

“Where do I start!?”: Getting going on your thesis

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Beginning on any new research project, especially one that will become your thesis or dissertation, can be an extremely daunting task. Many students find that the pressure of needing to come up with a project idea that is “important” and “interesting” enough to serve as a thesis can be paralyzing. Here are a few tips to help get you started on thesis ideas when you feel like you’re stuck...

1. Read. Read. Read. Start reading generally in your field, and then try to focus in on more specific topics. Your supervisor can be a good source for suggested preliminary readings. While reading, look for ideas at the end of the discussion sections where the authors suggest future research in the area. Prepare questions for yourself while reading. For, example: “What would the next step in this line of research be?” “How could I improve on this study?”. Also, be sure to peruse the literature outside your field. For example, are there any paradigms or strategies from other research areas that could be innovatively applied to your own research interests?

2. Go to conferences, even if you’re not presenting. Check out the posters and talks that interest you, but, most importantly, network with the researchers in your area. Find out what they’re currently up to (keeping in mind that the published literature is usually about 2 years behind what’s really

happening). If you can’t attend all the conferences you would like to, try e-mailing individuals whose research articles you’ve read and have inspired you.

3. Use the other graduate students in your department and lab as sounding boards for your ideas. Have a brainstorming session or lab meeting where you present some of the research studies that you’ve read and are interested in and see where the discussion takes you.

4. When coming up with your thesis idea, give some serious consideration to the sample that you will need to recruit. For example, while studying depression in red-headed twins with OCD might initially seem like a fascinating topic, if the power calculation say that you will need 60 sets of these twins, you may be collecting data until you’re 80. So, unless the idea of being able to claim tuition on your taxes for the rest of your life appeals to you, think your topic idea through carefully. Sometimes very interesting clinical questions can be answered with lab-based research using a non-clinical sample!

5. However long you expect your study to take, multiply that by 4 and then use that as your estimate and time-line. No matter how organized, wonderful, and amazing you are, bad stuff always happens or things get delayed (especially

when you are depending on another organization, like a hospital, to help you recruit subjects). Count on it.

6. Once you have your idea, you may be tempted to start your study without first writing your proposal. While it may be a good idea to do some initial piloting to make sure your project is actually doable before getting yourself in too deep, it is good to get the formal writing over with before you plunge into data collection. You'll feel confident that you have a thorough understanding of the relevant literature and have thought all the issues through. Once you begin the study and get all caught up with data collection, it's very easy to let the proposal writing slide. Plus, it's insulting to your committee members (i.e., "I'd love you to be on my committee, but I've already collected 3/4 of my data so I don't really care what you have to say...")

7. Don't pressure yourself by setting unreasonable goals. Lots of students reserve time for data collection, analysis, and write-up, but sometimes coming up with an idea that will intrigue you (or at least not bore you to death by the time you're near finishing the project) can take just as long. Budget in that time for yourself.

8. Try to enjoy yourself. You're embarking on an exciting project that will (hopefully) contribute meaningfully to the research literature. And just remember that the best part of the thesis is when it's finished! Taking the time to come up with a well thought out project idea can help make sure that that will happen.

(Part II of this article "How to finish your thesis" will follow when I actually finish mine!).