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Preparing a research study

(The suggestions below are only guidelines, individual styles, tastes, research subjects are influencing factors that cannot be accounted for in these guidelines.)

The empty sheets of paper at the beginning of writing a long assignment such as a research study can be frightening. The aim of these guidelines is to alleviate some of these fears. Many assignments in [CTPDC's second year Diploma in Counselling course](#) will also prepare you for writing your research study. Most importantly, your tutors will act as supervisors of your research study, thus will give you guidance and advice throughout the process.

1. Defining the research questions

You will have to define your research questions (along with other things) in your synopsis. Your tutor will assess whether the research questions are appropriate for a research study. The typical reasons for asking you to modify your research questions are: a) too broad; b) over-researched; c) difficulty with obtaining empirical evidence; d) too narrow.

In general, you will be expected to base your research question on your training placement, however, with the approval of your tutor, you may choose a topic unrelated to your placement.

2. Literature review

One of the second year's assignments is literature review. In this you will have to review the core of the available secondary sources of the research question you chose. You will have to **critically evaluate** the theories, analytical frameworks used in the literature (that is not only describing them). You will have to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and demonstrate the implicit assumptions they make. There are two reasons why this phase is important: a) you will recognise the works of others; b) you will probably use your empirical findings to test these theories and analytical frameworks.

3. Creating hypotheses

You will have to break down (convert) your research questions to hypotheses or expectations, which can be rejected or accepted on the basis of your findings from your empirical research (but not on the basis of secondary sources!).

4. Choosing the right method

Your research questions and hypothesis will define the method that will yield the empirical evidence you need. You will also discuss this in your synopsis.

5. Doing the fieldwork

This is probably the longest phase of your preparations. As you are not allowed to change your survey or interview schedule once you have started your fieldwork, it is recommended to pilot the instrument you will use in your fieldwork. One of CTPDC's second year Diploma in Counselling course assignments is the analysis of your findings from your pilot study. This will help you to ascertain the effectiveness of your method and will give you the opportunity to fine-tune your questions. In addition, you will exercise your analytical skills.

6. Writing the research study

The length of your research study is expected to be between 13-15,000 words (excluding footnotes, bibliography, appendix). This is about 60-72 pages (double space). You will have to justify (with very strong arguments) if your research study is shorter or significantly longer.

Your research study will start with *introduction*. The purpose of introduction is to set the context of your research study. Thus you will have to explain why you chose the research subject and importance of the research subject. You will briefly introduce any theoretical debates around the subject (in the literature) and inform the reader of the theoretical/analytical approach you will mainly use.

A condensed and rewritten form of your literature review follows this. Thus you will have to present the main characteristics of the theoretical/analytical approach you use, its main claims and any competing theories that are relevant for your research subject.

From the literature review you can deduct your *expectations*. It means that from the theoretical framework you chose you would make conclusions with regard to your fieldwork. These expectations are, in principle, your *hypotheses*. Thus, you will say if the assumptions of theory X hold, we can reasonably expect that the evidence you collected will show this or that.

After this you will describe the *methodology* you used. However, this should not be a simple description: you will also have to explain why you chose this method (most of this should already be in your synopsis).

The main body of your research study will consist of two main sections. In the first you will present your *empirical findings*. You will organise your findings in an order appropriate for the next section! In this way, the empirical findings section is not simply a description, but a reconstruction of the characteristics of your research subject. It is likely that you will present tables, graphs or other statistical evidence in this section. However, you will have to remember that tables and statistical evidence are only references, graphs are only illustrations for your **narrative** explanations!

The second section of the main body of your research study is the *critical evaluation* of the theoretical framework you used on the basis of your empirical findings. Thus, this is the point where you accept or reject the hypotheses and explain the factors that create and influence the characteristics of your findings. In this way you will make a kind of judgement on the theoretical framework. It can concern with the assumptions of this theory, it can be identification of the limits of the theoretical framework, it can be fine-tuning of the assumptions, etc. You may not describe anything here. All the material you use in this section should be presented in the previous sections of your research study.

A very important section of your research study is *conclusions*. Conclusions are not a summary! The function of this section is **reflection**. What did you learn from your research, how does your research contribute to our knowledge, and where should we go from here (depending on your research question, this could be *recommendations*). In the conclusions you have to reflect on everything you discussed in your research study in general and in your *critical evaluation* in particular.

You may have *footnotes* in your research study. While in many cases footnotes can be justified, be very sparing with them. The **general** rule should be: 'If something is important, it should be in the main text, if something is not important, it should be omitted.'

If you used abbreviations, there should be a list of these. It is up to you whether you want to put these at the front of your research study or at the end. However, be sparing with abbreviations (use only those that are commonly used by the public or the literature).

Bibliography is an indispensable part of your research study. You will have to choose one of the two main methods of referencing and use it throughout your research study. Anything you took from others' work, including ideas!, you must reference. Not doing so, is plagiarism, which is an offence that inevitably will result in a fail mark. You may not plagiarise your own work either! Thus, if you intend to use any of your previous assignments (from your counselling or other courses) you must reference it! At CTPDC you will have to sign a declaration form on plagiarism and insert it in your submitted work.

You may insert an *appendix* in your research study. This could be anything that is important for understanding your research study, but not part of your main discussion. The most likely candidates for an appendix are the information about your method. Thus it could be your questionnaire (if you used survey), the interview schedule (if you used interview method), excerpts from transcripts (if you used case study), notes (if you used observation method), etc. If you used recorded conversations in your fieldwork, make sure you retain them as your examiners may request them.