

THE QUALITATIVE SOCIAL WORK THESIS A BRIEF GUIDE TO PROCESS AND PROPOSALS

THE PROCESS

So, you want to write a thesis...or you think you do. Writing a thesis can be tremendously rewarding, interesting and exciting, but it isn't for everyone. If you are intending to continue in graduate school and eventually complete a PhD, you probably *need* to do a thesis – most PhD programs require that you have completed a thesis. You may also *want* to write a thesis if

- You want or need to conduct research as part of your employment
- You really enjoy working independently
- You want to pursue a topic closely related to your practice in an in-depth fashion
- You are interested in exploring a particular policy in considerable depth

Be aware that writing a thesis requires certain resources:

Time: Completion of a thesis, from beginning your proposal to final thesis defense, usually takes about a year for a full-time student. It often takes longer (see section below on 'Patience'!) If your main goal is to complete your degree as soon as possible, and you have no intention of ever pursuing a PhD, then a thesis may not be your best option.

Focus: Your thesis will likely take longer than a year if you have other significant demands (job, family, disability, community activism) on your time and energy. Completing a thesis also usually requires significant chunks of uninterrupted thinking and writing time.

Skills: Writing a thesis requires (and will help you improve) writing, organizational and analytical skills. It also requires that you be able to work independently and are able to motivate yourself.

Indirect costs: In addition to tuition and living expenses, a research thesis may also require that you pay for photocopying, recording and transcription costs, long distance phone calls, etc. In some situations, you may also need to provide an honorarium or other recognition for your research participants.

Patience: Pursuing a thesis also involves waiting and negotiating: waiting for your supervisor, and then your committee, to review your proposal and thesis drafts (plan on waiting about 4 weeks for feedback on each submission); waiting for research participants to contact you or for documents to arrive; waiting for your ethics submission to be reviewed if it involves participants (another 4 weeks – or longer!); negotiating with those who control access to documents or research participants, etc. Almost everything will take longer than you imagine!

Persistence: Most students encounter at least some roadblocks during the thesis process. You may not get through the ethics review process the first time around. Folks who you want as part of your thesis committee might not be available, or you might have to replace someone because s/he is going on leave during the time you are finishing your work. Access to research participants may prove more difficult than you expected.

OK, if you think you are still up for it (you believe you do have the resources)...now what?

The sooner you decide to pursue a thesis, the better – if you decide to write a thesis early on in your time in graduate school, you may be able to use most of your course work assignments as preliminary work for your thesis. Or if you know you want to do a thesis but aren't sure what to focus on, you can use your course work to explore topics that interest you and to narrow your interests and ideas down to one clearly defined topic. Reading you do now will save you time when you start to write the literature review section of the thesis. Remember to keep an accurate reference list/bibliography in APA format – you might at this stage want to invest in a reference list software program like ENDNOTE or Reference Manager.

There are other ways that you can help yourself from the time that you begin your course work:

Get to know the faculty: Research which faculty are interested in your topic or in topics closely related to your topic or, as you start to get familiar with this, which faculty are familiar with your research methodology. Descriptions that faculty provide about themselves provide some information about this, but often faculty have interests or have done research that is not listed. Have discussions with faculty – get to know them, allow them to point you in the direction of relevant literature and help you focus your ideas in terms of both your topic and the research methodology you will use to investigate it. You are looking for a good 'fit', so don't be afraid to get to know people – it is important to consider not only how knowledgeable a faculty member may be, but also matters such as personalities and politics. You may want to read a few articles that various faculty members have written to guide you in assessing whether you are on the same ideological page. Because you will be working closely with your thesis advisor/supervisor, and eventually with your committee, it is critical that you have a good relationship with these folks.

Do your reading: Hopefully, doing the assigned course readings in your various courses will help you refine your interests. If not, perhaps some of the suggested supplementary readings will. Failing both these options, block off some time to do some reading each month (at least) in your general topic area, and then start to narrow your focus. Keep notes on significant ideas you encounter during your reading.

Take advantage of your classes: Use class assignments to write about aspects of your topic (keeping within the parameters of the assignments, of course!). Keep in mind that some instructors are flexible about assignment requirements, and may allow you to reconstruct an assignment so that it better suits your interests – it never hurts to ask!

Learn to use the library and other university resources: Become familiar with how to use library resources and services such as 'Document delivery'. Keep an eye out for free workshops and training on topics such as how to do internet searches. Take advantage of free workshops on such topics as academic writing and use of bibliographic tools such as ENDNOTE or RefWORKS. Get your word processing skills up to speed.

Know the regulations: Read the Student Handbook and the Graduate Calendar, and visit the Graduate Studies website – these places not only have lots of useful information, they also contain information about regulations and deadlines that you need to know and that you need to keep in mind as you pursue your degree.

Talk to other students: An excellent source of information on all of the above.

DEVELOPING A COMMITTEE

Over the course of writing your proposal and your thesis, you will work closely with your committee and especially with your supervisor. You should therefore devote some time to finding people that you can work well with during this process. A general guideline is that your committee includes one person who is knowledgeable about your topic, one person who is knowledgeable about your methodology and one good general reader. Since University of Victoria regulations only require two committee members, you should think through whether two committee members can offer these attributes. It is helpful if at least one person on your committee has been at the university for a while and has successfully supervised other graduate students, as this person is likely to be knowledgeable about negotiating procedures and requirements.

In addition to knowledge, you should also consider compatibility, including ideological or political compatibility. While you might expect to, and should welcome, being challenged in constructive ways by committee members, some differences can block rather than facilitate your work. You also want to be sure that you and the committee members agree on general guidelines for ‘turn around times’ – i.e. how long after you submit work will you receive comments and suggestions from them. Finally, you should ensure that committee members will be available at significant points in your process. Remember that faculty sometimes go on sabbatical or are away from the university for other reasons and be cognizant of this as you plan your work schedule.

Committee membership is not set in stone. If you find that you have a compatibility problem, you want to be sure that committee members are willing to take a ‘no-fault divorce’ approach to their involvement, and are prepared to withdraw and be replaced if things aren’t working out.

THE PROPOSAL

The aim of your thesis proposal is to outline a plan of action that you will follow in pursuing your research – you are giving yourself and your committee a road map. The proposal needs to provide clear answers to various questions that your committee (and you) might have about your plan. Your proposal explains, in detail, what your project is about, what questions you will try to answer (alternatively: what puzzle you will try to solve, what area of practice you are trying to illuminate) and how you will gather and analyze data in order to do so. As outlined below, it provides answers to various questions.

‘Who’, ‘when’ and ‘what’ questions:

Convince your committee and yourself that your research is feasible in terms of funds and availability of participants (or access to documents)

Outline how the research can be completed within a reasonable time period (be aware of time limits for full and part time students)

Be clear about the aims of your research

Locate your research within existing research and scholarly literature

‘Why’ questions

Show that you are contributing something original or that you are extending previous research in an interesting or original way

Clarify the importance and/or need for your research

Demonstrate that there is a match between the topic and your interests and abilities

‘How’ questions

Show that you sufficiently grasp the methodology and its associated methods in order for your research process to proceed smoothly – and that you clearly understand how to proceed with your research relatively independently

Describe the method and the methodology clearly

Prove that you have thought through the possible ethical issues enough that you will be able to successfully navigate the ethics review process

STRUCTURING THE PROPOSAL

1. Introduction

Introduce the reader to the general subject area and then to your specific topic – be clear how your specific topic is related to the general subject area. State the topic concisely and succinctly. Briefly point out why the topic is significant and briefly explain how your research will contribute to knowledge in the general subject area. Set out the specific aims you have for your particular research: main issue(s) to be addressed, main aspects of the topic which you will consider. Say something about where you stand in relation to your topic – what is your theoretical orientation to the topic?

2. Literature review

This, together with your description of methodology/methods, is the main substance of your proposal. It lays the foundation for discussing how you are going to approach your research. The purpose is to show that you have a good grasp of the general subject area in which your topic is located and an excellent understanding of your specific topic area. The lit review puts your research in context – it locates your research within existing research and theory. It provides the background for your project, making clear why researching your particular topic is important and interesting.

You should select for review all the literature that has direct bearing on or (if direct literature is sparse) is very closely related to your specific topic area, paying special attention to recent (within the last 5-10 years) publications and research. You need to summarize important findings, arguments, theories and developments specifically related

to your topic. Outline the major strengths/contributions and the major criticisms of existing research and scholarly literature. Discuss omissions and gaps in existing literature, especially as these gaps relate to your proposed research. This helps explain why your research is valuable and/or interesting – what are you researching that hasn't already been researched? What perspective are you taking that hasn't been taken? Will your project provide a response to some of the criticism that has been leveled at existing research?

TIME SAVING TIP: Do the first draft of the literature review after you have read **ONLY** a few of the recent major important works about your chosen topic. This will allow you to develop a clear outline. You can then answer the questions that I have posed – fill in your outline – as you read more.

You will also need to review some of the literature that is significantly but less closely related to your topic area, especially literature that is closely related to significant or foundational concepts in your proposed research. In order that your lit review not become a never-ending task, you should consult regularly with your supervisor about the boundaries of your lit review. Also, be aware of the tendency to get distracted by interesting literature that is not connected to your thesis topic. One way to maintain focus is to frequently remind yourself of the purpose of your study and the question you are seeking to answer (the puzzle you are hoping to solve, etc.)

Your lit review, both in terms of the general and the specific, should concentrate on social work research and publications. If you have to go outside of social work to find related research/publications, you should be clear about what you did or didn't find in the social work literature and also why you chose to go to the literature in other fields – which other fields did you go to, and why?

Keep in mind that, at the proposal stage, your lit review will be quite close to what this chapter will look like in your completed thesis, so expect to be thorough, though you will likely continue to expand and update the lit review as your research progresses and as you locate new publications. The lit review will only be in its final state in your completed thesis.

3. Methodology

This part of the proposal explains what methodology you have selected and why, and describes the methodology (how you will collect and analyze your data) in considerable detail. Both you and your committee should feel very confident, based on what you have written in this part of the proposal, that you know how to proceed with your research, that you are aware of problems that might arise, and that you can proceed with alternatives if need be.

Explain how your proposed methodology is a good fit for your topic. Some topics can be investigated using many different methodologies. When you are choosing from alternative approaches, give reasons (the advantages) for your choice. These reasons should be congruent with the theoretical orientation that you outlined in your introduction

and that you expanded on in your literature review. You may also want to outline ethical or political reasons for your choice, if these apply.

You will need to show that you have an in-depth understanding of your chosen methodology and where it fits within the general field of qualitative research. In order to write about it knowledgeably, you should read and study the foundational text(s) on the methodology¹ as well as the most recent writing on how to use the methodology. Your supervisor and committee will expect you to reference these materials in this chapter, and also to demonstrate a good general understanding of the field of qualitative research. To develop your general understanding, you should read some general writing about qualitative research, such as Esterberg (2002), Merriam (2002) or Patton (2004) and reference this material in situating your chosen methodology.

In addition to reading, understanding and referencing theoretical works on your chosen methodology, you should also describe how this methodology has previously been used to conduct research in your topic area, or in areas closely related to your topic area. This helps make clear the fit between your topic and your chosen methodology.

You should describe in considerable detail your data collection and data analysis methods. These must be drawn from the methodology you have chosen. If you intend to modify them (for example, by applying a feminist perspective), you must explain how the modification is useful, why it is needed and how it will be applied. Description of your methods should include:

- What kind of information are you after and how will you obtain that information?
- If you are using documents, you should list which documents you intend to obtain, explain why you have chosen these particular documents (i.e. how do they relate to your topic?) and describe how you will get them.
- If you are obtaining information from participants, you should describe the characteristics of the participants that you are seeking, explain how you will recruit them (if you will be using a recruitment flyer, you may include a draft of this in an appendix to your proposal or wait to include it as part of the ethical review process), whether or not you will be offering participants any inducements and why, and how many participants you are seeking (numbers should be congruent with what is prescribed by the methodology)
- If you are interviewing, you should explain whether you are conducting individual or focus group interviews and why. You should also include considerable detail on where and how interviews will be conducted, such as
 - A list of possible questions or topic areas that will be covered in the interview
 - Approximately how long the interviews will be
 - Whether or not the interviews will be recorded
 - Whether or not the interviews will be transcribed, and by whom

¹ For example:

Grounded theory = Strauss and Corbin, Charmaz Phenomenology = van Manen
 Institutional ethnography = Dorothy Smith plus Campbell and Gregor
 Case study = Stake Narrative analysis = Riessman and Fraser Feminist = Reinharz

- How you will maintain confidentiality and any exceptions to confidentiality. (you may include a sample consent form, or you may wait to do this as part of the ethical review process). What other ethical and safety considerations might apply?
- How you will manage the data you are collecting (for example, how will you ensure that interview tapes, transcriptions and consent forms are safely stored?).
- How will you engage in and manage relationships with your research participants? What ethical and political considerations might apply here? Expect to reference some of the literature that has been written on how to ethically engage in and manage research relationships.
- Describe in detail when and how you will analyze the data. Some methodologies suggest that you begin data analysis with the first interview (grounded theory) while other methodologies are more flexible, and some methodologies instruct that all interviews should be finished before data analysis begins. What data analysis methods are prescribed by the methodology and how will you be applying them?

You should describe how you believe your research should be evaluated – how can you and others who read your research know that it is ‘good’ research? Does your chosen methodology prescribe the use of measures like ‘rigor’ and ‘validity’ in assessing research? If so, how will you measure rigor and validity? If not, what assessment and evaluation measures specific to your methodology will you be applying, and how will you apply them? Are there other measures you would also like to use for assessing whether your research is ‘good’ research? If so, what are they and how will you be applying them?

Keep in mind that, at the proposal stage, your methodology chapter is only a plan – a description of what you propose to do. It will only be in its final state in your completed thesis, where you will describe exactly how you actually went about collecting and analyzing your data.

TIME SAVING TIP: Do the first draft of the methodology part of your proposal after you have read ONLY a few of the recent major important theoretical works about your chosen methodology. This will allow you to develop a clear outline. Next, before you doing any more reading on methodology, review a few research studies, preferably on topics closely related to your own, that used this methodology and add to your outline information about why this methodology is a good ‘fit’ for your topic. Only after you have done both of these steps should you read any additional theoretical work about your methodology.

4. References

Your reference list should include all the references in your proposal, properly formatted in APA. You may want to use a program such as ENDNOTE or Reference Manager to assist you with establishing and maintaining a reference list. You will save a lot of time at the end of your thesis process by doing a good job on your reference list from the very beginning of preparing your thesis proposal. You will also save a lot of time by properly

formatting writing that you think will go into your thesis (for example, your proposal) from the very beginning.

What do you mean...rewrite it??!!

(WORKING WITH YOUR ADVISOR AND YOUR COMMITTEE)

It is absolutely normal that you will have to do re-writes, both in the proposal stage and as you prepare your final thesis (your advisor probably has had to do a lot of them – ask her sometime!). Keep this in mind so that you won't be offended or defensive when your advisor or committee asks for revisions. Writing both the thesis and the proposal are ongoing learning projects in which you write drafts, get feedback on your drafts, and exchange ideas with your advisor and committee. Usually, your advisor will want to be satisfied with your proposal and later with your thesis before it is circulated to the entire committee. So be prepared to do extensive editing. Here are some of the common reasons why a rewrite is necessary:

- You haven't provided enough information, or the right kind of information, to convince your advisor (committee) that you understand how to proceed with your project and are prepared to handle problems that might arise. (This is common at the proposal stage.)
- Your advisor and committee want your work to be as strong as it can be – essentially, a solid piece of work that could be considered for publication in a scholarly journal. Keeping in mind that this is the goal, your advisor/committee may think there is a clearer way to write something, or an alternative method of analyzing something, that you seem to have not considered.
- The rewrite process is intended to help you. Editing is part of the learning process. Making revisions will fine-tune your writing skills, so that you can express your ideas as clearly and powerfully as you can. If you are headed for a management, policy, research or academic career, this process will provide excellent experience for you. For example, in order to get published in academic journals, work is reviewed by outside reviewers and editors who almost never accept a piece as it is originally written.
- Your completed thesis is a reflection on you – but also a reflection on your advisor, your committee, the faculty and the university.
- Finally, keep in mind that your advisor/committee will be asking for rewrites because they want you to succeed. They want to be sure that you know what you are doing well enough to successfully negotiate the ethical review process; to successfully complete your project; and, finally, to successfully defend your thesis at your oral defense.

Generally, your work will go to your advisor/supervisor for feedback and rewriting before it is sent to the rest of the committee for feedback and/or approval. Usually, your proposal (and your thesis) will not go to the full committee until you and your advisor are satisfied that it is an acceptable and complete final draft. Sometimes, if one committee member has a particular area of expertise that your advisor does not have (for example, the methodology or the topic area), that section of the proposal (thesis) may go directly to that committee member first rather than to your advisor/supervisor. These arrangements should be worked out and agreed to by all committee members, and you as the student,

early on in the process. It is usually a good idea to confirm all these arrangements in writing with all committee members. It is also a good idea to make notes about any meetings you have with your supervisor, committee members, or the full committee.

NEXT STEPS

1. Ethics review: If you are gathering data by talking to or observing people (or by any method that involves some kind of interpersonal contact) you will need to get approval from the Ethics Review Board before proceeding with your research. Information about this process is available at http://www.research.uvic.ca/ethics/HREguidelines/overview_index.htm
2. No matter what your circumstances, you **MUST NOT** begin your research until you have received ethics approval for it. You should begin working on your ethics submission as soon as your committee has approved your proposal.
3. The thesis: The final draft of the thesis that you present to your advisor (committee) should use the formatting and reference style required by the university. It is often useful to have another person proofread your thesis before you hand in the final draft – often as the writer you are so familiar with the material that you do not see typos or places where information is missing. Your committee will probably need a minimum of two weeks with your thesis before your thesis defence – often, committee members need four weeks.
4. The defense: You should review guidelines for your thesis defense with your advisor. Generally, the student is expected to provide a 15-20 minute summary/review of the main points of the thesis, and then be prepared to answer questions about it and engage in a knowledgeable discussion of the literature, the research and the findings. After this, the committee will meet together, while you wait, and then let you know whether:
 - the thesis is acceptable as it is (extremely rare!)
 - the thesis requires minor changes
 - the thesis requires major changes
 - the thesis is unacceptable (it would be extremely unusual for your supervisor and committee to let a student go forward for defense if this is even a remote possibility)

You should look at the Graduate Studies website for useful information about ethics, thesis preparation, the oral defense and required forms:

<http://web.uvic.ca/gradstudies/research/thesis.html>