

Welcome to the 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 gradually get better at these things. But 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. Universities offer 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 your dissertation**.



Explore the Toolkit



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At any time, you can use the **top bar** to navigate to the **main phases** in your research journey.

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

And the menu on the **left** to find navigate the **smaller steps** within each phase

Got it, thanks. Continue with toolkit



CONSIDERING A
RESEARCH DEGREE?

GETTING
STARTED

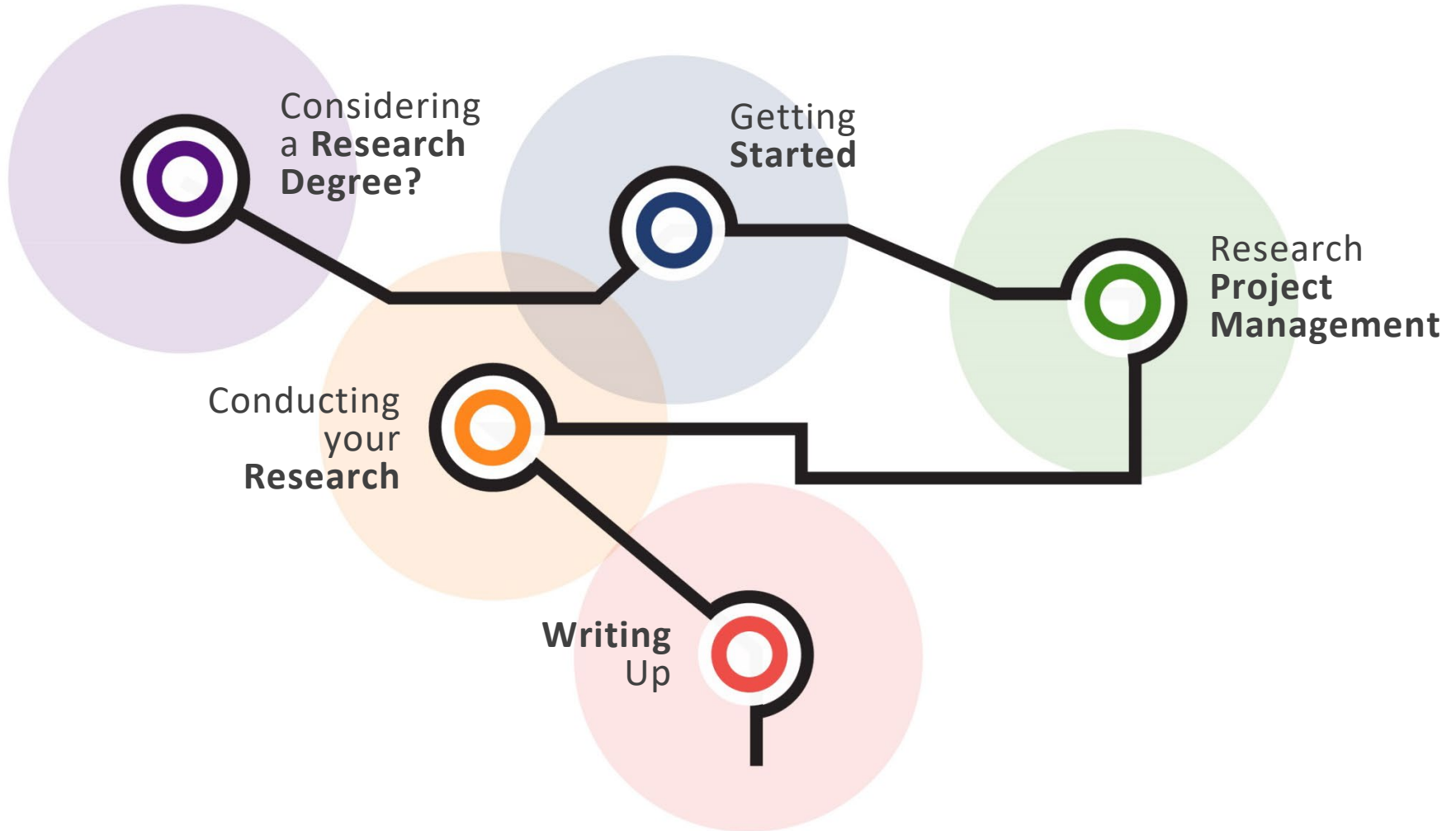
PROJECT
MANAGEMENT

DOING YOUR
RESEARCH

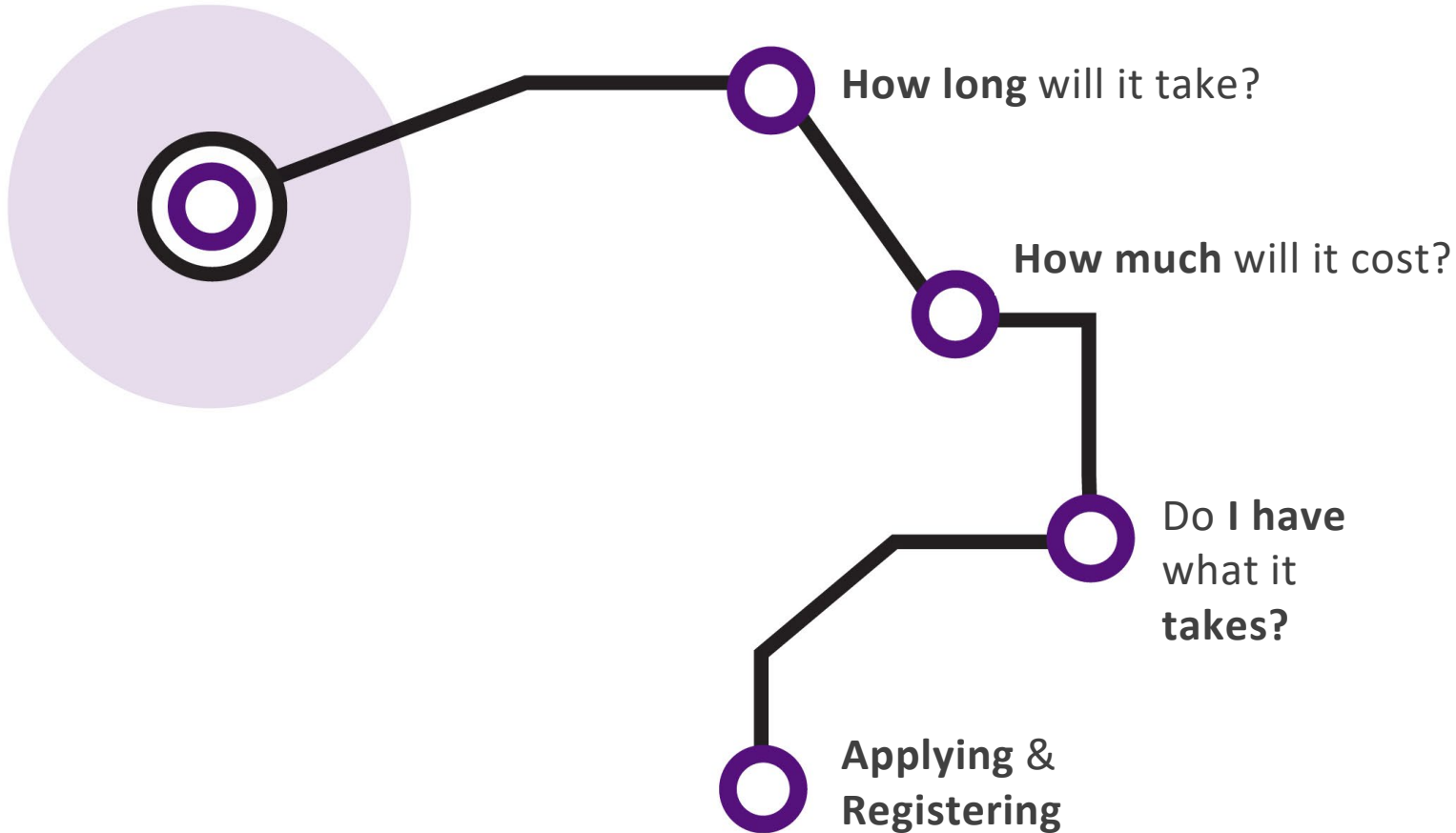
WRITING
UP

JOURNEY
MAP

Your guide to completing your Research Degree!



Considering a Research Degree?



Considering a Research Degree?



How long will it take?

- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
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- Applying & Registering

Master's Degree

Typically, the minimum period for getting a Master's degree after a Bachelor's degree in South Africa (SA) is 2 years and after an Honours degree, is 1 year. Most Master's students complete their degree in **2 years**.

Doctorate

Typically, the minimum period for a PhD in SA is 2 years. Maximum periods allowed for completion vary and are dependent on progress, but it is unlikely 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

Do the maths!

Considering a Research Degree?



- How long will it take?
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How long will it take?

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 can work 3 hours a day, a PhD will take you $3600 \div 3 = 1200$ days, i.e., 3 years and 3½ months.

Close

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Considering a Research Degree?



How much will it cost?

- How long will it take?
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1. University Fees

Master's degree: typically, between R ... and R ...

PhD degree: typically, from R ... to R ... depending on the faculty and on how long you take to complete your degree. In most faculties, the bulk of the fees are paid in the first two years, after which further registration will cost you between R ... and R ... per annum. In other faculties, the cost is spread evenly over four years.

2. Cost of Research [\(Click to expand\)](#)

3. Cost of Living [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Considering a Research Degree?



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, above, you will need money for your actual research. Depending on the type of research you are doing, this could include photocopying and printing, laboratory costs, fieldwork expenses, consumables and travelling costs. Some departments make these available, but do not just assume this. Find out! It is always a good idea to work out a budget for your research project anyway, whether you end up paying for it personally or not. Most research proposals require a budget like this, as do grant funding applications, so it is a good skill to learn. Many postgraduate students underestimate the cost of research or do not realise that money to cover research costs is not always freely available from the university.

3. Cost of Living [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Considering a Research Degree?



How much will it cost?

- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
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- 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. However, it also means you have to calculate your potential loss of earnings and find alternative funding to cover your living expenses, which could amount to at least R90 000 a year.

Considering a Research Degree?



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?

When postgraduate students fail it is normally because they never hand in a dissertation, rather than 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.

TIP

[How do I develop my research skills?](#)

2. Do I have the necessary support? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

3. Do I have the motivation? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Considering a Research Degree?



- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
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Do

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 – your supervisors, peers, senior students, support staff. This kind of development is self-driven. You need to identify your needs and ask for help, feedback and support. Your institution may offer support services for postgraduate students. These services are usually not there to teach you research skills, but rather to help YOU to engage with your research environment, where your main development should take place.

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As a postgraduate student,
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Close

Considering a Research Degree?



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 can sometimes be 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? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Considering a Research Degree?



- How long will it take?
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Do

TIP

Family, friends and employers

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Your family, friends and employer will mostly have 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 and most importantly, sticking to your timeline.

See also: [‘Early Career Academics: Balancing work and thesis’](#)

to work independently. your postgraduate project, g the support you need.

Close





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

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Your supervisor

Your research supervisor is an invaluable support and can have a huge impact on the success of your research degree. It is worth spending time carefully choosing a supervisor (if this is an option) and considering how you will manage this relationship. This will be covered in more detail in the Getting Started Section. Remember a supervisor cannot be everything to everyone; understand why you chose this supervisor, what they are good at and find other people to assist you in aspects in which your supervisor is less strong.

See also:

[‘Finding the right programme & supervisor’](#)

[‘How to approach a potential supervisor?’](#)

Close



...independently.
...graduate project,
...support you need.

Considering a Research Degree?



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

Do

TIP

University support

Some of the key support services to look out for are:

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

to work independently. your postgraduate project, g the support you need.

Close

Considering a Research Degree?



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?

Motivations are very personal. Your own motivation might be a mix of extrinsic motivators, such as status or better career prospects and intrinsic motivators, such as acquiring new knowledge in a particular field (Mouton, 2009). Whatever your motivation, remember that completing a postgraduate degree is one way in which to achieve these ends. There are many other ways of learning more about a subject, getting recognised and achieving status. Following the postgraduate route to these ends means you will have to **do research**, independently. **If research and scholarship itself motivates you, you are probably on the right track.** Try to put your motivations into words. Will they be enough to see you through many late nights and social sacrifices? Will they get you to stick to your timeline despite other demands?

Considering a Research Degree?



Applying & Registering

- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
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- Applying & Registering

1. Before you apply

Unlike an undergraduate degree, the process usually 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

See also:

[‘Advice for prospective postgraduate students’](#)

[‘Deciding to do a Master’s Degree?’](#)

[‘Deciding to do a Doctoral Degree?’](#)

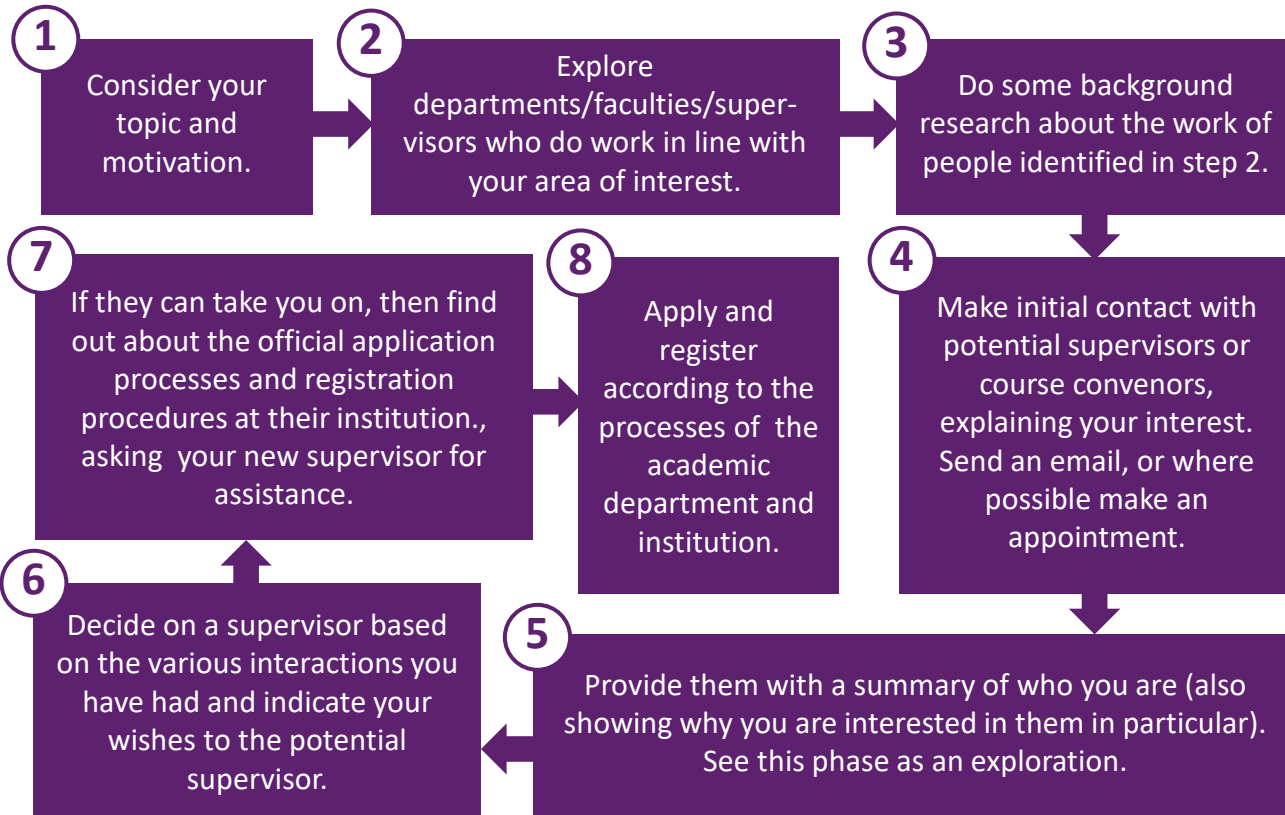
[‘Understanding the PG journey & process’](#)

2. Formal application [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Considering a Research Degree?

TIP

8 Steps before applying



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

Close

Considering a Research Degree?



Applying & Registering

- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
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- **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 previous degree)
Find out from the university that you are applying at what the procedure is.

Prospective students (e.g. new to the university or returning to the university) At most SA universities, prospective students must complete an online e-application process. Information about the process is typically available on these universities' postgraduate web pages.

Please remember, in both cases you should ideally already 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?



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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

3. Formal application: Doctoral

The process leading up to registration for doctoral candidates differs quite a bit from that for Master's degree students. SA universities' various faculties also follow different regulations, and you should familiarise yourself with the processes, regulations and dates applicable to the specific department and faculty. Departments may 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](#)

Please remember, 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

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

Model 1



Model 2:



From Mouton (2009)

Close



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STARTED

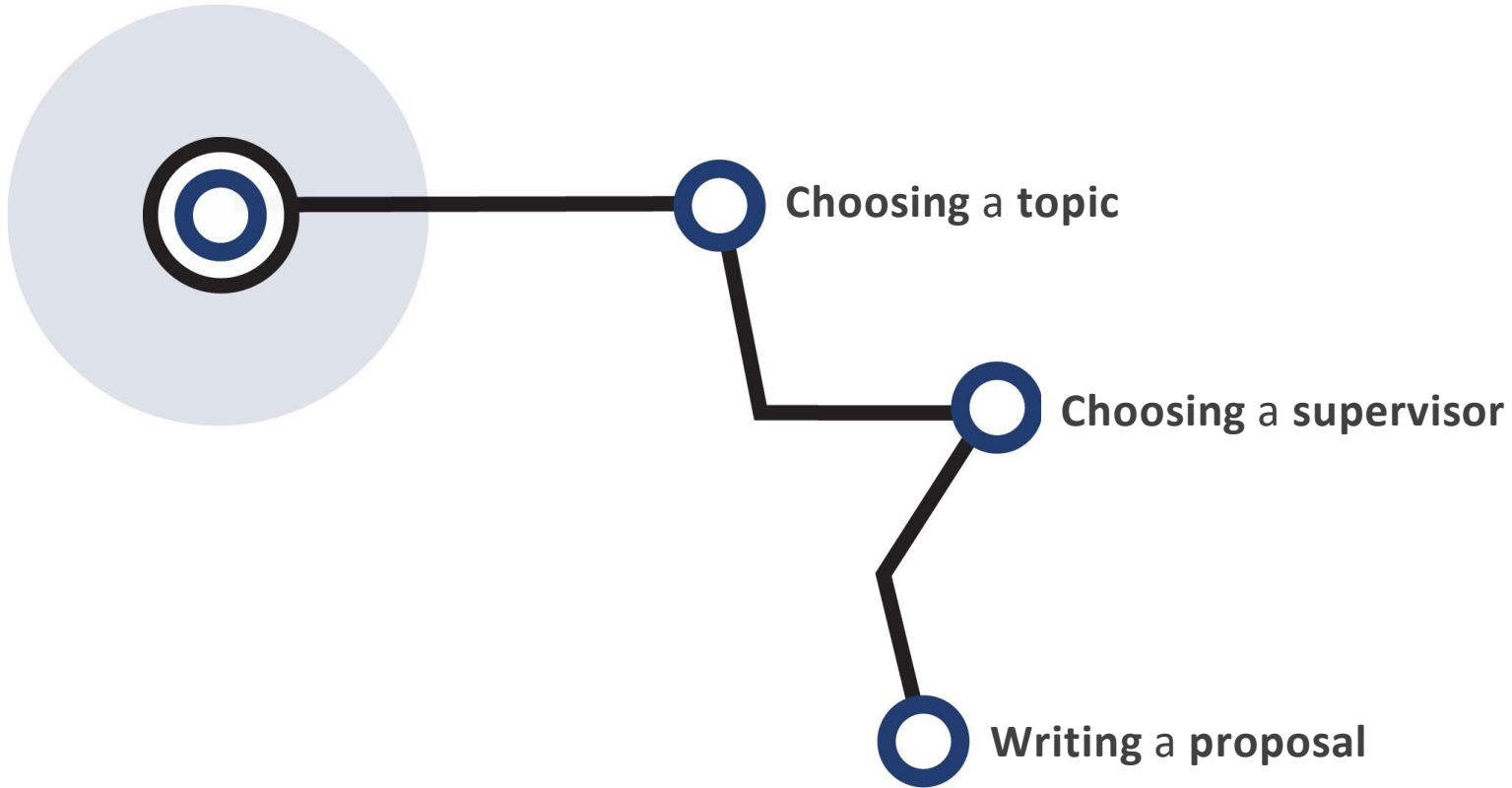
PROJECT
MANAGEMENT

DOING YOUR
RESEARCH

WRITING
UP

JOURNEY
MAP

Getting started



Getting started



Choosing a topic

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

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. Databases listing 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

TIP

Questions to ask when choosing a topic

- Is the topic in line with your career objectives?
- Will the topic keep you academically stimulated for many 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 dissertation 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?

Close

section [Conducting your research – from topic to research question.](#)



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

Getting started

TIP

Collections of Theses and Dissertations

South African Collections

Consult your university's theses/dissertation on-line repository

[NRF Nexus](#) South African research.

Alternative link: <http://nexus.nrf.ac.za/>

[National ETD Portal \(South Africa\)](#) South African theses and dissertations.

[IR Space](#) A search platform that searches across South African institutional repositories (Use the search bar lower down on the page).

International Collections

[PhDdata](#)

[NDLTD](#)

[ProQuest Dissertations and Theses](#)

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Getting started



Choosing a supervisor

- Choosing a topic
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- Writing a proposal

Understanding how your supervisor will assist you in your research process may help you to choose someone who you feel confident working with. According to [Helm and van der Westhuisen \(1999\)](#), the responsibilities and roles of the supervisor will differ according to three research or study phases. Consider the phases delineated below when making your choice:

1. **The design phase** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
2. **The work phase** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
3. **The editing phase** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

The following documents are **useful for both supervisors and postgraduates** in the initial stages of developing a healthy supervisor/student relationship:

Practical process recommendations for supervisors when shaping the relationship.

Memorandum of understanding (or agreement) – not compulsory at all SA HEIs, but is a useful tool to guide discussion/s between supervisor and postgraduate, to clarify mutual expectations of the relationship. Many problems in supervision come from misunderstandings regarding the other's expectations. Also, find out whether your university or department has an official **Supervisor Student Code of Conduct**. This is an official document stating the university's general expectation of the supervisory relationship.

Getting started



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

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The **Design** phase

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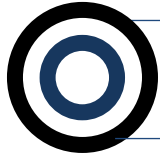
Here the student has to learn to be creative and systematic in his/her research. The supervisor's task in this phase is to help the student to choose a research topic. Moses (1985) stresses the importance of this role and even includes that the supervisor should ensure that the topic is suitable for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

Close

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Getting started



- Choosing a topic
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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.

Moses (1985)

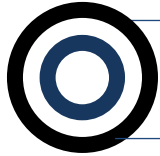
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Close

Getting started



- 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.

See also:

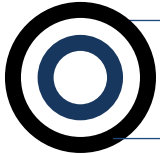
- [‘Formative feedback \(for supervisors\)’](#)
- [‘Getting the feedback you need \(for students\)’](#)

Close

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n thinking about the kind of official document, i.e. not for a discussion with your ionship. Many problems in other's expectations. official **Supervisor Student** tes the university's general

Getting started



Writing a proposal

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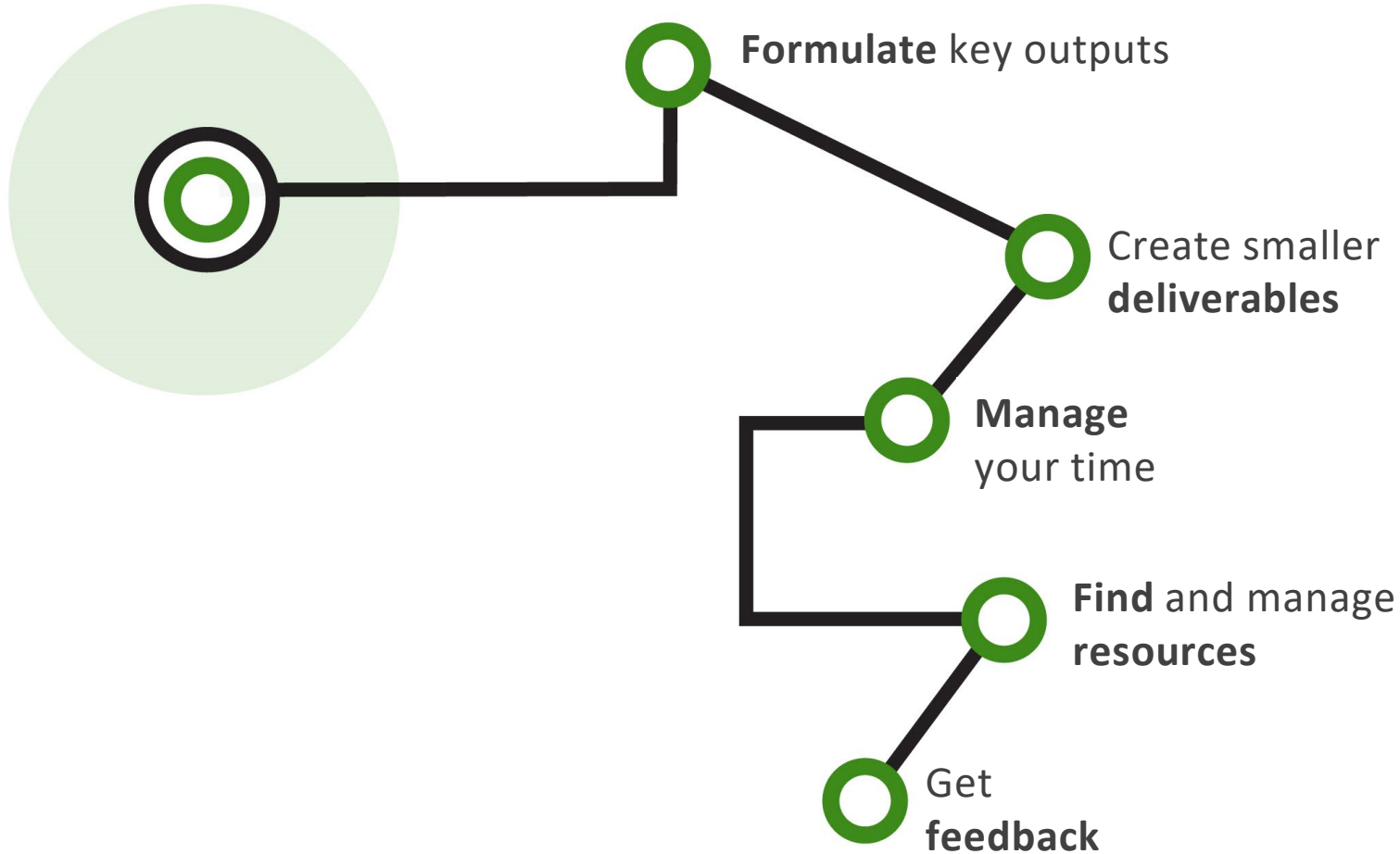
In postgraduate education, your research proposal or protocol marks a major milestone within the actual research journey. It is usually developed with your supervisor in the first phase of your studies and is then formally accepted by the Higher Degrees Committee of your faculty. The formal research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

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:

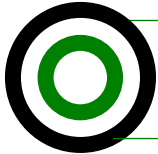
- what your broad research topic is
- what the relevance of such a study might be
- that you have read some of the relevant literature and that you can situate your research interest / preliminary research question within that literature
- that you can communicate your ideas, even if they are preliminary,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

Each Faculty or Department will have 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?

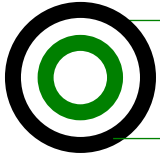
Why do you think it is that most postgraduates have no problem in completing and passing the structured or taught parts of their courses but falter in the dissertation phase? If you think about it, you will see that a taught course follows all of the project management steps we list on the left. In the 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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

A holistic understanding of a research project [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Project Management



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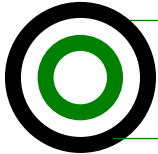
Why is project management important? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Identify the end goal

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**.

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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

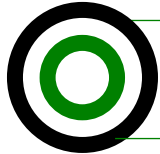
A holistic understanding of a research project

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

TIP → **The main steps in the research journey**

These steps may not all be applicable to you or occur in the same order as 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 and this broader journey in mind.

Project Management



- **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

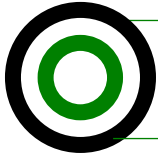


which you are expected to
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Project Management



Create smaller **deliverables**

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

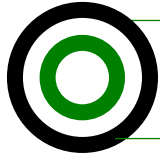
In a taught course, complex content and activities are broken into manageable tasks and assignments. This gives you focus (which makes you more productive) and keeps you from feeling overwhelmed. How can you build a similar structure and discipline into your research project?

TIP ➤ **Sample 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** ➤ **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.

Project Management



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

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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/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.

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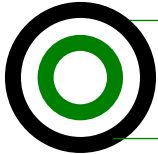
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Project Management



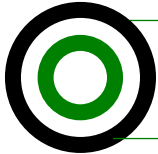
Manage your time

- **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).

Project Management



Find and manage resources

○ **Formulate**
key outputs

○ Create smaller
deliverables

○ **Manage your**
time

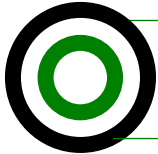
● **Find and**
manage
resources

○ 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 → **Cost of tuition, accommodation and books**

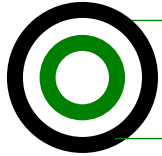
TIP → **Cost of research, e.g. printing, laboratory and fieldwork costs, conferences**

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)

Project Management



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

Fin

TIP

Cost of **tuition**, accommodation

Funding (for university registration, living expenses and books) is normally referred to as **bursaries** (as opposed to grants).

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

1.

For a list of available bursaries contact your university's **Student Funding** section. Make sure to note the deadlines, these are often well before the start of your intended study.

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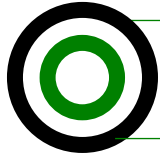
work costs, conferences

d. Click on the tips above

Close



Project Management



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

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TIP

Research costs

The cost of research is normally covered by **research grants** (as opposed to bursaries which tend to 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 your chosen university's [Division for Research Development](#).

Your [Funding Office](#) may sometimes subsidise travel to an **international conference**, provided you are full time and are presenting a paper.

Close

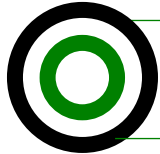
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4. Computer hardware and software (click to expand)

Project Management



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

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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

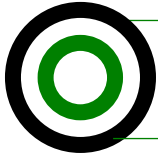
computer hardware and software in advance. You can ask your supervisor for help with asking.

Work costs, conferences

d. 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:

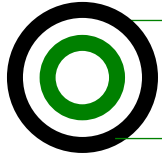
TIP ➤ **Secondary data**

TIP ➤ **Primary data**

3. **People** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

4. **Computer hardware and software** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Project Management



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

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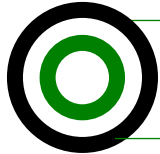
Secondary data

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 guide)

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

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TIP

Primary data

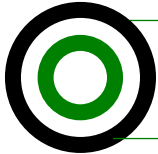
Primary data entails the raw data that you will analyse to come to a conclusion about your research question. It can be data that has been collected by someone else, but not yet analysed. There is nothing wrong with using good quality existing data. For **existing data**, consider whether you can get 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, 2009).

Close



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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

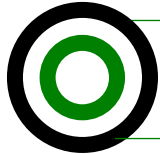
TIP ▶ Fieldwork, laboratory and data capturing assistants

TIP ▶ Copy editors

TIP ▶ Postgraduate support staff

4. **Computer hardware and software** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Project Management



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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 your **library website**).

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

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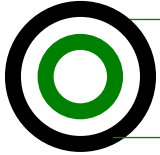
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Project Management



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TIP

Statistician

Check whether your chosen university has a **Statistical Consultation Service**. Do this early in the research process to ensure the collection of relevant and analysable data.

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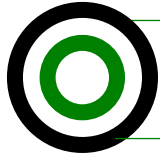
- Formulate key outputs
- Create smaller deliverables
- Manage your time
- Find and manage resources
- Get feedback

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Close





Find

TIP

Fieldwork, laboratory and data capturing assistants

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

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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.

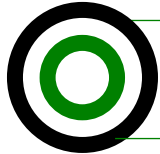
computer hardware and resources in advance. You can ask them about the best way of asking.

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Project Management



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TIP

Copy editors

Your university may have a language editing service offered at a fee. Find out from your department or supervisor whether they can recommend discipline specific editors – editors that they are perhaps familiar with – who provide quality work and charge reasonable fees.

See also SU Language Centre's '**Style Guide**' for tips on good academic writing practices.

Close



○ **Formulate**
key outputs

○ Create smaller
deliverables

○ **Manage your**
time

● **Find and**
manage
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○ Get **feedback**

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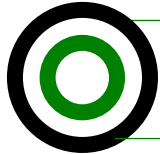
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Project Management



Find

TIP

Skills development and support

Find out whether your university has a postgraduate research skills development programme. Some SA HEIs offer workshops to their postgraduates which may help you to complete your postgraduate degree.

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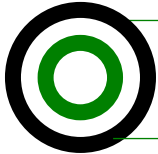
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- Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- Manage your time**
- Find and manage resources**
- Get **feedback**

Project Management



Find and manage resources

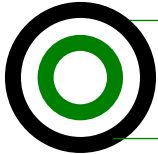
- **Formulate** key outputs
- Create smaller **deliverables**
- **Manage your time**
- **Find and manage resources**
- Get **feedback**

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 *Ref Works* or *Mendeley*. Your [university library](#) may have courses and information about these 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 university's faculty [librarian](#). **See also:** ['Setting up your digital workspace'](#)

Project Management



Find feedback

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

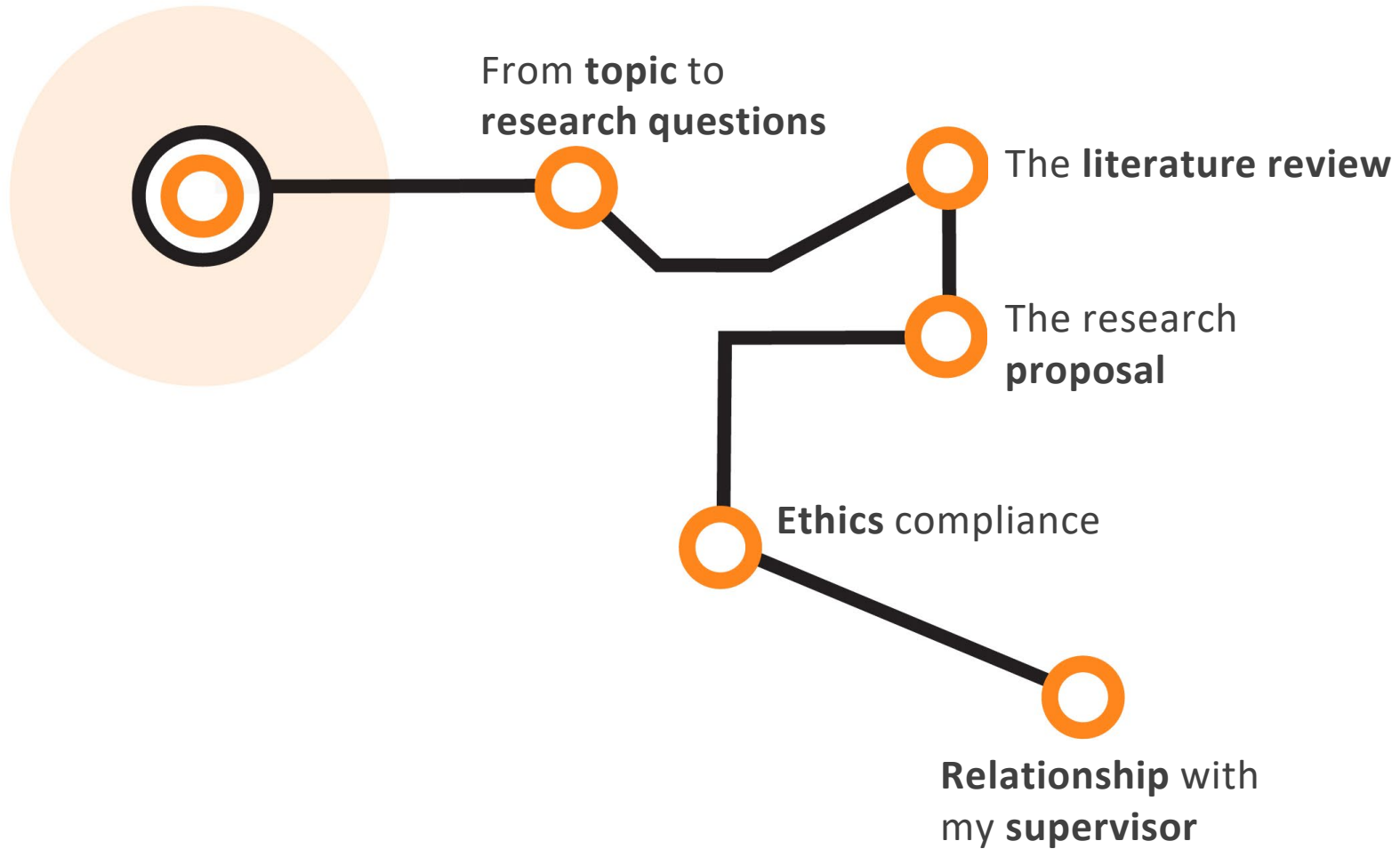
Your supervisor is probably the most important person to whom you should communicate your deadlines. Not only will this place pressure on you to stick to your deadlines, but it will also allow the supervisor to plan his or her own time and ensure that you get feedback that you can incorporate into your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

[Click here](#) for some advice on managing your relationship with your supervisor.

See also: '[STEM students: Strategies to deal with research related challenges](#)'

Conducting your research



Conducting your research



From **topic** to research questions

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

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 \(2009\)](#) also gives excellent guidelines and examples of different ways in which research questions can be formulated.

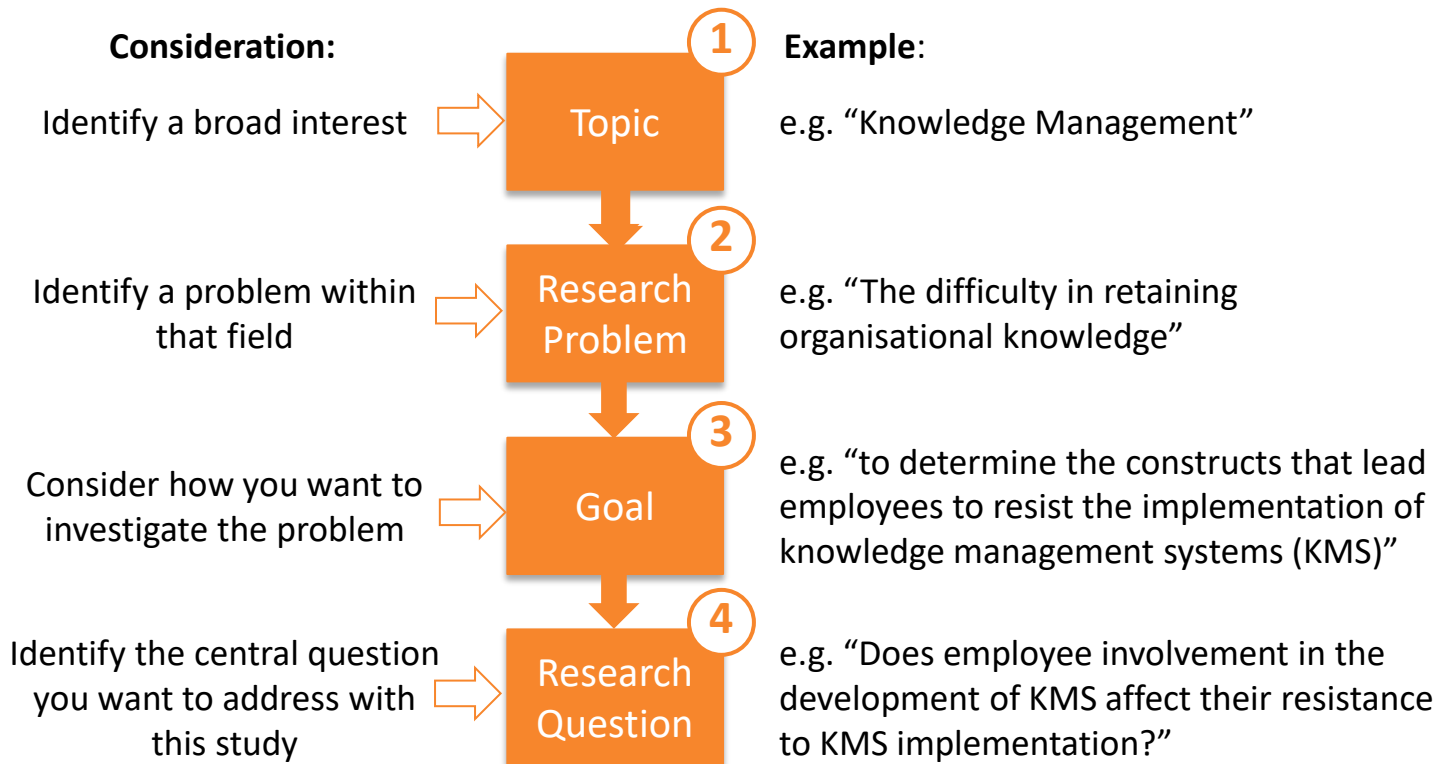
Once you have formulated your preliminary research question, try the checklist below to see if it measures up to all the necessary attributes of a good research question.

TIP Checklist for a good Research Question

TIP

From topic to research question – the process

[From Ellis and Levy \(2008\)](#)



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

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



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Conducting your research



The literature review

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

Your university Library will typically provide 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. **Make friends with your librarian** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
2. **Develop a search strategy** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
3. **Can I use Google Scholar?** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



The literature review

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1. Make friends with your librarian

Some SA universities have **a librarian per faculty**. Take the time to meet or correspond with this person so that you can pick up useful advice from them on how to approach the **Library's resources**.

2. Develop a Search Strategy **(Click to expand)**

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

Conducting your research



The literature review

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1. **Make friends with 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. **Can I use Google Scholar?** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



The literature review

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3. **Can I use Google Scholar?** [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



The literature review

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1. **Make friends with your librarian** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
2. **Develop a Search Strategy** [\(Click to expand\)](#)
3. **Can I use Google Scholar?**

Google Scholar can be 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.

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

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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



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

The

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 succinct description of the research topic.

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d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals ([Click to expand](#))

Conducting your research



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

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TIP

Research Question

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

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It is so like

(expand)

ed within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close



3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



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

Th

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 end product that you envision?

Close

expand)

d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



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

Th

TIP

Theoretical Framework

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

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Mouton's (2009:188-199)

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.

expand)

d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



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

Th

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

expand)

d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



- From **topic** to **research questions**
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Th

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.

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d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close



3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



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

Th

TIP

Methodology

1.

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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 potential lose its focus if all of these aspects are covered in one go.

expand)

d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close

3. Further readings on proposals (Click to expand)

Conducting your research



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

Th

TIP

Timeframe and Resources

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

1.

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d within your department, the following aspects are e about a specific section.

Close

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. 2009.

Ellis, T. and Levy, Y. 2008

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 many university libraries that 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

A good researcher is one who considers the people and things around them and always adheres to the principles of mutual respect, high standard of scholarship, responsibility and transparency. Each university typically has a division responsible for ensuring that all research undertaken through the university, *including postgraduate research*, adheres to these standards. On the university's website you will usually 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 generic 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. At some SA HEIs 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 typically 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 typically four committees - which one you apply to will depend on your research area and methods:

- 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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



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

Eth

TIP

Human Research Ethics Committee

The ethics application process typically 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. Find out from your supervisor what your university's processes are.

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Close



TIP

Animal Research Ethics Committee

All animal research and teaching conducted under the auspices of your university should typically uphold the “Three R” principles for humane animal research, namely:

Replacement - wherever possible, replace “sentient” animals, with “non-sentient” research models 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, fetuses and embryos (where development of an integrated nervous system is evident) in research and teaching activities (SANS 10386:2008).

Close

Plagiarism [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Policies [\(Click to expand\)](#)

- From research questions
- The literature review
- The research proposal
- Ethics compliance
- Relationship with supervisor

TIP

Biosafety and Environmental Ethics Committee

This committee is typically 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 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 typically be prepared in consultation with peers, the relevant Head of Department, and the REC's administration office. Find out from your supervisor what your department's processes are.

Close



Plagiarism (Click to expand)

Policies (Click to expand)

- From resea ques
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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 university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) before the research study commences. Find out from your supervisor what your department's processes are.

Close



Plagiarism (Click to expand)

Policies (Click to expand)

- From research questions
- The literature review
- The research proposal
- **Ethical considerations**
- Relationships with supervisors

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, find out if your university offers a workshops on this. Some SA universities also make use of a similarity tool called Turnitin. Turnitin does not measure plagiarism, rather it shows you where your document is like other work stored in its memory (all published work, as well as previous uploads by you and other people). So, it is only a tool to help you check that you did not accidentally plagiarise. Should your university have a Turnitin site, 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, as 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. See the Plagiarism Policy of your university referred to in the next section and this [EPE resource on Turnitin](#).

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 [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Policies

Please also check [your university's web page](#) for the ethics policies relevant to your context.

For example, Stellenbosch University's policy on plagiarism is listed below.

- [Policy on Plagiarism \(in Support of Academic Integrity\) \(2016 \)](#)

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 really wrong? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



Relationship with my supervisor

- From **topic to research questions**
- The **literature review**
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- **Ethics** compliance
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How to avoid problems in your supervisor relationship

Many, 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. Try to clarify expectations right at 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**. Even if you don’t work through such a formal agreement, use it as a guide to make sure *you* are clear about what they expect.

What if things go really wrong? [\(Click to expand\)](#)

Conducting your research



Relationship with my supervisor

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

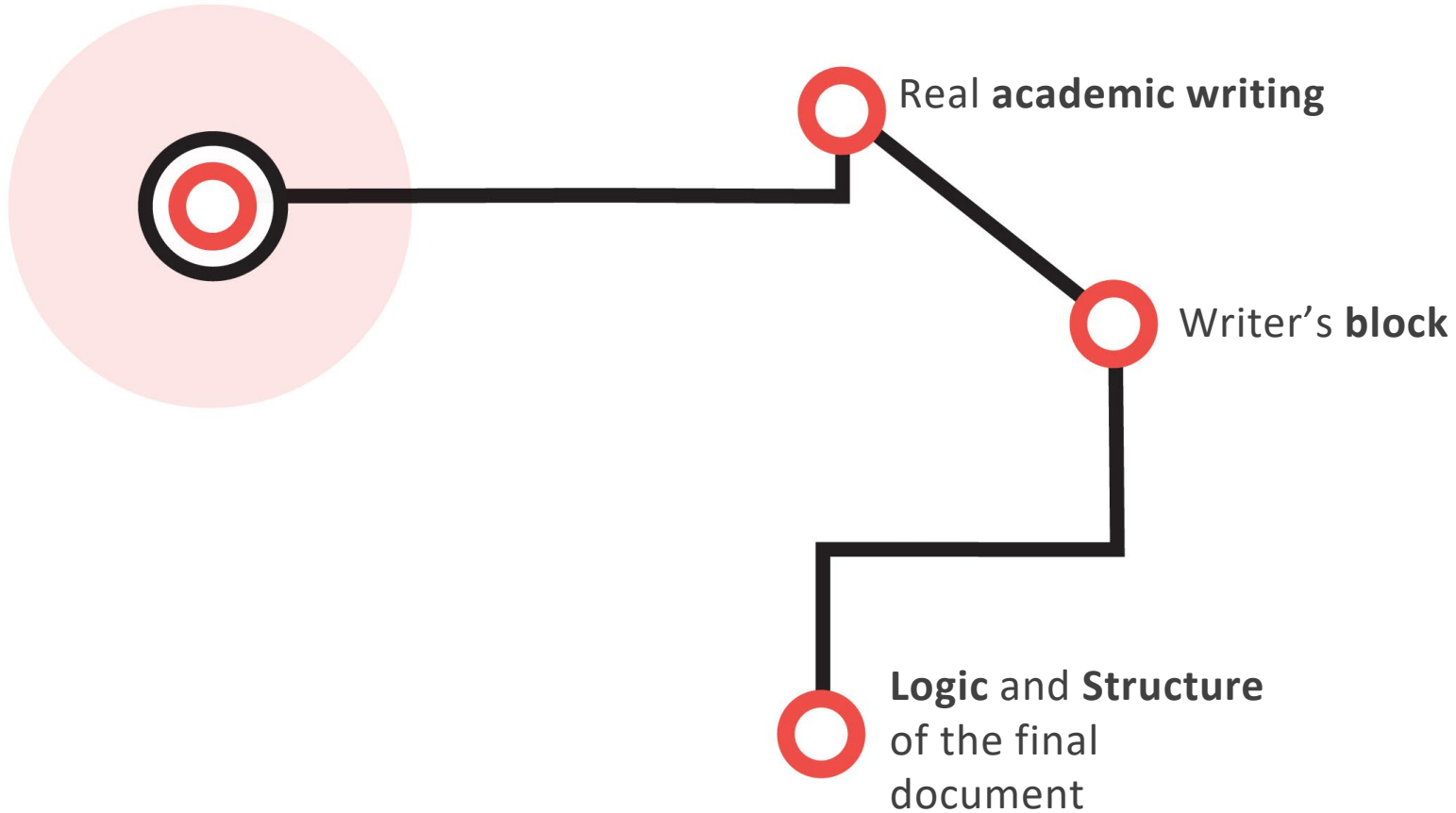
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How to avoid problems in your supervisor relationship [\(Click to expand\)](#)

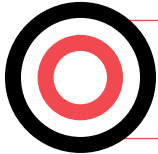
What if things go really wrong?

Clarifying expectation early on can avoid many of the common problems experienced in a supervision relationship. So can honest communication with your supervisor – also about things you did not or do not feel you need help with. If you have serious concerns about your relationship with your supervisor, the agreement could also form a good basis for a discussion about your concerns. In some cases, you might need to ask for an intervention from someone else in the university, (your first step would be Head of Department), although it could be uncomfortable for you to expose yourself in this way. Having said that, if you have done all you can to speak to your supervisor about your concerns and still feel unfairly treated, you do need to take it up with someone like the Head of Department, or another senior colleague.

Writing Up



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. Writing should, in fact, be an activity 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'

'Keeping a Reading Journal'

'How is Good Science Writing Like Good Cooking?'

Writing Up

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 a number of 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



- Real writing
- Writing block
- Logging structure
- final

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.

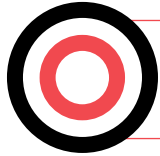
Conquering writer's block

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**

Writing Up



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

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 in an attempt to reduce

From [Passman, R.H. 1976.](#)
and [Duke Graduate School](#)

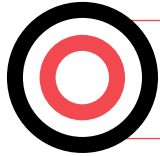
Close



... found themselves staring at
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... e, and in extreme cases it has

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Writing Up



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

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!
- ➔ See the **EPE website** – specifically the '**Just Write**' resource.

Close



selves staring at
to start typing up
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problem.

Writing Up



Logic and Structure

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

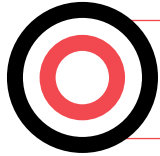
Most research fields have developed standard or typical dissertation structures. While these structures are not prescriptive, it is a good idea to familiarise yourself with the conventions in your discipline, by looking at the layout of dissertations within your discipline – consult your university's research repository. 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 ➤ **How to make your dissertation clear, logical and easy to follow**

TIP ➤ **How long should my thesis or dissertation be?**

See also: '[Setting up your digital workspace](#)'

Writing Up



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

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 particular 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

- Real writing
- Write blocks
- Logic structure final



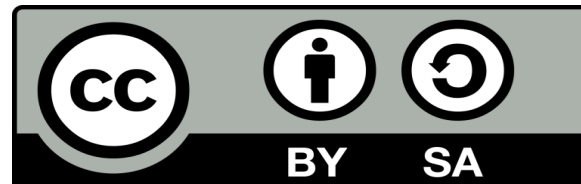
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Useful South African contextualized postgraduate web resource site: www.postgradenvironments.com