WRITING YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL

9.00 – 12.00pm, Friday 16th March 2007

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Venue: Guild Seminar Rm 2, 1st Floor Guild Village

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http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/learning
http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au
WORKSHOP OUTLINE

9.00 – 9.10: Introduction and overview of workshop objectives

9.10 – 9.30: Why write a Research Proposal?

9.30 – 9.45: Differences between masters and PhD Research Proposals

9.45 – 10.00: Cornerstones of the Research Proposal

10.00 – 10.15; The requirement of originality

10.15 – 10.30: The elements of a good research proposal (i)

10.30 – 10.45: Morning Tea break

10.45 – 11.15: The elements of a good research proposal (ii)

11.15 – 11.45: Review of exemplary Research Proposals

11.45 – 12.00: Overview of the review process
WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- To consider the role of proposals in the research process
- To examine the differences between a Masters and PhD Research proposal.
- To understand the cornerstones of a Research proposal.
- To identify the key components of a UWA research proposal
- To review some exemplary Research Proposals from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.
- To recognise what is involved in the review process
- To clarify your thinking in relation to your own research proposal

Recap of Time Limits for completion of a Research Proposal

University General Rule 3.1.15 states that:

(1) A candidate for the degree of master by research (by thesis) must provide a research proposal to the Board for approval, through the head of school and supervisor(s) within four months from the date of first enrolment for the degree if the enrolment is full-time, or the equivalent as determined by the Board if the enrolment is part-time or a mixture of full- and part-time.

(2) A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, other than one upgrading from a master's by research (by thesis) programme, must provide a research proposal to the Board for approval, through the appropriate head of school and supervisor(s) within six months from the date of first enrolment for the degree if enrolment is full-time or the equivalent as determined by the Board if the enrolment is part-time or a mixture of full- and part-time.
Why Write a Research Proposal?

There are two good reasons why students are obligated to undertake the task of writing an effective and comprehensively planned Research Proposal:

- Firstly, this is a document that presents the case for an idea, your idea, and, because a Masters or PhD research project requires a large investment of time, energy and resources – by both you and the University - more experienced researchers must be persuaded that the idea (formulated as a research question) warrants this sort of investment. Why should this be the case? It is because each new project contains an element of risk or uncertainty. What you are proposing in this idea of yours has probably never been done before, indeed, this is what makes it significant and important. So it is logical that we should do everything possible to maximise your chances of success. The proposal approval system exists to ensure that you have made a realistic, well formulated judgement as to the significance and viability of your research question.

- Second, the Research Proposal outlines a convincing plan to answer that question using the principles of academic enquiry relevant to your discipline. Each of the key elements within the proposal contributes, in an integrated fashion, to this overall plan of action. For instance, you will need to have a method in mind for collecting and interpreting the data, a budget which shows you have considered (and have access to) the funds needed to bring your project to fruition, and a realistic timeline identifying the various stages of the research and the dates by which these will be completed. You must also show that you will have adequate supervision over the course of the project, and that you have considered any pertinent ethical issues. Overall, what a successful thesis proposal demonstrates is that you understand the steps that are involved in turning a good idea into a thesis.
A Proposal is a persuasive document that:

- establishes that there is a research question that needs to be answered
- outlines a plan for answering that question using the principles of academic inquiry relevant to your discipline
- is a plan to answer that question using available resources
- outlines expectations, commitments and obligations that the student and the University have to each other

The aim of the thesis proposal is to convince the Graduate Research School that:

- there is a need for the research: it is significant and important
- You have an organized plan in place for collecting and interpreting the data you will need to solve your research problem/question
- you are contributing something important to the field
- the topic is feasible in terms of availability of funding, equipment, supervisors and data
- the research can be completed in the expected time period
- Ethical issues have been considered and approval has been given

What a successful thesis proposal demonstrates is that, regardless of the eventual idea you pursue, you understand the steps involved in turning it into a thesis.
Exercise One:
What benefits will you gain from preparing a research proposal?

Exercise Two:
How might you prepare yourself to write a useful research proposal?
What is the difference between a Masters and a Doctorate thesis proposal?

**For PhD:** Rule 3.3.3 specifies that a PhD study must make a "substantial and original contribution to scholarship, for example through the discovery of knowledge, the formulation of theories or the innovative re-interpretation of known data and established ideas". In what way is the proposed study expected to fulfil this requirement?

**For Masters:** Rule 3.2.3 specifies that a Masters study must be a "substantial work generally based on independent research which shows a sound knowledge of the subject of the research, evidence of the exercise of some independence of thought and the ability of expression in clear and concise language".

**Research Proposal Differences**

It is important to recognise that regardless of whether you are writing a Masters or Doctorate Research Proposal, you will need to address the same questions, in the same format, as is outlined in the Graduate Research School’s [Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal](#). The only exception being that in section A. (Proposed Study) you will address either question 2 or 3, depending on whether you are a Doctoral or Masters candidate. If you are undertaking a PhD, for example, you are required to demonstrate how it is your proposed study will make a 'substantial and original contribution to knowledge'. If you are enrolled in the Masters program, then you are expected to achieve, by the end of your project, a ‘sound knowledge of the subject of the research, evidence of the exercise of some independent thought and the ability of expression in clear and concise language’.

**Reviewers’ Expectations**

Clearly, however, the reviewers’ expectation in regards to the scope of the intended project will be different for a PhD project when compared to that of a Masters. A Masters by Research study for a fulltime student is expected to take 2 years. Therefore, the scale of the project should logically be less than for a PhD (which carries a maximum period of candidature of four years for fulltime students). This will be particularly evident in the sections where you are required to detail the aims and methods of the project, as well as the timeline and the budget.

**Confirmation of Candidature**

Another important difference is the requirement for PhD students to list a series of milestones that need to be completed in the first 12 months, for candidature in the PhD to be confirmed. The particular milestones are a matter for discussion between students and supervisors, taking account of [guidelines and requirements set by the School](#) in which the research is being supervised. There is no such requirement for students undertaking a Masters by Research.
All Research Proposals should be divided into sections and formatted as set out in the following. No more than fifteen pages should provide sufficient detail.

An outline for your research proposal
For a copy of the guidelines see: http://postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/forms?f=109740

A. Proposed study

1. Title

Your title should reflect the thesis and capture its content in one phrase! (The same can be said of chapter titles and chapter sub-headings). Titles, therefore, should reflect the research question or proposition. The title should identify the purpose of the study, which is defined by the research question. The research question has a ripple effect in this way. Take care when composing it, as this will have a great effect on the nature of the overall dissertation.

Good titles are those that reflect the thesis statement or question, for instance:
- The role of the bull in Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival into Greek religion.
- The importance of religion to psychiatric patients: do religious clients relapse more or less often than non religious clients?

Not so good titles include those that do not reflect the thesis statement or question)
- Encoding the National Imagination: Civil Religion in Turkey
- The impact of twelve hour shifts in the workplace
- Factors in the successful performance of strategic alliances
- Deep ecology: the ghost of Nazism?

Student exercise: Can you produce a working title for your thesis? What key words need to be included to accurately reflect your work?
2). Outline how the proposed study fulfils the requirement of originality (rule 3.3.3)

For PhD: Rule 3.3.3 specifies that a PhD study must make a "substantial and original contribution to scholarship, for example through the discovery of knowledge, the formulation of theories or the innovative reinterpretation of known data and established ideas". In what way is the proposed study expected to fulfil this requirement?

Unfortunately, there is often little or no discussion between students and their supervisors as to what constitutes originality in the PhD. However, Phillips (1992) has listed fourteen different definitions of originality from students, supervisors and thesis examiners which might be useful.

- Carrying out empirical work that hasn’t been done before.
- Making a synthesis that hasn’t been done before.
- Using already known material but with a new interpretation.
- Trying out something in this or another country that has only previous been undertaken in other places.
- Taking a particular technique and applying it to a new area.
- Bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue.
- Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies
- Looking at areas that people in the discipline haven’t looked at before.
- Adding to knowledge in a way that hasn’t been done before
- Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time.
- Continuing (extending) a previously original piece of work.
- Providing a single original technique, observation, or result in an otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research.

Make sure you are explicit in identifying how your research fulfils the requirements of university rule 3.3.3

e.g. “This study takes the next logical step in integrating…….”
“This study will extend…”
“Until now it has not been possible to…. however ….”
“Until now ……has not been understood, however…..”
“…..has been overlooked in previous studies of…”
“Previous work was limited by ……, we propose to…”
“It has been suggested by previous research that …..be investigated further”

Can you state concisely how your thesis will fulfil the requirement that it make a ‘substantial and original contribution to scholarship’?

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B. Research Plan

(i) Preparation of a research timetable
The most important consideration in timetabling is creating deadlines for each stage of your work. In so doing, you can construct a schedule so that you can work steadily towards the completion of your project. Remember the workload is extensive and must be structured. To do this, you must be aware of important dates (such as the submission date).

Some Important Tips
- Make sure you understand the sequence of tasks that is required by your school. Some of these have time requirements or are ‘dead-line driven tasks’, for instance, the research proposal will have a final date for submission relatively early in the year. This is the same for ethics clearance if it is required. Chart these.
- Refer to your thesis structure and identify those components that can be tackled in the initial stages of the project – the literature review and methodology chapters are good examples. You can begin scheduling these into your timetable early.

Research program timelines usually begin from the date you enrol until the date you expect to submit your thesis. The time-line can be formatted as a table or list.

(ii) Identify the specific aims of the project

Steps in selecting a topic for research
i). Identify the broad area of study - This is the time to read in these areas to get a feel for what has been done and where gaps exist. Consult with your supervisor and draw on their expert knowledge or look at recently completed theses in the field to get an idea of cutting edge ideas. This is part of the ‘narrowing process’.

ii). Identify or list potential research questions- Look for an issue that you think is intriguing, that you are enthusiastic about, one that sparks your curiosity. Your reading can then become more focused; journal articles will become increasing important at this stage. At some point you will become convinced that something is ‘problematic’ in your field and you will want to make it the focus of your research. Warning – don’t jump in just yet!

iii). Seriously consider the feasibility of the topic - Consult with your supervisor and consider these points:
- Availability and access to data and information.
- Is the study suitable for a research project such as the PhD?
- Will I, in choosing this topic, have adequate supervision?
- Will there be a problem with ethics clearance?

Student exercise: Try to clearly articulate the objective(s) of your research by stating these to someone in your group. If you are unable to, construct a list of questions you would like to answer in you research and rank these in order of importance.
(iii). Methodology
Show that the methods you propose to use are appropriate and workable; and that you have (or have a strategy to acquire) the skills to enable you to apply these methods effectively. By 'methodology' we mean a body of practices and a set of working methods used to engage in an enquiry (in particular for gathering, presenting and analysing data).

**Student Exercise:** Can you identify the methods you will use in your particular research? Remember, you need to show how these are appropriate for your research (you can refer to methods used in similar research).
(iv). Avoiding duplication:
Ph.D. students need to show how the work they are embarking upon will make an original contribution to scholarship in the field. To this end, you must provide evidence that your project will not duplicate any work previously done. A very concise (i.e. no more than two pages) literature review is probably the most effective way of showing that you have established for yourself a *research niche* by:

- Indicating gaps in previous research
- Raising questions about previous research
- Showing how previous knowledge needs to be extended

### C. Scholars

Here you must identify some of the leading scholars in the field (perhaps five or six) particularly some whose published work you have studied. If possible include at least one from Australia. Provide contact details for those scholars nominated, including email addresses if known. Also provide a concise biography and list their major publications – at least as they pertain to your research field. For instance:

### D. Bibliography

Candidates should be able to show familiarity with the literature in the field. In this section you should reference landmark studies and major authors. You should also include some of the most recent publications
## E. Facilities

(i). What is the School/University agreeing to provide? What access do you have to facilities outside your School? Do you have access to facilities that are essential to the successful completion of your project? Consider such things as:

- Special equipment – camera & film; mini-tape recorder; batteries; computer software; etc.
- Special skills or techniques -
- Special literature -
- Statistical advice -

| Student exercise: compile a list of facilities you will need during the course of your research. Sort these into the categories listed above. |

(ii) Provide details of your supervisors, for instance:
F. Estimated Costs

This is very important. Consider incidental costs such as photocopying, computing, telephone, administrative as well as costs specific to the research project.

G. Confidentiality and Intellectual Property

Very important – seek advice if necessary. (UWA has a legal office). For more details see:

H. Approvals

Specify what approvals you may need, and outline your plan for obtaining them.

Evaluating Some Proposals

Look through the example proposals you have been given. Which is the most convincing? Why?

What makes a good proposal?” A good proposal stems from a good concept. The best proposals are those to which the reviewers respond, "Of course, I wish I had thought of that!"

What is Involved in the Review Process?

Once you have written your Research Proposal and attached the completed Research Proposal Coversheet, you are required to submit two copies of both documents to the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office, Hackett Hall (M358). Make sure that you, your coordinating supervisor and Head of School sign the Research Proposal Coversheet where indicated prior to submission. Your Research Proposal will then be checked by an administrative officer to ensure that all the relevant sections outlined in the Research Proposal Guidelines have been completed. Your Proposal will then be forwarded to a member of the Board of the Graduate Research School for review.

The Board of the Graduate Research School

One of the responsibilities of the Board of the Graduate Research School is to review and approve Research Proposals presented by candidates in the PhD and Masters by Research degree courses. These Research Proposals include those submitted as part of candidates’ applications for upgrade from enrolment in a Master to enrolment in the PhD.

Normally, a Research Proposal is reviewed by a single member of the Board. The Board member who reviews the Research Proposal will not be a member of staff of the School in which the candidate is enrolled, but will normally be from a cognate discipline area.

By the time your Research Proposal reaches its reviewer, the expectation is that it would have gone through an internal assessment process within your School. Once again, the signatures of both your coordinating supervisor and Head of School on the Coversheet confirm that the information contained in the Research Proposal is complete and correct, that you have access to resources and will be provided with adequate supervision, and that you have obtained all necessary approvals in relation to your proposed study.

However, approval by the Board is still considered to be a vital part of the University’s cycle of accountability, and represents a formal agreement between you as candidate, your supervisor, your School and the Board of the Graduate Research School. We might consider this to be a process of shared decision-making. Sharing the decision-making takes maximum advantage of the reviewer’s extensive research experience, and, because Board members are privy to all thesis examiners’ reports for Higher Degrees by Research at UWA (including the comments and criticisms therein) they are in an ideal position to identify potential problems in the proposed research.

Once the reviewer has carefully read all aspects of the Research Proposal, they will indicate whether there are any problems or questions that need to be addressed before final approval is granted. If there are areas of significant concern, the candidate will be provided with written feedback to assist in revising the thesis. The response required may include a full revision of all or part of the Research Proposal before it is finally approved. If, on the other hand, there are no areas of concern, the Proposal will be approved in its
present form.

Board members reviewing Research Proposals are expected to evaluate, and to comment if appropriate, on any or all aspects of the Research Proposal. These include:

- The budget and funding issues
- Ethics and safety issues, and whether the appropriate approvals have been obtained.
- Conflicts of interest, for example, in the proposed arrangements for supervision
- Suitability of expertise of the proposed supervisors
- Appropriate use of references and absence of plagiarism
- Overall acceptability as a piece of academic writing
- Appropriateness of the project for the degree in which it is intended to be undertaken (in terms of scope, structure and originality)
- Any perceivable shortcomings in data analysis skills
- Appropriateness of, or anything that is potentially problematic in, the research design.

The process of review will generally take about three to four weeks. When your Research Proposal has been formally approved, a letter will be sent to you – and to both your coordinating supervisor and Head of School - confirming this. Administrative staff in the Graduate Research School will also place an electronic copy of your Research Proposal on your student record.