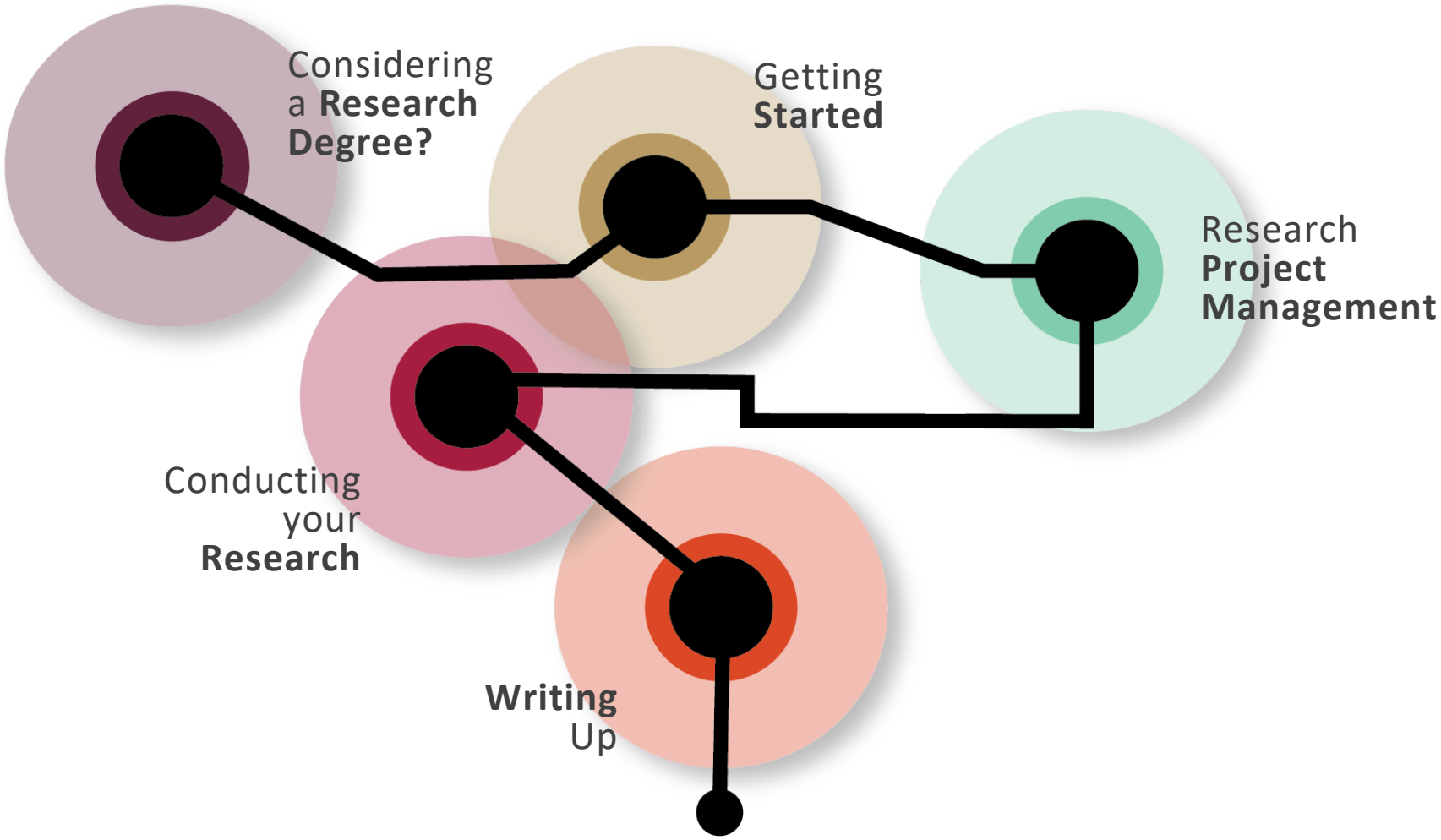
Welcome to the Postgraduate Office's Research Degree Toolkit

A research degree differs from undergraduate study in many ways:

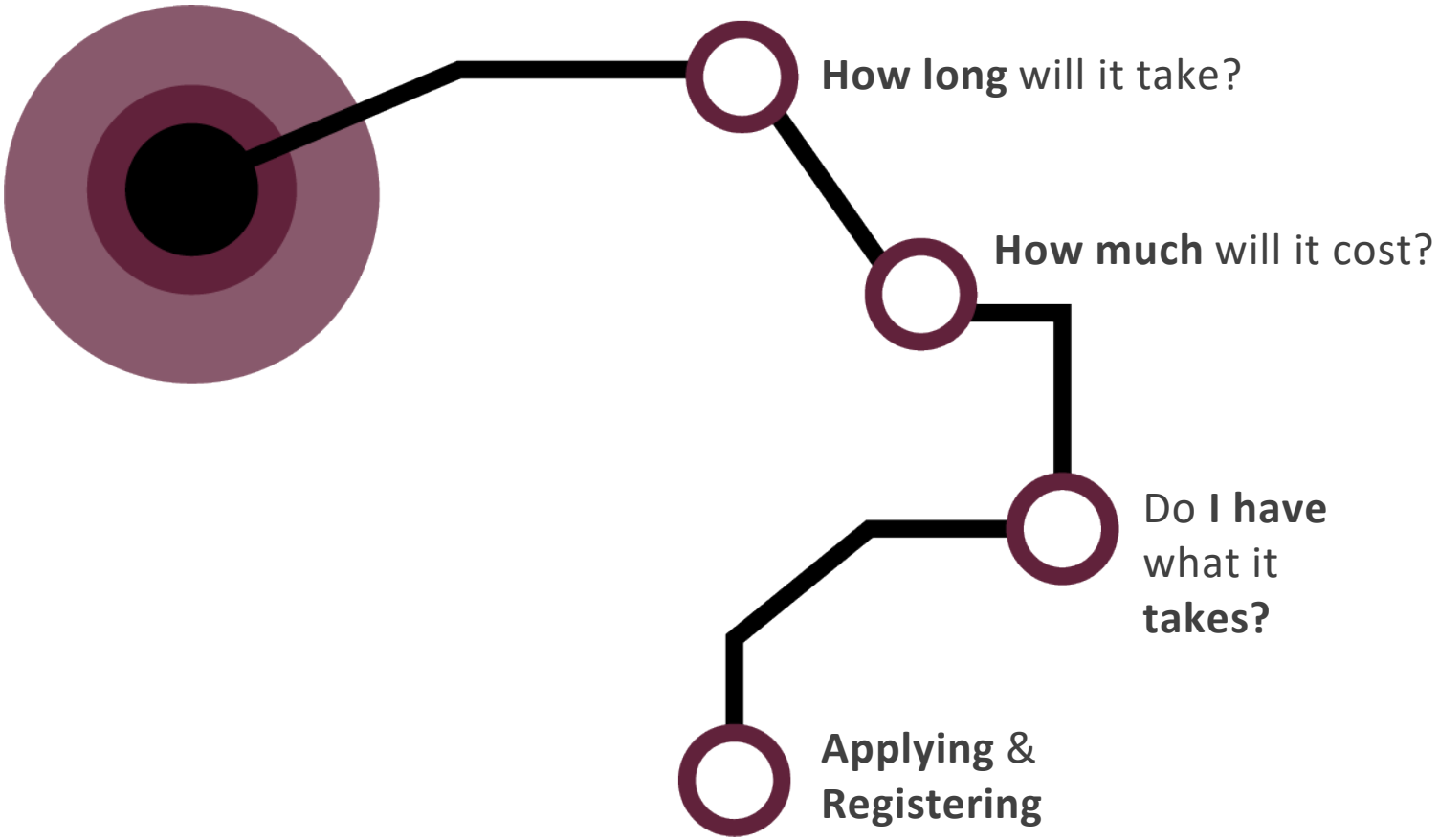
In an undergraduate degree, you mostly learn from **existing knowledge**; in a research degree you learn how to **create new knowledge**. You are expected to **work independently,** and **project manage** your degree. This means structuring your **time**, deciding what to do when, arranging **resources** and **people** to help you do your research. As you progress through your research journey, you will get better at these things. Instead of sitting passively in a class, this development takes place through trying new things in a **research environment** where you can **interact** (with people and books!) and **get feedback** on your work. Stellenbosch University (SU) offers fantastic learning environments, but a lot of the interaction will have to **be driven by you**. This toolkit offers advice and information that can help you **take charge** of your degree – from **deciding** whether it is indeed what you want to do, all the way through to **writing up** and **completing** your thesis or dissertation.

Explore the toolkit

Your **guide** to **completing** your **Research Degree!**



Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?



Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?

How long will it take?

- **How long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
- Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- **Applying** & **Registering**

Master's Degree

According to Stellenbosch University regulations, the minimum period for getting a Master's degree after a Bachelor's degree is 2 years and after an Honours degree, is 1 year. Most Master's students complete their degree in **2 to 3 years.**

Doctorate

The minimum period for a PhD is 2 years. Maximum periods allowed for completion vary across faculties and are dependent on your progress, but it is not often that you will be allowed to continue after 5 years without substantial progress. There is a general expectation that you should finish in **3 years**, but the average duration for a PhD countrywide, is **4 to 6 years**.

TIP **Click here to do the maths**

Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?

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TIP

Notional hours

A PhD degree counts 360 credits and a Master's degree 180 credits. Credits are meant to reflect the number of hours it should take to achieve the outcomes of the course. Every credit represents 10 hours of learning. So, a PhD amounts to 3600 notional hours. If you work 3 hours a day, a PhD will take you 3600 ÷ 3 = 1200 days, i.e., 3 years and 3½ months.

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1. University Fees for SU South African students

Click here for details of SU postgraduate fees.

2. Cost of Research (Click to expand)

3. Cost of Living (Click to expand)

4. Funding your studies.

Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?

How much will it cost?

- How **long** will it take?
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1. University Fees **(Click to expand)**

2. Cost of Research

In addition to the tuition fees mentioned above, you will need to budget for the actual costs of conducting your research. These may include expenses such as photocopying and printing, laboratory materials, fieldwork, consumables, and travel. For example, lab-based students may need to pay for reagents and equipment use, while humanities students might need funds to access archives or travel for interviews. While some departments provide limited support for research costs, this should never be assumed—always check in advance with your supervisor. It is essential to prepare a research budget, regardless of whether you are covering the costs yourself. Budgeting is not only a useful planning tool, but also a common requirement for research proposals and funding applications. Many postgraduate students underestimate the true cost of research or are unaware that funding is not automatically provided by the university.

3. Cost of Living **(Click to expand)**

4. Funding your studies.

Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?

How much will it cost?

- ○ **How long** will it take?
- ● **How much** will it cost?
- ○ Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- ○ **Applying** & **Registering**

1. University Fees **(Click to expand)**

2. Cost of Research **(Click to expand)**

3. Cost of Living

Studying full time could save you costs in terms of annual registration fee because you are likely to complete in a much shorter time. But it also means you must calculate your potential loss of earnings and find other funding to cover your living expenses annually.

See the SU guide for calculating a provisional quotation of fees and living expenses **here.**

4. Funding your studies (click to expand)

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- How **long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
- Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- **Applying** & **Registering**

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Funding your studies

Securing funding for postgraduate studies can be challenging—especially in today's rapidly changing economic climate. This makes it even more important to apply for available scholarships and bursaries as early as possible. In some cases, funding applications may need to be submitted *before* you formally apply for admission to your postgraduate programme.

At Stellenbosch University, the Postgraduate Funding Office manages scholarships and bursaries for postgraduate students. A variety of funding opportunities are regularly advertised on their website: www.sun.ac.za/pgo/funding.

Close

Considering a **Research Degree** at SU?

Do **I have** what **it takes**?

- ○ **How long** will it take?
- ○ **How much** will it cost?
- ● Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- ○ **Applying** & **Registering**

1. Do I have what it takes to succeed?

Postgraduate students normally fail because they never hand in a dissertation, not because they handing one in that fails! This says something about the importance of managing the project, rather than about the intellectual difficulty of the degree. By conferring a Master's or PhD degree, a university confirms that you can do **independent research,** in reasonable **time** and **report** on it in a well-structured way. The good news is that you will **develop** the skills to do this during your studies, provided you understand that they are **normally not taught** during a postgraduate degree - you are expected to acquire them. As a postgraduate student, you are in charge of your own development just as you are in charge of the entire research project. Click on the tip below.

TIP **How do I develop my research skills?**

2. Do I have the necessary support? **(Click to expand)**

3. Do I have the motivation? **(Click to expand)**

- **How long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
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TIP

Developing your skills

Research at postgraduate level is a bit like an apprenticeship – you learn by doing your work and asking for feedback from your environment, such as your supervisors, peers, senior students, and support staff. This kind of development is self-driven. You need to identify your needs and ask for help, feedback and support. SU offers many support services for postgraduate students.

Click here for a list of SU postgraduate support services

Close

Considering a **Research Degree at SU?**

Do **I have** what **it takes**?

- ○ **How long** will it take?
- ○ **How much** will it cost?
- ● Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- ○ **Applying** & **Registering**

1. Do I have what it takes to succeed? **(Click to expand)**

2. Do I have the necessary support?

Getting a postgraduate degree is proof that you can work independently. This is sometimes a lonely journey. As manager of your postgraduate project, you can do something about it by organising and managing the support you need. Here are some key sources of support:

TIP **Family, friends and employers**

TIP **Your supervisor**

TIP **University support**

3. Do I have the motivation? **(Click to expand)**

- **How long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
- Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- **Applying** & **Registering**

ble to work independently.
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TIP

Family, friends and employer

Your family, friends and employer will mostly need to give you the time and space to conduct your research. They might also be financially supporting you while you are studying or helping in other ways such as taking a larger share of family and household responsibility. Respect this support network by setting a realistic timeline from the beginning of your project, communicating your time requirements and deadlines to them regularly and most importantly, sticking to your timeline.

Close

- How **long** will it take?
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- **Applying** & **Registering**

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TIP

Your supervisor

Your supervisor is a crucial source of support and can significantly influence the success of your research degree. If you have the option to choose your supervisor, it's worth taking time to make an informed decision. Think carefully about their expertise, communication style, and availability—and consider how you will manage this relationship over time.
This topic will be explored further in the *Getting Started* section. For now, keep in mind that no supervisor can meet every need. Be clear on why you've chosen your supervisor, recognise their strengths, and build a wider support network to complement areas where they may be less strong.

Close

- **How long** will it take?
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ng the support you need.

TIP

University support

Universities are well resourced research environments and Stellenbosch University has a host of resources to support postgraduate students. Some of the key support services to look out for are:

- your faculty librarian
- the writing laboratory
- centre for student counselling
- division for research development
- postgraduate skills development
- postgraduate funding office
- statisticians

Click here for a list of SU postgraduate support services

Close

Considering a **Research Degree at SU?**

Do **I have** what **it takes**?

- How **long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
- Do **I have** what **it takes**?
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1. Do I have what it takes to succeed? **(Click to expand)**

2. Do I have the necessary support? **(Click to expand)**

3. Do I have the motivation?

Undertaking your postgraduate studies requires significant commitment and perseverance. A clear understanding of your motivation can help keep you focused and on track throughout the journey. Your motivation may be *intrinsic*, such as a desire to improve your career prospects or achieve personal growth and status. Alternatively, it may be *extrinsic*, such as making a meaningful contribution to society through your research.

Whatever your motivation is, pursuing a postgraduate degree means you will have to **do research**, independently. **If research and scholarship itself motivates you, you are probably on the right track.** Before embarking on your postgraduate studies, take time to articulate your motivations. Are they strong enough to sustain you through late nights, social sacrifices, and competing demands? Will they keep you accountable to your goals and timelines?

Considering a **Research Degree at SU?**

Applying & Registering

1. Before you apply

Unlike an undergraduate degree, the process does NOT start with filling in the application form! Because so much of research development relies on forming relationships and working alongside people, you need to understand who the people are you are going to work with, what the environment is going to be like and what its research focus is.

In short, **before** you fill in an application form, you should have followed these steps:

TIP **8 Steps before applying**

A valuable site to explore to identify areas of research expertise, or a potential supervisor at SU is the **Discovery Researcher Portal** (see step 2 in tip above).

2. Formal application **(Click to expand)**

- **How long** will it take?
- **How much** will it cost?
- Do **I have** what **it takes**?
- **Applying** & **Registering**

TIP

8 Steps before applying

1. Consider your topic and motivation.
2. Explore departments/faculties/ supervisors who do work in line with your area of interest.
3. Do some background research about the work of people identified in step 2.
4. Make initial contact with potential supervisors or course convenors, explaining your interest. Send an email, or where possible make an appointment.
5. Provide them with a summary of who you are (also showing why you are interested in them in particular). See this phase as an exploration.
6. Decide on a supervisor based on the various interactions you have had and indicate your wishes to the potential supervisor.
7. If they can take you on, then find out about the official application processes and registration procedures at their institution., asking your new supervisor for assistance.
8. Apply and register according to the processes of the academic department and institution.

Close

Considering a **Research Degree at SU?**

Applying & Registering

- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
- Do I have what it takes?
- **Applying & Registering**

1. Before you apply (Click to expand)

2. Formal application: Master's

Current students (e.g., those in their final year of their degree apply via the SUNStudent application portal). You will not be asked to submit academic transcripts, degree certificates, or additional documents as part of your application. However, individual departments may request additional documents directly from the applicant as part of the selection process.

Prospective students (e.g., new to Stellenbosch University or returning to the university after a year or so) must apply via the SUNStudent application portal Information about the process is available at **www.sun.ac.za/pgstudies**.

Please **remember** that in both cases you should ideally have discussed your plans with someone in the department **before they receive the application form**.

Registration
Once your application has been accepted, your registration normally takes place at the start of your academic year.

3. Formal application: Doctoral (Click to expand)

Considering a **Research Degree at SU?**

Applying & Registering

- How **long** will it take?
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- **Applying** & **Registering**

1. Before you apply (Click to expand)

2. Formal application: Master's (Click to expand)

3. Formal application: Doctoral

The process leading up to registration for doctoral candidates differs quite a bit from that for Master's degree students. Various faculties also follow different regulations, and you should familiarise yourself with the processes, regulations and dates applicable to the department and faculty. In general, departments follow one of two models related to when a prospective student is allowed to register. In some instances, prospective students are required to research and formulate a complete research proposal before they are allowed to register, whereas other faculties allow students to register and then formulate their research proposal, already under the supervision of an academic in the department.

TIP **See graphic**

Remember that in both cases you should ideally already have discussed your plans with someone in the department **before they receive the application form**.

TIP

Doctoral registration – 2 models

Remember that in both cases you should ideally have discussed your plans with someone in the department before they receive your application form.

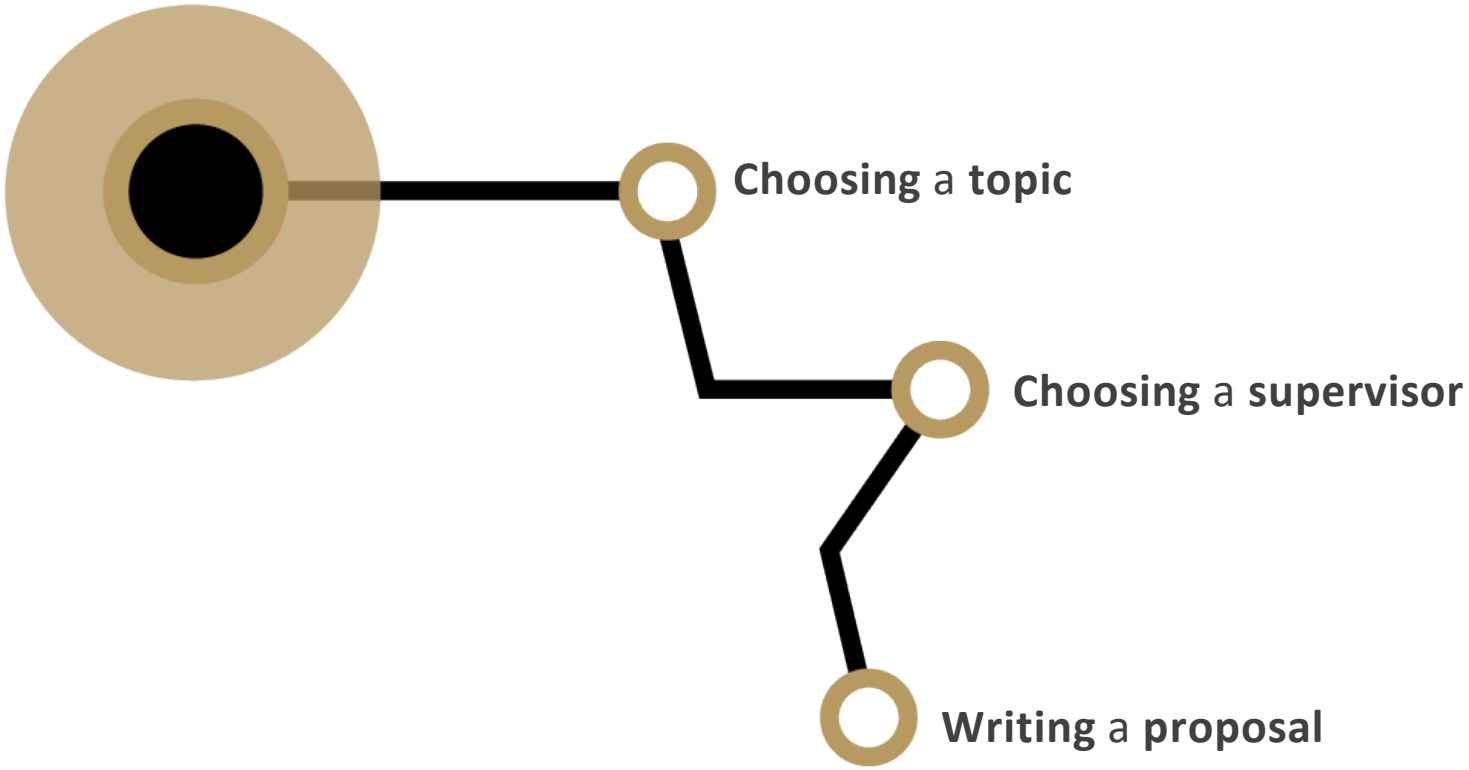
Model 1

Model 2:

From Mouton (2001)

Close

Getting started



Getting started

Choosing a **topic**

In the initial stages of sourcing a topic, read as much you can in order to expose yourself to as many potential topics as possible. The process is simple, yet there are no shortcuts: read, read, read and read!

TIP **Questions to ask when choosing a research topic**

Find out what research is being conducted in your field of study. **The Library** is an essential resource, as is your **faculty librarian**, who can tell you about the relevant databases and recent publications in your field, including the Sabinet Journals which focuses on research originating from or pertaining to Africa.

Another good starting point is to look at existing theses or dissertations on your topic. Viewing databases listings of current or completed research projects can avoid duplications in research and create networks and collaborations between researchers.

TIP **Collections of theses and dissertations**

Once a topic has been found, the process of narrowing it down, which in turn leads to the formulation of a research question, begins. This is further explained in the section Conducting your research – from topic to research question.

- **Choosing a topic**
- **Choosing** a **supervisor**
- **Writing** a **proposal**

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Questions to ask when choosing a topic

- Is the topic in line with your career objectives?
- Will the topic keep you academically stimulated for a few years?
- Is the literature and data needed to conduct your research available or accessible?
- Is the topic researchable to such an extent that you will be able to produce a good thesis on it?
- Do you possess the skills, or are you able to develop the skills necessary to research this topic?
- Can you find a good supervisor who is willing to guide you in this process?
- Will the topic make a meaningful contribution to society?

Close

- **Choosing a topic**
- **Choosing** a **supervisor**
- **Writing** a **proposal**

TIP

Collections of Theses and Dissertations

South African Collections

SUNScholar Research conducted at Stellenbosch University (A collection of theses and Dissertations, that have passed examination).

International Collections

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ProQuest Dissertations and Theses

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Getting started

Choosing a supervisor

Understanding how your supervisor will assist you in your research process may help you to choose someone who you feel confident working with. The roles and responsibilities of the supervisor will differ according to three research or study phases (Helm & van der Westhuizen, 1999). Consider these three phases:

1. **The design phase** (Click to expand)
2. **The work phase** (Click to expand)
3. **The editing phase** (Click to expand)

Consult the following documents to develop a healthy supervisor relationship:

A Memorandum of Understanding – **this is an official SU requirement**, i.e., it is compulsory to have one between all supervisors and their postgraduate students! The Postgraduate Office has designed a **useful template of an MoU** as guideline should your department not have a comprehensive one. Many problems in supervision come from misunderstandings regarding expectations. – having a good MoU in place helps to alleviate unnecessary misunderstandings and stress.

SU Supervisor Student Code of Conduct as printed in the SU's **Yearbook Part 1 paragraph/point 7**. This is an official code of conduct that states the University's expectations of the supervisor relationship.

- **Choosing a topic**
- **Choosing** a **supervisor**
- **Writing** a **proposal**

TIP

The **Design** phase

Here the student must learn to be creative and systematic in their research. The supervisor`s task in this phase is to help the student to choose a research topic. Moses (1985) stresses the importance of this role and includes that the supervisor should ensure that the topic is suitable for research, that it will bring new insights and that it could be completed within a reasonable period.

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- **Choosing a topic**
- **Choosing** a **supervisor**
- **Writing** a **proposal**

TIP

The **Work** phase

The student must learn to undertake the study in a scientific manner. According to Moses (1985), the supervisor should help the student to find the most effective way to gather research, analyse the results, identify certain problems and come to certain recommendations.

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- **Choosing a topic**
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TIP

The **Editing** phase

The student receives sufficient guidance in writing a scientific report. The supervisor`s responsibility in this phase is to know what the different criteria entail regarding the research report. During the first meetings, the structure and the final text as well as dates for presenting certain chapters should be discussed. In most cases this is the phase where the student and supervisor lose contact. However, for a student to stay motivated, it is important that the guidance in this phase is effective.

Close

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Getting started

Writing a proposal

In postgraduate education, your research proposal or protocol marks a major milestone within the actual research journey. It is usually developed with your supervisor in the first phase of your studies and is then formally accepted by the Higher Degrees Committee of your faculty. The formal research proposal will be covered in more detail in the section related to **Conducting your Research.**

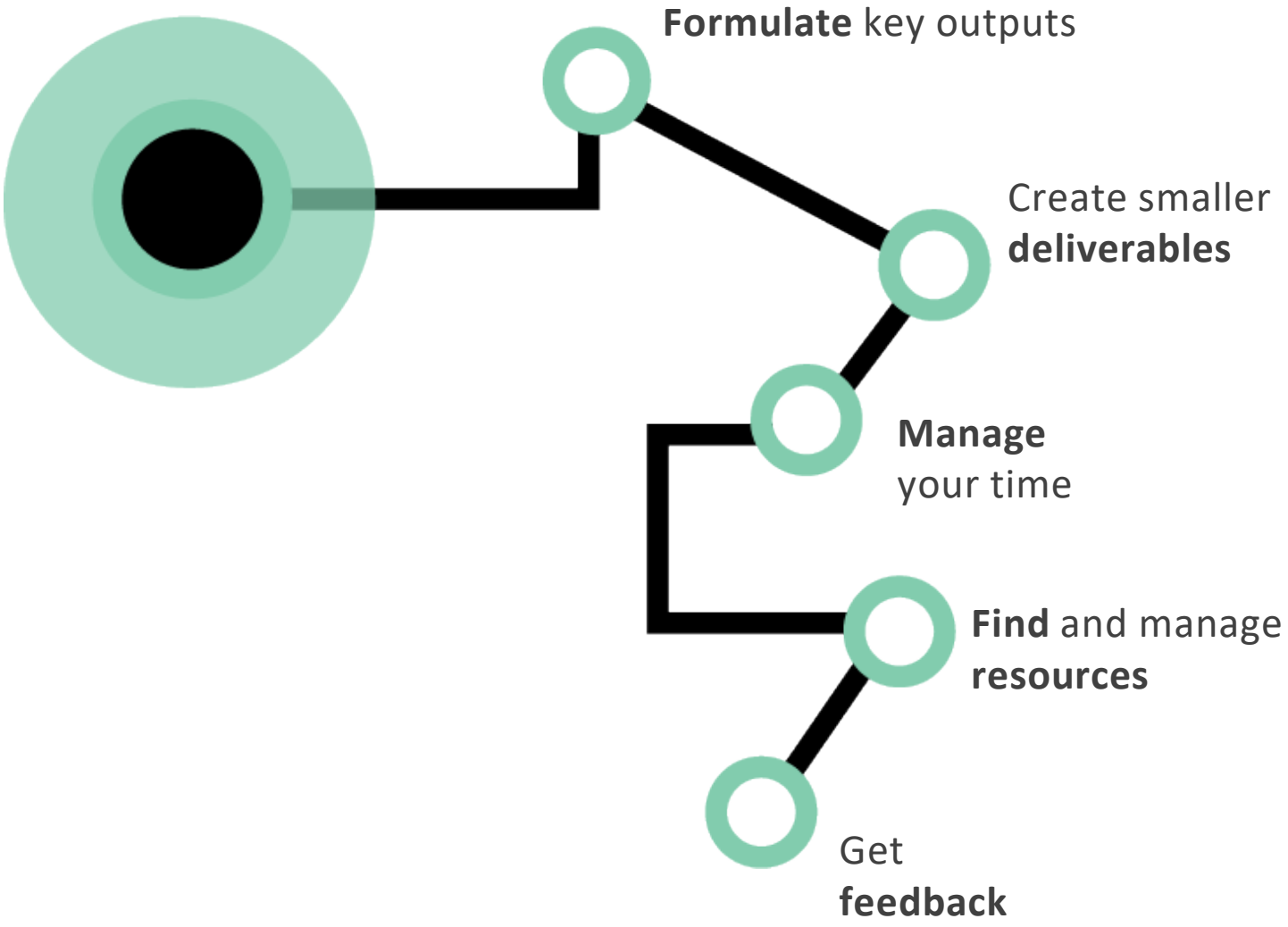
A preliminary proposal

However, if you are planning to do a research degree (i.e., Master's degree by thesis or a PhD), you will probably also be expected to include a preliminary proposal as part of your application or even before then, when you are in the **enquiry phase**. This is a much shorter document and is intended to show your potential supervisor / intended university department/ research centre /scholarship funders:

- what your broad research topic is
- what the relevance of such a study might be
- that you have read some of the relevant literature and that you can situate your research interest / preliminary research question within that literature
- that you can communicate your ideas, even if they are preliminary, in writing

Each Faculty or Department has their own requirements for what is expected, and you should ask if there are specific requirements, but it is worth developing your ideas along these lines before you contact the university /department /supervisor of your choice.

Project Management



Project Management

Formulate key **outputs**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Why is project management important?

Why do you think it is that most postgraduates have no problem in completing and passing the structured or taught parts of their courses but falter in the dissertation phase? If you think about it, you will see that a taught course follows all the project management steps we list on the left. In the case of a taught course, the course convenor or lecturer would be the project manager. At postgraduate level, you are no longer a consumer of knowledge; you are expected to produce knowledge and to take charge of your own research. This means that the role of project manager has shifted to you, and you must follow each of the steps yourself. In effect, you will structure your own "course". No more waiting for someone to tell you what to do. Rather plan what you need to do, check with your supervisor, make changes to your plan and then of course, do it!

See also **'Balancing Work and Thesis'**

Identify the end goal (Click to expand)

Doctoral graduate attributes (Click to expand)

A holistic understanding of a research project (Click to expand)

Project Management

Formulate key **outputs**

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Why is project management important? (Click to expand)

Identify the end goal

Being in charge means knowing what you are trying to achieve. As mentioned on this site, the university will award you a postgraduate degree if you have done a piece of independent scientific research within a reasonable amount of time and reported on it in a well-structured way. The degree of complexity, independence and level of specialisation will differ between Master's and Doctorate degrees, but the basic requirements are the same. The physical output that you need to produce to show that you have met this requirement is the **thesis or dissertation**.

Doctoral graduate attributes (Click to expand)

A holistic understanding of a research project (Click to expand)

Project Management

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Why is project management important? (Click to expand)

Identify the end goal (Click to expand)

Doctoral graduate attributes

In 2018, South Africa's Council for Higher Education (CHE) released a Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees. The Standard prescribes a set of nine graduate attributes - five knowledge attributes and four skills attributes - that doctoral graduates must master to meet the degree requirements. The graduate attributes will be assessed within the context of the purpose of the qualification. The purpose and level of the qualification will have been achieved when all the attributes are evident. It is thus important for all doctoral candidates to ensure that they keep these attributes in mind and consider how they will develop these throughout their doctoral journey. Click here **for the nine doctoral graduate attribute descriptors.**

A holistic understanding of a research project (Click to expand)


Doctoral Graduate Attributes
1
Broad Knowledge
2
Specialised Knowledge
3
Insight into Related Fields
4
Ethical Awareness
5
Original Contribution
6
Appropriate Methodologies
7
Reflection and Autonomy
8
Communication and Digital Literacy Skills
9
Critical Thinking for Problem Solving

Close

Project Management

Formulate key **outputs**

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Why is project management important? (Click to expand)
Identify the end goal (Click to expand)
Doctoral graduate attributes (Click to expand)

A holistic understanding of a research project

There are certain established and accepted ways in which you are expected to conduct your research and write your thesis or dissertation. Because all research typically follows this basic logic, there are also some typical or common tasks that make up the research project and will lead you to your end goal.

TIP **Click here for the main steps in the research journey**

These steps may not all be applicable to you or occur in the same order as is indicated here. Also, all these steps don't take an equal amount of time and they can overlap considerably. For example, you may spend most of your time on data collection, writing up your findings and reading the literature as you go along. On the other hand, in some fields, you might spend an entire year on your literature review *before* you start collecting data. However, the steps give you a holistic sense of what an entire research project might entail. Your next step is to create smaller measurable outputs for yourself, keeping your end goal in mind.

TIP **Use our *plan.it* project management resource to help you plan**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

TIP

Overview of typical steps in research project

- Do preliminary research
- Develop research question/hypothesis
- Create research design and methods
- Budget and resource planning
- Ethics approval if applicable (research involving humans/animals)
- Draw up proposal
- Literature review
- Data collection
- Analysis of data
- Describe findings
- Draw conclusions
- Report on study
- Publish

Close

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Project Management

Create smaller **deliverables**

In a taught course, complex content and activities are broken into manageable tasks and assignments. This gives you focus (which makes you more productive) and keeps you from feeling overwhelmed. How can you build a similar structure and discipline into your research project?

TIP **Click here for how to approach the Project Plan**

Use the Sample Project Plan as a starting point. Now you need to do two things - break the steps down into smaller deliverables as far as possible and write them as *outputs* rather than just activities. An output is something that you can measure and observe. It gives you focus because you will know when you are done and what you still need to do to complete it.

TIP **Click here for an example activity vs output**

You will probably already be able to fill in at least some more detailed outputs, but you will find that as you go along, you will be able to (and should) be more specific. It would be even better if you can agree with someone (either your supervisor or another accountability partner) that you will show them a specific output by a certain date.

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
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with someone (either your
ou will show them a specific

TIP

Example: activity vs output

If you go to the library every day for 3 months to "Do detailed secondary research" how will you know when you have finished and whether you are making any progress? Much better to go there on Monday with the explicit goal of coming away with "a list of current thinkers or researchers in the field of X" or "Notes on the work of Expert Y". The reason why the sample project plan does not have this level of detail and in some cases does not state outputs but rather activities, is because outputs are so context dependent.

Close

Project Management

Manage your **time**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Create realistic deadlines for each of your outputs along the way and add these to your project plan. Consider the benefits of a taught course again - it is structured in such a way that the time is spread realistically across the various tasks and assignments - everything is not squeezed into the last 6 months. Rather be conservative in setting deadlines, but then stick to them religiously. Consider your strengths and weaknesses, and your personal circumstances, whether you are part-time or full-time, etc. Use the average completion time for your degree as a guide. And of course, check with your supervisor whether you have allocated enough time to certain phases.

If you have broken your outputs into smaller units, it will be much easier to use little gaps in your week to work on a task. That said, it is sometimes necessary that you plan for some blocks of uninterrupted time, especially for your literature review and your writing-up phase. It is also a good idea to overlap certain tasks, so that you have alternative tasks to work on if you get stuck in one area. A good way to display your timeline is through a Gantt chart. To create a Gantt chart, you can use Project Management Software (Microsoft Project offers a 60-day trial period). Another way to display your timeline and to manage your project is through our ***plan.it*** **resource. Find out more about this SU project management tool here.**

Project Management

Find and manage **resources**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Any research requires money, information, people and computer hardware and software. Use your project plan to organise your resources in advance. You can ask for support, but as project manager it is up to you to do the asking.

1. **Money** (Click to expand)
2. **Information** (Click to expand)
3. **People** (Click to expand)
4. **Computer hardware and software** (Click to expand)

Project Management

Find and manage **resources**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Any research requires money, information, people and computer hardware and software. Use your project plan to organise your resources in advance. You can ask for support, but as project manager it is up to you to do the asking.

1. Money

Postgraduate studies carry two types of costs:

TIP **Tuition, accommodation and books**

TIP **Cost of research, e.g., printing, laboratory and fieldwork costs, conferences**

It is easier to find funding for the first type than the second. Click on the tips above to find out more. Consider available funding when you make your decision on where and what to study.

TIP **Other sources of funding**

2. Information (Click to expand)

3. People (Click to expand)

4. Computer hardware and software (Click to expand)

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

TIP

Cost of **tuition**, accommodation

See SU's student fees here.

Funding (for your university registration, living expenses and books) is normally called a **bursary** (as opposed to grants).

Many bursaries explicitly exclude research costs, which is dealt with in the next tip.

For a list of available bursaries, contact the Postgraduate Student Funding section of the Postgraduate Office. Make sure to note the application deadlines, these are often well before the start of your intended study.

Close

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ources in advance. You can ask
do the asking.

l fieldwork costs, conferences

second. Click on the tips above

4. **Computer hardware and software** (Click to expand)

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

l computer hardware and
es in advance. You can ask
ne asking.

dwork costs, conferences

nd. Click on the tips above

TIP

Research costs

Cost of research is normally covered by **research grants** (as opposed to bursaries which tend to only cover tuition).

There are very few research grants for which postgraduate students can apply directly. Most research grants are given to rated scientists (those who already hold a PhD). If you cannot apply for the grant yourself, ask your supervisor if they could apply as project leader and allocate some money for your research as part of the project. Find out about research grant calls from the Division for Research Development.

Also note our Postgraduate Funding Office will occasionally subsidise travel to an **international conference**, provided you are presenting a paper.

Close

4. Computer hardware and software (Click to expand)

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

TIP

Other sources of funding

- Some departments have small funds available for postgraduate research. Speak to your supervisor.
- Your employer might agree to sponsor you, especially if the research benefits them.
- Depending on your field of study, you might be able to and be expected to pay for research expenses yourself.
- Consider available funding when you make your decision on where and what to study.

Close

and computer hardware and
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fieldwork costs, conferences

econd. Click on the tips above

4. Computer hardware and software (Click to expand)

Project Management

Find and manage **resources**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Any research requires money, information, people and computer hardware and software. Use your project plan to organise your resources in advance. You can ask for support, but as project manager it is up to you to do the asking.

1. **Money** (Click to expand)

2. **Information**

There are two types of research data:

TIP **Secondary data**

TIP **Primary data**

3. **People** (Click to expand)

4. **Computer hardware and software** (Click to expand)

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

and computer hardware and
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TIP

Secondary data

Secondary data refers to all scholarly work already done related to your research statement and is gathered through a literature review.

Managing information consists of finding the relevant information and keeping records and notes on what you find in your review. (See the section on the Literature Review in this toolkit)

Close

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

and computer hardware and
ources in advance. You can ask
do the asking.

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TIP

Primary data

Primary data entails the raw data that you will analyse to reach a conclusion about your research question. It can be data that has been collected by someone else, but not yet analysed. There is nothing wrong with using good quality existing data. For **existing data**, consider whether you can get access to the data, how long it will take and if there are costs involved. Consider the quality of the data and the methods used for producing it and whether it is in electronic format or will have to be transcribed. For **new data**, consider your method for collecting the data, how you will access the sources, how long it will take and if there are costs involved. Also plan how you will capture the information (Mouton, 2001).

Close

Project Management

Find and manage **resources**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Any research requires money, information, people and computer hardware and software. Use your project plan to organise your resources in advance. You can ask for support, but as project manager it is up to you to do the asking.

1. **Money** (Click to expand)
2. **Information** (Click to expand)
3. **People**
   - TIP Librarian
   - TIP Statistician
   - TIP Fieldwork, laboratory and data capturing assistants
   - TIP Copyeditors
   - TIP Postgraduate support staff
4. **Computer hardware and software** (Click to expand)

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

and computer hardware and
ources in advance. You can ask
do the asking.

g assistants

nd)

TIP

Librarian

Academic librarians are highly specialised professionals and know where to find information on your research field. After your supervisor, they are your most valuable support. Make an appointment with **your faculty librarian** as early as possible in your research process (see the **Library website**).

Close

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

and computer hardware and
ources in advance. You can ask
lo the asking.

g assistants

nd)

TIP

Statistician

If appropriate, consult Stellenbosch University's **Statistical Consultation Service (SCS)** early in your research process to ensure the collection of relevant and analysable data if your study requires it. Some SU faculties have an agreement with the SCS for their students to consult for free. If not, you will have to pay for their services.

Close

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

and computer hardware and
ources in advance. You can ask
do the asking.

g assistants

nd)

TIP

Fieldwork, laboratory and data capturing assistants

Your department may have assistants available to help with your research. If not and you do need the additional assistance, you will have to find and pay for freelance assistants.

Close

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

e and computer hardware and sources in advance. You can ask do the asking.

ng assistants

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TIP

Copyeditors

The **Postgraduate Skills Development Programme** in the Postgraduate Office has a list of unvetted freelance editors you can consult.

Also see SU Language Centre's **'Style Guide'**

Close

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

e and computer hardware and
sources in advance. You can ask
o do the asking.

ng assistants

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TIP

Skills development and support

The **Postgraduate Skills Development Programme** in the Postgraduate Office offers free research-related workshops and resources that can help you to undertake and to complete your postgraduate degree smoothly and on time. Keep an eye on their website throughout the year for updates and new offerings!

Close

Project Management

Find and manage **resources**

- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Get **feedback**

Any research requires money, information, people and computer hardware and software. Use your project plan to organise your resources in advance. You can ask for support, but as project manager it is up to you to do the asking.

1. **Money** (Click to expand)
2. **Information** (Click to expand)
3. **People** (Click to expand)
4. **Computer hardware and software**

You need access to a computer with at least word processing software and possibly a spreadsheet programme. You might also require high speed computing or specialised data analysis software. Establish what you will need, where you can access it or how much it will cost to buy. It is **recommended** that you use a form of academic reference management software for researchers like *EndNote*. The university library has excellent courses and information about such programmes and if you are willing to invest some time in learning how to use them, you will be rewarded by saving weeks when it comes to compiling your bibliography. Ask your librarian.

Project Management

Find **feedback**

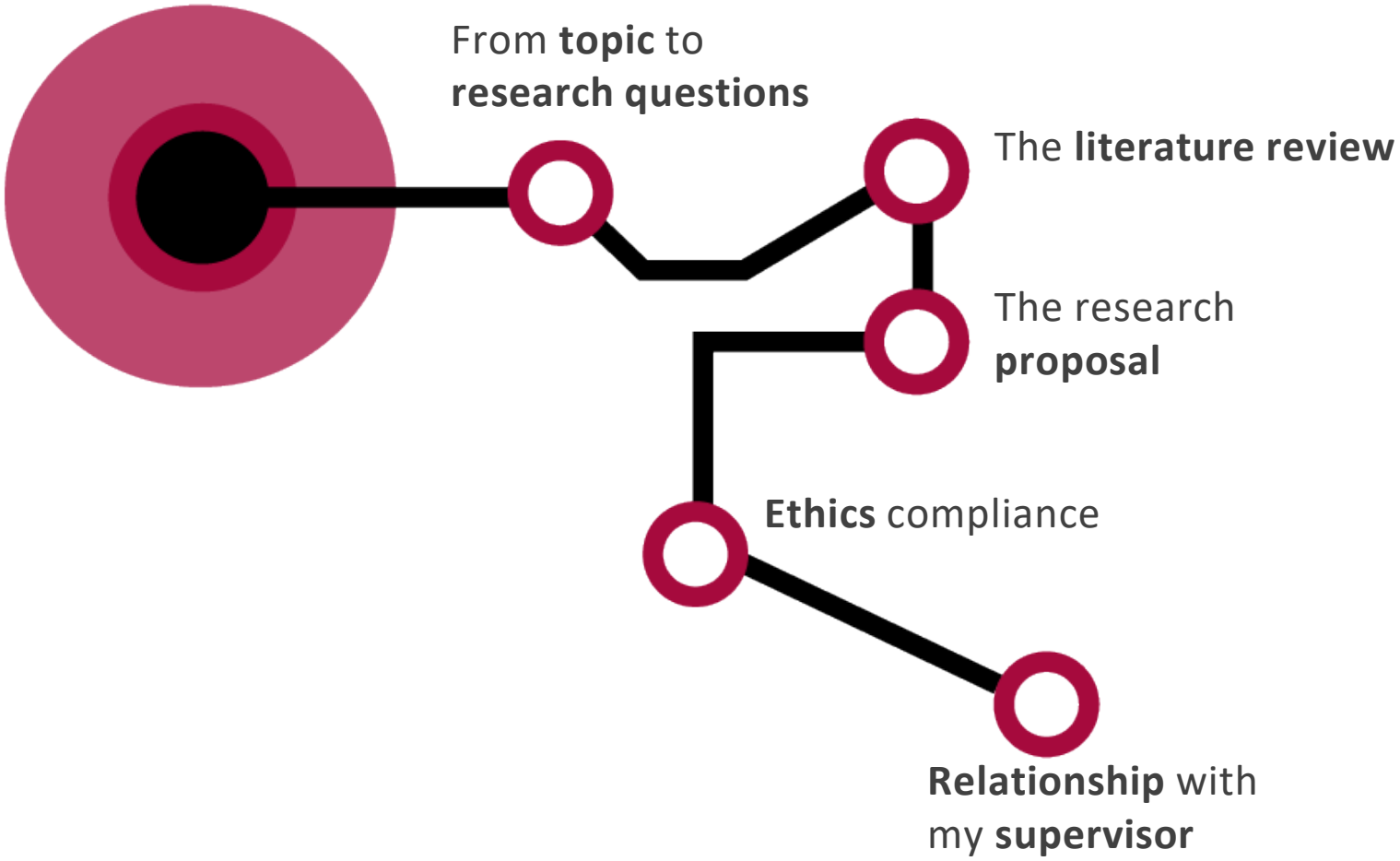
- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage** your **time**
- **Find** and manage **resources**
- Find **feedback**

Your supervisor is probably the most important person to whom you should communicate your deadlines. Not only will this place pressure on you to stick to your deadlines, but it will also allow the supervisor to plan his or her own time and ensure that you get feedback that you can incorporate into your work.

Mark the specific outputs in your project plan that you want to show your supervisor. Before you even start your research project, you should have shown your outputs and proposed deadlines to your supervisor and agreed on a set of dates to meet. In this way you will build in the feedback inherent in taught courses, ensure your development as a researcher (which is your responsibility) and avoid the common cycle of guilt and avoidance.

Click here for some advice on managing your relationship with your supervisor and here for advice on how to get the feedback you need from your supervisor!

Conducting your research



Conducting your research

From **topic** to **research questions**

After selecting a topic, you have to identify a researchable problem within that field. The research question is thus linked to the research problem and the goal of your research.

TIP **Follow this process to get from Research Topic to Research Question**

Remember this is just a general guide. There are many different forms of questions with which to work. Mouton (2001) also gives excellent guidelines and examples of different ways in which research questions can be formulated.

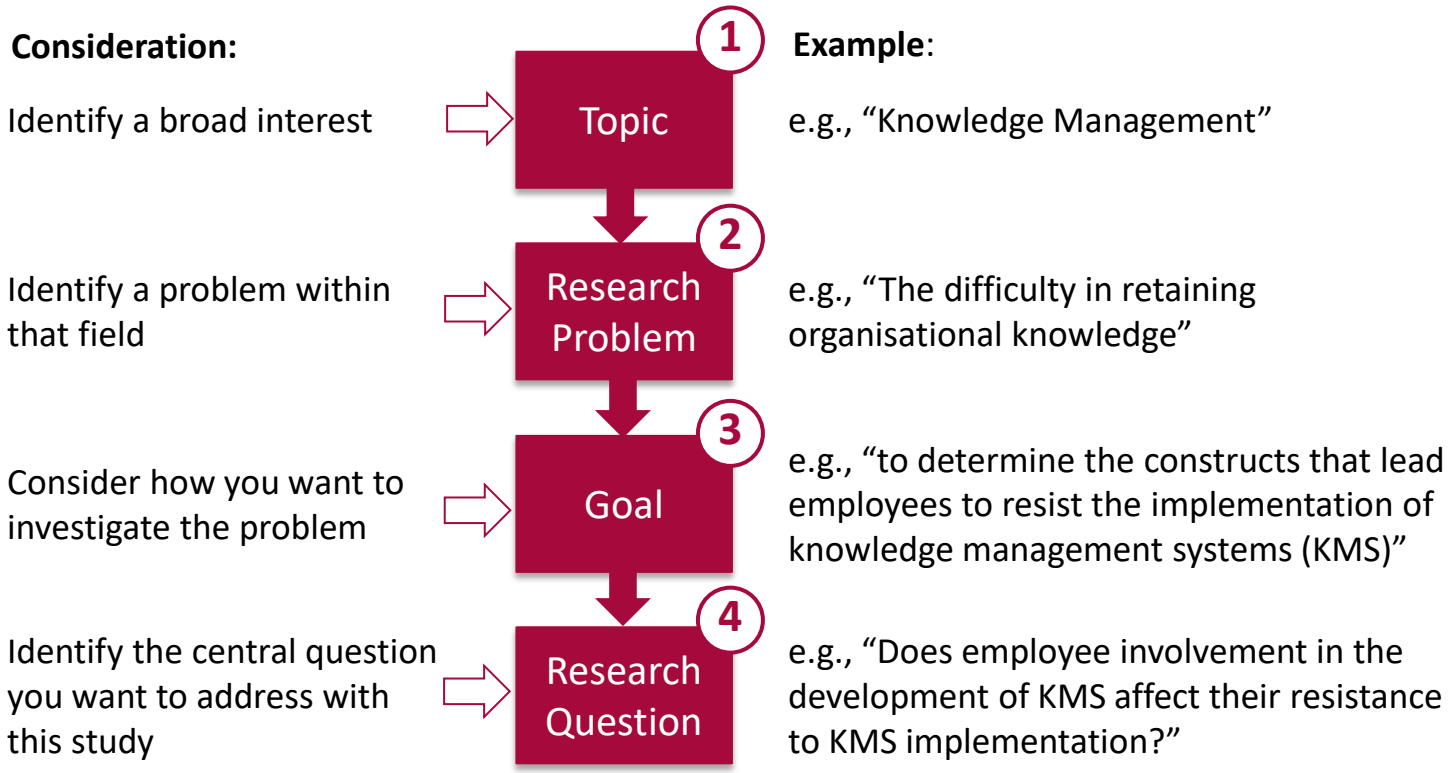
Once you have formulated your preliminary research question, try the checklist below to see if it measures up to all the necessary attributes of a good research question.

TIP **Checklist for a good Research Question**

TIP

From topic to research question – the process

From Ellis and Levy (2008)



Close

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

em within that field.
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of a good research

TIP

Checklist for Research Question

- ✓ clear and concise
- ✓ serve as a delineation of your study
- ✓ be grounded in theory
- ✓ supported by literature in the field
- ✓ researchable
- ✓ derived from practical and/or theoretical considerations
- ✓ contributes to knowledge building
- ✓ and has theoretical and/or practical implications
- ✓ indicate the nature and direction of relationships between variables and/or themes

From Parajuli, M (2008)

Close

Conducting your research

The **literature review**

The Stellenbosch University Library provides a huge collection of books, journals, electronic and human resources to help you to conduct a search for relevant literature to include in your review. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming, so it's best to learn how to search comprehensively and efficiently.

1. **Get to know your librarian** **(Click to expand)**
2. **Develop a Search Strategy** **(Click to expand)**
3. **What is SUNSearch?** **(Click to expand)**
4. **Can I use Google Scholar**? **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

The **literature review**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

The Stellenbosch University Library provides a vast collection of books, journals, electronic and human resources to help you to conduct a search for relevant literature to include in your review. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming, so it's best to learn how to search comprehensively and efficiently.

1. **Get to know your librarian**
   Stellenbosch University Library has **a librarian or two per faculty**. Take the time to meet or to correspond with them so that you can pick up useful advice on how to approach the **Library's resources**.

2. **Develop a Search Strategy** **(Click to expand)**
3. **How to do a Library search?** **(Click to expand)**
4. **Can I use Google Scholar**? **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

The **literature review**

The Stellenbosch University Library provides a vast collection of books, journals, electronic and human resources to help you to conduct a search for relevant literature to include in your review. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming, so it's best to learn how to search comprehensively and efficiently.

1. **Get to know your librarian** **(Click to expand)**
2. **Develop a Search Strategy**
   Make a short list of the phrases and keywords in your research question. Try different combinations and remember that there may be different words used for the same concept. Your search will probably yield broad results in the beginning. Select a few relevant items to narrow down the results. Thereafter, expand your search on specific authors' previous articles on related topics to create a more manageable collection. Conversely, you might start out with a narrow search in a subject specific database, after which you can expand your search using a meta-search tool to find related and more recent literature. The library offers excellent courses and online resources for developing a search strategy.
3. **How to do a Library search?** **(Click to expand)**
4. **Can I use Google Scholar?** **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

The **literature review**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

The Stellenbosch University Library provides a vast collection of books, journals, electronic and human resources to help you to conduct a search for relevant literature to include in your review. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming, so it's best to learn how to search comprehensively and efficiently.

1. **Get to know your librarian** **(Click to expand)**
2. **Develop a Search Strategy** **(Click to expand)**

3. **How to do a Library search?**

As a registered student, you have access to the entire library catalogue through the Library's search tool which allows a user to search multiple databases simultaneously. The way in which the results are delivered is novel and it offers a lot of additional advantages to a user, like the ability to save your previous searches.

4. **Can I use Google Scholar?** **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

The **literature review**

The Stellenbosch University Library provides a vast collection of books, journals, electronic and human resources to help you to conduct a search for relevant literature to include in your review. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming, so it's best to learn how to search comprehensively and efficiently.

1. **Get to know your librarian** **(Click to expand)**
2. **Develop a Search Strategy** **(Click to expand)**
3. **How to do a Library search?** **(Click to expand)**

4. **Can I use Google Scholar?**
   Google Scholar is a good starting point but take care to not only rely on Google Scholar because you could end up missing a lot of important literature simply because these did not come up as the highest-ranking hits in a search. Especially older publications are unlikely to feature in Google Scholar. This is where your librarian could prove to be invaluable in pointing you to field specific databases. Remember to log on to the Library's website first to maximize your Google Scholar success rate i.e., search Google Scholar via the Library's website to gain access to full articles.

Conducting your research

The research **proposal**

1. The importance of a good research proposal

Drafting a research proposal is an essential part of the postgraduate research process and in some instances, the acceptance of this proposal may be a required before a student is allowed to register. (See: Doctoral Registration – 2 models). The value of this piece of work goes much further than that though. Regardless of your field of study, or whether you are doing research for a Master's or PhD degree, putting effort into writing a good research proposal is worthwhile, as it will make the process of writing your thesis so much easier. Some experts go as far as saying that a good research proposal can make your thesis as easy as "filling in the blanks". Well, it is not entirely as simple as that, but a good proposal should provide a good structure to work within. Furthermore, developing proposal writing as a skill is of great value, especially if you are considering a career in research. In that case you will probably write numerous research and grant proposals throughout your career.

2. The content of a research proposal (Click to expand)

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research

The research **proposal**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

1. The importance of a good research proposal **(Click to expand)**

2. The content of a research proposal

It is possible that a very specific format may be prescribed within your department, so it is important to ask your supervisor. The following aspects are likely to be required. Click on each topic below to see more about a specific section.

TIP **The Title**

TIP **Research Question**

TIP **Aim of the Study**

TIP **Theoretical Framework**

TIP **Rationale**

TIP **Literature Review**

TIP **Methodology**

TIP **Timeframe and Resources**

3. Further readings on proposals **(Click to expand)**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

to expand)

ibed within your department, following aspects are likely to ut a specific section.

TIP

The **Title**

This refers to the likely title of your eventual thesis or dissertation. At this stage it is your *proposed* title, which means it is likely to change somewhat through the course of your research. A good title is a clear and short description of your research topic.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

to expand)

ibed within your department,
he following aspects are likely
bout a specific section.

TIP

Research Question

In addition to including the title of your study in your research proposal, you will also include the research question you have formulated.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Aim of the study

The goal that you formulated while focusing your study from a topic to a research question is a handy tool here.

What do you want to study and what is the final product that you envision?

Close

k to expand)

cribed within your department, e following aspects are likely to out a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Theoretical Framework

In this section you should explain the core concepts attached to the study.

Mouton's (2001) example of a good proposal is an excellent resource in this regard, as it gives a practical example of how a student unpacked the core concepts in a well-structured manner against a solid theoretical background.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Rationale

Why are you conducting this research? This section should give an indication of the *"general importance of the issue you plan to investigate"* (Bak, 2004:17). This section should include more than just your motivation for conducting the study (although this is important) but should go further to render reasons for the significance of the study within the academic community. Existing literature on the topic may form a good reference point here.

Close

k to expand)

cribed within your department, e following aspects are likely to out a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Literature Review

The literature review will eventually form part of your thesis and should be included in your proposal as it forms the backbone of your theoretical research up to this point.

Close

k to expand)

cribed within your department, e following aspects are likely to out a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Methodology

How do you plan to go about conducting your research? This section can also be used to "defend" the way you plan to conduct the study. This section may include the details of your chosen *research design* and *methods*, as well as give an overview of *cases* you plan to use in your study, the *data collection* and *analysis techniques* you plan to employ. Some experts suggest dividing this section up into smaller segments dealing with those topics individually. This is a very good idea, as this section can become extremely long and potentially lose its focus if all these aspects are covered in one go.

Close

k to expand)

cribed within your department, e following aspects are likely to out a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

TIP

Timeframe and **Resources**

You can't anticipate exactly how long your study will take, but it is extremely important to set goals and to stick to them in order to evaluate your own progress. You will also need to determine the resources, be it infrastructural or financial, needed to conduct your study.

Close

k to expand)

ribed within your department,
following aspects are likely to
out a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research

The research **proposal**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

1. **The importance of a good research proposal** **(Click to expand)**
2. **The content of a research proposal** **(Click to expand)**

3. **Further readings on proposals**

Bak, N. 2004.
Hofstee, E. 2010.
Mouton, J. 2001.
Ellis, T. and Levy, Y. 2008
Wentz, E. 2013

For the full references to these works please go to Reference List.

Apart from the books listed above, the internet also offers a wide range of resources in this regard. There are a few university libraries that also post examples and suggested templates for research proposals. Focusing your online search on your field of study may give you even better examples of proposals structured in a way that is relevant to your field. Always remember to discuss your proposed structure with your supervisor.

Conducting your research

Ethics compliance

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

Overview

Stellenbosch University believes that a good researcher is one who considers the people and things around them and always adheres to the principles of mutual respect, a high standard of scholarship, responsibility and transparency. The Division for Research Development (DRD) is responsible for ensuring that all research undertaken through the university, *including postgraduate research,* adheres to these standards. On the DRD's website (click here) you will find the relevant policies related to ethics and integrity as well as information about the process of Ethics Approval for your postgraduate research project. Here we will try to give you a brief overview.

Ethics approval **(Click to expand)**

Plagiarism **(Click to expand)**

Policies **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

Ethics compliance

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

Overview **(Click to expand)**

Ethics approval

Ensure you have the necessary approval for your research *before* you start collecting data. Ask your supervisor whether you need to formally apply for ethics clearance. Projects that pose a low risk may be approved at Faculty level, but those that may potentially harm people, animals or the environment, must be approved by one of the formal Research Ethics Committees (RECs). RECs meet at specified times through the year, so take these dates into account in your project planning. Waiting for ethics approval can really hold up your research - be sure to build in the time and follow the correct steps. There are four committees - which one you apply to will depend on your research area and methods (also see the DRD webpage):

TIP **Human Research Ethics Committee**

TIP **Animal Research Ethics Committee**

TIP **Biosafety and Environment Ethics Committee**

TIP **Health Research Ethics Committee**

Plagiarism **(Click to expand)**

Policies **(Click to expand)**

TIP

Human Research Ethics Committee

The ethics application process starts within respective Departments via the Departmental Ethics Screening Committee (DESC). Applications are screened to determine their risk levels. Applications of minimal and low risk are screened by the DESC and are ratified by the REC. Only applications with medium to high ethics risks are referred to the REC for full review.

Close

Policies (Click to expand)

TIP

Animal Research Ethics Committee

All animal research and teaching conducted under the auspices of SU should uphold the "Three R" principles for humane animal research, namely:

Replacement - wherever possible, replace "sentient" animals, with "non-sentient" research models in order to eliminate the use of animals that can experience unpleasant sensations.

Reduction - use design strategies that try to use the smallest number of living beings that will allow valid information to be obtained from the study.

Refinement - refine your practices around animal sourcing, animal care and experimental procedures to eliminate physical and psychological distress as much as possible.

When do I need ethics clearance for an animal study?

Ethics clearance must be obtained for the use of all live non-human vertebrates and higher invertebrates such as the advanced members from the Cephalopoda and Decapoda, including eggs, foetuses and embryos (where development of an integrated nervous system is evident) in research and teaching activities (SANS 10386:2008).

Close

Policies (Click to expand)

TIP

Biosafety and Environmental Ethics Committee

This committee is mandated to review and approve research that is potentially hazardous to humans, animals or the environment. Such research may involve work related to Recombinant DNA, Pathogens and Infectious Agents, or Biological Toxins. The committee is also responsible for providing guidance on practices to minimize health and environmental hazards related to biological agents used in research and teaching within the university community. All research involving genetically modified organisms or research that poses a risk to the natural environment or the researcher and supporting staff, must be submitted for ethical review and approval before the research commences. All SU researchers and lecturers are responsible for obtaining ethics approval for a given project or teaching activity before its start date. Applications for ethics approval should be prepared in consultation with peers, the relevant Head of Department, and the Reek's administration office.

Close

Policies (Click to expand)

TIP

Health Research Ethics Committee

All health research, as defined by the National Health Act, must be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council. Thus, all health-related research involving:

- any direct interaction with or observation of human participants,
- the use of potentially identifiable personal health records, information or tissue specimens, and/or,
- human progenitor or stem cells

requires the approval of a Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee (REC) before the research study commences.

Due to the number of review requests, there are two Health RECs, they meet at different times, but both have the same status and function.

Close

Policies (Click to expand)

Conducting your research

Ethics compliance

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

Overview **(Click to expand)**

Ethics approval **(Click to expand)**

Plagiarism

Plagiarism, even "accidental" plagiarism, is seen as serious scientific misconduct. If you are not sure about what plagiarism is, access the Postgraduate Skills Development Programme's self-paced course on SUNLearn: **Academic Writing Integrity: Avoiding Plagiarism**. Note that SU has a license for *Turnitin*. *Turnitin* does not measure plagiarism, rather it shows you where your document is picking up similarities to other work stored in its repository (all published work, as well as previous uploads by you and other people). So, it can be used as a tool to help you check that have not plagiarised. The Postgraduate Skills Development Programme, the University Library and the SUNLearn team can assist you with using this tool. Make sure to ask for the "sandbox" version if you want to use it as a training tool and not as a final formal requirement, which is sometimes expected by supervisors. Otherwise, if you try to load a next version of your document, it will show high levels of similarity, because *Turnitin* would have saved your previous version. The "sandbox" deletes your previous version from its memory. Also see the Plagiarism Policy of the university in the next section.

Policies **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

Ethics compliance

- From **topic** to **research questions**
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- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

Overview **(Click to expand)**

Ethics approval **(Click to expand)**

Plagiarism **(Click to expand)**

Policies

Please also check the DRD web page for updates to these policies.

- Policy for responsible research conduct at Stellenbosch University
- Policy on Plagiarism (in Support of Academic Integrity)
- Stellenbosch University procedure for the investigation and management of allegations of plagiarism

Conducting your research

Relationship with my **supervisor**

- From **topic** to **research questions**
- The **literature review**
- The research **proposal**
- **Ethics** compliance
- **Relationship** with my **supervisor**

Like any relationship, your relationship with your supervisor can have its ups and downs. As the project manager of your research degree, you also share the responsibility for managing this relationship. This is not always easy – sometimes you do not get to choose your own supervisor, or your expectations of a particular supervisor are disappointing On the other hand, always try to remember that supervisors are not superhuman. Like us, they have their strengths and weaknesses.

How to avoid problems in your supervisor relationship **(Click to expand)**

What if things go very wrong? **(Click to expand)**

Conducting your research

Relationship with my **supervisor**

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How to avoid problems in your supervisor relationship

Many issues can be sorted out through open communication. For a start, make sure both you and your supervisor have a similar understanding of your respective responsibilities. **It is compulsory to discuss and sign a Memorandum of Understanding between you and your supervisor before you start your research.** It is important to clarify expectations right in the beginning– ask your supervisor/s how they would like to work with you, what they expect of you and let them know well in advance if you are not going to be able to meet a particular expectation. Every relationship will be different because of individual differences, disciplinary differences, departmental contexts etc. There is therefore no template for doing it 'right' – the discussion and agreement itself is probably more important than the content you agree on. Have a look at the example of a **Memorandum of Understanding**.

What if things go very wrong? (Click to expand)

Conducting your research

Relationship with my **supervisor**

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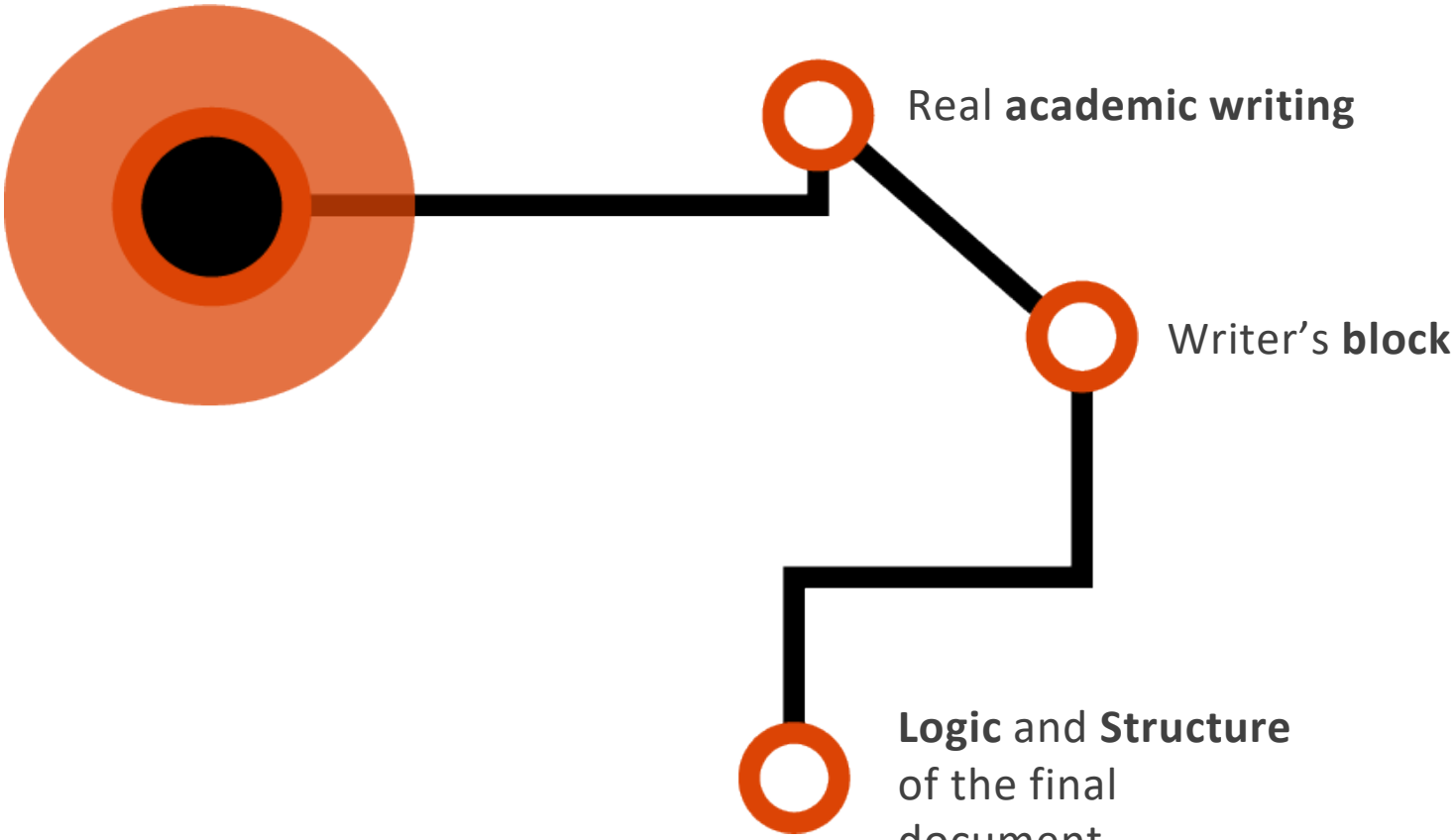
How to avoid problems in your supervisor relationship **(Click to expand)**

What if things go very wrong?

Establishing clear expectations early on can help prevent many of the common challenges that arise in postgraduate supervision. Open and honest communication with your supervisor is equally important — even about areas where you feel confident or don't believe you need support. If you have serious concerns about your supervision relationship, the signed MoU can serve as a useful reference point for initiating a conversation about your concerns. In some cases, it may be necessary to seek support from someone else within the university. Your first point of contact would typically be your Head of Department. While it might feel uncomfortable to raise concerns formally, if you've already tried to address the issues directly with your supervisor and still feel unfairly treated — it's important to escalate your concerns. Depending on the nature of the issue, other appropriate contacts may need to be contacted such as the Equality unit or the Director of the University's Postgraduate Office.

Writing Up


Real **academic writing**
Writer's **block**
Logic and **Structure** of the final document

Writing Up

Real academic writing

- **Real** academic **writing**
- Writer's **block**
- **Logic** and **Structure** of the final document

Myths about academic writing

One of the biggest myths about postgraduate study is that writing occurs towards the end of your studies, after you have done all the data collection and analysis. In fact, writing should be an activity you do throughout your degree. By writing down your responses to an article you have read, or to a set of results in the lab, you are starting to formulate your arguments which will go into your final product. A good practice is not to let a day go by without doing some form of writing. Most students think that writing is about crafting and proofing the final product, about good grammar and big words. They are unaware of the stages involved in good academic writing. In the earlier stages of your degree, writing is a tool for thinking. Nobody but you needs to see what you have written. Keeping up a regular writing habit will also make the compilation of your final documents less daunting.

TIP **The stages of real academic writing**

See also **'Supporting Academic Writing'**

And **'How is Good Science Writing Like Good Cooking?'**

TIP

Real academic writing as three overlapping phases

It is much easier and more enjoyable to write academically if you start regarding writing as a process, consisting of three overlapping stages.

Throughout your degree, you will go through many cycles of this writing process. For example, when you develop your proposal, you will go through the phases of pre-writing (for yourself), drafting (for your supervisor) and editing (preparing the final documents for presentation/publication). You will go through similar cycles for each chapter, article and of course your final thesis or dissertation. With a document as big as a dissertation, you will go through the cycle numerous times.

By neglecting the first phase, most people **never get to experience the real benefits and even joys of writing just for yourself**. By focusing only on the final phases, writing can be anxiety provoking, leading to avoidance and writer's block.

Close

Writing Up

Writer's block

- **Real** academic **writing**
- Writer's **block**
- **Logic** and **Structure** of the final document

Many students, and even seasoned academics, have found themselves staring at their computer screens in a state of anxiety over not being able to start typing up their research, or being unable to formulate coherent sentences. Writer's block can be an incapacitating and extremely stressful experience, and in extreme cases it has led to students discontinuing their studies.

Conquering writer's block
The way to tackle writer's block often depends on the cause of the problem.

TIP **Causes of writer's block**

TIP **Help for your writer's block**

- **Real** academic **writing**
- Writer's **block**
- **Logic** and **Structure** of the final document

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TIP

Possible causes of writer's block

- Exaggerated fear over the way in which others will judge your work
- A strong link between academic performance and your self-esteem
- Perfectionism and/or unrealistic expectations
- Negative self-talk and self-criticism
- Personal problems, such as isolation
- Anxiety over writing, and subsequent avoidance of writing to reduce your anxiety

From Passman, R.H. 1976 and Duke Graduate School

Close

- **Real** academic **writing**
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TIP

Help for writer's block

- Divide your thesis into **smaller, more manageable chunks**, for example set a goal of writing *one segment* of a chapter rather than a whole chapter.
- Set a **daily writing target** - decide on a realistic amount – and stick to it! Some even say you should not write any *more* than your target.
- Try the **Pomodoro technique** – in which you set an alarm for 25 minutes slots, just for writing.
- Try **free writing** to break the block – just write whatever comes into your head without stopping. Don't think or edit. If you get stuck just write, "I'm stuck" over and over again until something else pops into your head. This really works!

Close

Writing Up

Logic and Structure

- **Real** academic **writing**
- Writer's **block**
- **Logic** and **Structure** of the final document

Most research fields have developed standard or typical dissertation structures. While these structures are not prescriptive, it is a good idea to familiarise yourself with the conventions in your discipline, by looking at the layout of dissertations within your discipline on SUNScholar. These conventions have developed because they have an inherent logic and clarity and are also probably familiar to your examiners, so think carefully before you deviate from them. Whichever structure you decide to use, it should be clear, logical, cumulative and easy to follow.

TIP **What is SUNScholar?**

TIP **How to make your dissertation clear, logical and easy to follow**

TIP **How long should your thesis or dissertation be?**

See also the Generic SU guidelines for thesis and dissertation layout

See this toolkit's reference list here.

- **Real** academic **writing**
- Writer's **block**
- **Logic** and **Structure** of the final document

TIP

What is SUNScholar?

SUNScholar is the University's digital archive of all published SU research outputs. It contains the theses and dissertations of graduated SU students. You can search by faculty, department or even by supervisor, to find out how others in your field have approached their thesis or dissertation structure, layout and formatting.

Just remember that while all the theses and dissertations on SUNScholar were worthy of conferring a degree, they are not necessarily all examples of good formatting. Always use such examples only as starting points for your own decisions. Discuss your thoughts and ideas with your supervisor and others in your department. SUNScholar can be found at **http://scholar.sun.ac.za**, or you can reach it by Selecting "E-theses" in the Library **search box**. Select your faculty to see theses and dissertations published by students in your field of research.

Close

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- **Real** academic **writing**
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TIP

Make your dissertation clear and logical

- Your logic should be **cumulative**, i.e., readers are provided with all the information they need to move to the next section.
- The thesis **builds up** to its conclusions and recommendations through advancing and clarifying **arguments, reasons and evidence** for reaching them. See **'The Thesis as Argument'**.
- There should be **no repetition**. If your structure is logical and cumulative, there should be no need for repetition.
- **Headings** should be **relevant** to the content and in **logical order**.
- If you change the order in which elements typically appear in a thesis, make sure you **don't leave any expected elements** out.

Close

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TIP

How long should my thesis or dissertation be?

Note: the logic of your dissertation and the nature of your study should ultimately determine its length, e.g., complex methodologies will require shorter literature reviews and longer methods sections. Achieving the objective of the part is more important than writing the typical length of pages. Use the lengths given below as starting points only.

Typical lengths for dissertations	Lengths of the parts	
Master's Degree full thesis 100 - 120 pages	**Introduction**	10%
Master's Degree mini dissertation after coursework 60 - 80 pages	**Literature Review**	20%
PhD, Doctoral Dissertation 220 pages	**Method**	15%
The above page numbers are based on double-spacing. Please note that these are guidelines only. Your department, faculty or supervisor might have different prescribed or recommended lengths.	**Body**	45%
	Conclusion	10%

Based on the work of Hofstee (2010)

Close

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