

A black and white photograph of a coastal landscape. The foreground shows a dark, silty shoreline with some sparse vegetation. A body of water occupies the middle ground, reflecting the sky. The background features a dark, forested hillside under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

Chapter 2

CONSTRUCTING YOUR THESIS

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Anne Ryan and Tony Walsh

Introduction

This chapter explores a number of questions most commonly asked by students as they embark on writing a thesis:

- What is a thesis?
- How is a thesis structured?
- How do I select a thesis topic?
- How do I formulate a research question or hypothesis?
- How can I be sure I take an objective angle in writing my thesis?
- How do I start my thesis?
- What is theory?
- What can I expect from my supervisor?
- What will I learn from writing a thesis?

What Is A Thesis?

A thesis is the written account of your systematic exploration of a particular topic or subject area. Research is essentially the term that encapsulates this process of exploration.

Postgraduate students, particularly those who have been out of education for some time, often view research as unfamiliar and difficult. The reality is that research is neither alien nor mysterious. Kirby and McKenna (1987:17) suggest that 'we already do research as we interact with the everyday world...where we focus on problems, ask questions, collect information and analyse and interpret data'. For example every time you plan a journey, shop for something you need or select from a menu, you seek out information, you sort it, you draw on what you already know, you take account of your available resources and you make choices. As a researcher you will use these same skills. The main difference is that in the research process you exercise these skills in more conscious and formalised ways and record what you do in writing.

Student Comment:

Doing the research on my chosen topic was actually not much different from asking the kinds of questions we all ask from day to day about the things that interest us. I found that I pursued the research process in two parallel ways. First there was the reading on how to do research. Then there were conversations with family, friends and colleagues, snippets heard on the radio, random thoughts or reflections occurring while driving, falling asleep or daydreaming. I felt it was important to capture these and I kept a notebook at hand to jot down these rich but more random ideas. What I wrote wasn't always useful to put in my thesis but writing things down helped me to get used to recording what I was thinking and I found myself becoming more alert to everything.

A more formal definition of research suggests that it is a process of critical enquiry carried out in a systematic way. These key words are elaborated in the box that follows.

Research is a **process** of **critical enquiry** undertaken in a **systematic** way.

Process implies an activity that proceeds in stages. This means that there is a clear step-by-step procedural route followed by the researcher and clearly evident to the person reading the completed thesis. It is important for the researcher to remember that while the underlying approach is a step-by-step one, this does not necessarily imply a linear progress. Each new discovery can generate revisions in other parts of the project.

Critical implies interrogation, analysis and judgement. It implies the recognition and questioning of underlying assumptions - both your own and those of others, including the experts you will encounter. Words such as "analysis" and "analytic" are embodied in the concept of **critical**. While good research must always accurately and creatively describe and chronicle, it must also explore the reasons and conditions that cause events to take place. It's not just about asking the *who* and *what* questions; it also requires you to look at the *how* and *why* questions.

Enquiry is where there is a focus on a particular topic of interest, which needs to be purposeful in that it contributes to, draws on and/or questions what is currently known within a specific field of study.

Systematic is the necessity of looking at your research in terms of clear stages that need to be dealt with in a logical and orderly fashion. This approach allows you to construct order out of what could easily become chaos if not consciously managed in a systematised way.

How Is A Thesis Structured?

The structure of a thesis follows a fixed format, although aspects of that format may vary somewhat depending on the topic being explored and the norms of the department where you are studying.

The main body of the thesis is constructed in three parts. The first part sets the scene for the research question you have decided to investigate and gives a general background to it including what is already known about the topic. It also includes a rationale for your choice of research question. The central part of the thesis presents your research and a discussion of what you have discovered. The final part explores the meaning and relevance of your findings in light of what is already known about the topic.

While these three parts perform different functions they are essentially interdependent. The thread that links them is your research topic. The first and last parts serve to frame your research. Within each part there may be one or more chapters depending on the size of your thesis and the requirements of the department to which you are attached. When writing a chapter of the thesis it is important to be conscious of the section to which it most appropriately belongs. Once you locate the chapter appropriately it is possible to stay focused on its function within the overall structure of the thesis.

In addition to these three central parts, every thesis also contains a number of additional pieces. You will need a title page, a list of acknowledgements, an abstract and a table of contents. These come before the main text. Appendices and references come after the text. As these pieces are usually compiled when the thesis is nearing completion, they are outlined in detail in Chapter Seven of this book.

It is always a good idea to look at other people's theses, in order to get an idea of the various ways that students lay out their chapters and structure their work. You may get access to these through the department where you are studying or you can consult theses in the library.

The first task in developing a thesis is to select a topic.

How Do I Select A Thesis Topic?

When selecting a thesis topic there are three key points to bear in mind:

- (a) select a topic that interests you;
- (b) select a topic that is relevant to your field of study;
- (c) select a topic that is amenable to academic research in the context of a thesis.

(a) select a topic that interests you

While a thesis is an academic research exercise it offers you an opportunity to indulge your curiosity and to find out more about a topic in which you are really interested. There is a common misconception that a thesis topic must be highly technical, or very difficult. This is not the case. However, what is vitally important is your relationship to the topic. Ideally you should find the topic fascinating.

Student Comment:

Everyone is advised when choosing a thesis topic to go for something you are passionate about. This is so valid; at least then you are unlikely to end up bored stiff by the topic and completely unmotivated to keep going.

At the very least the topic you pick needs to hold your interest over the length of time it takes to complete your thesis. If you are undertaking a Masters degree you may well have to live with this topic for between one and two years. For a PhD you will spend a minimum of three years with the topic and perhaps much longer. Hence it has to be something that is likely to sustain your enthusiasm and curiosity.

(b) select a topic that is relevant to your field of study

The second consideration to bear in mind is that your thesis topic needs to be relevant to your area of study. All theses are meant to add to what is already known in a specific subject area. A thesis may do this by:

- Providing new or innovative analyses of current thinking;
- Combining information from various sources to reveal new conclusions;
- Exploring aspects of a subject not previously studied or widely known.

Student Question:

I was really excited about my thesis topic on the information needs of adults returning to learning. Now I've discovered that someone in a different department did a thesis on an almost identical topic two years ago. Do I need to pick another topic?

Answer:

Not necessarily. In fact you are really fortunate that work has already been done on this topic. This will be a useful source for you to consult alongside other writing in the area. The fact that the thesis exists allows you to refine your research question so that you build on what has already been done. The list of references at the end of the 'similar' thesis will also be very useful for your literature review. Every researcher brings their unique life experience and understanding to bear on their research and this invariably means that two theses on a similar topic will result in new and different insights. Discuss this further with your supervisor.

(c) select a topic that is amenable to academic research in the context of a thesis

Finally, you need to get some idea about the availability of information on the topic that interests you. You may have a very interesting topic, which is relevant to your course of study and about which you have a passionate curiosity, but it may be difficult to find relevant literature, or to conduct your research within the timeframe available to you. If this is the case now is the time to either reconsider your topic or refocus on an aspect of it that is amenable to your purpose.

There are two common difficulties that students encounter when selecting a thesis topic:

- 'I just can't come up with a thesis topic. I really can't think of anything to write about'

and:

- 'I have a lot of ideas. How do I decide which of these is the one to work on?'

These are very common dilemmas. If either applies to you try the following exercises.

Exercises:

Selecting a thesis topic

If you have no ideas...

1. Write down all the subjects that you can think of which interest you.
2. Now take a look at the various areas of your life, work/professional, recreational, family, the groups you belong to, the interests you have, significant events in your life history and so forth. List these.
3. Now ponder the following:
 - Are there any themes that recur in both areas? If so note these.
 - Which of the emergent subjects most interest or engage you? Make a note of these.
 - Are there areas that you always thought you'd like to follow up if only you had the time? Write these down too.

Now look at your lists and note:

- Which of the listed areas most capture your interest?
- Which would you really like to know more about?
- Which have you questions relating to?

Of these, prioritise:

- Which have a clear relevance to your field of study?
- Which are most accessible in terms of information?
- Which do you feel a sense of passion for?

Now make a shortlist of the three or four topics which most fulfil these criteria.

4. Talk over your shortlist with your supervisor.

If you have too many ideas...

1. List all of your ideas.
2. Prioritise them in order of your interest or passion.
3. Prioritise them next in terms of their relevance to your field of study.
4. Now prioritise them in terms of accessibility of information.
5. Finally create a short list of the three topics that are most amenable in terms of interest, relevance and accessibility.
6. Talk over your shortlist with your supervisor.

Remember that your research topic can emerge from interests that do not at first glance appear to offer scope for an academic study. The following example illustrates how an MA student formulated a topic from life experience.

Student Question:

My paternal grandfather was in the Old IRA and at every family occasion his medals were proudly taken from above the big sideboard in our sitting room, for all the family to admire. In contrast my mother's father was in the British Army. He died when she was twelve. Back in Donegal, where his widow and young family lived, the silence that surrounded any mention of his job in England made me aware from childhood that this was something we should not talk about. My mother told me recently that, as the child of a deceased British army soldier, she could have got a scholarship to go to secondary school in England. The local priest advised her mother against following this up. As a result my mother never went to secondary school and is still bitter about this.

Now I realise that this ambivalence to the part in history my maternal grandfather played, was not unusual in the Ireland I grew up in. But for years I've been fascinated by my grandfather's story and that of the other men who joined the British Army. I suppose what particularly gripped me was how that particular experience was not only written out of history, but how this process left a legacy of pain and bitterness in our family. I'd really love to be able to do my MA thesis on this, but I don't know how to tackle it.

Answer:

This student decided his interest in this topic lay in exploring and naming the societal influences that privileged one set of experiences and marginalised the other. His focus allowed him to examine the societal power discourses that serve to create heroes or anti-heroes. (Discourses are covered in Chapters One and Six)

Once you have identified your topic, your next task is to formulate a research question or make a statement (hypothesis) that encapsulates the specific aim of your thesis.

How Do I Formulate A Research Question Or Hypothesis?

In order to formulate your research question or hypothesis you will need to read recent publications dealing with your topic and/or talk to people active in the field with a view to identifying current issues and concerns.

Student Question:

I've picked a really interesting topic to do my thesis on – adult education in Ireland since World War Two. I think I'd like to do a comparative study between Ireland and the rest of the world. My problem is there are hundreds of books and articles written. I've over twenty books out of the library just now and I feel I'm drowning in information.

Answer:

This student has identified a topic and now needs to formulate a research question that establishes the precise parameters of her intended area of study. To do this she needs to identify (i) the specific aspects of adult education that she will focus on and (ii) the countries she wants to consider. She will need to establish a rationale for selecting both the aspects and the countries.

Establishing your research question is challenging. Your question or hypothesis needs to be precise so that you do not find yourself grappling with a morass of material because you are not sure what exactly is relevant to your thesis. The question also needs to be feasible given the constraints of time and the prescribed size of your thesis.

It is important to point out that while we talk of a research question, research is rarely about coming up with a definitive answer to that question. Instead it is about gaining new insights that further our understanding of that aspect of the topic which you have chosen to investigate.

Bear in mind that the hypothesis or question once chosen rarely remains static; it will change, evolve and be refined throughout the thesis. Although it will be constantly honed

it is not possible to begin to compile the thesis until the first version is clear in your mind. Many students find it useful to write their initial question or hypothesis on a card and put it somewhere where they can look at it regularly, replacing the old version with the more up to date form as it emerges.

Student Question:

I set out with a particular idea for my thesis and now find it is developing in a completely different way. I felt very certain of my research question as I began my research. The more I read the less certain I become. Now most of my views and theories have been turned upside down. It's a very confusing time. Should I go on or pick something safer?

Answer:

This is a common difficulty. Every researcher encounters shifts in their own perspectives. As you glean more information on any topic it is usual to question your original choices. Learning to manage this sort of uncertainty is important. If you return to your hypothesis or research question regularly and modify or refine it in light of your reading and reflection you will incorporate the shifts in your perspective that come as you engage with your subject. Constant revision will keep you focused and in control. As stated earlier research is a process rather than a linear progression. Each new discovery can generate revisions including a refining of the research question. There are circumstances when it is appropriate to change to a totally different topic, however you can be assured that whatever research question you select within that new topic, it will also need to be refined as you proceed.

The following exercise is useful in helping to refine your research topic and to establish the precise focus of your thesis.

Exercise:

Refining your research topic.

Compose a sentence to complete each of the following using no more than twenty words.

- I am studying...
- Because I want to find out who/why/how ...
- In order to understand how/why/what...

Completing the sentences is difficult particularly at the start of the research process. Most researchers will be dissatisfied with what they write until they are almost finished the thesis. This is due to the dynamic nature of research. The task of thinking through these statements and finding words to describe what you are doing is part of the process of refining your focus. By completing these sentences every so often, you can test your progress. It is particularly useful to get someone else to listen to or to read your statements and comment on the clarity and feasibility of your aims.

How Can I Be Sure I Take An Objective Angle In Writing My Thesis?

Students often ask whether their beliefs and attitudes will influence the research process. As mentioned in the introduction to this book, the authors view research through a post-positivist approach. Within post-positivism the notion of an objective or detached researcher is seen as a myth. It is recognised that as a researcher you bring your life experiences, values and ways of viewing the world to bear on how you approach any topic. This is considered to be the case with even the most logical and deductive questions, methods, and approaches – your biographical affinities and experiences are always at play, and they influence the questions asked and the approach taken. The topic, the specific questions, the data, the analysis of the data and the significance of the findings are all filtered through your frames of reference or meaning repertoires. In a post-positivist approach your presence as the researcher is considered a strength. Crucially, however, you need to show an awareness of your meaning repertoires, and to display the capacity to reflect critically on them.

Student Comment:

It's very disconcerting to have your view of your subject, and lots of other assumptions about the world dismantled; but I suppose it's in this dismantling that you learn.

We have already discussed the importance of developing an awareness of your own epistemological and theoretical stance in Chapter One of this book. As you become aware of your frames of reference or meaning repertoires you are defining this stance. You need to be conscious of it as you work on your literature review and as you analyse and write up your data. You need to draw attention to your stance and to its significance in the introduction to your thesis. Explain how you were drawn to the topic you have chosen, how your professional background and/or personal story has influenced both your choice of research question and your response to it.

How Do I Start My Thesis?

Student Comment:

When I was writing my thesis I compared its opening structure to a novel. This involved setting the scene in the introduction and using this as an opportunity to grab the attention of the reader, to lure them into the subject by titillating their curiosity to find out more by reading on.

What should be covered in the introduction?

The introduction is one of the most significant sections of a thesis. It needs to tell the reader *what* the thesis is about. It also needs to define *why* the research question is worthy of attention and to assert *why* it is relevant to your broad area of study. Finally it needs to tell the reader exactly *how* the thesis is structured.

In theses that are over 15,000 words in length it is usual for the introduction to form a stand alone chapter; in shorter theses it generally forms a section within the first chapter. In either instance its purpose is to:

- Outline your research question/s;
- Explain the relevance of your chosen area of research both for yourself and within your general field of study;
- Describe how your thesis is structured.

Essentially the introduction should expand the thesis title and describe the substance of your thesis in a nutshell, explaining the significance of your research question to you its author, as well as to the wider field of study. It should also include an outline of the broad areas of theory and related research to be discussed in the literature review. It should describe the design of the study. You may also include your methodological approach and your techniques for collecting data (see Chapter Five for a detailed discussion on the possible alternative locations). It is also useful if the introduction sets out in brief the content of the chapters that follow. Your introduction should provide a smooth transition into the main body of the thesis. In addition the way you write your introduction should enthrall your readers to such an extent that they feel compelled to explore the heart of the work (Day, 1996).

In summary the Introduction has seven main purposes:

1. It introduces your topic and research question;
2. It stimulates the reader's interest;
3. It gives the content of the thesis in a nutshell;
4. It defines the significance of your topic to the your broader field of study;
5. It makes links between the choice of topic and your personal and professional experience;
6. It sets out in brief the content of the chapters that follow;
7. It provides a smooth transition into the main body of the thesis.

When should the introduction be written?

The introduction is usually drafted in the early stages of writing your thesis and is then periodically revisited and refined as the thesis evolves. It is never possible to finalise it until the thesis itself is at an advanced stage. While the introduction needs to provide a guide to the whole thesis there needs to be a particularly close correlation between it and the last chapter of the thesis; the introduction signals where you intend to go and the concluding chapter indicates what you have discovered on that journey. The evolving nature of the introduction very clearly reflects the fact that a thesis is a work in progress right up to its final moments. Each chapter and the sections within chapters are interdependent. If you make a change in one area of your thesis this will very likely effect a number of other areas including the introduction.

Many researchers do not even begin to construct the introduction until they are writing the conclusions to their research. While this is an option, there are advantages to drafting the introduction early in the process and reworking it as the thesis progresses. The main benefit is that each time you attempt to articulate the purpose of your thesis it serves to focus your thinking and raise the kinds of concerns and doubts that help to refine your research question. Revisiting the draft introduction on a regular basis also serves to keep you focused on your research question. As you progress it is likely that you will shift the focus of your research and adjust your question accordingly. If you have a working introduction that you amend and change as you go along you will be better able to track any subtle or more dramatic changes that occur.

Before your thesis is completed you need to check that everything outlined in your introduction is included in the body of the work, and that each substantive point made in the body of the text is referred to in the introduction.

What Is Theory?

Theory refers to hypotheses that explain particular phenomena.

There are two distinct bodies of theory you need to engage with when researching – firstly, theories pertaining to your thesis topic and secondly, theories pertaining to the research process. The first of these refers to the knowledge that already exists around your topic and to knowledge which may add background and depth to your research. All academic research is concerned with moving scholarship forward; with building on what is already known. This means that as a researcher you are required to familiarise yourself with the key thinkers in your area of interest. You will need to know the issues on which there is agreement among these thinkers and those on which there is disagreement and the reasons for these disagreements. You will also need to be aware of shifts in thinking in the past and even more importantly those that are current. It is useful to identify these early on in the thesis construction process in order to contextualise your piece of work.

The second set of theory relates to the research process itself. Research is a formal process. The credibility of your research is dependent on how you gather and utilise information and your awareness of what is considered best practice with regard to the specific methods you have used. For example if you use interviews or questionnaires to glean information for your thesis you need to know how to construct questions, how to administer the questionnaire or how to conduct the interview and technical information of this kind. You also need to consider philosophical issues that generally pertain to less tangible issues such as the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. When you construct your thesis you have to take account of both these aspects of the data gathering process. Your thesis will record how you conducted your research and you will refer to writers who have identified how your approach takes account of what they have described as best practice. Chapters One and Four in this book deal in detail with methodological considerations.

Students often worry about theory. As a mature student returning to postgraduate studies you have probably selected a topic that you know from a practitioner point of view. You may, however, be less familiar with theories that inform this practice.

Theory provides a lens through which you view your particular topic. All academic research is grounded in theory. Your thesis is no different. Once you have selected a research

question you need to consider the theoretical framework which will best enable you to explore that question. Theory provides a range of general explanations that have been found useful in providing answers to 'how' and 'why' questions. For example in addressing the question "How do people learn?" or "Why do organisations behave in particular ways?", a particular theoretical framework will provide a discrete range of explanations. These will enable you to tease out and explore the issues that lie behind these questions. Essentially theory allows you to become an observer, to compare and contrast and to come up with differing explanations about a topic or event. It provides a structure to discuss what you observe and to speculate on its meaning. It allows you to put order on and deal with complexity. Theory is necessary in order to

get some grip on complexity, to narrow the problem, to develop parallels with other situations that may seem different, but provide the basis for new ways of looking at things. Only theory can give us access to unexpected questions and ways of changing situations from within (Schatz and Walker, 1995:107).

In your writing you need to make the theories you use explicit.

Specific disciplines have their own dominant theoretical perspectives. Psychological or sociological theories will provide differing vantage points from which to consider a research question. Each will tend to highlight different aspects of what is being examined, will focus on different questions and will emphasise specific facets within their explanation. Psychological theory is likely to highlight patterns of individual response; sociological theory is likely to focus on social or group patterns. The choice of theory, which will offer an appropriate lens for your study, is akin to focusing your telescope on a particular piece of landscape whose detail, terrain, light and shade you wish to explore. In selecting the theoretical framework through which to view your subject you need to be guided by the dominant theories in your field of study, the aspects of the topic that the theories highlight, and their relevance to the thesis question or hypothesis you have chosen.

It is never possible to consider all aspects of an issue. In selecting a particular theoretical framework you are explicitly indicating the aspects of the topic that you wish to highlight. In analysing a particular topic for your thesis you may need to draw on a number of theories.

Student Comment:

I had a great idea for my thesis and was really excited about it. Then I saw my supervisor. He told me that while my thesis proposal would make a really good project report it wouldn't make a thesis because it lacked any theoretical framework. What is a theoretical framework and why does a thesis have to have one? I guess I'm asking what is the difference between a thesis and a long essay or report? I think if I could figure that out in my head before I start it would save time in the long run.

Students undertaking research for the first time often remark that they do not know 'where to put the theory' in their thesis. In making this kind of remark, they are working on the assumption that there is one special place for theory and that it should be confined to this area alone. On the contrary, theoretical considerations should form a constant theme in your thesis. While they usually come under more intense scrutiny in the literature review, they should by no means be restricted to that part of the study. You need to refer to them in your introduction, explore them in the literature review, refer to them again as you discuss your methodology, and, crucially, consider how useful they have been to you and how you have developed them, in the analysis and discussion of your data. You also need to make reference to them in your conclusions and recommendations.

What Can I Expect From My Supervisor?

As a postgraduate student you will be allocated a supervisor to support you in developing and completing your thesis. As well as being familiar with the subject matter of your thesis, your supervisor will have expertise in the process of constructing a thesis and in research methodology.

The supervisor has four distinct areas of responsibility:

1. To be familiar with the standard of thesis required for your programme of study;
2. To establish a level of rapport that is sufficient for you both to engage in dialogue where ideas can be generated, developed, challenged and refined;
3. To create an environment which facilitates you in generating the best thesis you are capable of at this particular stage of your academic career;
4. To maintain an observer position so as to provide you with objective comment.

Supervision provides a learning context in which the specifics of your thesis provide the medium through which the teaching/learning is mediated. In this arrangement your particular research learning needs are paramount.

In general your supervisor will:

- meet with you on a one-to-one basis to discuss your progress;
- discuss your ideas;
- read written drafts of your work;
- provide you with feedback;
- encourage you towards clarity of thinking and expression;
- help you to refine your ideas;
- question your thinking;
- invite you to critique your underlying assumptions;
- critique the structure of your work.

Proofreading and technical proficiency are *your* responsibility. Work presented to your supervisor for comment should already have been checked for grammar, spelling and syntax. It is often a good idea to find a colleague, friend or fellow student with a good eye for such detail to fulfil this task.

To make the best use of the supervision process you need to:

1. Stay in regular contact with your supervisor.
2. Prepare for your one-to-one sessions by
 - having clearly framed questions;
 - sending written material for comment ahead of the session;
 - being open to suggestion.
3. Bear in mind that your supervisor needs time to
 - read your work;
 - formulate a useful response.

In the course of your supervision you can expect your supervisor to challenge your thinking and encourage you to fulfil your potential to construct a meaningful thesis.

What Will I Learn From Writing A Thesis?

Writing a thesis offers you an opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of your topic, of the research process and of yourself.

Learning about your topic

In the course of writing your thesis you will read widely in your subject area. As a result you will develop a richer and more complex understanding of your topic and the wider context in which it is embedded. This means that you will become familiar with current thinking, and know the issues on which different commentators agree or disagree. Invariably students comment on the breadth and depth of knowledge they have gleaned on their chosen topic by the time they have finished their thesis. They also note that this sense of new learning was retrospective and was not necessarily evident as they were immersed in the process.

Learning about research

Writing a thesis requires you to gain a comprehensive understanding of research methodologies. In order to address your research question you are required to choose appropriate methodologies to enable you to explore your subject. This means that you are required to gain an appreciation of the various possible options open to you and in the course of the thesis you are called on to justify your choice of methodology. You will also learn how to gather data and present and analyse your findings. This learning, which is necessary to produce a thesis is also particularly useful for those who are required to conduct, evaluate or commission research in their work environment.

Learning about yourself

Writing a thesis requires you to view and critique your topic from a number of different perspectives. As you interrogate your topic you will also find that you are beginning to question the assumptions that have been central to your ways of seeing the world. While you may not necessarily change your views you will become conscious of them and aware of the assumptions that underlie them. This allows for the possibility of personal change and development.