

HONOURS RESEARCH ESSAY: GUIDELINES AND REQUIREMENTS

2024



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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 (weight) 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 for a normal exam) and only with the approval of the Head of Department and the Honours Coordinator. Please note, supervisors cannot grant you an extension without an official Leave of Absence (LOA). Marks will be deducted from research essays that do not meet these requirements. You need to consult (before embarking every stage of the research) with your allocated research supervisor throughout the year to make sure that you are on track with your research project. 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 writing rules in the department.

DEADLINES AND REQUIREMENTS

Stages in the Research Process	Due Dates	Mark
1. Allocation of general topics and supervisors	22 February	
2. Submit your research proposal (first draft)	15 March	
3. Resubmit your research proposal (final draft)	27 March	20%
4. Submit your ethics protocol form on RUEESC	10 April	
5. Submit your literature review (incorporating a theoretical framework)	22 April	10%
6. Submit an overview of your research design including copies of your proposed interview schedule or questionnaire	17 May	10%
7. Complete the collection and processing of your research data	18 July	10%
8. Submit a draft of your data analysis	31 July	
9. Submit a draft of your research essay	10 August	
10. Submit your final research essay	2 September	50%

RULES FOR THE RESEARCH PROCESS

1. All submissions, *except for the final proposal, and first draft of the research essay*, are due at 12h00 on the specified date. Late submissions will result in marks being deducted from your final research essay mark, including the stages to which a mark is not directly allocated (see the *Sociology Handbook* for details).
2. Each submission must be emailed to your supervisor and copied (cc'd) to Mrs Noluvuyo Sakata (noluvuyo.sakata@ru.ac.za). If you fail to email your work to Ms Sakata, it will not be recorded as submitted and you may face a penalty. The requirements for each stage of the research process are outlined below. You are therefore advised to consult this handout prior to the commencement of each stage.
3. Supervisors will confirm regular group meetings which are compulsory.
4. If you miss a meeting, with or without an LOA, you need to catch up the issues covered at the meeting. You must initially do so by asking fellow students and only contact your supervisor for points of clarification.
5. If you miss a supervisor's meeting without an LOA, the HoD will be involved and the student will be allowed to present their case as well.

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 onto the next stage, which is to draw up your research proposal. A research proposal should be typed in one-and-a-half spacing on A4 paper and in 12 point font size. It should not be longer than 2000 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 the 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.

☞ **See Annexure 1 for a template of the title page for proposals.**

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 sections.

The proposal should be set out in six sections as follows:

Section 1: The field of research and provisional title

Briefly outline the field of research and list 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 the 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. 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.

Key question: WHAT?

Length: ½ - 1 page

Section 4: Methods, procedures and techniques

This section describes the manner in which the research will be undertaken. Overarching methodology (descriptive, historical, quantitative) should be described and the steps involved explained. Where the methods used are well recognised 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 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.

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 Department’s Handout Number 1. 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 sections.

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 Grahamstown, if your unit of analysis is individual human beings; families in Grahamstown 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 Grahamstown, 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 project will depend on proper data collection. Many social research projects 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 final research paper:

- 1) Must be no less than 5000 and no more than 8000 words (excluding the bibliography and appendices).
- 2) Must be typed in 1.5 spacing.
- 3) No page breaks between sections.
- 4) 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 want appendices these must be kept to a minimum and either be included as a separate submission to the actual paper or after the bibliography/reference list.
- 6) If you want to include an acknowledgments section, please do so before the bibliography/reference list.
- 7) For ethical reasons, you should not include consent forms signed by research participants.
- 8) The final version 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 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 project.

Length: Between 400 and 800 words

5.4 Literature Review and 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 on 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 project 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 project. Include an appendix only if it helps the reader to better understand and to evaluate your arguments. The transcription of your interviews must be included as an appendix.

Wishing you all the best with your research!

RUconnected Page

There will be a dedicated page for your research essay: *Sociology Honours Research 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 it will automatically send to your email.

Research Module

The research module offered in the first term is designed to assist students with their individual research projects, as it will unpack the dynamics involved in conducting a research project in Sociology.

Seminars and Workshops

The Centre for Postgraduate Studies (CPGS) offers workshops and seminars on various issues relating to dissertation/thesis writing. You will be sent a separate flyer with all the dates of the workshops and seminars for the year. While attendance is not compulsory, you are encouraged to attend relevant seminars as this will be beneficial to your own development as a scholar. You can access the page, and dates of workshops here: <https://www.ru.ac.za/postgraduategateway/workshops/>.

Annexure 1

**Dining Hall Conversations among First-Year Students:
A Study Exploring Conversations about Food among First Years at Rhodes
University**

Name: Andy Manzi

Student Number: G19M8099

Degree: Honours in Development Studies

Department of Sociology & Industrial Sociology

Supervisor: Mr. Thoko Sipungu

(t.sipungu@ru.ac.za)

Estimated date of submission: October 2022