

Writing COVID-19 into your thesis

Guidance for Professional Doctorates



UK Quality Code for Higher Education by the Quality Assurance Agency (2014)
<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks>

Descriptor for a higher qualification at Level 8 (Doctoral Degree)

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication
- A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice.
- The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in light of unforeseen problems
- A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

The structure of a doctoral thesis and Covid-19

In this document we attempt to guide you through the usual chapters in a thesis and suggest how the pandemic might be referenced within them. We have listed the purpose of each chapter and considered how you may acknowledge the shaping influence of Covid-19. While this information has been prepared with Professional doctorates in mind, it may be also useful for doctoral researchers doing a PhD.

Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose of the chapter

The introduction locates the context of your research. You should provide the background of your study including the professional or practice setting – this will also help set up the rationale and professional relevance of your research. The introduction should also state your research questions or hypothesis and aims and objectives. Lastly, the introduction normally contains an outline of the doctoral thesis, so the reader knows how the thesis is structured/what to expect.

Thinking about COVID-19 and your introduction

The personal and professional context of your thesis is likely to have changed as a result of COVID-19. The changes implied are immediate and short-term, but there will also be long term implications (for example, online teaching, the role of the state, levels of unemployment, return to deepened austerity) even if our understanding of them at this stage is speculative. It is worth reflecting upon this. Your individual context may be unchanged but the context for your research study has altered. Your research participants (and/or the institutions within which they are embedded) sense of priority and focus may have changed. What was of great importance before the pandemic may seem less important during or after it. The struggle over safe returns to the workplace may for example generate new instructional alliances. How have your participants been emotionally impacted by the experience? This need not be entirely speculative. It may influence the questions you ask of your research and research participants.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Purpose of the chapter

This should be a comprehensive review of the literature in relation to the research questions or hypothesis. This literature may include theoretical, conceptual or empirical information. The review should not be descriptive in nature but it needs to be a critical review. Often there are competing schools of thought or findings that may seem contradictory in nature; it is important to show an understanding of the current state of knowledge, acknowledging the complexity of debates and situating your research into this. The literature should provide a rationale for your research question(s)/hypothesis – building up the story of your research. It may even answer some questions about, for instance, resilience, flexibility or precarity.

Thinking about COVID-19 and the literature review

It is less likely in the short-term that the crisis will impact on your literature – which is theoretical or empirical and tends to have a long lead into publication. However, there is great deal of research at the moment around the impact of COVID-19 on family life, healthcare and education. The literature review is something that you should update throughout your doctoral studies. New key pieces of research relevant to your study are likely to emerge over the coming months. One recommendation is setting up a journal alert, if you haven't already. Identify key journals in your field, and set up publication alerts using keywords, which will result in newly published papers being sent directly to your email.

For a hot take on how COVID-19 may be reshaping your literature it may be worth checking the blogs of credible writers and institutions. [PostPandemic University](#), [UCL Institute of Education](#), [LSC](#), [Pat Thomson](#), [Thesis Whisperer](#), [BELMAS](#) and [BERA](#) all have (or will very soon have) blog posts devoted to the subject, some of which may be of relevance and interest for your area of research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose of methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the reader how your study was conducted and the rationale for decisions made. From this, readers should be able to make a judgement about the quality and robustness of your study. Research does not always go to plan (for example, if you can't access participants as originally planned, you may need to rethink or revise the entire project). A part of the

doctoral process is being able to make decisions and adapt in changing situations. It is important to document and reflect on decisions and the decision-making processes. Your methodology chapter usually includes your research design and epistemological position (linking these to research questions, positioning of the researcher, sampling and recruitment, development of data collection tools, data collection procedures and reflections, ethical issues and data analysis.

Thinking about COVID-19 and the methodology chapter

If you are currently amidst data collection, or will be in the near future, your methodology is likely to be the main chapter influenced by the pandemic. This is particularly true if you have had to revise your methods and data collection plans in the light of the new social distancing requirements. Even if you have opted for a study break, the new guidelines are likely to be in place for the long term and it is likely they may have an impact on how we conduct research for some years to come. It is possible that research participants may have been interviewed under different circumstances.

It is important to discuss how your methods have changed to accommodate circumstances (yours and those of your research participants). Discuss the implications of the new arrangements for the nature of the data you will be able to generate, i.e. the differences between face to face and online interviews, observations of online rather than face-to-face teaching, placing greater emphasis of minutes of meetings, and institutional documents as sources of information instead of / alongside interviews. Please keep your epistemic framework in full view here and don't allow your paradigm to slip. It maybe that your research question(s) have to adapt slightly to accommodate changed circumstances, and this is entirely legitimate and may be discussed here and to some extent in Chapter 1 or 2.

The emphasis here is not on how you soldiered on despite the pandemic, but rather how you incorporated context into your understanding of your research concern and how it influenced you and your research participants.

It is probable that ethics will be an important aspect of this discussion. Ethical questions such as how to maintain your own and your research participants safety and well-being are significant here. You will need to be mindful of the appropriateness of behaving in a way that might possibly be interpreted as intrusive or insensitive at a time of crisis when people are somewhat preoccupied, ill or bereaved. You will need to resolve the extent to which approaching people for help with your research is something you feel is ethically possible. Your weighing up that choice will form part of your discussion.

You will by now be familiar with the detailed discussions around the practicalities of conducting research during COVID-19 (see for instance, [Fieldwork during a pandemic](#)) and the need to revise your methodology in the light of it.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis / Findings

Purpose of the chapter

Presentation of statistical or qualitative analysis linking back to your research question(s). Note sometimes results and discussion are written together or other times as separate chapters.

Thinking about COVID-19 and Findings chapter

Given the unique nature of our current research situation, to what extent has your research been re-shaped? The relevance here extends beyond the stressful situation you and your participants are probably living and working within, but includes also the extent to which what is required from them and therefore how they feel about themselves and those around them – including how they respond to the investigation that drives your research – might have been quite dramatically changed. I am not here encouraging imaginative speculation. But it may be possible to explore direct connections. For example, a teacher confesses to being unsympathetic to online pedagogy, may be responding to the stressful experience of pivoting overnight to online modes of delivery with little time for either thought or preparation. Likewise expressing concern over the wellbeing of colleagues may be driven by the pandemic which has exposed deep levels of inequity.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Purpose of chapter

The purpose of the discussion (which may be a separate chapter or as with most interpretivist studies, part of your data analysis / findings chapter) is to provide an interpretation and explanation of your results. This would in most circumstances explicitly answer your research question(s). Exploring how your findings fit with their wider literature (e.g. do they support the existing literature or say something different, why?) The new dimensions / contributions your thesis provides to knowledge and practice and their implications will be argued here.

Thinking about COVID-19 and Discussion chapter

The unprecedented nature of the current situation creates additional potential for your study to make unique a contribution to knowledge. We are not suggesting that implications of COVID-19 are interpreted throughout your study. But it may provide an unexpected slant. Whatever your research question, as part of your closing chapter you might be able to add a variation on the theme of the following phrases to your conclusions – *during a crisis, in a time of global health crisis, while experiencing a pandemic* or in less fixed terms – *at a time of rapid and unexpected change*. You will have no objective basis for asserting the extent to which your research conclusions are reshaped by context, but it does offer the potential of a distinct contribution of lasting value.

Example of a doctoral thesis

The following PhD thesis provides a good example of writing amidst unexpected circumstances.

Ayrton (2017) *History, drawing and power: essay towards reflexive methodological pluralism in sociology*, University of Southampton. Unpublished thesis. Available at: <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/415350/>

References

Below we include a few relevant texts that might help you think through the implications of context. It is important that this is theorised rather than simply described. It is also important that you don't

confine the relevance of what you say to a particular moment but attempt to broaden and heighten it. COVID-19 may not feel very interesting in 2021 but 'an international health crisis' has a more long-term resonance.

Beck, U., Lash, S., & Wynne, B. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity* (Vol. 17). Sage.

Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*. Stanford University Press.

Klein, N., & Peet, R. (2008). The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism. *Human Geography*, 1(2), 130-133.

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