

A Brief Guide and Outline for Drafting a Doctoral Proposal.

(Prepared by Professor Peter Stokes - peter.stokes@dmu.ac.uk)

The proposal should be expected to be at least approximately seven pages long not including diagrams, figures and reference list. They is much material and ground to present and cover.

The indicative key sections and headings which are intended to provide prompts and points for a proposal are mapped out below:

Motivation

- Relate the passion and drive that is motivating you to undertake the study
- Reflect the questions: Why this topic?, Why you?. Why now?

Title

- Think carefully about the nouns you use in your title. Often this will mean that your literature review will have to address them. Choose your words advisedly and carefully.
- Think about using colons (:) and hyphens (-) to style and lay out the title
- What role can adjectives (in relation t your chosen nouns/terms) possibly play a role?

Introduction

The introduction should:

- Indicate the general area of concern and interest the proposal considers
- State what has been stated/what are the key areas, topic and domains in this area of interest
- What areas of literature does it involve?
- Indicate what is the focal/specific area of interest that your study considers
- What is the issue/gap that you have identified in the existing research?
- Why is this interesting, important and significant?
- How will your work contribute /add to your chosen areas of literature? How will you conceptually develop the field?
- Indicate the steps and stages through which you plan to address answering this gap – e.g. nature of literature review, choice of methodology, analysis, approach to writing up etc
- In writing your introduction try to keep in mind : Think who you want to have conversation with? Why? What will you tell them? What inspires you?

Research Question(s)(RQ)

- The introduction should end with a research question emerging from it – being stated as ‘Research Question:.....’.
- Generally only one well-crafted, well-thought through research question for the proposal/thesis is advised. More RQs causes the risk of spreading the study too thinly.
- The RQ will often look kindred to/like a reworking of the title but in question form.
- Indicative examples of research questions:

- *What are the transforming issues and challenges surrounding retail parks in the Manchester area – the role of the family as a consumer unit?*
- *To what extent, and in what ways, does distributive leadership in an engineering context impact on employee engagement?*
- *To what extent are e-mail marketing tools an important factor in relationship marketing within the UK IT retail market?*

Literature Review

- The literature review should respond to your research question.
- Based on the terms you have employed in your research question and title.
- Moving from a general literature to a focal literature discussion the literature should identify and target specific bodies of literature. Sometimes a study will merge or span a number of literatures. Examples of (and there are literally hundreds of possibilities) might include, innovation, agility, strategy, organizational commitment, well-being, non-market mechanisms, moral identity, micro-foundations, change management, identity, employee relations, pricing strategies or organizational ambidexterity. The way to decide on your direction is initially to scan literatures and topics, see the recurrent themes and what seems relevant to your thesis and most importantly what piques your interest.
- Start with broad general observations (referenced) and move progressively to narrowing down that argument to focus on your specific area of interest.
- Identify the historical narrative and evolution of the writing in your chosen area.
- Your literature review should identify the key/salient authors and commentators in your chosen/identified field.
- What are the key themes/issues and debates in the area?
- What are the respective and competing/complementary schools of thought?
- What are the methodological commitments and positions of these schools?
- What are the emerging leading-edge positions in the literatures under discussion?
- Remember to argue your own position/argument through the literature – do not fall into the trap of simply describing the literature.
- Remember to reference sufficiently, constantly, adequately and in the correct format (Harvard is recommend).
- Ensure you provide at least an initial definition of any term at the first point of it being mentioned in you text/argument. This can be done briefly in a well-crafted, referenced sentence.
- Ensure you do not just relate and describe the literature. This is a common error. This has the risk of providing just a list of different commentators writings and positions. It is imperative and vital that you undertake critical analysis on the materials you chose to introduce into your review.
- Try to figure out what literature you need to read to be able to answer your research question.

Methodology and Research Design

- Provide an opening general coverage and appreciation of the general methodological positions from which it is possible to choose e.g.:

inductive/deductive...interpretivist/positivist These are the most popular/common broad positions – you may in fact also identify an interest in additional alternative choices including for example: critical theory or postmodernism, or post-positivism etc.

- Chose and discuss the methodology/methodological approach you will adopt for your study – why have you chosen this? How will it fit and operate with your study? What are the limitations of your chosen methodological approach in relation to your study?
- Why did you not choose and use other methodological approaches? Provide reasons.
- In relation to, and within your chosen methodology, what specific research methods are your planning to use? What are the features/characteristics of these methods? How do they relate to you study? What limitations might your chosen methods have?
- Constantly use relevant references throughout. Often research methodology references tend to come from text books rather than articles.
- Be clear regarding what kind of data you need to generate in order to be able to answer your research question.
- How will you secure access to data for your data collection? What will be the obstacles and how will you overcome them? What process for this will you design in and develop?

Approach to Analysis

- What analytical approach/framework will you use? For example, Thematic Analysis (inductive) or statistical approaches (deductive) ... or some other approach?
- To what extent will your work develop qualitative or quantitative data? What analytical techniques will you use to process and analyse these data?

Approach to Writing Up

- What will be the structure of your document?
- The typical structure of course would include an expanded form of what we have laid out here in the headings of this proposal document – abstract, introduction, literature review, research methodology, ethical considerations, findings and analysis, discussion, social and practical implications and contributions, conclusion references, appendices.
- However in addition and within such structures you may also employ approaches such as – many possibilities are available - writing a case study, using stories and storytelling, ethnography, critical incident analysis, discourse analysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism and these too might influence the shape of how you write and present your thesis.

Ethical Considerations

- This should provide a fulsome account of the ethical issues – the faculty and case organizational procedures with which you will need to engage.
- The typical issues surrounding ethical considerations – informed consent, your own safety in the research process/ in the field.
- Data storage considerations and issues – be mindful of UK law of for example GDPR.

Research Schedule /Timetable

- Remember that year one of the DBA will be taken up with, clarifying your topic/ thesis and studying the three modules and completing the three assignments.
- Some of the categories for a schedule/time allocation slot on a tabulation might be:
 - Initial meetings and discussion with supervisor
 - Initial literature search/review
 - Developing Research Questions
 - Research design and research methodology
 - Planning entry to the field and securing data
 - Ensuring ethical approval
 - Fieldwork
 - Data analysis and interview transcription
 - Writing up.

Useful indicative texts:

Denscombe, M. (2019) *Research Proposals: A Practical Guide*, London, Open University Press.

Punch, K. (2016) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, London, Sage Publications.

Stokes, P and Wall T. (2015) *Business Briefings – Research Methodology*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.