

AGST Alliance

MTh (Theology)

Thesis guidelines



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<www.agstalliance.org>

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The thesis: An overview

AGST Alliance's **Master of Theology (Theology)** program is "designed to produce graduates who can present Christian truth in churches, theological seminaries and Christian organisations in ways that are dynamically appropriate for Asian contexts. As they are trained to think theologically and contextually, so they will be able to more effectively serve God's Kingdom and Church in Asia" (*MTh(Theol) Program Handbook*, p. 4).

A significant component of the program which is designed to demonstrate this is the **thesis**. As the culminating item in your MTh(Theol) program, the thesis will demonstrate your ability to design and carry out a research project based on a focused topic, drawn from the themes of the coursework, as it relates to your specific interests and ministry setting. You will also be showing that you have acquired the appropriate skills to conduct and report such research at an acceptable master's level.

An alternative to the thesis is to research and write two major (4 credit) papers. The expectations of the quality of your work will be similar to those for the thesis. The topic/focus of at least one of the two papers should arise from your own unique context.

This option should not be chosen by participants who plan to proceed with higher-level studies at a later date. Consult with the Theology Programs Director to help your decision-making.

As you commence your thesis

Whatever form your thesis takes, its context is the Church in Asia. While it is easy to see your research as an academic exercise, a requirement to complete your MTh(Theol) program, it is important that you continue to sense your stewardship of the resources and abilities which God has given you to be able to complete this assignment.

Thus, maintain a sense of humility before God as you progress through your thesis. Recognise that you are doing it ultimately for him. Allow prayer and reflection to permeate the process of your inquiry, from start to finish: From the Kingdom's perspective, this is unlikely to be time wasted!

Time commitment

The stated value of the thesis is 8 credits – equivalent to 2½-3 modules. A person working diligently could complete the thesis within 10-12 months. There is no set common completion date for the thesis, because students will work at their own pace, with their own time constraints.

However, you need to complete your thesis within two years of the completion of your MTh(Theol) coursework modules. If you have passed the MTh(Theol) modules satisfactorily but fail to complete the thesis in this time, you will be awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology.

Form and expectations of the thesis

The thesis may take one of a variety of forms, tailored to your interests and ministry setting. It may be a conceptual-theoretical or empirical research thesis.

Whatever form it takes, the successful thesis will give clear evidence that you have acquired skills in the criteria for study at the MTh level, which you have been honing up through the course work of the program:

The MTh(Theol) is pitched at a level which reflects your ability to demonstrate these skills:

- Understand what is 'going on' in a topic, not just 'what happened' (= 'getting beneath the surface').
- Read, summarise and discuss quality texts and research which has been carried out up to a doctoral level.
- Critically evaluate alternative viewpoints, from the basis of an understanding of fundamental issues relating to the topic and the use of primary sources.
- Cope with contradictory and hostile interpretations.
- Formulate and express a defensible viewpoint on topics that have been researched.
- Make evaluative judgments with a high degree of confidence.
- Formulate questions of importance in a topic.
- Efficiently identify significant quality texts relating to the topic area and use them critically.
- Make full and efficient use of library facilities, as well as electronic and internet resources.
- Present written material in an appropriate format and following a recognised style guide.
- Write in a way in which points made can be logically defended.

[Abstracted from *MTh(Theol) Program Handbook*, p. 10]

What is a thesis?

Joe Wolfe (University of NSW, Australia) has summarised the nature of a thesis well:

Your thesis is a research report. The report concerns a problem or series of problems in your area of research and it should describe what was known about it previously, what you did towards solving it, what you think your results mean, and where or how further progress in the field can be made.

Do not carry over your ideas from undergraduate assessment: a thesis is not an answer to an assignment question. One important difference is this: the reader of an assignment is usually the one who has set it. S/he already knows the answer (or one of the answers), not to mention the background, the literature, the assumptions and theories and the strengths and weaknesses of them. The readers of a thesis do not know what the "answer" is. ...

(<http://www.phys.unsw.edu.au/~jw/thesis.html>. Accessed 29 December 2011)

What will the thesis look like?

Before you settle on what sort of thesis you will do, a good idea is to browse through the masters' theses in a seminary library (especially the theses in education and applied/practical theology). These should give you an idea of the commonly-used structure, and the range of research methods employed.

Generally, a thesis will contain these elements:

- **Introductory pages**

(Title page, declaration, acknowledgements, table of contents, abstract, etc.)

- **Introduction**

What is the topic and why is it important? How does it fit into the broader world of your discipline?

- **Literature review**

Where did the problem come from? What is already known about this problem? What other methods have been tried to solve it?

- **Middle chapters**

The exact structure in the middle chapters will vary among theses, depending on the research method being used. In conceptual/historical enquiries, the middle chapters will be structured in a way determined by the logic of the enquiry. In empirical (experimental) enquiries, the middle chapters are more likely to follow the form of methods being used for the research, results of the research, and discussion of the results and their significance in your enquiry.

- **Final chapter**

What are your conclusions? What are the practical implications of your work? What further interesting avenues of research does your work point to?

- **References**

All the resources you have cited in your writing (= reference list) and perhaps a list of significant resources you used in your research but have not specifically cited or drawn from in your final written submission (= bibliography). Both 'hard form' (books, articles) and 'soft form' (internet resources) resources need to be included.

- **Appendices**

Material that is relevant to your thesis/report, but which distract the reader from the major flow of the writing. Use appendices with caution: they are not designed to give you an undercover means of exceeding the word count for your thesis!

Appendix 1 (*Research Methodologies*) on pp. 13ff gives a brief overview of various research possibilities.

See also N. J. Vyhmeister. 2018. *Quality research papers: For students of theology and religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Thesis presentation style

The word limit for the MTh(Theol) thesis is 30,000 words (which includes footnotes, but excludes the bibliography/reference list and appendices). Precise guidelines for the physical layout of your thesis are available separately.

AGST Alliance uses the Turabian (author-date) referencing style. The key reference book is K. Turabian. 2018. *A Manual for Writers of Term papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Language medium

Generally, students will complete their thesis research and writing in English. However, sometimes a student may be in a situation where their main language is not English.

In these cases, a student may be granted permission by the Theology Programs Committee to research/write a thesis in a language other than English. These conditions will apply:

- A competent supervisor who is conversant in the non-English language is available.
- There are sufficient resources relating to the thesis topic in the non-English language to warrant allowing non-English research and thesis writing.
- The official copy of the thesis will be in English.
- The thesis examiners will usually receive the English copy.
- An oral examination will be routinely expected.

Note that effectively the research and writing will need to be bi-lingual (English and the non-English language), because of the availability of suitable resource material.

You and your supervisor

You will be assigned a supervisor for your thesis. The precise topic/scope of your thesis will be decided in consultation between you and your supervisor, and endorsed by the program director.

You are invited to suggest names for a possible supervisor, and then a formal invitation will be issued by your program director. Frequency of meeting between you and your supervisor will be mutually agreed. At least initially, the meetings may need to be fairly frequent.

Completing your thesis (and on time!) will be a collaborative effort. While final responsibility for completion of the work is yours, a good working relationship with your supervisor is a key to your success. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to this relationship, although the common strong images are those of *mentor* and *critical friend*.

Note: clear written communication is your responsibility. Even if English is not your main language, you can not expect your supervisor to read drafts which are in poor English, or to adopt the role of editor.

Responsibilities

Both you and your supervisor have responsibilities if you are to thrive in, and complete, your research thesis. Some of these responsibilities are:

You:

- Maintaining regular communication with your supervisor, as mutually agreed.
- Complete and submit tasks you commit yourself to. It is recommended you keep a record of your contacts with your supervisor.
- Frank and honest discussion of your progress, difficulties and concerns.
- Occasional reflection on the process of supervision.

Your supervisor:

- Monitor your progress.
- Provide critically constructive feedback within an agreed time frame.
- Alert you to areas in which you are not handling your research competently, especially in English communication, argumentation, and use of resources.
- Point you towards appropriate resources.

'Turn around' of work

We know the value of getting feedback within a reasonable timeframe; and we are encouraging supervisors to act responsibly to provide it. Realistically, we all face time/priority pressures, and it is not always possible for a supervisor to respond immediately. We will request your supervisor to work within this schedule:

Item	Target response time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Administrative emails' from you (e.g. requesting clarification of process, a resource reference, contact address of another person, setting up a time to phone, etc) 	Within one week
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An email/letter from you, raising a significant content issue (e.g. working through the details of an aspect of the research topic) 	Acknowledge receipt: 1 week Substantive response: 2 weeks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A major section of writing (e.g. a draft chapter of the thesis) 	Acknowledge receipt: 1 week Substantive response: 2-3 weeks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading a complete dissertation draft 	Acknowledge receipt: 1 week Substantive response: 4-5 weeks

Some issues may be most easily dealt with by a quick telephone call rather than a written response.

We will also request your supervisor to alert you if (s)he anticipates that (s)he will not be able to meet a target response time.

If problems with your supervisor arise

Difficulties and/or misunderstandings may arise between you and your supervisor. Seek to resolve such concerns directly with your supervisor as they arise.

However, if you feel that things have not been, or cannot be, adequately resolved directly, approach the program director to air your concerns and to discuss a way forward. Your supervisor similarly has an invitation to comment confidentially to the program director.

Costs

Supervisors will be given an honorarium from AGST Alliance for their supervision. However, direct costs incurred in your contact with your supervisor are generally your responsibility: Please don't presume upon the generosity (or affluence) of your supervisor.

Items you will need to arrange to reimburse your supervisor for (unless (s)he indicates otherwise) may include the cost of photocopied articles and travel for your meetings.

Examination of the thesis

Pre-submission thesis perusal

When you and your supervisor agree that your thesis is getting very close to its final form, 1-2 readers internal to AGST Alliance will peruse it, in order to 'OK' it for final submission and sending out to the external examiners.

The internal readers will be looking at criteria for 'readiness to submit' which include:

- **Technical:** is the grammar/formatting/style of the thesis accurate, appropriate and consistent?

- **Conceptual:** is there an appropriate/clear logical flow of argumentation through the thesis?
- **Use of research evidence:** are the cited sources used appropriately, to complement the argumentation rather than to provide the argumentation; and is there any obvious evidence of plagiarism?
- **Academic:** overall, is the thesis at MTh(Theol) level?

The internal reader(s)' role isn't to agree/disagree with the specific argumentation content of your thesis (which we assume will have been done by you with your supervisor). So it is more a general overview of the quality of the thesis rather than a detailed critique that will be done.

After the draft has been received by the Theology Programs Director, it is likely to take two weeks or so to be perused.

Thesis examination

Your completed thesis will be read by two external examiners. Although the final decision relating to the examiners lies with AGST Alliance, you will have an opportunity (through your supervisor) to suggest the names of possible examiners and anyone you would prefer not to be an examiner.

An oral defence may be called for, to assess your understanding of aspects of your work.

A grade will be awarded your thesis, based on the main AGST Alliance assessment/grading scale (see *MTh(Theol) Program Handbook*, pp. 11-13). The thesis must receive at least a Pass for the MTh(Theol) to be awarded. If the examiners decide that a submitted thesis is not passable, participants may be invited to revise and resubmit their thesis.

Ethical clearance for your research

Internationally in recent decades, there has been an enhanced awareness of the ethical responsibilities of researchers towards research participants. Issues of integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice lie at the heart of this concern as theological issues too. So, as a Christian institution, AGST Alliance wants to ensure that people in its programs reflect these values also.

If you are involved in research which gathers 'live' data – the views of living people – then ethical issues will relate to such areas as:

- Aspects of anonymity and confidentiality
- Care for research subjects/participants
- Protocols for selection of samples
- Informed consent and rights of research subjects/participants

'Live' data sources may include the administration of questionnaires, interviews, observations, drawing information from current administrative records of an institution, etc.

If you envisage ethical clearance may be required, indicate this in your proposal. After your proposal is approved and prior to your data collection and/or interaction with research subjects, the *Human Participants Research Ethics Application Form* (see page 23ff) will need to be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval. Your research cannot proceed until ethics clearance is given.

Thesis timeline

This table indicates action and responses required for the duration of the thesis phase of your MTh(Theol).

Time	Participant action	AGST Alliance response
Focus phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Focus of interest</i> form submitted • Suggest possible supervisor • Thesis fees paid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus approved • Supervisor approached & appointed
After supervisor appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact with supervisor • Do broad but focused reading • Commence detailed research of focus area to determine specific topic.. 	
Proposal phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit initial literature review • Detailed research proposal prepared & submitted • (Timeline: three to six months) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal approved; or revisions/ amendments recommended
Research phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed work on the research • Submit <i>Ethical Clearance form</i> for approval if required • Writing of thesis chapters 	
1 month before thesis/ report is likely to be submitted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit <i>Notice of intention to submit a thesis/dissertation</i> form. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiners approached
Pre-submission thesis perusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'close-to-final' copy of your thesis submitted for perusal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis approved for final submission
Thesis submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of thesis handed in. Include the signed <i>Declaration on thesis/dissertation submission</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis sent to examiners
~ 2-3 months post-submission		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiners' reports received & considered • Oral exam date set (if required) • Decision conveyed to participant
~ 3-4 months post-submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral exam (if required) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision conveyed to participant
~4-6 months post-submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amendments/ revisions made • Final dissertation copies bound and submitted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision conveyed to participant • Graduation ceremony confirmed
~5-6 months post-submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation fee paid • Graduation ceremony 	

Thesis proposal

Once you have had your 'focus of interest' approved, you will commence working to firm up your specific thesis proposal. This will be done in close consultation with your supervisor. It will entail significant reading and research on what has already been done in your area of focus – and may form a substantial part of your final presentation (especially the review of existing literature).

Two resources in the appendices provide helpful insights for this process: *Getting Started on Your Thinking/Proposal* (Appendix 2, pp. 16f) and *Developing a Research Proposal* (Appendix 3, pp. 18f).

Your *thesis proposal* will be your plan for further, detailed research and writing. This needs to be approved by the AGST Alliance Theology Programs Committee before you can proceed further.

Produced in consultation with your supervisor, your proposal will include these elements:

1. **Title:** Provide a working title.
2. **Background and Context of Research** [250 words]
3. **Research Question, Sub-Research questions, hypothesis: An unambiguous research question;** and hypotheses to be explored. Three or four sub-research questions. [Each sub-question will be the question asked for each chapter of the thesis]
4. **Area of Research:** A clear description of the area of research that you propose to explore (*up to ½ page*).
5. **Significance:** A statement of the potential significance of this investigation: why does it need to be done? What contribution do you think it will offer? What is 'new' about your investigation? (*up to 350 words*).
6. A **detailed plan of your research:** this includes the methods/procedures you propose to use to collect and analyse the data (*up to 700 words*).
7. **Limitations and delimitations:** An indication of the limits/boundaries of the proposed research – in terms of both the area to be addressed and method(s) to be used (*up to 250 words*)
8. **Timeline:** A proposed time-line for your research and the writing of your thesis.
9. An **initial literature review** of representative resources. Highlight the more important works and authors discovered so far. (*700-1,000 words*)
10. **Initial bibliography/references:** Provide a list of 30-35 resources (books and articles) of which one third should be published within the last seven years.
11. Indicate the **availability of resources** necessary for you to conduct your research (e.g. which libraries? What groups of specific people for your data collection?)
12. Indicate whether your research will require *ethical clearance*. (See p. 9)
13. Your supervisor's comments on the viability and benefits of the research (*~200-250 words*).

The page length indicators above are a suggestion only: The optimal length of your proposal will be the minimum required to do the job well. Avoid padding!

Type your proposal, single line spacing on A4 paper, with 3 cm left- and right-side margins and 2 cm top and bottom margins. The preferred font is Times New Roman 12 point. Incorporate in-text referencing of sources you cite in your proposal and a reference list (as distinct from the initial bibliography of #8 above).

Thesis submission process

When you get close to submitting your thesis for examination, you will need to fulfil various requirements, outlined in a separate set of guidelines. It is worth perusing these guidelines early, to ensure you don't face a delay in your submission.

* * * * *

Appendix 1: Research methodologies*

This is a brief introduction to various research models, processes, and terminology... Once you have a basic understanding of different types of research and research terminology, you will be in a better position to seek your supervisor's advice as well as being better prepared for your initial supervision meetings.

The type of study you undertake will depend on numerous factors such as the type of data you wish to collect, your research question and aims. Ongoing discussions with your supervisor and more experienced researchers will also help you to pinpoint the type of study, or the research methodology which will be most suitable for your research question(s).

Empirical

This type of research requires that data be collected. Thus, empirical research is grounded in reality rather than in the some abstract realm. Data may be collected by observation or by experiment. The purpose of empirical research is to explain the data collected through the development of a model or theory that hypothesises about the relationship between the data and relevant variables of the environment. The results of empirical research should be able to be replicated as adherence to this method implies the use of objective, reliable and valid research methodology and criteria.

Theoretical

Provides explanatory principles for phenomena. It may remain on an abstract rather than a reality referred (data driven) level. In this type of research, theoretical principles are developed, proposed and described. Theoretical research is carried out in all disciplines.

Qualitative and quantitative

Generally *qualitative research* focuses on the subjective experience and perception of the research subjects. In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument of data collection. Tools used include open ended interviews, field notes, 'conversations' with participants or journal diaries. The focus of qualitative research is not only to describe but also to analyse: it seeks to look at the *why* of events not just the *what* (Tuckman, 1988).

In contrast, the focus of *quantitative research* is objective measures rather than subjective experience. Data is collected in some objective and replicable manner; this methodology provides greater distance between the data and researcher than in qualitative studies. In addition, data is usually analysed statistically in this type of research. The tools of quantitative research include test performance scores, physiological readings, survey responses and spectrometer readings.

Action research

Used in applied settings such as the classroom or a health care environment, this approach involves the practitioner as researcher collaborating with students or work colleagues in order to bring about change, to develop new skills or to problem solve in a particular situation that directly arises from the setting. A distinguishing feature of this approach is its spiraling and cyclical nature typically involving stages such as planning, action, observation and reflection. An example of action research is the introduction by the researcher of self assessment criteria for student learners. The research would investigate the effect of this innovation. Collaborative and/or reflective aspects of such a project may include a discussion with students about their input, perceptions and evaluation of the innovation.

Case study

This type of research looks in depth at particular issues with a single or small number of subjects. Advantages of case study research are that the researcher can investigate a

characteristic and/or its development in depth and at close range. This approach is also often used in fields such as neuropsychology to investigate cases of rare or unique pathology.

Ethnographic

Ethnographic research is a means of gaining insight into a culture or social process. It involves participant observation, which means the researcher becomes immersed in the daily lives of the people or community he or she is observing. Data for ethnographic studies may include field notes, interviews, taped conversations.

Experimental

This type of research uses quantitative methods and involves a formal control of variables. It may occur in a laboratory situation. *True experimental studies* investigate possible cause and effect relationships by exposing one or more experimental groups to one or more treatment conditions and comparing them to control groups who are equal in other respects but do not receive the treatment(s). This type of design allows a comparison to be made and a conclusion drawn about the effect of the treatment. For example, to investigate student learning from computers one group of students learn about a topic using the conventional teaching materials (the control group) while another learns about the same topic using the same information except the information is presented on a computer. Students would be randomly assigned to the groups or matched using some valid criteria. Variables such as intelligence, prior knowledge of the topic, familiarity with a computer and gender would need to be accounted for or controlled in this process. Other variables such as time of day and number of students in a learning group would be equalised or randomised across the groups in order that these variables are also controlled. After the learning period, the students' knowledge of the topic would be assessed using an identical test for both groups. Objective criteria would be used to establish the test results of the groups. A conclusion about the effect of using a computer for learning can then be drawn, as the other variables that would impact upon the ability of the students to learn have been controlled. Experimental designs demand scientific principles such as objectivity, replicability and validity be upheld.

Out of a laboratory it is often difficult to control all of the variables that impact upon an experiment. *Quasi-experimental designs* use experimental methodology without total control of relevant variables. Although the researcher in this situation compromises the internal validity of the experiment (since not all variables are controlled), they may gain some external validity as the results they have obtained would be generalisable to other similar situations in the real world.

Interventionist

As the term implies, interventionist studies involve some deliberate change in a particular process or situation so that the effects can be monitored and evaluated. Interventionist studies tend to have less control over variables than experimental studies. An interventionist study on student learning could involve the introduction of different teaching approaches to enhance learning. It may not be possible to achieve a control group (controlling all variables such as socioeconomic status, performance and prior knowledge) who are taught only using the old teaching approach and materials given factors such as ethics and real classes and courses. Action research is a type of interventionist research as all participants intervene to create change. Interventionist research also occurs in a more scientific research setting where change can be engineered by an agent external to the experimental groups.

Phenomenological

This approach investigates ordinary human life experiences within their context to discover meaning. Thus, an individual's 'life world' or 'living experience' is studied as he or she experiences it rather than looking to categorise the experience or theorise about it. Examples are frequently used in this approach to illustrate the significance of the 'life experience' being described. An example of a research question using this approach is "what is the nature of

the experience of becoming a nurse?" and the aim of this research would be to understand this experience (Munhall, 1994).

Longitudinal

In this type of study data is collected repeatedly over a period of time in order to document or measure changes which have occurred in the population over the period of the study. For example, to investigate student's learning, students taught about the same topic using either a paper based or computer based technique for information presentation may be tested immediately after learning, one month after learning and six months after learning. This approach would investigate whether the learning benefits associated with a particular presentation technique continued over time. Longitudinal studies may also occur over many years and have a *developmental* focus or a *correlational* focus. Data for longitudinal studies can include surveys, interviews, diaries, test results, documents such as student writing.

Developmental

Investigates patterns and sequences of growth and/or change as a function of time.

Correlational

Investigates two or more existing situations in order to determine and explain their differences and similarities.

Multi-Method Research

Data is gathered about a range of related issues using a mix of methods.

Triangulated data/triangulation of data

This involves the comparison of data relating to the same issue or phenomenon of investigation but from different perspectives or from different methods of collection: for example, comparison of data from different stages of research; comparison of data from different sets of participants; or comparison of data from different tests that purport to measure the same variable. Data is therefore crosschecked in order to confirm the hypothesis. Triangulation of data can show up disjunctions in the research results, as well as provide additional insights.

Grounded Theory Research

Data is gathered and analysed to generate hypotheses that are grounded in practice.

Interpretive

Data is gathered that generates 'thick' description & interpretation and that allows theory building.

Historical

Reconstructs the past objectively and accurately, often in relation to the tenability of an hypothesis.

Descriptive

Systematically describes a situation or area of interest, factually and accurately.

Evaluative

Determines whether a particular program or procedure is providing the expected outcome.

* * * * *

* This material is abstracted and adapted from *Research and thesis writing: 1. Research models and methods*, University of Wollongong, <http://learning.uow.edu.au/resources/LD/thesis1.pdf>. Accessed 29/12/2011.

Appendix 2: Getting started with your thinking/proposal*

A: PREPARATION

1. Insight and Passion.

What has fired my imagination and interest? From my reading, writing and experience is there an emerging focus? Is there an issue that I really want to think through more rigorously? One needs both insight and passion for a dissertation topic to emerge and to be completed within a reasonable time-frame . (Your study program is intended as a gateway to the next phase of life, not a career!)

2. Disciplinary Knowledge.

What disciplines will I need to draw on for my research? How can I build up the basic knowledge and skills to embark on my research?

- Use any postgraduate courses/modules that you are completing to help you get into the best possible shape for the writing process.
- If you need particular languages for your research make sure that you are well grounded in your knowledge of the language(s).
- If you are doing qualitative or quantitative research, make sure you have an adequate knowledge of the requisite methodologies.

3. Technical Knowledge.

Ensure you are familiar with the extended functions of your word processor, footnote/referencing software, and the technical requirements for the writing of theses (styles for endnotes, footnotes, bibliography, and grammar). It is essential that you use current anti-virus software and file backup mechanisms on your computer.

4. Procedures.

Familiarise yourself with the AGST Alliance procedures. If something is unclear, contact your AGST Alliance programs director or the Dean.

5. Research.

A dissertation is meant to be an original piece of work, so it is extremely important to do a serious library search to ensure that no one else has written on the precise dissertation you are to pursue. Theses (dissertation) abstracts are available in printed form, online or as CD. Familiarise yourself with the ATLA Database, AULOTS, and other library research tools – ask the assistance of the librarian in a theological institution.

B: GETTING A PROPOSAL TOGETHER

Most people begin with a global theme which has to be refined over time into a *do-able* project that can be completed in a reasonable time: the *Filtration process* for writing a dissertation proposal. The following are some ways to aid this filtration process.

1. Conversation (talking yourself into clarity).

Talk through your ideas with friends and advisers. Conversation may help you clarify ideas and others, from their own background and knowledge, may well contribute to your project.

2. Writing (writing yourself into clarity).

Type a page or two on your area of interest. Read it aloud to see if it makes sense and there is enough material for a dissertation/dissertation. Think about the chapters that will be required and how they will cohere. Put this material aside for a week, and do something different, then take another look at the project. Eventually you should aim at being able to express the central issue of your dissertation in one complete (even if complex) sentence.

3. Reading (reading yourself into clarity).

There is no substitute for time spent in the library, or with material borrowed from the library, steeping yourself in works that address your area of interest. (If you take notes as you read, make absolutely sure that you have your notes fully referenced: there are few things more frustrating than trying to remember where you acquired that wonderful quote that you really wanted to use to support your proposal, or include in your dissertation).

4. Mulling (thinking yourself into clarity).

Leisure time is essential, not only during the writing time, but in getting it together for a proposal. Often issues that are on the backburner come to a greater degree of clarity when we give ourselves an appropriate amount of space and exercise.

5. Discipline (working yourself into clarity).

Use the keyboard to start to sort the potential chapters of your dissertation while constantly asking yourself the about the ways in which these discrete sections relate to the dissertation topic.

6. Bibliographies.

Begin the process of gathering bibliographies around areas of particular interest. If you find that very few people have written anything about your area of interest then proceed very cautiously.

7. View successful dissertations.

It can be very instructive to take a serious look at several of these so as to get a good idea of what is required both in terms of presentation and content.

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* This material is adapted from Michael A. Kelly, *One Approach to Writing a Dissertation Proposal and Completing the Dissertation*, <http://www.mcd.unimelb.edu.au/forms/DissertationWriting2005.pdf>. Accessed 2006.

Appendix 3: Developing a thesis proposal*

MODES OF ENQUIRY

There are two main ways of pursuing enquiries, conceptual and empirical. Each has in common:

1. Identify a problem

What is an area of interest you have, perhaps one which has arisen from your previous studies and related to your own church/ethnic context? It is likely to involve reading in one part of the field to become clearer about the problems it raises. Such reading will probably appear later in your writing as part of a *literature survey*, so it is important to take good notes and file bibliographical details as you go so that this work can be retrieved at the later stage of writing up. Ethical concerns of autonomy, privacy and integrity should be considered too.

Clarifying the specific problem you would like to explore will lead you to formulate a *research question*, which will become the main focus of your enquiry. Make sure that your research question is something you are genuinely interested in finding an answer to, to give you added motivation to complete your thesis.



2. Develop a hunch

From your research question, a number of more specific 'sub-questions' (or, hypotheses) will be derived, as hunches to be investigated. These will involve thinking of ways of getting answers to these sub-questions, and at this point you will need to confirm the primary methods of enquiry you will be pursuing. You will probably find that you are drawn to one or more of the modes of research described below:



<p style="text-align: center;">Conceptual Enquiries</p> <p>These may include philosophical studies of language, logic and the use of models, ethical enquiries into the justification of certain aims or values in education, and curriculum design in its conceptual phases. In short, they involve the consideration of problems requiring the marshalling of convincing arguments to support a normative point of view.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Empirical Enquiries: (a) Psychometric</p> <p>Studies in this mode involve the accumulation of empirical data relevant to one's hypotheses, with a view to processing them by statistical means. Such research may be undertaken in laboratories, classrooms, other learning environments, and on samples drawn from -the general population.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Historical Enquiries</p> <p>Studies which utilise historical methods of research fall between the conceptual and the empirical. They begin with an organising idea much like conceptual enquiry, but they then proceed with the collection of testimony and documentary data like an empirical enquiry. Then comes a kind of interpretive analysis more like the marshalling of arguments to defend a view. The goal is to generate a plausible and illuminating interpretation of events.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Empirical Enquiries: (b) Ethnographic</p> <p>Psychometric studies seek objectivity by trying to keep the scientific observer out of the equation. Ethnographic studies factor the observer in by emphasising the collection of data through participant observation. Ultimately, however, this kind of enquiry, like psychometrically controlled enquiry, collects and processes data in the real world with a view to solving problems of observation and method. Its biggest problem is reliability.</p>



<p style="text-align: center;">3a. Formulate theses</p> <p>It is now necessary to formulate the ideas which you will be clarifying and defending in the study. They need to be stated as specific and original insights or <i>theses</i> which will steer and integrate the course of your enquiry. Even in historical research, mere description of a sequence of events is not enough; interpretive ideas give point to the enquiry, and their credibility will be measured by the extent to which they illuminate and account for the events and trends you are describing.</p> <p>(Note: a <i>thesis</i> is a proposition to be proved/ disproved. A number of such theses will drive the shape of your dissertation.)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">3b. Formulate hypotheses</p> <p>It is now necessary to formulate the ideas which represent the hunches you have about how that part of the world you are investigating works. This calls for useful <i>operational definitions</i> of terms to be used in your <i>hypotheses</i>, which in their turn are best framed in the form "If X, then Y", on condition that they are in a genuinely testable (or falsifiable) form. Wrestle with this phase of your proposal, because muddy work at this point will dog you for the rest of your study. Don't aim to fix them later.</p>
<p><i>Note: The classical distinction between 'theses' and 'hypotheses' in educational/social science research is breaking down. Current educational and psychological research talks more often in terms of hypotheses (used when a researcher is fairly sure about the nature and direction of relationships between key variables) and research questions (used when a researcher is not so sure about the nature and direction of relationships but reasonably suspects that some sort of relationship exists).</i></p> <p><i>The preferred terminology to use is research question (= the main focus of the enquiry) and hypotheses or sub-questions (= hunches to be investigated, derived from the main research question).</i></p>	



4. Foreshadow your plan of attack and a provisional time-scale

You should now be in a position to foreshadow your plan of attack and estimate how its various stages will fit in to the time frame allowed for the degree you are working for. What are natural divisions in your enquiry which may become discrete chapters? Examples of plans in each of the three broad categories distinguished above are given below.



5. Confirm your proposal

Now draft entries for the proposal, requiring details of your topic, a sample bibliography, methods of enquiry, plan of attack, and the anticipated time frame for each stage. Discuss these entries with your supervisor and then fill them in on the form.

* This article has been adapted from Brian Hill, *Developing a Proposal*, Murdoch University School of Education, W. Australia, undated.

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AGST Alliance MTh(Theol)

Thesis 'focus of interest' form

[Complete this worksheet and send/email to the Dean, AGST Alliance]

1. My general area of theological interest:

.....
.....
.....

2. A major problem/challenge I see in this area of interest that I would like to explore for my thesis:

.....
.....
.....

3. To explore this problem/challenge, a possible research question and four related sub-questions could be:

Research Question:

.....
.....
.....

Sub-Questions:

Sub-question

1:
.....
.....

Sub-question 2:

.....
.....
.....

Sub-question

3:
.....
.....

Sub-question 4:

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.....
.....

4. A possible way(s) I could seek to get answers to the research question/sub-questions is: (e.g., by means of a conceptual enquiry, action research, qualitative research, etc)

.....
.....
.....

5. Data sources I envisage I will need access to develop a preliminary bibliography.
(e.g., written records, archival records, resources for interviews)

.....
.....
.....

6. Possible locations of libraries/resource centres:

.....
.....
.....

(Please attach a bibliography of 25 references, of which one-third should be published within the last ten years.)

7. Possible supervisor:

(Note: most likely, this person will hold a relevant doctorate and have experience in your field of interest. But if not, suggest a name if you think the person may be suitable.)

I suggest a suitable supervisor may be:

Name:

Preferred title: Mr/Ms/Rev/Dr/Ms/.....

Position/role:

Church/organisation:

Postal address:

..... Postcode:

Tel.: [home/office] (.....) [Hp] Email:

Your relationship (if any):

An alternative supervisor may be:

Name:

Preferred title: Mr/Ms/Rev/Dr/Ms/.....

Position/role:

Church/organisation:

Postal address:

..... Postcode:

Tel.: [home/office] (.....) [Hp] Email:

Your relationship (if any):

(Note: you may wish to sound out possible supervisors about their likely availability, but do not make a commitment for/with them.)

8. Other aspects

Further comments relevant to my area of interest/possible research focus are:

.....
.....
.....

Student's Name:

Date of Submission:



AGST Alliance

Human Participants Research

Ethics Application

You require ethics clearance if you propose to use living human participants in research, and/or research data which are not accessible in the public domain.

Ethics clearance must be obtained before you commence data collection for your research.

1. When you are ready to submit your ethics clearance form, please inform the dean (dean@agstalliance.org) and you will be registered on Edbrite on the Human Participants Ethics Panel (HPEP) page. All the latest forms are downloadable from that site.
2. You may also inform the ethics panel of your intention to submit here:

The Administrator
AGST Alliance Human Participants Ethics Panel
ethics@agstalliance.org