# Research Audit:

# Questions to ask as you set out to write a thesis

Welcome to the joys, stresses and intellectual stimulation of thesis writing! This document is written to help you get clear in your own mind about the “why?” and “what?” of your thesis, and to begin thinking about some of the crucial aspects of the writing process that you will need to master. You may well not be able to provide full answers to all of the questions at this stage, but you will have a good idea of the questions you should start thinking about right from the beginning of the thesis-writing process.

# A. Planning a Thesis

## A1. The big picture

Writing a thesis is a long process that takes a lot of effort. If you are clear in your mind about why you want to set out on this path then the task will sit more lightly on your shoulders. So to begin with, could you please state clearly and succinctly why you want to spend several months or years of your life researching and writing this project. There is no “right answer”, but it has to be an authentic reason that works for you:

I want to write this thesis because:

## A2. Material

A thesis engages with two sorts to material: primary texts and secondary texts. Your primary text(s) are the main work(s) about which you are writing your thesis, and your overall thesis title will usually make reference to it/them. Secondary texts are what other people have written either 1) directly about your primary texts or 2) about broader questions or problems important to your thesis. It is taken as read that all or nearly all of your secondary texts will be peer-reviewed journal articles or academic monographs, unless the particular subject matter of your thesis provides a very good reason for this not to be the case.

From the outset you need a very clear sense of your primary text(s), and a developing sense of the secondary literature that will be relevant to your argument.

My primary text(s) are:

The main secondary text(s) relevant to the thesis (if you know them already) are:

## A3. Argument

This is the beating heart of the thesis, and the organizing principle for everything else. In other words, it’s very important. Think of writing a thesis like presenting a case in a criminal court. You may want to draw on multiple pieces of evidence and you may make a number of different points along the way, but in the final analysis you are trying to prove one overarching point: that the accused is either innocent or guilty of a particular charge.

Similarly, your thesis may explore a number of complex areas and examples but it must have one overall argument that ties everything together. The introduction will explain to the reader the argument your thesis will make, and it will justify the argument’s importance, answering the “so what?” question. The conclusion will show how you have been successful in making the case for your overall argument. Everything in the body of your thesis will earn its place by contributing in some way to this overall argument, and everything that doesn’t help your argument should be cut. So as you can see, honing the argument is absolutely crucial for the success of the thesis.

You are not expected to have your precise and robust final argument at this stage, but if you embark on researching and writing the thesis without any idea of what your overall argument might be then you risk wasting a lot of time and getting overwhelmed or frustrated (or both!). So in the box below I would like you to write, in one sentence and with no jargon, what (at this stage) you want your thesis to argue.

Argument:

## A4. Structure

The structure of your thesis is dictated by the argument. Honours theses usually have 2 or 3 chapters and doctoral theses about 6, but the principle in both cases is the same: each chapter is a crucial brick in the wall of your overall argument and the argument builds cumulatively from chapter to chapter.

So in the set of boxes below I would like you to think, as far as you can at this stage, of the different bricks that you need to cement together in order to build your overall argument. They could take the form of something like “x is an important theme in my author’s work”, or “x has not been investigated in the secondary literature yet”, or “x has been misunderstood in the secondary literature so far”, or “the secondary literature thinks that my author talks a lot about x, but in fact he/she is really talking about y”.

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| Ch1: | Ch2: | Ch3: |

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| Ch4: | Ch5: | Ch6: |

## A5. Spider diagram

On one side of A4 paper, please could you draw a [spider diagram](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9839678/Spider-diagrams-how-and-why-they-work.html) or [mind map](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map) of all your ideas about the project so far. Feel free to use colours, symbols and drawings if that would help you, but do not feel obliged to do so. Organise the spider diagram however you think best. The aim of this exercise is twofold: to begin categorising your ideas in a systematic way under logical headings, and for both you and I to be able to see, at one glance, the intellectual material that you have to work with at this stage. Please return the spider diagram to me along with this completed form, either as a scanned document or as a photograph (if the latter, please make sure that the text is legible). If you want to make and maintain your mind map electronically, changing it as the project progresses, then you may wish to use the free [Xmind](http://www.xmind.net/) software. However, please don’t spend ages fiddling with the software at this stage: just get your ideas down on paper.

# B. The Research and Writing Process

There are three basic elements to the process of writing a thesis: reading, note taking and writing. The questions in this section are intended to make both you and I conscious of the way in which you work, with its strengths and possible weaknesses, in order to make sure that you are improving the way you work at the same time as improving the depth and sophistication of your arguments, and to address any problems at this early stage. It may be that you have not reflected upon one or more of these questions before: that’s OK, just describe your usual practice.

### B1. How you read a book

Would you call yourself a fast, average, or slow reader?

Faced with a book-length secondary text to read for your thesis, briefly describe (perhaps using bullet points) how you would go about reading it (i.e. would you just open to the first page and start reading every word, or skim the index and then dive in to relevant pages, or read the introduction and the conclusion first, or something else?). How do you find the information that is really important to your argument in a book or an article? Do you read all books and articles in the same way, or do you have different reading strategies for different sorts of reading tasks (for example: primary texts, secondary texts that will almost certainly be central to your argument, secondary texts that look really interesting, and secondary texts that are probably not going to be that useful but you just need to make sure). Do you [read with a ruler](http://writerlylife.com/home/2016/04/editing-challenge-day-14-read-with-a-ruler/) or a bookmark to guide your eye across the page, or by running your finger along the text, or another way?

Further reading: Mortimer Adler, [*How to Read a Book*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Read_a_Book)

### B2. How you find secondary sources

Digging up the best and most relevant secondary sources for your thesis is an important stage of the research process, and missing key texts can cause all sorts of problems later on.

Do you think that you are good, average or below average in being able to find all the relevant, peer-reviewed material on a topic you want to research?

Describe how you plan to go about finding and collecting the relevant secondary material for your thesis. Think about which search engines or websites you plan to use (for example: the University library website, Google Scholar, Google Books…), what search terms do you think are most appropriate for your thesis (to allow you to get to the most important sources in the quickest possible time), and how will you decide which of the results are relevant to your project?

### B3. How you take notes

Do you think your current note-taking strategies are strong, average, or weak?

Please briefly describe your note-taking strategies in the box below. Are your notes electronic or paper-based? If electronic, what software do you use? If paper-based, do you use labels, colours, an index, or something else? Do you put sticky tabs in your books? Do you use a highlighter or scribble the margins of your own copies of books and articles? How do you find information in your notes? Do you have a way to scribble down thoughts that occur to you at random times and systematically catalogue them so that you can return to them later? Can you always find a note you have made or an idea you have had in the past, or do you sometimes spend a long time hunting for something you think you wrote a while ago? Do you use bibliography software like Endnote or Zotero to keep track of everything you have read? If not, how you organise your references?

## B4. How you convert notes into a thesis

Do you think your current strategies for turning your notes into a final written argument are strong, average, or weak?

Making and keeping a good set of notes is a crucial skill for writing a thesis, but of course you are not marked on your notes. In order to get value from your notes you need a good way of transitioning from piles of scribbles to pages of prose. Please describe the process you intend to use in order to transition from notes to the final thesis:

## Further reading

You might find it helpful at this stage to read a book about the research and writing process. Here is one that I recommend both for Honours and doctoral students, though it is written primarily for PhD candidates:

Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, [*How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*](https://www.amazon.com/How-Get-Phd-Handbook-Supervisors/dp/0335264123/) (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2015).

If you have identified particular weaknesses in your own research practices then you might want to follow up with some specific reading in those areas. You may also find something useful on the Monash library [Research and learning skills](http://www.monash.edu/library/skills) page.