

# **HONOURS RESEARCH ESSAY GUIDELINES AND REQUIREMENTS**

**2025**

## **DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**



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# THE RESEARCH ESSAY

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the honours research programme. The research essay is an essential prerequisite for being accepted into the department's master's programme. The research essay also carries the same value as one honours course, so you need to take it seriously from the start. This means that you cannot get an extension for the final research essay submission except on medical or compassionate grounds (as you would have to for a normal exam) and only with the approval of the HoD and the Honours Coordinator. Please note that supervisors cannot grant you an extension without an official Leave of Absence Certificate. Marks will be deducted from research essays that do not meet these requirements. You need to consult (before embarking on each stage of the research) with your allocated research supervisor throughout the year to make sure that you are on track with your research essay. The onus is on you to make sure that you meet the research deadlines outlined in the research guide. Lastly, it is of vital importance for you to familiarize yourselves with the honours research guide and sociology handbook for rules related to the submission of written work in the department.

## DEADLINES AND REQUIREMENTS

Stages in the Research Process	Due Date	Mark
1. Selection of topic and allocation of supervisor	20 February	---
2. Submit a first draft of your research proposal	14 March	---
3. Submit a final draft of your research proposal	28 March	---
4. Submit your ethics protocol form to RUESC and your supervisor	14 April	---
5. Submit your literature review (incorporating a theoretical framework)	21 April	10%
6. Submit your research design, including a copy of your research instrument/s	16 May	10%
7. Complete the collection, processing, and analysis of your research data	18 July	10%
8. Submit a first draft of your research essay	11 August	---
9. Submit a final draft of your research essay	1 September	70%

## **RULES FOR THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

1. All submissions, *except the final proposal and first draft of the research essay as noted above*, must be submitted by 12h00 on the due date. Late submissions will result in marks being deducted from your final research essay mark (see *Sociology Handbook* for details).
2. Each submission must be emailed to your supervisor and copied to Mrs Noluvuyo Sakata ([noluvuyo.sakata@ru.ac.za](mailto:noluvuyo.sakata@ru.ac.za)). If you fail to email your work to Mrs Sakata, it will not be recorded as having been submitted, and you may incur a penalty. The requirements for each stage of the research process are outlined below. You are, therefore, advised to consult this handbook prior to the commencement of each stage.
3. Supervisors will call regular meetings, which are compulsory.

### **1. CHOOSE/CONFIRM YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC**

You will need to choose a sociologically relevant area of research. To facilitate effective supervision, *you are restricted to topics offered by the supervisors*. Once you have consulted with your prospective supervisor and have chosen an area of research, you will need to familiarise yourself with the research topic. The best point of departure is to read extensively, under the guidance of your research supervisor. What you need at this stage is broad background knowledge of the subject area.

### **2. SUBMIT YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

After consulting with your research supervisor, you can move on to the next stage, which is to draw up your research proposal. A research proposal should be typed in one-and-a-half spacing and in 12-point font size. It should not be longer than 2,000 words, excluding the supporting references.

All proposals should be presented with a front page indicating the following:

- (a) The title of the research.
- (b) Name of the student and their student number.
- (c) The degree for which the proposal is being submitted.
- (d) The Department in which the candidate will be carrying out the research.
- (e) The name(s) of the supervisor(s).
- (f) Estimated date of submission.

Your proposal should include a set of guidelines for how you intend to approach your research area and provide the kind of knowledge that would allow you to solve the

problem you have identified within this area. The research proposal is an outline of your plan of action for your research project for the rest of the year and should, therefore, always be at hand. The proposal should include the following six sections.

### ***Section 1: Field of Research and Provisional Title***

The field of research and the provisional title of the research project, with a brief description, if the title is not self-explanatory.

### ***Section 2: The Context of the Research***

This section provides general information regarding the research that will be undertaken and should make it clear why the problem is worth addressing. It sketches the background and, where appropriate, should provide a brief theoretical framework within which the problem is to be addressed. It should address the questions: What motivates the research? Why is it being undertaken? How will the results add to the body of knowledge? Where research arises out of problems encountered in personal, social, economic, historical, political or literary contexts, these problems should be briefly stated. The key question: WHY?

**Length: 2 - 3 pages**

### ***Section 3: The Goal(s) of the Research***

This section should either set out the specific question(s) to which the candidate hopes to find an answer or, in the case of open-ended topics in the humanities, outline the subject/area/field to be critically investigated. It should indicate clearly what the research intends to achieve and what the intended final deliverable is.

The key question: WHAT?

**Length: ½ - 1 page**

### ***Section 4: Research Design***

This section outlines the methods, procedures, and techniques to be followed. This section describes the manner in which the research will be undertaken. The overarching methodology (descriptive, historical, quantitative) should be described, and the steps involved should be explained. Where the methods used are well established in the discipline, they need only be briefly mentioned. Where they are not standard or are innovative, a more detailed description is required so that their viability can be assessed. This section should contain a description of “subjects” or research participants where appropriate, details of the sampling technique and sample size, a description of the study site if appropriate, the intended data analysis methods/techniques, the proposed time schedule for the research, and ethical issues. Where there are ethical issues relating to human and animal subjects, approval must be obtained from the University Ethics Committee. The key question: HOW?

**Length: 1 page**

## **Section 5: References**

Important and relevant sources that support the proposed research and which provide a background to the research should be cited. Such source material referred to in the proposal should be cited in the format described in the *Sociology Handbook*.

### **3. COMPLETE A RESEARCH ETHICS PROTOCOL FORM**

South African law requires all research involving human or animal subjects to be reviewed and approved prospectively by a research ethics committee. The Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (RUESC) is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council and reviews research proposals and ethical standards protocols in accordance with national policy and guidelines to ensure that all teaching and research activities involving humans or animals are performed responsibly and meet the highest ethical standards. Your supervisor will guide you through this process.

### **4. COLLECT AND PROCESS YOUR RESEARCH DATA**

Given that you will already have identified some research problem or hypothesis and framed it within a particular theoretical perspective, you will have a good idea of what or whom you are going to study – i.e., your unit of analysis. Individual human beings are the most common units, but you may want to focus on social groups or organisations rather than people within a group.

After delimiting a unit of analysis, your next task is to choose the population most relevant to your study (e.g. all students at Rhodes or domestic servants in Makhanda if your unit of analysis is individual human beings; families in Makhanda or political parties in the Eastern Cape, if your unit of analysis is social groups or organisations). Obviously, you cannot interview or observe all domestic servants in Makhanda, all students at Rhodes University, or all political parties in the Eastern Cape, so your next task is to decide on your method of sampling. The basic rule is that your sample must be representative of the population, in order for it to be valid. A good sample frame is necessary – i.e., one that is up-to-date and includes all units of analysis within your population.

By now, you will have decided on your data collection technique, as it is related to your choice of methodology and theoretical perspective (discussed in the previous section). At this stage, you need to set out in detail how you are going to do your research by answering such questions as:

- ☞ Is your research ethical?
- ☞ Do you have informed consent?

- ☞ How are you going to make sure your research is valid?
- ☞ How long will the research take?
- ☞ What are the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen research technique?

Whatever method of data collection you have chosen, you must make sure it is ethical and that you have the informed consent of all participants. This is an extremely important stage of your research; the success of your essay will depend on proper data collection. Many social research essays have been rendered useless because of sloppy data collection. When you have eradicated any flaws in your data collecting instrument or techniques, you are ready to make your 'observations', i.e. collect your data. Data collection and processing should be finished during the July vacation. Once you have conducted the interviews, they need to be transcribed and analysed (see Section 5.6 below).

## **5. SUBMIT YOUR FINAL RESEARCH ESSAY**

Your final essay must be proofread, typed, and submitted for marking on or before the deadline mentioned above. The report must form a coherent whole – it is not just the different sections tacked together. You must, therefore, ensure that the numbering system is consistent and that the same tense, format and so on is used throughout. Towards the end of each section try to give a pointer towards the next section, thus giving continuity to the essay as a whole. General instructions for the final research draft of your research essay include the following:

- 1) It must be between five and eight thousand words (excluding the bibliography and appendices).
- 2) It must be typed in 1.5 spacing.
- 3) It must not have page breaks between sections.
- 4) There must be some form of distinction between headings and sub-headings (ideally numbering but otherwise bold and italics or some other accepted system of differentiation).
- 5) If your supervisor recommends the inclusion of appendices, these must be kept to a minimum and either be included as a separate submission to the actual paper or inserted after the list of references.
- 6) If you want to include an acknowledgement section, please include this before the list of references.
- 7) For ethical reasons, you should not include consent forms signed by research participants.
- 8) The final draft of your research essay must include the following sections:

### **5.1 Title Page**

Your research project must have a title. The title page should also include the name and student number of the researcher, the name of your supervisor, the date of submission, a word count and a signed declaration concerning the University's policy on plagiarism.

## 5.2 Abstract

This is a brief, comprehensive summary of the focus and findings of the research project. An abstract should describe in 100–150 words the problem under investigation, the sample frame, the theoretical orientation, the research methods used, the findings, and the implications of the research. The abstract must be written in your own words – i.e., it should not contain any quotes or references. A good abstract is:

- ☞ accurate (correctly reflects the purpose and content of the project).
- ☞ self-contained (is fully explanatory on its own).
- ☞ concise and specific.
- ☞ non-evaluative (report rather than evaluate and do not add to what is in the body of the project); and
- ☞ coherent and intelligible.

## 5.3 Introduction

Present the specific problem under study and describe the research strategy. Provide the reader with the necessary background information, and indicate the structure of your project and its main theme/s. Consider the following:

- ☞ What is the point of the study?
- ☞ How do the hypothesis and the research design relate to the problem?
- ☞ What are the theoretical implications of the research, and how does it relate to existing work in the area?
- ☞ What are the theoretical propositions tested, and how were they derived?

A good introduction answers these questions and, by summarising the relevant arguments and the data, gives the reader a firm sense of what was done and why. Clearly develop a rationale for your hypothesis through a definition and explanation of the variables. Be careful to avoid details that properly belong to the main sections of the essay.

**Length: *Between 400 and 800 words.***

## 5.4 Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This section contains a review and critical assessment of theories and research relating to the area being studied. Existing studies should be used to develop a theoretical framework that will guide your research.

**Length: *Between 1800 and 2600 words.***

## 5.5 Research Design

This section should describe your research design, and the procedures followed to achieve each research objective. It should be sufficiently detailed to enable a scientific assessment of the results and the appropriateness of your methods. That is, the method section should tell the reader *what* you did and *how* you did it.

**Length: Between 1000 and 1500 words.**

## 5.6 Data Processing and Analysis/Discussion

Data processing forms the heart of the project and requires considerable time and thought. It is both conventional and expedient to divide this section into distinct sub-sections that correspond with the major themes of your research. You should also include a description of the types of analysis to be carried out, and the procedures and techniques for processing and analysing your data. Report the data in sufficient detail to support your conclusions. The data that was collected during the research needs to be systematically 'interrogated' by the theoretical approach that you have adopted. That is, you need to not only describe but also explain your findings with reference to the theoretical framework outlined in your literature review.

In this section, you are encouraged to examine, interpret and qualify the results, as well as to draw inferences from them. Emphasise any theoretical consequences of the results and examine the validity of your findings. Similarities and differences between your results and the work of others should be clarified. Do not, however, simply reformulate and repeat points already covered in the theory section. Each statement should contribute to your central argument and to the reader's understanding of the problem.

Avoid polemics, triviality and dubious or weak theoretical comparisons. Speculation is in order only if it is (a) identified as such, (b) related to the empirical data or theory, and (c) expressed concisely. Identifying the practical and theoretical implications of your research, suggesting improvements to your study, or proposing new research are also appropriate, provided you keep these comments brief. In general, be guided by these questions:

- ☞ How have you contributed to a deeper understanding of the topic?
- ☞ How has your study addressed the research problem?
- ☞ What conclusions and theoretical implications can you draw from your research?

There are many different ways of doing your data processing and analysis depending on the type of research methods employed. In a qualitative project such as field research or semi-structured interviews, you need to transcribe the recorded interviews,



highlight the various themes in the responses, and seek explanations for differences and similarities in the various accounts given by the respondents. Data analysis involves working with the information gathered; organising it; separating it into parts, elements or units; synthesising it; and searching for patterns. With the facts broken down into manageable pieces the researcher sorts and sifts them, searching for types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes. The researcher also needs to have a general analytical strategy since the ultimate goal is to treat the evidence in such a way as to produce compelling conclusions and rule out alternative interpretations.

Provide some descriptive information on the respondents and their organisations in order for the reader to appreciate the context of your research. While you may (if it is required) use pseudonyms to protect the identity of your respondents and/or fictitious names to conceal the identity of an organisation, it is important to provide a contextual background to your study. This includes information such as the organisation's date of establishment, ownership structure, occupational hierarchy, turnover and so on. In addition, you should allow your respondents to 'speak for themselves'. That is, quote some of the pertinent responses elicited from the interviews to support your argument. Take care not to use the quotes to make the argument for you.

When using quotes from the interviews, indicate the omission of irrelevant or non-essential comments by using three dots ( ... ). Take care, however, not to distort the meaning of the response. For example: "Well, um you know, the minimum wage has had um, how shall I put it? Do you want a cup of tea? No thanks. Um where was I? Oh yes. The impact. It has had a significant impact on our cost structures, but very little on our staffing policies". This should be transcribed as follows: "[T]he minimum wage has had ... a significant impact on our cost structures, but very little on our staffing policies".

**Length: *Between 4500 and 5500 words.***

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The conclusion should be as brief and cogent as possible. Do not introduce any new ideas or substantive issues that are not covered in the report. Your conclusion should include the following:

- ✍ a summary of the discussion in the main sections.
- ✍ a summary of the findings and inferences.
- ✍ recommendations and conclusions based on the findings.
- ✍ an emphasis on the significance of the subject matter; and
- ✍ wider implications of the research.

**Length: *Between 300 and 600 words.***

## 5.8 References

The requirements with regard to the citation of sources are set out in the *Sociology Handbook* and should be followed at all times. Ensure that *all* references in the essay appear in your bibliography and guard against plagiarism. See the section on plagiarism in the *Sociology Handbook*. Choose your references judiciously and only cite research pertinent to the specific focus of your research. Avoid references with only tangential or general significance and take particular care not to cite established authorities out of context. You must use the Harvard system of referencing (see *Sociology Handbook* for guidelines on how to reference in this style).

## 5.9 Appendices

Do not confuse the reader with endless statistics or detail – supplementary information should be included as appendices. Appendices are helpful if the detailed description of certain material is distracting in, or inappropriate to, the body of your essay. Include an appendix only if it helps the reader to better understand and evaluate your arguments. The transcription of your interviews must be included as an appendix.

### **RUConnected Page**

There will be a dedicated page with relevant information and documents needed for your research project and essay. You are all required to join the page. Mrs. Fuller will send the enrolment and login details. All reminders and announcements regarding deadlines will be sent through this page – which will automatically be sent to your email.

The page contains:

- ✓ The Honours Research Essay: Guidelines and Requirements
- ✓ The Sociology Handbook 2025
- ✓ Sociology Honours Orientation Programme
- ✓ Relevant Information from the Ethics Office
- ✓ Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism
- ✓ Seminars and Workshops offered by the Centre of Postgraduate Studies. You can access the page and dates of workshops and seminars here: <https://www.ru.ac.za/postgraduategateway/workshops/>

***WISHING YOU ALL THE BEST IN YOUR RESEARCH!***