

# **Guideline for a PhD thesis \***

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## **Introduction**

This article is in three parts. The first offers some advice on setting out to do a PhD. The second examines the structure of a PhD. The third and final part summarises some useful things to keep in mind, considered from the perspective of the reader.

The purpose is to give a good impression of the layout, structure and form of a thesis. As the same time some advice is proffered on the do-don'ts of style, content, and purpose. The aim is to give you a preliminary idea of what is expected of a finished thesis by its readers and examiners (see Witcher 1990).

## **Preliminary desk and library research**

Find out all you can about the work that has been done before and see what the accepted style of research is for your area. When thinking of starting a PHD then the first step is to look at existing theses in your proposed subject-area. Look at theses which have used theory and methods that are similar to those you are proposing to use. PhDs dominate a student's life for some years – make sure that you really want to do it!

## **Develop a detailed research proposal to focus your ideas**

One of the reasons why so many PhDs fail to finish on time is that students do not focus their ideas early enough. You should arrange with a prospective supervisor a time-table for the first six months (or similar time which suits you both) to put together a detailed research proposal. Ideally you should then present its ideas to others who know something about the topic and the proposed research methods. Proposals have the following:

- **Rationale**  
Why the proposed research is important
- **Objective and results**  
A clear statement of what it is hoped to achieve through the research and what the results will be in terms of practical benefit and/or addition to knowledge.
- **The research idea you will use to guide the research**

A concise statement of what the research will investigate and why. The major insights expected, and if it is expected that the research will prove, disprove or discover any hypotheses, then these should be stated.

- **Previous work**  
A very brief indication of other work that has been done before on the topic, demonstrating the gaps that the proposed research will fill. This should refer to well-known pieces of research and not to information from textbooks.
- **Methodology**  
A brief account of how the proposed work might be carried out, with some indication of the proposed sources of information and research approach and methods.
- **Proposed timetable**  
A provisional outline of how the research will be completed in a proposed period of time, suggesting how many months will be spent on each of the various stages involved.
- **Qualifications**  
A note as to why you believe you are particularly qualified and suited to undertake this research.
- **Likely research success and extension of results**  
A note about the chances of success: what are likely to be the main problems, how when and where will the results of the research be publicised and written-up.

## **What a finished PhD thesis should look like**

The following is a list of the main considerations usually found in presented PhD theses. The numbers shown do not necessarily coincide with chapter numbers, but the thesis structure is likely to be based closely on this ordering of text materials.

1. An introduction.
2. Necessary subject-area background information.
3. Necessary theoretical background.
4. A critical review of other researchers' work and conclusions.
5. The thesis research approach and methods.
6. Presentations of evidence/findings.
7. Analysis of (6) in terms of (5).
8. Discussion of (7) in the framework provided by (3) and (4).
9. Conclusions and recommendations.
10. A reflexive account of how the research process qualifies conclusions in (9), given (5).

