

Advice for creating a concept for scientific qualification work (MA-Theses and PhD Dissertations)

Preliminary Note:

Between the first ideas and discussions about scientific work and the actual writing of it stands the concept, which serves as the basis for writing this scientific work. A concept is a stand-alone document that is worked out by the students and which must be accepted by their supervisor so that the students have permission to actually write the work they have proposed. Doctoral students must also present this concept publicly (FöP). A concept for a Master's thesis should be 6-8 pages long (not including the bibliography), and a PhD dissertation concept should be 9-12 pages (1.5 line-spacing).

The concept should contain 10 parts:

1. Working title, with a more specific subtitle where necessary
2. General research interest and research question, field of interest/theme, current state of research on the question
3. Specific research interests and concrete research question (or hypothesis)
4. Theoretical considerations
5. Methodological considerations, including methods
6. Intended argumentation process
7. Ethical research considerations (if relevant)
8. Tentative timetable
9. Preliminary considerations for an alternative research plan (Plan B)
10. Literature references

Further clarifications on the different parts of the concept:

1. Working title, with a more specific subtitle where necessary

It is worthwhile to be very precise in wording the title. Scientific qualification works do not need attractive titles (those are only important for publications).

2. General research interest and research question, field of interest/theme, current state of research on the question

It is important that you start with formulating the general research interests that guide you (in short, what interests you) and that generate your research question (see Point 3). This is then followed by a description of what has already been researched and said on this general research interest. You should also outline the subject area to which your research will contribute. To do this, you should start from your research question and the related problem, not from ready-made reading lists. That is to say: you should have an overview of what international research has already been made in the field on this topic as well as whether there is any non-educational research literature that might be relevant for your topic.

It is a plus if you are able to show where there is a research gap or a “blind spot” in the research (i.e. what has not yet been explored in the research, but should be). It is important to identify these research gaps in regard to content as well as to name precisely the problem you are planning to address (based on the specific case study you want to work on).

At the same time, do not forget that this case is always “only” a case inside the larger context of a problem, which can be handled elsewhere in the world using examples from other case studies. In this way, it is not just a matter of saying that a particular problem has “never” been worked on, but you should also be able to formulate and/or justify why this topic is relevant for the (international) research field. It is from this point that the work on your specifically chosen and well-founded case study can be developed. In other words: your work always wants to contribute to the research (no matter how small this might be).

3. Specific research interests and concrete research question (or hypothesis)

On the basis of this identified research gap or “blind spot,” you can now formulate your own very specific research interests (you want to fill this research gap at least partially) and then your specific research question: what exactly do you want to know? To what broader context do you want to contribute with your work? Also justify why this is important for the educational sciences. A precise research question is the be-all and end-all of any work, which essentially consists of answering this question (methodically and logically). There is also the option of formulating a precise hypothesis instead of a precise research question; with a hypothesis, you state a claim that you want to prove/disprove (methodically and logically) during the course of your work.

If you intend to write a compilation thesis, it is not unusual to split an overarching research question into more specific sub-questions, which you will then work on in your different articles. However, for the concept paper to be presented at the FöP, you do not need to have decided exactly how the various questions will match the various planned articles.

4. Theoretical considerations

Some research projects are theory-based from the outset, i.e. the researcher would like to confirm, further develop, or even refute certain theories through their research. For most master's and dissertation projects, however, this is not the case: your theoretical perspective often only develops in the course of your work. At the beginning of your project – once you already have a rough overview of the state of research on your topic (see point 2 above) – you should ask yourself which theoretical approaches are possible and convincing in accordance with your research question.

In simple terms, theory is a kind of lens that helps explain what we are observing/studying. The theory is therefore always derived from our research interests. If we are interested in social inequality, we look for theoretical approaches which can, for example, help us hone in on the emergence and reproduction of social inequality. If with our research interests we mean to answer why certain ideas have been able to gain a foothold at certain times, we make use of theoretical tools that can, for example, shed light on the emergence and transformation of discourses. Think of theory more as a heuristic instrument – i.e. a tool which can help you proceed in your search for answers – and less as a straightjacket into which your research project has to fit. In the case of a compilation thesis, you can also work with different theoretical approaches in your different articles.

5. Methodological considerations, including methods

Your methodology, like your theoretical considerations (there is often hardly any difference between the theory you use and your methodology), depends on your interests. With which approach(es) can you best approach your research topic? What alternatives are there, and which do you choose and for which reasons? In principle, methodology is the extended arm of theory: if your theory is your lens with which you can see better or more clearly, then the methodology is responsible for the different possible settings of this lens (e.g. close-up, wide-angle). The methods, in turn, are the many small cogs that you use for the setting you have chosen.

“Methodology” refers to everything that you specifically intend to undertake in order to answer your research question (or prove/disprove your hypothesis), i.e. how you will work. It is also about which materials (written sources or documents, images, objects, data sets, interviews, statistics, etc.) you will use in working with your research question. A first step for this is to consider how many sub-questions your research question could be subdivided into: What all must you specifically work out beforehand in order to be able to answer your research question (or prove/disprove your hypothesis)? By this point, you have already provided a part, namely the current state of research. Another step is to consider how extensive your work can be and whether you are forced to limit your project to individual examples or case studies; this choice of examples or case studies requires justification. Consider very carefully 1) what all you need to know; 2) in which order; 3) how you want to appropriately deal with these individual steps; and 4) how many sources, secondary literature and research literature, and/or empirical survey methods you need. Keywords that will be addressed in these methodological considerations are reviews of (research) literature or journal articles, image analysis, source and/or data collection, context analysis, discourse analysis, content summary, interviews, questionnaires, etc. In compilation theses, the various articles often draw on different types of methods.

6. Intended argumentation process

If you have methodically identified these necessary individual steps which are needed for answering your research question (or proving/disproving your hypothesis), and if you have also defined the order in which these individual steps must be dealt with, and if you have made clear which concrete methods will be required for each individual step, then you are already in a position to be able to write a specific and explanatory, continuous text about what you expect content-wise from each of the individual steps so that you can, in the end, answer your research question (or prove/disprove your hypothesis). It is therefore the work in a nutshell, in an easy to understand manner. This part of the concept is then to be concluded with a provisional table of contents, or, in the case of a compilation thesis, with a preliminary overview of how contents and steps of your thesis work will materialize in your different planned articles.

7. Ethical research considerations (if relevant)

In certain research projects, you need to think about the extent to which your own research practices are in line with ethical guidelines. This applies above all to projects that contain elements of field research (e.g. participant/non-participant observation, interviews) or experiments, that is: any research in which humans (or animals) are the objects of an investigation. For other types of research, these ethical considerations may be relevant if you are working with sensitive, personal data (the improper handling of which could have negative consequences for the people behind the data). At other times, you may have to get approval for any copyrighted material before including it in your work. In particular, consider:

- How will your research affect those involved in the study? How will you make sure that your research participants are not physically, psychically, or materially burdened (e.g. through interview questions, conditions of participation, grouping of people)?
- How can study participants take part in your research? Will they have the possibility to be informed about your insights and results, or will you write “over their heads”?
- How do you plan to handle and save the data? How will you make sure that the anonymity and integrity of your study participants is preserved?

8. Tentative timetable

Create an approximate schedule which lays out your planned activities and desired (partial) results, by month and/or possibly by semester. Review it critically: Does one activity build upon another? How are you dealing with simultaneous tasks? What are the milestones that you want to have achieved each year?

9. Preliminary considerations for an alternative research plan (Plan B)

Think about the risks which could be associated with your planned research project and how you could deal with these risks in case of any setbacks. For example:

- Researching sources: What is the situation concerning the sources? Are there alternative but comparable sources that could be used as a Plan B? In the case that sources are too extensive: Is there a plan for how these could be narrowed down?
- Field research: How is the access to the field? Who are possible gatekeepers, and can you ensure multiple ways in? Would another field than Plan B be possible if the first field didn't work out?

10. Literature references

At the end of the concept, there should be two formal, correct bibliographies according to scientific citation guidelines. One concerns the literature used in the concept, and the other includes all of the possible literature being considered for the planned work (as much as is possible in this context). The differentiation of sources and secondary literature is especially recommended for historical work.

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