

## PREPARING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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### 1. Choosing a Topic

Before you finally accept a friend or a teacher's suggestion on an M.Phil. or a Ph.D. topic please examine it seriously and ask yourself the following questions:

- (a) Is it such a hackneyed topic that nobody would remember what you did on it?
- (b) Does it represent a new interest in the intellectual arena?
- (c) Is it a project with a clearly delimited scope which can be done within a limited period of six months for an M.Phil. dissertation or two to five years for Ph.D.?
- (d) Is there someone around to supervise you on the topic?  
(Until you finish your Ph.D. unfortunately you cannot escape this.)
- (e) Do you feel excited about the topic? Remember it is likely to stay with you for sometime and possibly for ever. So choose the topic seriously.
- (f) See whether the field in which you propose to work is overcrowded which would affect your career prospects. But you may like to do that topic for intellectual reasons. Are you convinced that the project is worth taking?

### 2. Central Question

If you cannot identify the central question which you are asking in the project then you have not thought sufficiently about the project. Something should bother a researcher provoking him/her to investigate it. If you do not have a central question then you will find it difficult to formulate your main hypothesis or proposition and you may not arrive at the main finding. Whether you have a theoretical or an empirical project the objective is to present an argument about something. It may be a finding from observation or historical analysis or logical and philosophical explanation. You have to present a thesis. Many people write bulky dissertations without presenting a thesis in them. If you do not start with a principal question then you may not be able to develop a thesis.

### 3. Related Questions

You may feel that there are more than one questions for investigation. After isolating the central question do indicate the other related questions. They should not be too many though. That would show that you have not engaged yourself in identifying the scope. Only a few other questions may be raised to clarify the kind of project you are launching

### 4. Review of Literature.

Before settling on a topic you must have read a few books and articles to know what work has already been done on the broad subject. You have to now refer to them and justify why you are undertaking this study. You have to mention only the more significant writings. You are either adding a new dimension to the treatment of the theme or evaluating their findings. You may confirm or reject some formulations. It must be remembered that an M.Phil. dissertation is an integrated essay on a theme based on secondary sources and is not intended to present original research based on primary sources. A Ph.D. work is expected to present a new formulation or a new argument. Therefore, while placing your study in the existing literature on the subject do not attempt unnecessarily ambitious exercises. A sense of intellectual adventure is always welcome but at the appropriate stage of research.

### 5. Scope of Study

Give a short description of the main aspects of the theme. This would give the favour of the proposed dissertation as a whole. At the same time it should delimit the subject. This section should tell the reader how the various aspects are related to each other and they develop from step of the argument to another. Most proposals devote maximum space to this section. It is understandable because you would like to say all that you wish to write in your proposal dissertation here. But even though you may be a little detailed resist the temptation of turning this section into a full essay. In fact, it may be a good idea to write a separate exploratory essay on the proposal topic. Here the idea is to develop the theme and identify the scope of the study.

### 6. Concepts and Methodology

Some idea you would have get already as to the theoretical framework and the methodology which you wish to adopt for the project. The framework may be within a dominant stream like Marxism, functionalism or some such thing. That may

not be enough. For your particular topic you may have opted for a specific theoretical framework at a less general level taking into account some debate in recent time. It may be, for example a communication theory or a theory of class hegemony.

Every empirical project has theoretical underpinnings and it is better to be conscious of them. Similarly the theoretical and philosophical studies have historical and practical implications. The tendency to build a great wall between normative theory and empirical analysis which was dominant in the 1960s caused many dichotomies and that should be avoided.

Key concepts that you are using in your project have to be defined and explained right from the beginning. Otherwise you may be using them in some sense that is yet to be clarified. Of course, all this might undergo change as you go on and you would deal with the sophisticated meanings of the key concepts. But you have to start with some definitions.

On the method of analysis you have to indicate your choice. That should grow out of your theoretical framework. Is it a logical analysis of texts? Is it inductive or deductive analysis from historical or contemporary data? Is it content analysis of selected documents? Is it observation through field work? Participant observation? Action Research? May be combination of some of these and more.

#### 7. Sources

It could have been covered under Methodology. But some students confuse the two. Note that Methodology involves more than sources. Here do indicate whether you are relying on primary sources (those which are closer representation of reality e.g. census, Field Data, Sample Surveys, Committee Reports, etc.) or only secondary sources (interpretations of data, commentaries, books and articles based on primary sources). Do remember that this distinction is tenuous. Some so-called primary sources may be very removed from reality and may indeed distort it while some secondary work may be more valuable than the former. Many writers have abandoned this distinction and only clarify their sources by their generic character as books, articles, government reports etc.

#### 8. Chapterisation and work plan

It may appear premature to plan the chapters. But a tentative plan of the main chapters would give you an outline of your work. You would know where it is overweighed and where you have to balance it. As you make progress and depending on your data and other discoveries you are free to recognise your chapters.

Prepare a schedule of work as well. An M.Phil. dissertation has to be done within six months, a Ph.D. between two to five years. Accordingly plan out your theoretical readings, source exploration analysis of the material, drafting of the dissertation and finalization.

#### 9. A Working Bibliography

A short bibliography should accompany the proposal. In any case in order to prepare this proposal you would have gone through some works. The bibliography would indicate that you know your way through the library to do this project. Do follow the format of preparing the bibliography. There are many forms. Here is one.

##### Book

Singh, Randhir, Reason, Revolution and Political Theory (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1967.)

##### Article:

Dutta-Gupta, Sobhanlal, "Towards and Ideology of Order: Political Theory of Ancient India". Socialist Perspective, 11 (3), (December 1983).

##### Chapter in a book:

Chatterjee, Partha, "More on modes of power and peasantry" in Ranjit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies II, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

##### Government document:

India, Government of, Ministry of Agriculture, Dept. of Agriculture and Cooperation, All India Report on Agricultural Census 1980-81 (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1987).

(In your dissertation you may give either footnotes on each page or endnotes at the end of the chapter or the whole text. Footnotes are preferred by the reader. They are not to be treated as ornaments to show off scholarship. Give a note as evidence for an argument or to extend it or qualify it or give a related or parallel point).

#### 10. Defending a proposal

If you have paid attention to all these you can defend it well. Be tolerant to your commentators. They generally mean well. A revision on time would save you much trouble in future perhaps.