

1

Help! How do I find a research topic?

When you begin working on your master's thesis you will soon face a number of new challenges. You may ask yourself: 'How do I find a topic? How do I find a good advisor? Do I have the necessary skills for academic writing? Should I take an additional writing course? What kind of literature should I read?'. Most importantly, 'What should I do first?'. It might seem as if all of these challenges need to be solved immediately. Indeed, you should work on several aspects of your thesis simultaneously. However, you must decide and initiate a first step. We will begin by discussing a commonly accepted first step: finding the topic for your research.

Students face a variety of issues when they try to find a research topic. Some have difficulties in finding a topic because of the seeming wealth of possible research topics. This feeling is common during the early phase. Fortunately, you will quickly find that some topics appear to be more interesting than others on your list. Some students don't have difficulties finding a topic that can be developed into a research topic because they focus on an issue they feel strongly about and they want to use the thesis to confirm their beliefs rather than acquire new knowledge. Although it is a common strategy in research to pose questions on the basis of existing knowledge, this approach has an important premise, namely that the scientist is willing to be proven wrong. You must distance yourself enough from a topic to be able to consider that your research may prove you wrong. If this is difficult for you, consider tackling another topic. Always keep an open mind as it relates to the result of your research.

Some students look at the thesis as their 'life project' which will define their identities and future professional opportunities. Most likely, you will



conduct several projects during your career, so this is not your sole opportunity to write. It is more helpful to look at the master's thesis as a project that will give you the opportunity to learn how to do research and write about it rather than seeing it as an 'identity' project.

And then there are the students who do not have a great interest in research. They are not driven by curiosity, but look instead at the thesis as a necessity to finish their degree. It is difficult to write a thesis with this attitude. If this is a description that fits you, try to look at the thesis as a source of new learning and insight. You might be surprised.

Every student has a different point of departure when it comes to finding a research topic. It is impossible to provide a detailed guide of how to go about it, but we will offer some ideas and advice that hopefully will be useful during this phase.

1.1 Finding a topic

Interest

What do you do if you are unable to come up with any ideas? Clearly, you are unlikely to achieve much success if you pick a topic that does not interest you. Which topic would you consider working on for a year or more? Are there questions to which you do not know the answer? Curiosity and the ability to constantly ask questions are useful qualities in finding and developing a research topic. Furthermore, the reader of your research is unlikely to find your thesis appealing if you, the author, do not find the topic interesting.

Problems, issues or conflicts

One possible strategy to find a research topic is to focus on specific problems, issues or conflicts that evoke your curiosity. By taking a look at different topics that dominate debates within the sciences, you will often find that good science has been inspired by social events (see section 7.2). One example is the scholarly interest during the 1940s and 1950s as to why some people became Nazis during the Second World War. Biologists, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists and historians conducted several studies to address this question from different perspectives. Another example is the interest in religious extremism and violence among political scientists, sociologists, historians and scholars of religion that appeared after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 and the bombings in London on July 7, 2005. It is also reasonable to believe that the terror attacks in Oslo on July 22, 2011 will result in new research. These examples show that science

is closely related to the societies in which we live, which is also reflected in the topics chosen by scholars and students. An illustrative example is a master's thesis on electric car cultures. This student did an ethnographic study of the everyday use of electric vehicles in the UK (Brady, 2010). It would have been impossible to do this study only a few years ago. Many students find the topic for their thesis by taking a closer look at events, conflicts and problems in society.

Personal interests and experiences

Some students draw from *personal interest* during the process of finding a research topic. One example is a student with an interest in football. He used his master's thesis in social anthropology to study local Liverpool fans and their experiences of the commercial changes in the industry (Gustavsen, 2010). Another example is a student in North American studies who was interested in African American blues and hip hop. Her thesis explored the expression of dissent and social protest within these genres of music (Hansen, 2007).

It is also possible to begin by using your *personal experiences* to find and develop a research topic. One example is a student in social anthropology who grew up in an impoverished suburb of Buenos Aires, Argentina. She used her background and experiences with socioeconomic inequality to write a thesis that focused on the local responses to neo-liberal politics in a Uruguayan rural locality where a pulp mill had been installed (Salinas, 2010).

Not every personal experience is suitable for a research topic. If the topic becomes too personal and emotional, it might be difficult to create the necessary distance to write a good thesis. In some instances, fan studies, written by students who are fans of music, literature, film, football and other sports, tend to be implicit and positive, and often fail to ask difficult questions and raise critique of those who they admire. It is important to have a certain degree of distance so that perceptions are not clouded.

Profession or workplace

Some students find topics that are related to their own profession or workplace. Many students in nursing, social work and teaching write master's theses based on their work experiences. One example is a student who used to work as a secondary schoolteacher in London. She wrote a thesis on teaching methods developed for those working in caring professions (Nash, 2010). Another example is a student who conceived the idea for his thesis from his experiences both as a pupil and as a teacher in comprehensive schools in the north-east of England. His thesis focuses on pupil resistance to authority and

its implications for pedagogic practices (Fortune, 2010). The advantages of this approach are that the student harbours knowledge of the field and has local access and trust. There are, however, some disadvantages to this approach as well. Students may lack critical distance and adopt the perspectives of the actors. They may also be tempted to consider colleagues and leaders to such an extent that scientific norms of truth and independence are sacrificed.

Research literature

Another way to find a topic is to take a closer look at the research literature. Is there a book or an article that impressed you? Does the literature discuss topics you find interesting? Is this something you will consider spending more time researching? Perhaps you think the author was limited in the way she or he addressed the topic? You should ask several types of questions to research literature (see section 6.3). Did the author leave out questions you think should be included? Or should the author have offered different interpretations?

A common strategy is to address gaps in current research (see section 8.2). Try to find phenomena that have received little or no attention by scholars. One student found that aspects of secular culture in Britain were neglected by sociological research. She used this gap as a reason to study the experiences of irreligion in individual lives (Lee, 2006).

Another strategy is to study the same phenomenon at different points in time. One example is a student in political science who analysed five American presidential elections between 1992 and 2008. By comparing different points in time, he explored the role that foreign policy issues played in these elections (Lian, 2010). A similar strategy is to study the same phenomenon in different contexts or in different key figures. For example, a student compared affirmative action in two different contexts, the US and the UK (Herron, 2010). Another example is a student who compared speeches delivered by two major politicians, Tony Blair and George W. Bush, during the same time period, from September 11, 2001 to the end of 2005 (Stenbakken, 2007). She was able to detect their different rhetorical styles by comparing their ideologies, rhetorical devices and modalities. Indeed, the use of comparisons, contrasts and differences are useful strategies when formulating research questions (see sections 7.1 and 7.2).

There are also different ways to use the literature to find a research topic. A common approach is to study two or more books or articles about a particular topic that interests you and to ask how they differ and why (see Chapter 7). Do they pose different questions? Do they use various types of data? Do they use alternative interpretations or modes of explanations? Do they define or use key concepts in different ways?

It is a good idea to study encyclopaedias, handbooks, companions and dictionaries to see if the review articles give you ideas (see section 5.7). At this early stage, skim reading is a must in order to avoid wasting time on topics you will not pursue. If you spend too much time studying the research literature before you have decided on a topic, you may risk becoming too dependent on the reading you have done. It is easy to be trapped into forming an opinion too readily on the basis of your reading. Many students overestimate the amount of knowledge needed to get started. Read some of the literature thoroughly and skim the rest. But read enough to be relatively well informed. You do not want to select a topic, only to discover that others have gone over the same ground before.

Classes and seminars

A good start in finding a topic is to make use of classes and seminars and talk with the professors (see section 4.3). Most of them are helpful in finding a topic. Some direct large research programmes and invite students to do a thesis within the frame of the programme. Others form research groups, where several students do their theses within the same or related fields.

Talk about it

Finally, it is helpful to discuss your ideas with other students. ‘To talk about it’ actually helps. Ask the other students about their topics and outline your own ideas (see section 4.2). Use social media and blogs by master’s-level students to find more information about possible topics and discuss your ideas (see section 4.1). Later, use the social media and the blogs to present the findings from your study. When you have clarified your interests, paid attention to public debates, discussed with students and professors, studied literature and participated actively in class, you will find that these activities assist you in finding a research topic. This phase may take some time and it has its frustrations. Generally, students hope that good ideas will just appear out of the blue, but this is not how it works. Good ideas come when you search for new information and ask critical questions (see section 6.3).

1.2 Developing a topic

After you have found a topic that’s caught your interest, it must be specified and developed further. The process of developing a topic will eventually lead to the formulation of research questions (see Chapter 7). During the early

phase of this process, it is a good idea to work with several topics or several aspects of one topic. This will expand your ideas to include related topics. Eventually, you will find a topic you want to pursue. The aim here is to present a few useful techniques for developing topics.

Brainstorming

One method that will help you to find new ideas is brainstorming. This is a technique that will help you to *find* different ideas. Later, you go back and *evaluate* the suggestions you found. What you actually do is to sit down at your computer and write ideas without stopping. It does not matter whether you believe the ideas are good or bad, the issue for now is just to write them down. Before you start, make a decision to write, for example, for a period of five to ten minutes. When the time is over, go back and evaluate what you've written. Delete the ideas you do not like and keep the ones you believe can be developed further. With these new ideas in mind, repeat the process.

A common mistake among students is trying to be creative and judging new ideas simultaneously. You cannot come up with new ideas and label them as good or bad at the same time. This approach tends to limit creativity. Remember that finding ideas and evaluating them are two different processes. By letting yourself write down your ideas without stopping, and then going back and selecting the good from the bad, you are allowing yourself to be creative. This is the central structure in creative writing (see section 3.2).

Analogies

Another method for developing a topic is the use of analogies. Models that are proven to be useful in one field of study can sometimes be transferred to other fields. An example of the use of analogies is when theories about negotiations between political parties are applied to interpretations of negotiations between partners in the area of domestic work and childcare. Another example is when theories of decision making on the economic market are applied to other areas of decision making, such as participation in social movements. The method of using analogies requires familiarity with the literature in the field. You need theoretical knowledge to develop this application. Before you make serious efforts to use this method, ask your advisor if this is a good approach, otherwise, you may risk losing valuable time studying the wrong type of literature.

Mind map

Further, you can develop a topic by making a mind map. A mind map consists of mapping key concepts that are related to each other. In order to come up with ideas for relevant concepts, use the brainstorming method described above. You will find electronic tools for mind maps, brainstorming and planning for groups and individuals on Web 2.0 sites, and several are open source and free (e.g. see <https://bubbl.us/>). Some even provide opportunities for a group of students to share a mind map and work on it together to develop ideas. Let us say, for example, that the topic of your interest is ‘social inequality’ as shown in Figure 1.1.

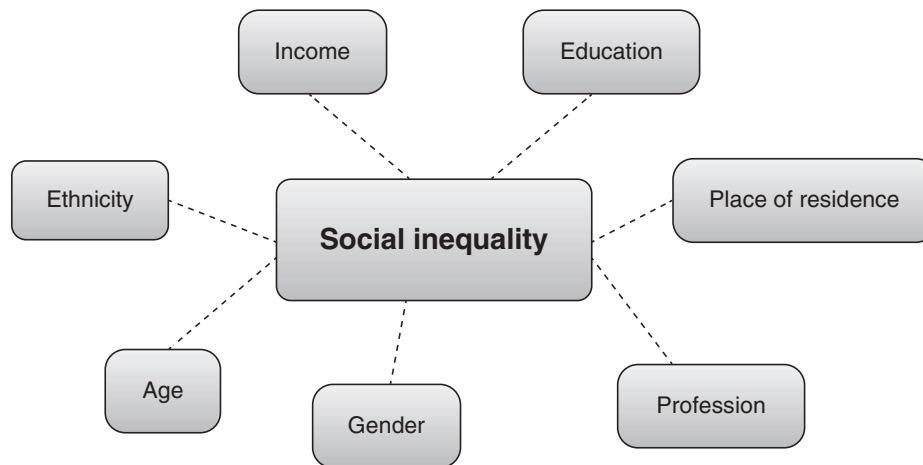


Figure 1.1 Initial mind map

This mind map gives you an *overview* of possible topics for a thesis (it is possible to add more ideas than shown). Develop the mind map further by selecting some concepts you think are related, and *group them* (see section 7.1). This group of ideas will, perhaps, create a conceptual starting point for a thesis. Draw arrows between the concepts you think constitute causal relationships. When you have completed your groupings, find one key concept and then repeat the process.

In our example, we have selected the concepts of income, education, ethnicity, age, gender and profession. These concepts can be the beginning of a study of educational performance among high-school students, as shown in Figure 1.2.

The method of drawing mind maps, as demonstrated in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, will help you to choose topics that can be developed further. By selecting some concepts and omitting others, you are specifying your research topic (see section 7.4). You may not readily understand why one concept is more

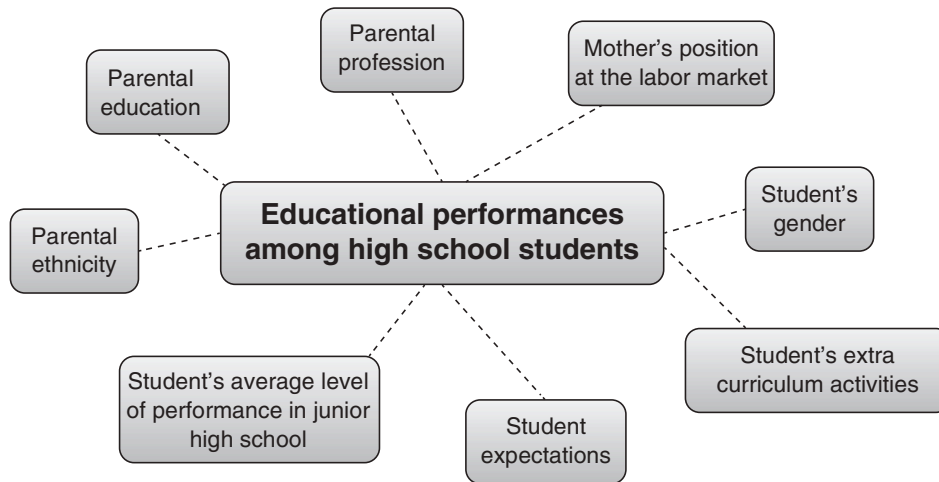


Figure 1.2 Concepts from initial mind map developed into a more specific study

developable than the other or why you have selected it. At this point, it is not important. The important issue is that you have begun. Defining your research questions will come later.

Asking open-ended questions

Finally, develop your topic by asking a few open-ended questions (see section 6.3). The different questions suggested below will, in some cases, indicate what type of methodological approach you will have to use in order to answer them (Barnes, 2005). These questions will vary somewhat within different fields of study:

- What is going on? (Surveys, evaluations, documentation, facts)
- Is this true? (Hypothesis testing, critique of sources)
- What happens if? (Trials, experiments, new methodology)
- What is the solution? (Problem solving)
- How can something be improved? (Evaluation, action research, applied research)
- Why is this happening? (Explanatory, analytical). (Barnes 2005: 108)

In some instances, a thesis will consist of one of these questions, and in other instances, a combination of two or more questions (see section 7.4). For example, if you want to answer the question 'What is going on?' you will search for documentation. To follow our example, we would like to map

educational performance among high-school students. This might provide a basis for questions such as:

- 'Is this true?' (Is it true that children of well-educated parents get better grades than other students?)
- 'Why is this happening?' (Why do children of well-educated parents get better grades than other students?)
- 'What is the solution?' (What is needed to improve the grades of children whose parents have lower levels of education?)

Changes along the way

By developing your topic the way we have described here, changes will take place (see section 7.5). Perhaps you end up with a different topic than the one you initially found. Or perhaps you choose to focus upon issues you had not considered before. If you use this approach of specifying your topic several times, you will eventually develop a research topic.

Once you have an idea for a topic, be careful to avoid two common mistakes. One is selecting a topic that is too broad to be researchable: two examples are 'The role of the family in post-industrial society' or 'The significance of Islam in the Western world'. Be aware, though, that both topics can be developed further into research topics (see section 7). The other mistake is to select an 'overpopulated' topic: two examples are 'New analyses of the classical sociology of Max Weber' or 'The development and meaning of the concept "identity"'. There are topics within every field that have been researched to the extent that it is nearly impossible to present new and valuable information.

At this point, you should begin to consider if relevant data are available or if you must produce the data (Chapter 8). Ideally, a topic may be researchable even if it is impossible to collect relevant data. For example, it is theoretically possible to study the process of lobbying members of parliament, even if it is highly unlikely that you will collect a complete set of data.

When you have found one or more topics you would like to develop further, it is time to talk to your professor. She or he will help you to specify and develop your topics even further (see Chapter 4).

Finally, once you have selected a research topic and your professor agrees that it is viable, try to stick to your decision, unless you have good reasons to switch to another topic. It will help you avoid wasting time. It is difficult to write a thesis, and you will make it even more difficult for yourself if you change an agreed-upon topic (see section 7.5).

1.3 Research ethics

All research, including student research, is regulated by ethical norms and standards. Ethical concerns are relevant in several phases of your thesis. We will discuss these issues throughout the book. In the social sciences, several decisions are made which have an ethical dimension, including: the collection of data (section 8.3), writing (section 9.6), referencing different sources of information (section 11.4), and the student–advisor relationship (section 4.4).

Ethics during the research process and for the consequences of research

Research ethics relate to norms for behaviour during the research process and the responsibility of researchers for the consequences of their research (Hart, 2008a: 277–311). First and foremost you must have a fundamental respect for the people you are researching. Respect for people is relevant when you are deciding on a topic, during the research process and in communicating the research results.

When you are searching for a topic, consider the possible ethical issues involved. If you plan to use people as sources of information, you must know the laws and regulations that guarantee the right of privacy. The research process must demonstrate respect for individual liberty and autonomy, which means that you cannot begin data collection before you have the consent of the people involved. The research participants shall not be exposed for injuries or pain because they participate in your study. You must provide participants with all the necessary information to get a reasonable understanding of your project in order to give their informed consent to participation. They also have the right to withdraw their participation at any time without facing any form of negative consequences. Finally, you have an obligation to make the results of your research known by communicating them (e.g. by publishing them) in an understandable way.

Responsibility towards society

As a researcher, you also have a responsibility towards society, meaning that your study somehow should benefit society, either directly or indirectly. Based on the premise that research implies a search for new and better knowledge, research should not be affected by the interests of those who initiate the study. The funding institution should always be known to the public. As a master's student, you must adhere to the same ethical rules, regulations and reflections that established scholars do.

Help! How do I find a research topic?

Ethics is not left to the individual. Therefore, several professional organizations have outlined formal codes of conduct so that all researchers, including students, can be aware of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Below are a few examples of ethical principles and codes of conduct for various groups of social scientists, as defined by some British and American organizations:

American Marketing Association: www.marketingpower.com/AboutAMA/Pages/Statement%20of%20Ethics.aspx

American Political Science Association: www.apsanet.org/pubs/ethics.cfm

Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth: www.theasa.org/ethics/Ethical_guidelines.pdf

The British Psychological society: www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards

The British Sociological Association: www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf

Before you begin working on your thesis, get to know the ethical principles and codes of conduct that are relevant for you.

1.4 Writing a research proposal

Writing a research proposal is essential for all research. Often advisors and research committees require that you write a proposal for your work. If you want someone to fund your research, which is typically the case for any researcher, the research funding bodies require an excellent proposal in order to do so.

A research proposal is a plan for your work (for more information, see Hart, 2008a: 365–405). It is a map that outlines what you want to do, why you want to do it, how you want to do it, what you expect to find, and a plan that shows your ability to deliver what you promise. Remember to discuss your proposal with other students and, most importantly, with your advisor (see section 4). Your advisor knows what a research proposal should look like and will be able to guide you. If you have never written a proposal before, try to get the advice of someone who has been successful and ask if you can see a copy of their proposal. Also look at the Economic and Social Research Council's website (see www.esrc.ac.uk), which gives advice on 'How to write a good research proposal'. All of this will help you to understand what you are about to do, and save you time and effort.

Your research proposal will be a guide for your work, based on your design for your thesis (Chapter 8). This research design is related to the definition of your topic and your research questions (Chapters 1 and 7), a search and

tentative description of the research literature (Chapters 5 and 6), your research methods (Chapter 8), plan for the analysis (Chapter 9), and ethical issues (sections 1.3, 8.3, 9.6 and 11.4).

You may ask why we discuss writing a research proposal here and not later in the book. It takes time to prepare and draft a research proposal because you will have to consider all aspects of the thesis. First, you need to know what the requirements for such a proposal are at your university. Then, you need to know something about a possible topic, the research literature, research methodology, research ethics and analysis before you begin your proposal. In order to find information that might help you, you can use this book actively by going back and forth. Finally, as you begin to work on your proposal, drafting and editing several times, you will begin to develop an outline of the work that lies ahead. This will help you in the planning process. There is also a certain excitement in anticipating what you might find and envisioning your work, accomplishment and future success (see Chapter 2). As you see, there are several reasons why it is a good idea to start the process of writing a research proposal early.

The main elements of a typical research proposal are outlined below. We have included references to where you will find relevant information in this book. In many ways, the structure of a research proposal is similar to a classic thesis structure (see section 11.1). One important difference is the *length of the research proposal*. The question of how long it should be depends on the requirements of your university, so do check this. A typical research proposal varies between 6 to 20 pages, which means that you have very little space to explain what you are going to do. While keeping spatial limits in mind, do not worry if your first drafts are too long; you will go back later and edit several times before you submit your proposal (see section 3.4 and Chapter 11).

- *Title and author*: Give a short title with a more specified subtitle. The title should describe what your research is about using as few words as possible. The title can be a working title, which you might want to change later; be aware that a change of title may have to be approved by your advisor or research committee.
- *Introduction*: A brief presentation of the thesis topic. Give a broad presentation of the theme and the narrative you are going to tell in the thesis. What is known about this topic, what you want to find out, and what are you going to do? How is your thesis different from that which is already known (see section 10.1)?
- *Aims and objectives*: What is the purpose of your research? Is there a particular problem in society that needs more knowledge, so your aim is to fill gaps in current research? Or do you think that previous research is mistaken and you want to propose an alternative approach? Perhaps you operate with a combination of several aims and objectives (see section 8.2).
- *Topic justification*: Why does this matter? Explain why this study is important. Will your work only have theoretical significance or will it have some sort of practical significance, such as to bring about some form of change (see section 7.3)?

- *Scope and limitations:* Due to very real limitations concerning time and money, you have to define the scope your research. Specify clearly the limitations of your thesis regarding theme, sample, geographical location and timeframe (see sections 7 and 8.2).
- *Literature review:* Give a brief overview of the relevant research literature. Search the literature and give an outline of the current research in the area, key concepts and debates (see section 5). What are the major issues and who represent the different positions? State the names of authors and their publications. How does the literature provide a frame for your thesis (see section 6)? Many students tend to give lengthy outlines of the research literature, and only add a few sentences when it comes to methods and practical issues regarding data collection. Unless you are writing a thesis where theory is the main issue, this is usually a mistake. The overview here is only meant to frame your thesis within current research.
- *Research questions:* Give a more detailed presentation of your overall research questions and all the specified questions your thesis will attempt to answer (see section 7).
- *Methods:* Present the methods you are going to use and the reasons for using them, based on the research questions. If you are going to use surveys or study specific groups of people or organizations, give detailed information about access. Have you gained permission to use the survey? Have people agreed to talk with you? It is time consuming to find out if you will be able to access the data you need, but this information is crucial. The more specific and realistic information you provide here, the more likely your advisor will think that you have the ability to conduct your thesis within your given timeframe.
- *Ethical considerations:* Include brief statements on how you intend to conform to ethical guidelines, and give detailed information about the different types of ethical issues and dilemmas you will need to deal with in your research (see sections 1.3 and 8.3).
- *Analytical approach:* Present briefly an outline of how you will analyse your data. If you write a quantitative study, somewhat detailed descriptions of the data and the statistical methods of analysis are required. Qualitative studies also require an outline of analytical approach (e.g. content, discourse, category, etc.) (see section 9).
- *Schedule:* Include a timetable for your work where you estimate the time it will take to complete your thesis. The timetable should be a realistic estimate of the time the work will take you (see section 1.5 and the summary below).
- *References:* Provide an alphabetical list of references that occur in the proposal (see section 11.7).

1.5 Project planning

As soon as you get started, make a plan for your work. Perhaps you will object and say that making a plan is a waste of time because you will never stick to it anyway. The purpose of a plan is not necessarily to stick to it for the sake of doing it: the purpose is to give you an overview and help you structure the work you are about to take on.

When you start making your plan, write a detailed list of all the things you need to do to finish your thesis. Include everything you remember, from finding a research topic to reviewing the research literature and contacting people. Then, structure your list according to deadlines. What do you need to do first, and what can wait? Organize the various tasks according to each semester you plan to use on your thesis. What are the things that need to be done each semester? Organize the first semester month by month. When the first semester is over, make a monthly plan for the next semester. You might find that you spend more time than you planned to do, but this is not a valid reason for avoiding to plan the next semester. During the last few months and weeks before you submit the thesis, careful planning is a must (see section 12).

It is a good idea to go over your plans at the end of every month. What did you do and what remains to be done? If you did not accomplish all the things you planned, what were the reasons? Did you make unrealistic deadlines for yourself? Did some of the work take more time than you thought? Or were there other factors outside your control that delayed your work? Equally important, are there areas where you spent too much time? Your original plan will be adjusted on a regular basis. Some things will, perhaps, be moved. Others will be taken out, and some new things will be added. By setting deadlines for your work, you put pressure on yourself to finish. You may need this pressure, especially when you are going through a difficult phase.

1.6 Summary

- 1 Remember that this phase offers a number of frustrations, as well as new discoveries.
- 2 You need to find a research topic. You can search several places:
 - your own interests
 - problems, issues or conflicts in society
 - personal experiences and interests
 - profession or workplace
 - previous research
 - classes and seminars
 - talk with other students and use social media
 - talk with your professor, so that you know that the topic you select is a good research topic – she or he has the skills, abilities and professional mandate to help you see whether a topic has the potential to be developed into a research topic.
- 3 Once you have found a topic, it must be specified and developed further. Use the following techniques to develop a topic:

Help! How do I find a research topic?

- brainstorming
 - analogies
 - mind-mapping
 - asking open-ended questions.
- 4 All research is regulated by ethical norms and standards. Ethics is not left to the individual, but there are formal codes of ethics for social science researchers and students. It is your responsibility to get to know them. These are some of the ethical norms that should guide your research:
- the people involved must give their consent
 - the participants must receive all the necessary information about your project to give their consent
 - the participants shall not be exposed to injuries or pain because they participate
 - people have the right to withdraw their participation at any time
 - you must make the results of your research known
 - it is your responsibility that your research should somehow be of benefit to society.

Remember that the student–advisor relationship is also guided by ethical codes and standards.

- 5 Begin your work with the research proposal early, as this is time consuming. A research proposal is a very brief map for your work, which includes:
- title and author name
 - introduction
 - aims and objectives
 - topic justification
 - scope and limitations
 - literature review
 - research questions
 - methods
 - ethical considerations
 - analytical approach
 - schedule
 - references
- 6 As soon as you get started, make a plan for your work. The Gantt chart is a standard form for project work. It is used to give an overview of the time schedule and all the activities involved. Several different computer programs can be used to draw these charts electronically, where some are open source and free and some must be purchased. It is possible to make a simple chart in Microsoft Word, which we have done in Figure 1.3.

Doing your master's dissertation

Activities	1st month	2nd month	3rd month	4th month	5th month	6th month
Finding a topic						
Planning						
Contact persons						
Finding literature						
Data						
Write						

Figure 1.3 Gantt chart for the first semester of doing a master's thesis

1.7 Action plan

- 1 Select two or three topics that interest you. Develop them by using an electronic mind map:
 - Fill in a key concept taken from one of the topics.
 - Fill in related concepts.
 - Select some concepts and group them.
 - If you think there are causal relationships between some concepts, draw arrows between them.
 - Repeat the process.
- 2 Select one of the topics you were working with above:
 - Ask all the questions listed on pages 8–9.
 - Which questions do you find relevant?
 - Which combinations of questions are useful?
- 3 Plan your thesis by drawing a Gantt chart where you fill out all the activities for the thesis in the left column. Make different charts on the basis of a year, semester and month.
- 4 Go over the charts at the end of every period:
 - What did you accomplish?
 - What remains to be done?
 - If you were unsuccessful in sticking to your plan, why was this so?
 - What can you improve?