

1. The Thesis Proposal

The proposal is a fairly detailed description of what your argument or hypothesis is, what you intend to do, and how you plan to do it.

Some supervisors will tell you that the proposal is not terribly important, and that it is simply a formality required by Registry. Ignore comments like that. The proposal is an important part of writing the thesis, for several reasons:

1) it forces you to articulate clearly and precisely what your intentions are, thereby avoiding vagueness and generalities

2) it demands that you consider the practicalities of your proposed research:

a) what resources do you need? how readily available are they? will you need extra funding? where will it come from?

b) what, exactly, will you have to do? is it possible in the given time limit? is it practical for you to do this? can you fit it in alongside your other commitments? will you have to travel? how will that be funded?

Before you can begin drafting a thesis proposal you need to familiarise yourself with your proposed field of research, and with your department's formal requirements regarding proposals.

Exploring the research area means that you should

- * read around the subject to gain a general outline view of it
- * read the main secondary sources during the last 50-odd years (though this may vary according to your particular subject)
- * know the main areas of interest, contention or neglect in the field
- * know most of the recent publications related to the subject.

Departmental requirements vary considerably, as does the amount of information departments provide prospective thesis writers. It is important that you find out what your department has, and it is also a good idea to look at other departmental guides to get ideas about how to tackle the proposal. Several departments have guides online that you can access through the university homepage: try looking at AFIS, Geography and Political Science. They differ considerably, so offer a good overview.

In general, there are a few elements all proposals must have (not necessarily in this order):

Title. This must express, succinctly, what your topic is. It is unlikely that the title you use in your proposal will become the title of your thesis, although it has been recommended that in future any change should need the Dean of Postgraduate Study's approval. Consult your supervisor about how fixed the title should be.

Your aim or objective: what do you expect to discover or demonstrate?

Your research question or hypothesis. This is often, though not always, stated in the form of a question. Many researchers couple the research question with the aim, because they are generally inseparable.

Background. A brief account of the relevant literature which provides a rationale for the research 'this could be an account of a state of ignorance about the subject, a need for research into a particular area, a demonstration of a need for further research because of recent developments, or the like. The important things to remember here are first, to make sure the literature you mention in this section is relevant to your specific project (that is, avoid a general survey where much of the

literature is barely, if at all, connected with your particular topic), and second, to use this background section as a way of indicating the significance of your own project. You will, of course, have to do a more detailed and extensive literature review when you write your thesis proper.

Bibliography: usually fairly brief in a proposal. Check with your supervisor.

Some things are not always required in the thesis proposal but are almost essential to keep you organised. Write them up for your own benefit even if your department does not require them and you decide not to include them in your submitted proposal:

Outline of the thesis as a whole, showing a breakdown of the main argument into its component parts. These will be your draft chapters. They will almost certainly change, but having provisional divisions gives you something to work with.

A trial table of contents. This may be part of your outline. It provides you with a temporary framework and helps you with your note taking. Try to estimate the length you expect each chapter to be.

A timetable. Probably one of the most useful things you can have. Most science departments require this as part of the proposal, but few of the humanities do. It is very easy to get lost, sidetracked and generally bewildered when writing a humanities, because there is no strict methodology for you to follow: because of this, it is doubly important to put together a timetable that will help keep you on track. (top)

2. Time management

You need to consider both short and long-term time management. Short term means on a daily or weekly basis. If you are working at home, make sure you structure your days, and that your friends are aware of your working hours. You will get very frustrated if you settle down to work and people drop in to see you because they think you're at home, and therefore available.

Long term time management involves planning ahead in terms of self-imposed deadlines or at least expected completion dates. Once you have drafted a structural outline for your thesis, it is worth taking some time to estimate both the lengths of your chapters and the time you expect them to take. This is easier to do if you divide the chapters into sections and then estimate how long each section will take to write.

This helps to keep you on track, and you can also monitor your progress easily using such a scheme. It makes those six-monthly reports much easier to write as well!

We will be offering a WASS seminar on Time Management for thesis writers, and this will be largely concerned with finding ways to plan timetables, organise work around them and stick to them.

People who are enrolled in WASS 120 will be sent an e-mail to let you know when and where the seminar will be held; others interested, you can contact us as

WASSpostgrad@regy.canterbury.ac.nz. (top)

3. Constructing the Thesis

The most important thing to remember, especially in the early stages of your thesis, is NEVER to say, 'I can't write anything yet because I have to do more research / get a grasp of the topic', or the like.

Some useful tips:

1) Never file your notes in alphabetical order. Use your thesis outline (no matter how rough, speculative or subject to change it is) and devote a file, folder or other filing device to WORK IN PROGRESS, with separate divisions for each potential chapter. As you research your topic, file the material under the appropriate chapter heading.

2) Always make yourself write why you've selected that material, and keep this with your notes. Doing this has two advantages:

a) it helps you to limit your notes (and you will still very likely have more than you need), and it forces you to process the material as you go along. It's too easy to waste hours, days or even weeks reading and taking notes without ever considering whether they'll be of any use in the long run

b) it means you start writing as soon as you start taking notes.

Other information worth putting in your Work in Progress file include

- * written-up bits you know you need that are basically busy work, such as definitions, survey or introductory material

- * ideas, written in sentences to clarify what you mean. Do not write cryptic notes'months later you'll be unable to work out what they are about.

- * reminders and cross-references to useful material. It is very easy to forget over time that a certain book was good in a specific area, or why you photocopied a particular article or quotation.

There are good reasons for doing all this:

1. You sort your material as you go, which helps keep it under control

2. It keeps you focused on where your thesis is going

3. It means you have a body of material for each chapter which will provide you with the basis for drafts, instead of finishing a chapter and facing a great void. (top)

4. Maintaining your focus

In one respect a thesis is the same as an essay: you need to have a clear, concise thesis statement that briefly expresses what your argument is. For example, the thesis of Jonathan Sawday's book *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* is that the Renaissance interest in anatomical dissection informed the culture of the times, and thus created a 'network of practices, social structures, and rituals' that influenced the way people saw themselves and their environment. In the rest of the book, Sawday sets out to demonstrate the truth of this claim.

It is essential that you devise a thesis statement for your work. Write it out in no more than a short paragraph and keep it at the front of your Work in Progress folder or on the wall at your desk, or anywhere else convenient so that you can see it as you work. Wherever you put it, make sure you see it regularly.

- * Revise your thesis statement regularly as your ideas change. Make sure it is as clear as you can make it at each stage so you have a solid point of reference as you work.

- * It is important that you are aware that it is perfectly normal for your argument to change focus several times as you learn more about your topic. Check with your supervisor about any new regulations concerning this: there have been recommendations to tighten this up.

If and when your topic changes, make sure you keep your supervisor informed. There are three reasons for this:

1. Courtesy. If you plan to give your supervisor a surprise, make it one he or she will enjoy'don't let them be the last one on the block to know that your topic has shifted.

2. Safety. You could be heading down the wrong track, or you might even have to rethink the whole proposal. In either case, you would benefit from your supervisor's advice.

3. University regulations. There may be limits on how much and in what way a topic may change.

If your supervisor objects to a topic change (this happens), first establish if it is because the change is not permitted by the university, or if it is your supervisor's own choice. If it is the latter, try to sort it out with him or her. If all else fails, you could consult the departmental director of postgraduate studies or the head of department, but use that as a last resort. However, do remember that it is your thesis, and you are ultimately responsible for it.

Another way to maintain your focus is to try to define the argument for each chapter, and update these regularly too, together with your chapter outline. (top)

5. Writing

GOLDEN RULE: Anything you write can be edited, expanded, or revised and it keeps your mind working. Until you write something, you have nothing to work with, and everybody knows the terror of the blank page.

ANOTHER GOLDEN RULE: Start writing before you're ready. Settle for a very rough draft as soon as you have any sense of where you're going with a chapter or, if necessary, write something about not having a sense of where you're going. The action of writing is surprisingly effective in helping people clarify their thoughts.

It does not matter if you write three pages instead of twenty. It is worth reflecting that, if you write one page per day that is, about 250 words you could draft an 80,000-word thesis in one year and have 45 days' holiday! Admittedly you would not be taking weekends off, but 250 words would not take all day either. Even if you write nothing but a rationale for some notes you've made, make it your practice to write something every day: it makes writing easier.

It also does not matter if what you write is totally unpolished: first drafts are for your personal use. They're a way of thinking on paper, recording your thoughts.

Avoid perfect chapter syndrome. This has you endlessly revising, rewriting and polishing because you think, 'This has to be good, or why am I doing a thesis at all?', or 'It would be humiliating to show my supervisor anything so rough', or 'I have to have something decent to show after all this time' the list is endless, and if you haven't come up with any of these yet, rest assured you will! The trick is to be aware of them and what they are.

The truth is there's NO POINT in polishing chapters until you have a rough draft of the whole thesis, because

1. you will undoubtedly want to shift material, expand bits, prune other bits, and alter the focus of sections in the light of the whole
2. as you progress with your thesis and become more of an expert in your field, your written style will change. Chapter One, which you wrote two years ago will seem to have been written by a complete stranger by the time the rest of the draft is ready, and you will have to go back and redraft it anyhow, so polishing it to publication quality is pointless until you are revising the whole thesis.

(top)

6. Individual Chapters.

Plan each chapter like an essay: work out your overall argument, and what you need to include in what order.

Try to see each chapter as a manageable Honours essay rather than a daunting section of the Great Work. If possible, break up the chapter into bite-sized pieces. Try to design sections that you know you can write in, say, three or four days. Some people recommend printing out each page as you complete it, so you get a tangible sense of the progress you're making.

Get feedback from your supervisor on both your plan and your chapter draft.

If your supervisor's feedback indicates that you have to change your draft, do not feel you have to do it immediately if you're feeling a bit put off by the comments. It's better to put it aside and work on something else until you can see the draft and comments more objectively.

File ALL your supervisor's comments together with the date: sometimes people forget what they've said to you. (top)

7. Putting it together

It's really helpful if you can get another reader to comment on how your chapter or thesis hangs together. Be cautious about asking friends and family to read your work: rather look for someone you can walk away from (and who can walk away from you) at the end of the process. At WASS it's what we're paid to do and we enjoy it!

Do not be put off if your reader isn't familiar with your field: often a reader who knows nothing about your topic will ask for clarification of a point or an idea and you realise that such an explanation should be written into your text.

Make sure each chapter follows logically from what has come before.

Refer to the overall argument, making it clear how this section fits in.

The introduction to the thesis will guide the reader through the outline and argument, and the conclusion pulls it all together. (top)

8. Referencing and Bibliography

What I have to say here may be virtually obsolete by now'find out about Library courses in using Endnote.

As I understand it, Endnote will format your entire text, references and bibliography for the style you are using. This does not obviate the need for you to enter the appropriate material, so do make sure you know which style you are using and that you record the necessary details: you will waste hours, even days, if you fail to make note of essential details such as page numbers of quotations or paraphrases, or if you forget to note the name of the translator of an edition you have been using. Check to see what details you need, and be meticulous in recording them.

Whether you are using in-text referencing or footnotes, enter them as you go, to avoid the likelihood of making mistakes. (top)

9. Writer's Block: some possible remedies

- * Explain to somebody else what you're trying to say: often saying it does the trick.
- * If nobody will listen to you (it happens!) try telling it to a tape recorder.
- * Pretend you have to deliver a 2-minute speech on the subject to a non-expert. Tape record it
- * Pretend you're writing a letter to a distant friend or relative, explaining what you're doing
- * Go and do your most hated chore (cleaning windows, washing the cat . . .) and keep at it until the penny drops
- * Try doing something that involves hand-to-eye co-ordination that you have to concentrate on to do properly'fixing something that has broken, knitting or sewing, painting, playing a musical instrument or whatever. Often just giving your mind a break helps, and the hand-to-eye thing is mysteriously effective.
- * Drink plenty of water (not coffee, tea, beer, juice. . .) (top)

10. Supervision

Most of the time your thesis topic will determine who your supervisor will be or, in some cases, it may be that you have chosen your topic because you have been inspired by a particular lecturer and want to have that person as your supervisor. Whichever way it turns out for you, it is important that you find out as much as possible about your supervisor:

- * ask around: how have other students got on with this supervisor? Nobody is perfect, but if you know about any problems other students have had, you can address them tactfully when you discuss your supervisory arrangements
- * look in the university Calendar and find out when and where your supervisor studied
- * find out what they've published/read some of it if you can
- * ask your supervisor about conferences and publishing: it's helpful if your supervisor has good contacts and can advise you about these things
- * ideally, find yourself a co-supervisor who can give you another perspective on your work and who can hold the fort if your main supervisor is away or unavailable.

Be aware that this is going to be one of the more significant relationships you will have in your life: many people liken it to a marriage, and as with a marriage you need to manage the relationship with care. No matter how much you respect and admire your supervisor, there will most probably be times when you disagree with him or her, get frustrated, feel neglected and all the rest of the negative bits that happen in any relationship. Try to be prepared for times like these and have strategies in place for coping with them.

There are a number of things you can do to avoid problems:

- * make sure you have a clear, reasonably formal agreement about the regularity of meetings, and make sure they happen often enough'say, every three or four weeks.
- * agree on what to expect at meetings:
 - * how often will you be submitting written work?
 - * where will you have your meetings? (NOT the caff or the Foundry)
 - * how long will your meetings be? (is fifteen minutes long enough?)
 - * agree on a turnaround time for your written work to be returned
- * make sure you have an understanding about your mutual expectations:
 - * will your supervisor accept rough work?
 - * how does your supervisor think you should go about writing your thesis'are you expected to submit polished chapters?'will he or she encourage you to write early on?
 - * does your supervisor accept that your thesis topic will probably change as you progress?

Be aware of the expectations attached to supervision: make sure your own expectations are reasonable. Identify areas that are important to you, so you can discuss them with your supervisor before they become problematic.

Also identify your own needs and capabilities in terms of time management, motivation and practical management, and work out whose responsibility you think it is to make sure everything is running smoothly in this respect. For example, if you run out of steam, is it your own problem, or do you think your supervisor should help out? Does your supervisor see it the same way as you do?

Once you have sorted out your needs and expectations and discussed them with your supervisor, make sure the day-to-day issues are kept clear:

1) Keep a record of all your meetings, noting the date and the ground covered

2) Take notes during meetings'this helps you to remember what has been said. Often you cover quite a lot of ground during a meeting and it can be difficult to take it all in. Also, people sometimes forget what they've said, so it is a good idea to have a written record in case you get inconsistent advice.

3) Don't be afraid to ask for more comments on your written work, or for clearer advice. Ask your supervisor to be specific: it is not particularly helpful if you are told, say, to 'Explain this more fully'. If you are given a comment like that, ask your supervisor exactly what they think is missing, or which part of your explanation needs to be extended.

If you do have a dispute with your supervisor, there are several things you can do:

1) consult the E-team to establish your rights and responsibilities: they're absolutely confidential and have huge experience. They can advise you about ways to tackle the problem.

2) try to sort it out with your supervisor

3) ask your supervisor if you can arrange a joint meeting with the Head of Department or the Supervisor of Graduate Students

4) in some instances it may be appropriate to consult the Academic Grievances Committee

5) if all else fails, you might be able to change your supervisor.

WASS supervision seminars

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Look at what the university and students expect of supervisors, and the extent to which these expectations are reasonable.

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What are the main areas of concern for supervisors, and why?

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Checking your understanding of thesis writing against that of your supervisor

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Assessing your own supervisory needs, and how to get them met

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Making meetings work for you and your supervisor

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Structuring your supervision

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Managing your personal relationship with your supervisor

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Written work you submit: how to establish guidelines, how to interpret comments and how to get your supervisor to give you the kind of comments that help you the most.

If you are not enrolled with WASS and are interested in attending these or other seminars, contact us at WASSpostgrad@regy.canterbury.ac.nz for details about enrolling. (top)