature at the earliest possible stage of their research. This in itself is not what is normally meant in formal references to the 'review of the literature', but is rather a preparatory stage. This survey stage ranges far wider in scope and quantity than the final review, typically including more general works. Your survey (which exists in writing only in your notes) should help you in several ways, such as:

- to decide on the issues you will address;
- to become aware of appropriate research methodologies;
- to see how research on your specific topic fits into a broader framework;
- to prepare you for approaching the critical review.

Clearly, if you are new to research in the field you are not in a position to ***'criticise'*** the work of experienced researchers on the basis of your own knowledge of the topic or of research methodology. Where you are reporting on well-known research studies closely related to your topic, however, some critical comments may well be available from other established researchers (often in textbooks on the topic). These criticisms of methodology, conclusions and so on can and should be reported in your review (together with any published reactions to these criticisms!).

However, the use of the term ***critical*** is not usually meant to suggest that you should focus on criticising the work of established researchers. It is primarily meant to indicate that:

- The review should not be merely a ***descriptive*** list of a number of research projects related to the topic;
- You are capable of thinking critically and with insight about the issues raised by previous research. Moreover, **simply the manner in which you choose theories and views of other researchers and the way you synthesise these indicate critical thinking on your part.**

The review can serve many functions, some of which are as follows:

- to indicate what researchers in the field already know about the topic;
- to indicate what those in the field do not yet know about the topic - the 'gaps';
- to indicate major questions in the topic area;
- to provide background information for the non-specialist reader seeking to gain an overview of the field;
- to ensure that new research (including yours) avoids the errors of some earlier research;
- to demonstrate your grasp of the topic.

In the formal review of the literature you should refer only to research projects which are ***closely*** *related* to your own topic. The formal review is not a record of 'what I have read'. If your problem is how to choose what to leave out, one way might be to focus on the ***most recent*** papers. You should normally aim to include key studies which are widely cited by others in the field, however old they may be. Where there are several similar studies with similar findings, you should review a representative study which was well designed.

If you find that very little seems to exist which is closely related to your topic you should discuss this with your supervisor. In such a case the most obvious options would be either to widen the net to include less closely-related studies or to reduce the length of the review. However, you should make sure that your search for relevant papers and books has been adequate. If this problem remains, your tutor may suggest that you should review more loosely-related studies which nevertheless employed the research methodology which you are intending to use.

The length of a literature review varies and the attitudes of your supervisor and examiners must be taken into account: some supervisors allow undergraduate students to devote the bulk of a mini-dissertation to a literature review; others insist on some element of original research. As to how many research studies you should review, this varies too. You should not review so many that you can devote little space to each.

Methodology

Methodology refers to the choice and use of particular strategies and tools for data gathering and analysis. Some methodologies embrace both data gathering and analysis, such as content analysis, ethnography and semiotic analysis. Others apply *either* to gathering *or* analysing data (though the distinction is often not clear-cut):

- ***data-gathering*** methodologies include interviews, questionnaires and observation;
- ***data analysis*** methodologies include content analysis, discourse analysis, semiotic analysis and statistical analysis.

There are many varieties of each methodology and the specific methodological tools you are adopting must be made explicit. Interviews, for instance, are often categorized as 'structured', 'semi-structured' or 'open-ended'. You should mention which other related studies (cited in your literature review) have employed the same methodology.

The section on methodology should include a ***rationale*** for the choice of methodology for data gathering and for data analysis. In the rationale you should consider what alternative methodological tools might have been employed (particularly those which related studies have employed), together with their advantages and limitations for the present purpose.

Your choice of methodologies should be related to the theoretical framework outlined earlier.

Findings and Discussion

The ways in which you report your 'findings' depend heavily on the methodologies employed so it is difficult to provide general guidelines here. However, it is important to ensure that you go beyond basic *description* of your data (e.g. simply reporting which television programmes were watched by which groups of people).

Some notes on numeric data. Extensive tabular data is usually best confined to appendices: select only the most important tabular data for inclusion in the main body of your text. Where you refer to total numbers it is often useful to include percentages (but only where the numbers involved are greater than twenty or so). Avoid any reference to 'significant' findings unless you can specify their *statistical* significance. Consider where it would be most useful to employ graphical displays such as bar-charts or pie-charts rather than tables. Label tables as 'Table 1' [or whatever] and all other forms as 'Figure 1' [etc.]. Remember to list these at the beginning of the dissertation. Whilst every table or figure requires comment in the main body of the text do not simply repeat the data: help the reader to notice and make sense of *patterns* in the data.

You should relate your own findings to those in any related published studies outlined in your literature review. Where your findings differ you should offer a suggested explanation.

Make clear what the *limitations* of your own study are. What are the limitations of your 'sample'? To what extent are your findings specific to a particular socio-cultural context? In what ways is your interpretation of your findings related to your own theoretical assumptions (outlined earlier)? What insights into the phenomenon does your study seem to offer? What could others learn from your study?

NB: Note that sections like the **Literature Review, Methodology** and **Findings/Discussion do not** appear in **ALL** types of theses. A doctoral thesis in a Humanities subject is likely to consist of an **Introduction** (which may or may not have a Literature Review, a **Conclusion** and a series of **Chapters** in between).

Reference Format

Universities, faculties and departments differ in the referencing formats required. Depending on your discipline and your department's requirements, you may need to use:

- Harvard referencing system
- Modern Languages Association (MLA)
- Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA)
- American Psychological Association (APA)

The *list of references* or *bibliography* should appear at the end of the thesis in alphabetical order. [1]

[1] Material for this resource was borrowed from:
David Chandler. 'Writing a Dissertation: Some Guidelines'. University of Aberystwyth. Available online: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/MAinTV/dissert1.html#B> [Accessed: 31/07/08]