

# 13

## Quality and Originality DRAFT- Extract

Jan Pries-Heje and David Avison

Defining a good research question is not a trivial task. As it is a question it should be possible to put a question mark behind it. But the question should not be trivial. Some kind of intellectually challenging question is preferable. That may involve: (1) Some kind of non-trivial puzzle. (2) The background for the question; why is it interesting? And for whom? (3) The starting point in answering the question. (4) An argument on how best to answer the puzzle defined in the question? And, finally, some kind of measure of the goodness of an answer.

As a good example of how to formulate a research question you can use the following rule of thumb: Avoid WHAT and HOW and aim at WHY. The reason is that what and how questions tends to lead to descriptive trivial

answers. And as it was said above a good research questions contains a non-trivial puzzle.

A number of questions to ask when evaluating a proposal are given below:

**Research question**

- 1 Good, short research question?
- 2 Discussion of who is interested in the answer to the research question?

**Research description**

- 3 Interesting title?
- 4 Good argument giving reasons why the topic is interesting?
- 5 Theoretical framework – does it show command of the existing literature on topic?
- 6 Are expected results described?

**Research method**

- 7 Discussion of which method best answers the research question?
8. Is there a reference to other studies using the same method?
- 9 Does one get a good overview of the data collection and data analysis method?

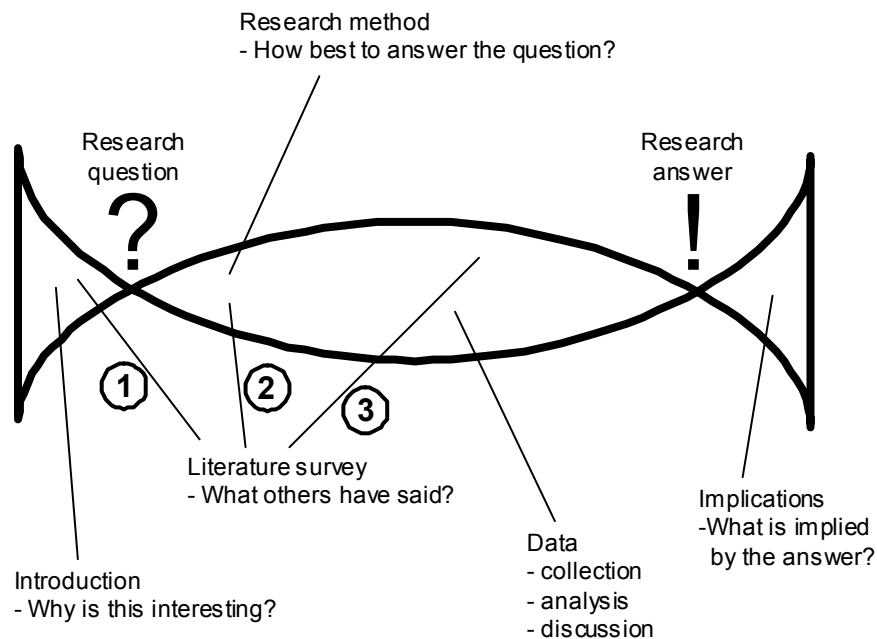
**Schedule**

- 10 Well defined deliverables – making it easy to see whether work is done?
- 11 Milestones - making it easy to see whether student is on schedule?
- 12 Planned publication outlets?

**PhD supervision**

- 13 Is there an agreement with a potential PhD supervisor?
- 14 Have PhD student and supervisor co-operated before. Result? What if not?

How to structure a PhD dissertation is a question often asked to a supervisor. In the figure below is an answer in the form of a “double-tailed fish model”.



To the left the first “tail” symbolizes that any dissertation should have an introduction. Why is this area, topic or issue interesting? This leads to the shortly formulated research question (where the lines cross and the tail ends), preferably formulated with a “why” as explained earlier.

Shortly thereafter a research method section comes naturally. The aim of this section is to discuss which method, being it quantitative or qualitative, that best answers the research question. Often this section will also contain an explanation of eventual field work and a discussion of validity.

Somewhere in the beginning of the dissertation there is also an expectation that there should be a literature survey. It is given that any dissertation clearly demonstrates that it “stands on the shoulders” of existing research. But it is not given where in the dissertation the survey should be. In the figure we have given three possibilities. Number one symbolizes that literature can be the driver for why the research question is interesting? So a discussion of existing literature can be a part of the introductory part of the

dissertation. Number two symbolizes that a literature discussion can be the first natural step in answering the research question, some times even before the research method part.

In between the lines numbered two and three in the figure is a line called data collection, analysis and discussion. This is typically the main part of any dissertation. This is where the real contribution should be made. Most often this part contains several chapters. Findings from the data collection and analysis often deserve to be discussed in relation to existing literature. What is new? What is the contribution?, are things that can be answered in this way. The line numbered three symbolizes this relationship.

The data discussion leads towards a conclusion; the answer to the research question. In principle a reader should be able to read the research question and then go directly to the conclusion, and the conclusion should then contain and answer – no more, no less – to the research question. But the answer can of course be followed by a discussion of implications, as is also stated in the form of the second “tail” in the figure.