

Writing a concept paper

****For PhDs in Psychology, Speech Pathology, Audiology and Social Work**

*Other Disciplines, please contact the relevant
Department*



What is the essential component of a PhD?

Makes a contribution to existing knowledge by:

- Developing a new theory or a new content area
- Debunking an existing theory and/or demonstrating fundamental shortcomings in theory
- Extending existing theory by merging two conceptually similar theories or by showing how two (or more) theories might be combined

What is most important is the contribution to knowledge and existing theory in the area, not how big the sample size is or how complicated the study design is

How do I come up with an area of interest?

- From an extension of your Masters research
- From your supervisor or from a research project team
- From the limitations and suggestions for further research identified in current publications

- Make sure the area of interest has some theoretical base to it (this is where you make the contribution, not in solving some practical problem)
- Not all data (no matter how big the data set) can be turned into a PhD
- A PhD is not just a bigger Masters study

Writing a concept paper

This is like a mini-proposal

Your concept paper should include these sections:

- Introduction/Background/Problem statement
- Rationale
- Aims and objectives
- Method (how you are going to investigate your research question/s)/ research design
- Proposed source of data (sample and sampling)
- Instruments
- Method of data collection/ procedure
- Method of data analysis
- Contribution to knowledge/originality

- Maximum 2500 words (about 8 pages) incl. references.
Longer concept papers will not be read.

How do I access articles if I'm not yet registered?

Google Scholar – doesn't give full access to every article, but you should be able to see the abstracts. Cross check with Google to see if it is accessible elsewhere

Author websites – an increasing number of articles are available through the author's website, institutional repositories or sites like ResearchGate, Academia.edu

Email the author – most authors are only too happy to email you a copy of their work

If you are an Alumnus – most Universities allow Alumni access to their libraries

Speak to someone

Your concept paper is more likely to be accepted if you have spoken to an academic and bounced your ideas off them.

Listen to what they say. If they are skeptical about your idea there is probably a good reason why.

If nobody has done it before it doesn't necessarily mean it's a good idea.

Academics are familiar with the current research in a field and what constitutes a new, debated or under-researched topic in the field.

Reviewing your concept paper

Once you have submitted your application through the Student Enrolment Centre, it is sent on to our School for evaluation as follows:

- Two reviewers are appointed by the School PhD Committee (usually one is your potential supervisor)
- Reviewers read and write a report based on the 4 criteria (see next slide)
- Reports are reviewed by PhD Committee and a final decision is reached (accept, reject or revise)
- Should take about 3 weeks to convey a decision

Questions asked by the reviewers:

- Does the candidate present a set of overarching aims and objectives and research questions that focus and guide the study?
- Does the candidate show evidence of understanding the theory in the area in which she/he wish to conduct their study?
- Does the candidate demonstrate a clear understanding of the methods (including data sources, research instruments and methods of analysis) selected to respond to the aims, objectives and key research questions outlined in the study?
- Is the study original and substantive enough for consideration at the PhD level of study?

Giving feedback

- Feedback includes summarised reports from the reviewers.
- Feedback may involve inviting you to revise the concept paper, if the reviewers see potential in it, but feel that it still requires further work. An applicant gets one opportunity to revise a concept paper. If it is still not acceptable after revision, it is rejected.
- In the case of a revision, a staff member may be appointed to assist you. This assistance takes the form of consultation around conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues. The staff member will not proof read or edit your concept paper and is not obliged to re-read it.
- If the PhD Committee is undecided we may call you for an interview.

Frequently asked questions

- When can I apply for a PhD in the SHCD?

At any point between January and end of August in a given year.

- Do I need to find a supervisor before I apply?

No, the PhD committee will identify potential supervisors and ask them to review your concept paper.

- If I am asked to revise my concept paper, when do I need to submit the revision?

There is no deadline – it is up to you. If you resubmit in a new academic year, you will have to reapply for the PhD through the Student Enrolment Centre.

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