



WRITING YOUR THESIS: PROCESS AND PROBLEMS

challenges

THESIS INFORMATION MEETING

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION / VIRKSOMHEDSKOMMUNIKATION

OCTOBER 2019



DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT
AARHUS UNIVERSITY

AGENDA

- ▶ How to get started
- ▶ From idea to problem
- ▶ The scientific genre
- ▶ The thesis process

*Allow yourself to focus on your third semester – it can be helpful in your thesis
(Student counsellors)*

HOW TO GET STARTED

FINDING AND CHOOSING A TOPIC

- ▶ Use a previous assignment or project as a starting point
- ▶ Inspiration from specific courses, profiles or project-based study
- ▶ Inspiration from scientific or professional journals or magazines
- ▶ Current or topical issues in the media
- ▶ Observation or experiences of a certain phenomena
- ▶ Etc...

Remember that you are to study the topic for a long time

→ INTERESTING, EXCITING, CATCHING

FROM IDEA TO RESEARCH: DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

RESEARCH QUESTION (PROBLEM FORMULATION)

- ▶ One or more connected questions you want to answer

Or

- ▶ One or several connected phenomena you want to: describe, categorise, analyse / interpret, discuss, argue for or against, synthesise / integrate, evaluate, turn into a design

Or

- ▶ A claim you want to argue for / against

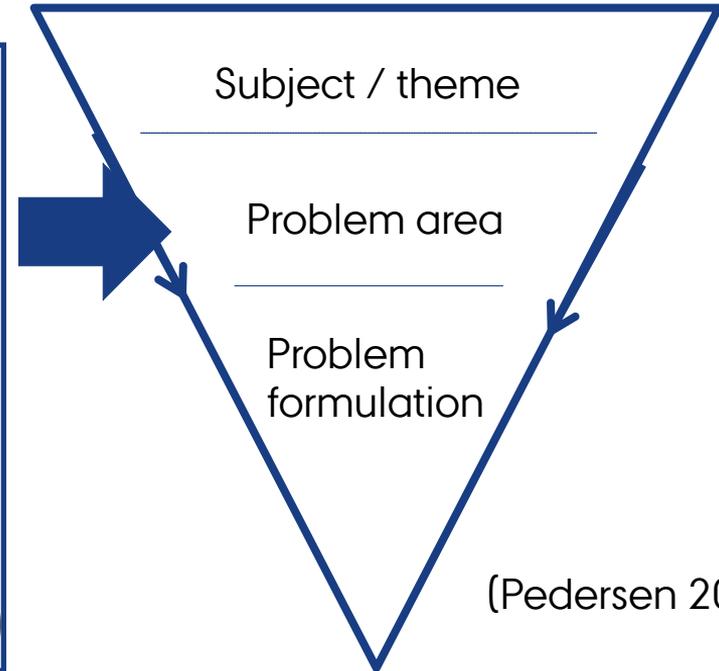
(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2013: 106)

RESEARCH QUESTION(S) / PROBLEM FORMULATION

A real problem

- ▶ A gap in the field's knowledge (lack of ...)
- ▶ Something the field has not or should not have finished
- ▶ An unexplained observation
- ▶ Lack of categorisation / analysis
- ▶ Something that does not seem right
- ▶ Something that is in conflict with the general view
- ▶ Something that must be (re)evaluated, changed, transformed or constructed

(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2013)



(Pedersen 2011: 25)

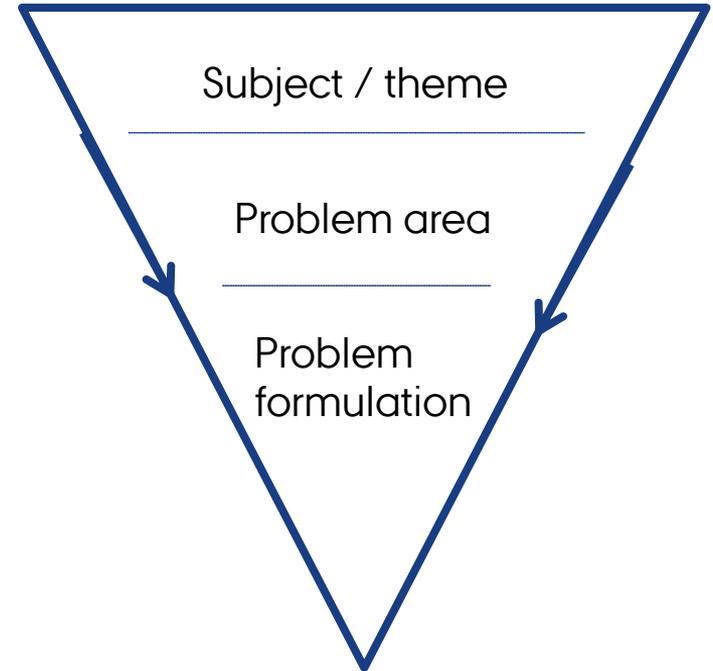
WHAT IS A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION?

Connected to the **big questions** in a field, e.g.

- ▶ Marketing communication: How to engage consumers?
- ▶ Organizational communication: How to increase employee identification?
- ▶ Crisis communication: How to avoid damage to corporate reputation?
- ▶ How to encourage businesses to integrate in CSR?
- ▶ Change communication: How to motivate people to embrace change?

LITERATURE REVIEW

- ▶ Shows that a topic is worth studying
- ▶ Reports what is already known about this area
- ▶ What are the relevant concepts and theories?



LITERATURE REVIEW

- ▶ Reviewing studies that have implications for your own study

- ▶ Provide mini-reviews of previous studies:
 - ▶ What did they study, how, and what did they find?
 - ▶ Are there major differences or similarities?
 - ▶ Are there controversies and inconsistencies?

YOUR LITERATURE REVIEW

- ▶ Directly relevant to the research question
- ▶ RELEVANCE more important than thoroughness
- ▶ Return to literature review when you discuss findings

WHAT IS A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION?

- ▶ A real problem
- ▶ As narrow as possible to serve as process tool
- ▶ Workable and researchable (feasibility)
- ▶ Clear and unambiguous
- ▶ Specific
- ▶ Ethically defensible

(Based on Pedersen 2011)

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question defines and presents the issue in order to frame specific questions. The problem builds on the context established in the introduction. This means that the introduction outlines and frames the problem. From here, you develop your rationale for your study and thesis by explaining the importance of the problem and the need to conduct research within the established context.

You need to persuade your reader that the problem is both relevant and important:

- ▶ Is the problem of interest to other scholars or practitioners in the field?
- ▶ Is it clear who or what will be aided by the research findings (contribution)?

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

First draft:

“The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the stakeholders of Arla and account for the relevance of social network theory”

Comments and questions from the supervisor:

- 1) What is the problem?
- 2) Why is this problem relevant?
- 3) What is the contribution?
- 4) What is your approach to stakeholder theory and stakeholder analysis? Which key concept will you draw on? How will you analyse the stakeholders?
- 5) What is the relation between the stakeholder analysis and the accounting for the relevance of social network theory?
- 6) What are the criteria for “relevance”?
- 7) The project seems unambitious: you “analyse” and “account for” – you need to relate, discuss, reflect...

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Second draft:

“The purpose of this thesis is to map the stakeholders of Arla in order to discuss the relevance of applying social network theory”

Improvements:

1. A link between stakeholder and social networking theory is (vaguely) established
2. The analysis is (somewhat) focused (mapping)
3. The thesis includes a “discussion”

Comments and questions from the supervisor:

- 1) What is the problem?
- 2) What is the contribution?
- 3) Why is Arla interesting?
- 4) How can you qualify the relevance of the link between your theoretical concepts (stakeholders and social network theory)?

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Third draft:

“Taking a point of departure in Arla and its critical stakeholders, the purpose of this thesis is to map the company’s stakeholders in order to discuss the relevance of applying social network theory”

Improvements:

1. The problem is indirectly addressed (critical stakeholders)

Comments and questions from the supervisor:

- 1) What is the problem and why is it relevant?
- 2) How can you qualify the relevance of the link between your theoretical concepts (stakeholders and social network theory)?
- 3) Why is this project relevant from a corporate communication or strategic communication perspective?

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Fourth draft:

“Taking a point of departure in Arla as a case of managing critical consumers, this thesis aims to analyse and discuss social network theory as a strategic tool for creating dialogue and relations with critical stakeholders”

Improvements:

- 1) Focus is clear (critical stakeholder and stakeholder dialogue)
- 2) The purpose of the study is clear: developing a new theory
- 3) What was previously stated as a purpose is now a presumption or premise: the stakeholder mapping is not the purpose but part of the initial research which identifies, qualifies and legitimize the problem

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

- The research question is not a description of the process or structure, but points towards the core problem and how it is conceptualized as well as outlines how to solve/discuss/explore this problem
- This means that when you have formulated the research question, you have already identified the project's key concepts, theories and methods to understand/explain it as well as potential solutions
- The question can be accompanied by sub-questions which guide both you and the reader in a certain (methodological, theoretical or analytical) direction and which demonstrate the overall argument, logic and progression in your thesis

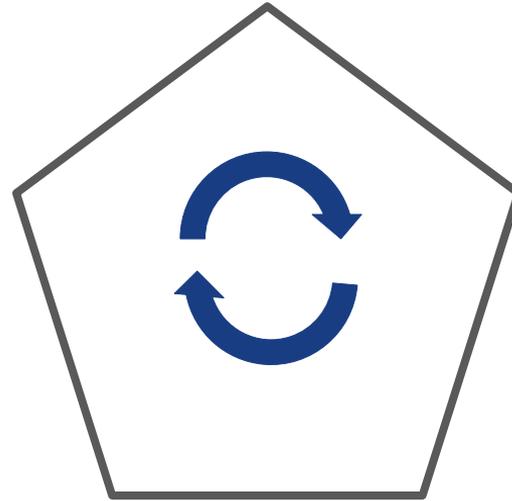
THE PENTAGON

The Pentagon can help you create an overview and ensure coherence and progression in your thesis

Procedure

Problem statement

Background and contribution



Theory, Concepts and Methods

Data

(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2010/2013)

THE PENTAGON

- ▶ Research question
 - ▶ Observations
 - ▶ “gaps”
 - ▶ Surprise
 - ▶ Motivation
 - ▶ Problem
 - ▶ Research question
 - ▶ Disciplinary gaps
- ▶ Background and contribution
 - ▶ Contribution to the field
 - ▶ “who can use the results of the paper and for what?”
 - ▶ Directions for actions
 - ▶ Professional use
 - ▶ Changing practice

(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2010/2013)

THE PENTAGON

- ▶ Theories, concepts, and methods
 - ▶ The paper's key concepts
 - ▶ Theories for analysing, explaining and discussing
 - ▶ Methods (disciplinary practices for collecting data, analysing and designing)
- ▶ Data
 - ▶ Texts (factual texts, theories, journals)
 - ▶ Interviews
 - ▶ Cases
 - ▶ Observations
 - ▶ Measurements
 - ▶ Statistics

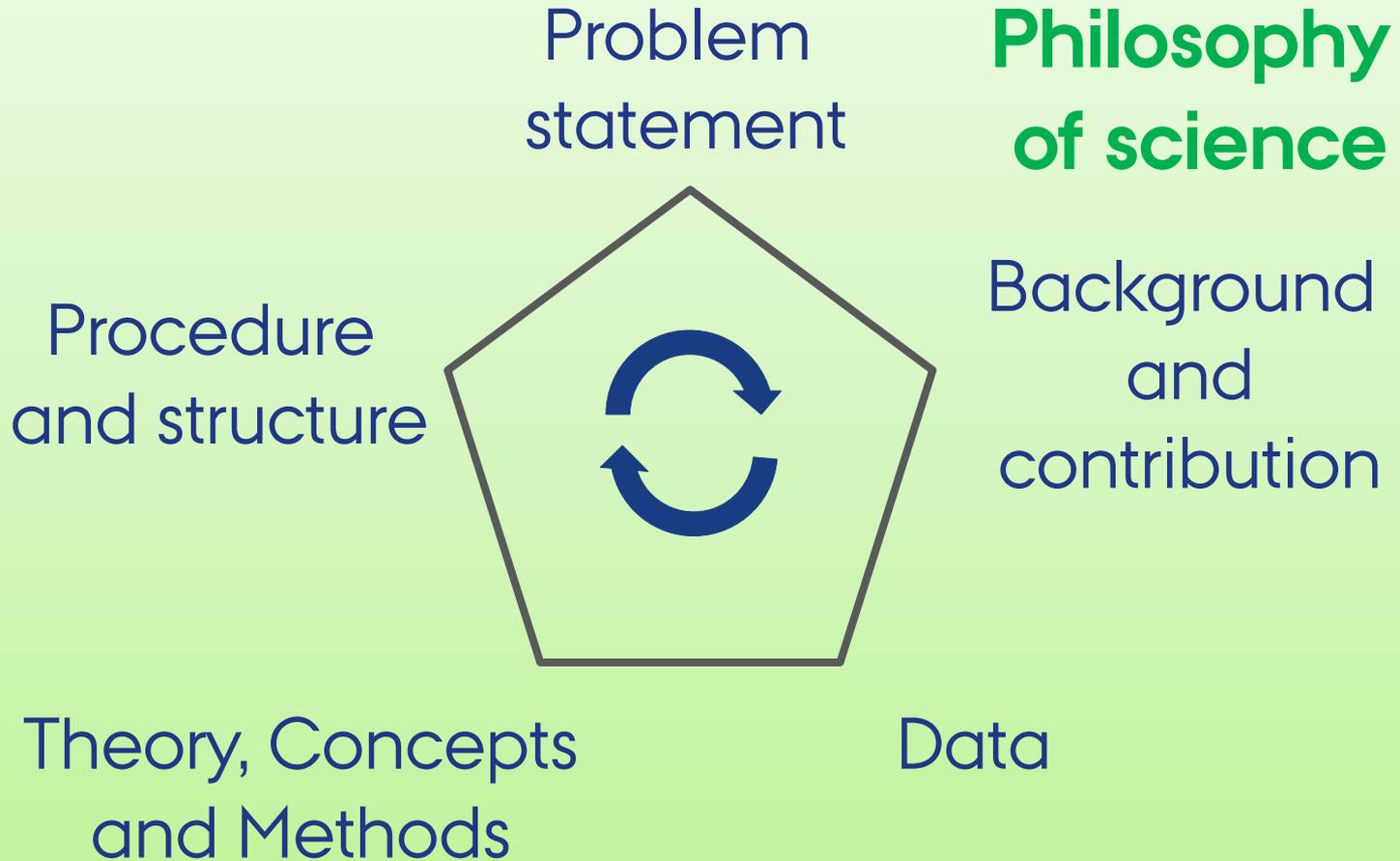
(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2010/2013)

THE PENTAGON

- ▶ Procedure
 - ▶ The ideal work process
 - ▶ The order of research: firstly, then, next, hereafter, finally
 - ▶ Texttypes: planning, collecting, analysing, discussing, concluding
 - ▶ The paper's structure

(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2010/2013)

THE PENTAGON - A PROCESS TOOL



(Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen 2010/2013)

WHAT IS A THESIS?

THE SCIENTIFIC GENRE

WHAT IS A THESIS?

According to the study guide the purpose of the thesis is to enable students:

- ▶ to carry out extensive scientific research
- ▶ of a problem which is relevant to the study program
- ▶ by applying scientific theories and methods

WHAT IS YOUR OVERALL CONTRIBUTION?

Empirical thesis raises questions regarding phenomena that may be observed or experienced. Argues and answers through data → reflects on theoretical consequences.

Theoretical thesis raises questions regarding existing theory/theories, compares, combine and discuss

Both types may provide recommendations for future actions. Remember that your thesis is an academic paper and not a consultant's report!

FROM A CONSULTANT'S REPORT TO AN ACADEMIC THESIS

~~“The purpose of this thesis is to develop a brand and CSR strategy for the English fashion brand ETC. In order to accomplish this, the project will focus on three questions:~~

- ~~▶ What characterizes the fashion market and the market for CSR products?~~
- ~~▶ How can ETC authentically integrate CSR messages in the brand?~~
- ~~▶ How can the strategy be implemented among ETC employees?~~

What is the problem?

Why is this a problem?

What does the literature tell us about such problem – or is there a gap?

What is the contribution?

DEFINING THE SCIENTIFIC GENRE:

- ▶ a documentation
- ▶ of the study
- ▶ of a problem which is relevant to the professional field
- ▶ by the use of the terms, concepts, theories and methods
- ▶ with the purpose of convincing
- ▶ a professional peer
- ▶ about the scientific quality and accuracy of the study's results and conclusions
- ▶ in a presentation which is acceptable for the professional community

(translated from: Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen, 2010)

THE SCIENTIFIC CHARACTER

- MORE THAN AN APPENDIX

"I am a social constructionist because I believe that the world is socially constructed through social interactions and discourses. Knowledge is also socially constructed. Knowledge is subjective and thus cannot be generalised. Consequently, this thesis merely reflects my subjective conclusions".

To be a social constructionist does not mean that you can disclaim any scientific position. In order to produce scientific knowledge, you must continuously reflect on your choices and actions as well as their consequences:

- What are the consequences of my beliefs and assumptions? Theoretically? Methodologically? Concepts? Process?

THE SCIENTIFIC POSITION

- ▶ The scientific position positions your research and reflects the underlying understanding of how the (social) world is approached and how knowledge is created
- ▶ This must be explicitly defined as a starting point for the choice of theory and method in order to clarify the basis on which the study rests
- ▶ There need not be a longer philosophical discussion starting from Adam and Eve, but the relationship between scientific position, knowledge production and choices of theory and methods must be clear as well as the possibilities and limitations of the scientific position
- ▶ Scientific reflection, explication of assumptions and consistency in methodology and research process

THE THESIS PROCESS

MYTHS AND REALITIES

- ▶ There is no "one size fits all"-way of writing your thesis
- ▶ It is okay to have off-days – enjoy them and use them to recharge your thesis batteries
- ▶ Writing a thesis can be a lonely process – be aware not to be shut up in your own ivory tower far away from realities and social relation
- ▶ Social relations are crucial; fellow students, thesis writing communities and supervisor – and don't leave friends and family behind
- ▶ The tough goals of writing a thesis: immersion in the topic vs. deadlines and project management
- ▶ Criteria for success when writing a thesis: Ambitions or self-worth!

Inspired by: Andersen & Hein 2002

WHAT IS SUPERVISION?

”In this context supervision means to help students to write an assignment as part of their education. Most supervision is practiced within the perspective that the supervisor must also evaluate and grade the assignment. Consequently, supervision includes the possibility of teaching, controlling and evaluation.”

(translated from: Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen, 2010: 23)

Supervision **vs.** Control
Guidance/coaching **vs.** teaching/ordering
Emotions **vs.** intellect
Good advice **vs.** Evaluation

As a thesis writer you constantly navigate within these dilemmas and shifting roles and positions!

SUPERVISION RELATES TO:

- ▶ Theories, concepts and models
- ▶ Research design, scientific method and methodologies
- ▶ Overall research process, argumentation and approach
- ▶ Writing process

MATCH EXPECTATIONS

- ▶ How many meetings can you expect? What about emails, phone calls etc.?
- ▶ How does supervision take place (face-to-face, Skype, phone...)? When can you expect email reply from your supervisor?
- ▶ Are all meetings planned in advance according to your planned process or are they planned along the way when you face sudden challenges and frustrations?
- ▶ What are the basic conditions for a supervision sessions (length, roles, agenda etc.)
- ▶ How far in advance are you supposed to send texts? And are texts always accompanied by a readers guideline and questions for discussion?

The context of writing a thesis is a

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

The relation between you and your supervisor is professional

The focus of your relationship is professional

The tone of voice is professional

Act accordingly!

Both in good times and in bad!

REMEMBER TO...

- ▶ Keep track of your study guide and the exam description for the thesis
- ▶ Remember the deadlines
- ▶ Choose an issue that interests and inspires you – on a long-term basis
- ▶ Prioritize working on and improving your research question
- ▶ Align expectations with your supervisor
- ▶ Keep appointments with your supervisor, be prepared, set the agenda and be active
- ▶ Write and send drafts to your supervisor as agreed upon
- ▶ Keep within your time schedule – or inform your supervisor if it isn't possible

ENJOY WRITING YOUR THESIS!



REFERENCES

Andersson, J.E. & Hein, H.H. (2002) *Ph.d.-processen*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Pedersen, K. (2011) Research Problem and Problem Formulation. In Olsen and Pedersen *Problem-Oriented Project Work – a workbook*. Roskilde University Press, pp. 23-41.

Rienecker, L. & Stray Jørgensen, P. (2010) *Den gode opgave*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Rienecker, L. & Stray Jørgensen, P. (2013) *The good paper*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur