

**University of South Africa**  
**College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences**

**A Guide on How to Write a  
Concept Note  
For Masters and Doctoral**

Developed by Prof Jana Olivier  
For the  
College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences

University of South Africa

2018

Welcome to the Online Electronic Resource for:

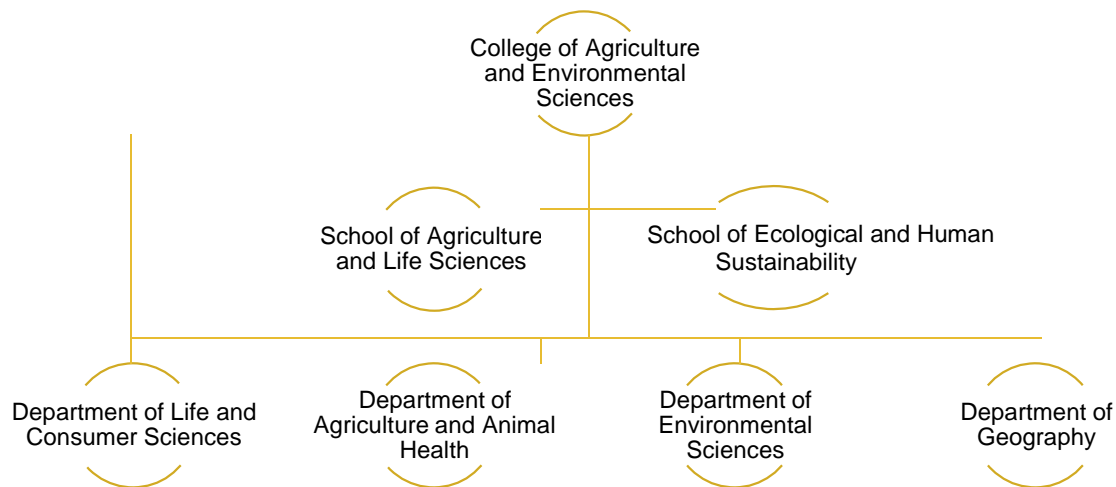
# A Guide on How to Write a Concept Note For Masters and Doctoral Students

## Introduction

We are delighted that you have decided to enroll for a postgraduate degree and that you have selected UNISA as your host university.

The postgraduate degree for which you are applying is either a Master's Degree (MA, MSc) or a Doctorate. A Master's degree is usually preceded by an honours degree or a B Tech qualification. It is assumed that you qualify for enrolment at UNISA and that you have all the required documentation.

Consider the structure of the College in Figure 1 and the Departments in the College as this will help you find your way to specific research focus areas.



Each department has various research focus areas, but these may change over time. Individual lecturers also have specific research interests. You will be able to access all information about the **VARIOUS RESEARCH FOCUS AREAS** and the lecturers by clicking on the following link: <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Apply-for-admission/Master%27s-&-doctoral-degrees/Research-focus-areas/College-of-Agriculture-and-Environmental-Sciences>.

## About the Concept Note

It is preferable but not essential, that your research topic falls in one of the College research focus areas or corresponds to the research interests of a specific lecturer. One of the first steps is to be accepted as a student by the College and to find a suitable research supervisor and mentor. This is achieved by means of a

### CONCEPT NOTE.

**First Read  
This**

A concept note is a short version of a proposal to explain the importance of a particular research project. It is usually no longer than 3 pages and provides a clear and concise framework of the research that you want to undertake.

The aim of the **Concept Note** is two-fold:

- It enables the lecturer to decide whether your research idea is worthy of further research
- Determine whether your research is aligned with their own interests and experience.
- Whether there is capacity in the research group to accommodate your study

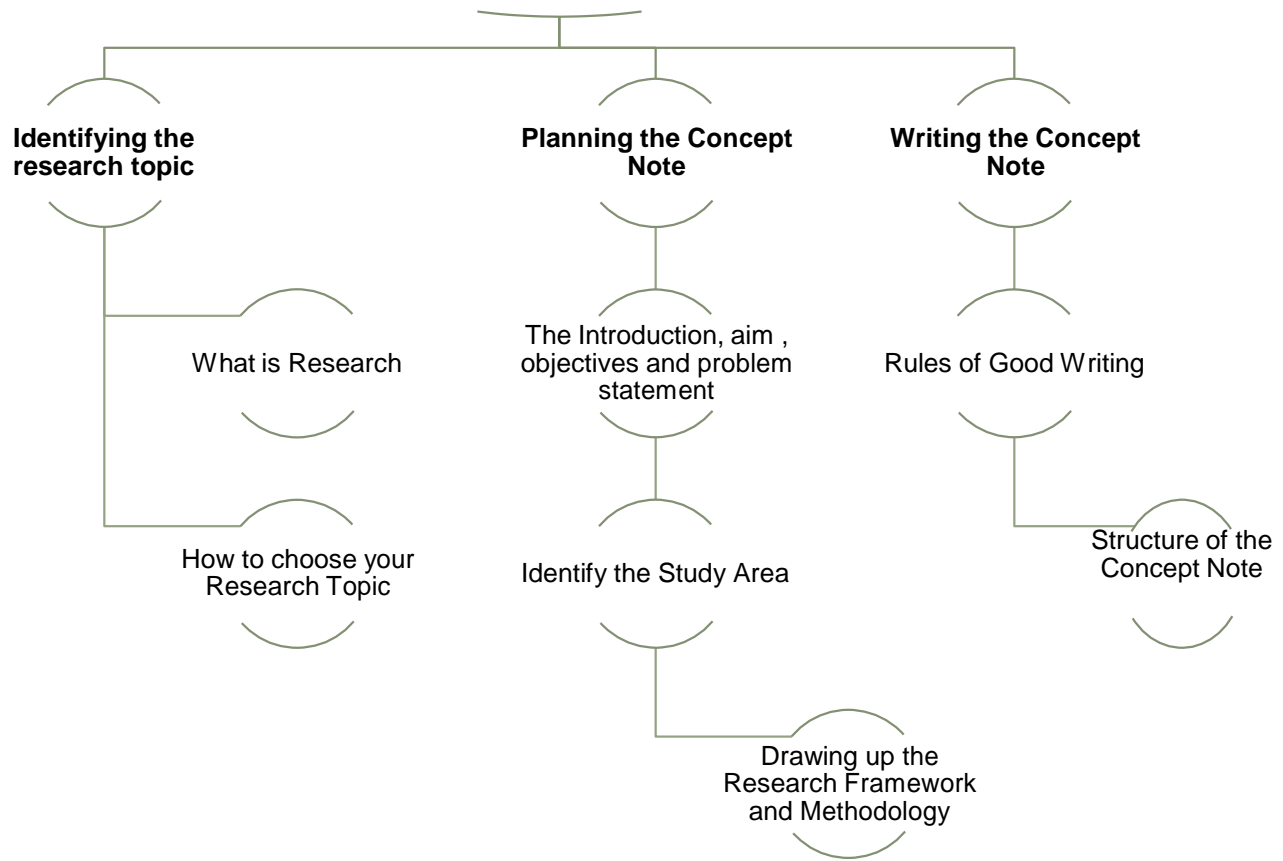
- Writing a concept note will assist you in clarifying your ideas, defining your research topic and presenting the material in a logical and coherent manner.
- It will also assist you in writing the proposal, the next step in the research process.

It is up to you to convince the prospective supervisor that you have identified a real research problem, that is exciting and **MUST** be solved and that you have sufficient background knowledge to understand the problem and how to solve it as well as the feasibility of your research in terms of resources, cost and time.

**Important**

The **AIM** of this document is to assist you with each of the steps in the process of producing a good concept note.

The following topics will be covered in this document



## 1. IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH TOPIC

First start with this question

They said  
Step by Step

### 1.1 WHAT IS RESEARCH?

It is important to keep in mind that your topic must reflect a RESEARCH problem that must be solved. **So – what exactly is research and what is it not?**

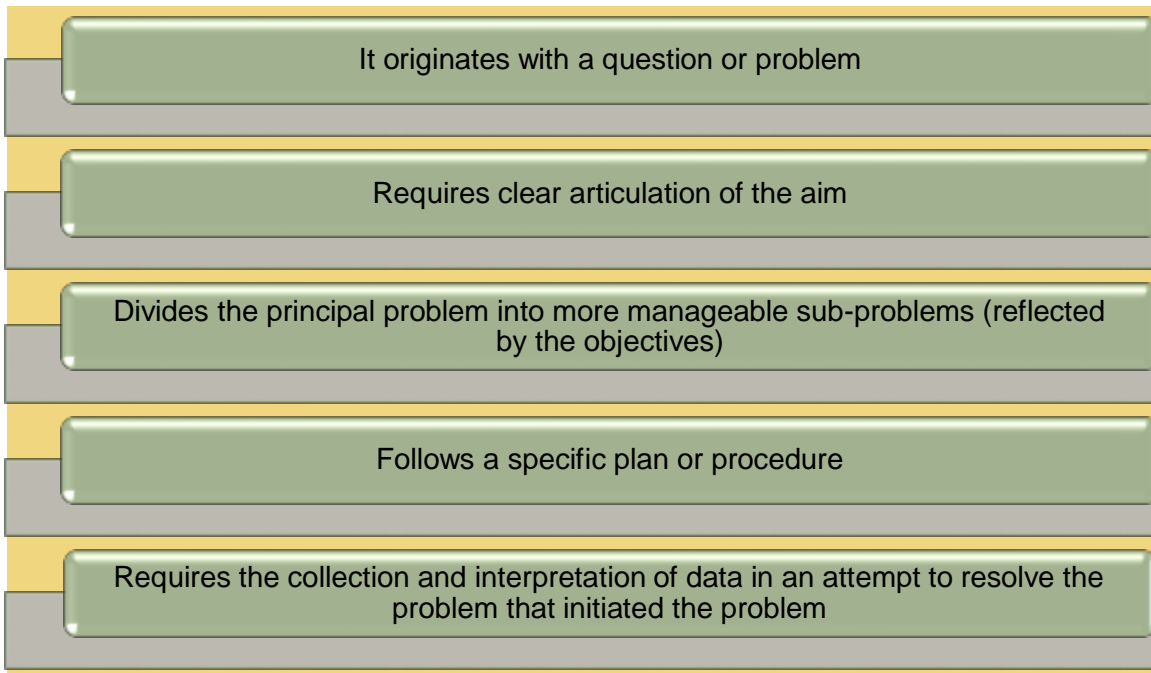


The word “research” has been used loosely to refer to a variety of activities such as finding an item of information or making notes and then writing a document paper.

This is NOT research: it is mere information gathering.

Make very sure that you are not just summarising information rather than conducting research.

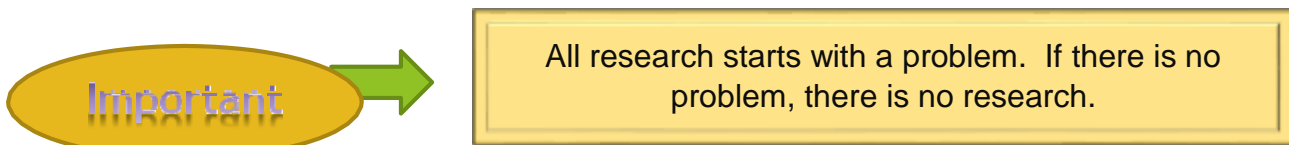
The characteristics of true research are:



There are a myriad of research problems that must be solved in every subject field. These can be addressed by asking relevant questions and seeking answers through systematic research.

## 1.2 HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC

The entire project starts with an IDEA. For purposes of post graduate studies, the idea must be transformed into a research problem or research question.



The problem can either reflect a **real problem in everyday life** or it can be a **gap in knowledge**.

However, keep in mind that you are going to conduct research on this topic for the next three to five years. You are going to live, eat, sleep and dream it. It therefore has to be something in which **you** are really interested, otherwise you will give up as soon as you encounter the first obstacle.

The first step is to identify your research topic and the research problem that you are going to solve by means of this research project.

### Step 1 → **Identifying the broad research topic**

Your motivation for pursuing postgraduate studies is relevant in the choice of a research topic. If you have a professional reason for studying further - such as improving your career options or your marketability - you should choose a subject that is of immediate relevance and value to your present or desired work situation. However, if you want to do research because of your interest in a specific topic, you have the luxury of choosing any relevant topic that falls within the College Research Focus Areas. Hopefully your career and your interests coincide.

### Step 2 → **Identify your interest**

If you are enrolling for a PhD, you can either continue with the foundation laid by your Master's study or you may choose a totally different project. The choice is up to you.

Unless you already know exactly what you want to do, a good way to start is to decide where your interest lies.



- ✓ Which undergraduate or honours courses did you really enjoy?
- ✓ What kind of topics/social or environmental problems really interest you?
- ✓ What topics do you feel passionate about?

This will indicate your broad field of interest. You should now narrow this down and identify an issue/problem that requires research

Try to develop a questioning attitude:

- ✓ Open your eyes and look at what problems exist in your area.
- ✓ What new developments are taking place?
- ✓ Read articles on related issues.
- ✓ Listen to or watch programs on radio or TV related to your field of interest.
- ✓ Speak to people who are working in fields related to your field of interest.



- ✓ Ask relevant role players in government organisations and NGOs what kind of research needs to be done. Many organisations are understaffed and don't have the time or resources to conduct research.

Step 3



***Extract the essence of the idea/problem of what your interest***

Once you have **an idea** of what you would like to study, you should spend quite a lot of time trying to extract the essence of the idea/problem. It helps to talk to people about your idea so that you can narrow it down.

Think carefully about what exactly you wish to study. Is it:

- ✓ An object (something tangible such as an insect, a plant, a bacterium etc),
- ✓ A phenomenon (such as a weather phenomenon like a cut off low),
- ✓ An entity (related to persons)
- ✓ A process (biochemical processes)
- ✓ An event or do you want to
- ✓ Devise social interventions.

Important



This exercise will help you to focus on the topic and to identify key words.

In order to be able to write a concept note, you will first need to know as much as possible on the topic and the problem.

Step 4



***Find information about your topic***

Literature

It is essential to read up about your proposed topic. You may believe that you are the first person to identify a specific research problem, but you are probably not. Reading what other researchers have done will give you an advantage since their publications will give you an indication of how other scholars have approached the subject - which aspects of the broad topic have been studied, from what angle the topic was approached, how the phenomenon has been studied and what the latest findings are. Published scientific articles might suggest areas of study or particular problems that you did not think of previously.

The internet is a wonderful source of information – especially **Google Scholar**.



## How to Access Google Scholar?

Step 1: Type in Google Scholar or schola google once you internet window has opened.

Step 2: Indicate that you want to access 'articles' (mark this).

Step 3: Type in the **key word for your topic**.



Key words indicate the most important topic in which you are interested, for example, if you are interested in conducting a study on ticks (blood sucking arachnids) – then type in 'ticks' and you will see hundreds if not thousands of articles on ticks. You can now narrow it by typing in more key words eg. ticks cattle, South Africa

There will also be a drop down menu on the left hand side of the page where you can choose any time frame (custom period) for the articles. Just by scanning the titles of the articles, you should be able to find at least a few that are relevant to your proposed study. Be very selective on what you read and what you accept as fact. As you read up about your topic you will find that you may have to refine your study.



Keep in mind that one does not just read an article for the information which it contains – but also for the language used, the methodology, the problems encountered and the gaps that remain.

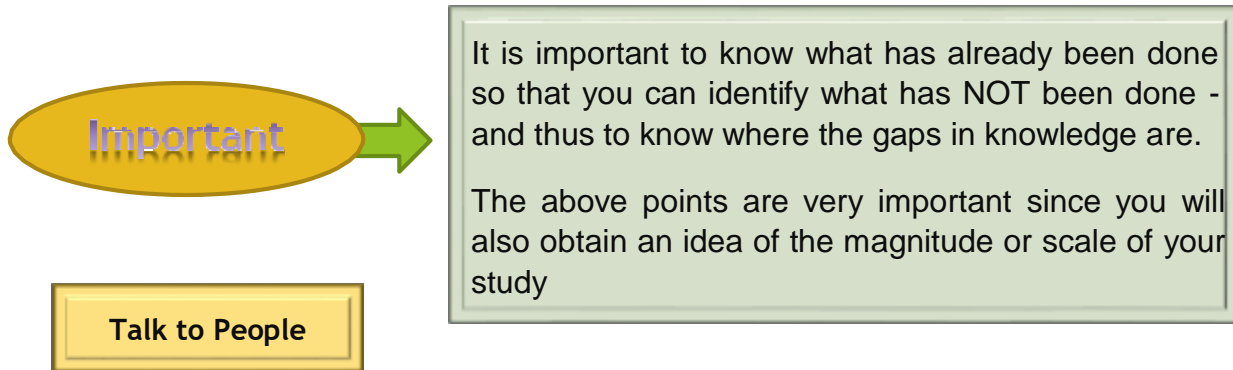
**Conducting a “NEXUS” search**

Not all research has been published as books or articles. It is essential that you find out whether some other post graduate student in South Africa is conducting or has already conducted an M or D on your topic. You can do this by going to [www.nrf.ac.za](http://www.nrf.ac.za). Click on “Information Sources” and then go to the Databases – specifically “Research Support and Knowledge Networking Databases”.

Government department libraries are another source of information. You should also be able to find information on research reports in the relevant governmental web sites. If



you are specialising in a field such as Agriculture, check their website or go to the Dept. of Agriculture library in Pretoria or the Departmental libraries in major regions in your province. If you cannot physically get to these libraries, phone or e-mail the librarian and ask for his/her assistance.



You may also consult professionals, lecturers, researchers or practitioners in your area of interest.

It is quite acceptable to conduct research on a topic if studies on the same or a similar problem have been done elsewhere, but not locally. For example, although numerous studies have been done in the United Kingdom on the establishment of geological heritage sites, none have been conducted in South Africa. How and where such sites can be established in this country is certainly a topic worthy of study. However, do not duplicate something that someone else has already done. Look for new slants on the problem or something that has been overlooked. The speed at which new knowledge is being generated is quite staggering and for every problem solved, new ones arise.

The information gathered forms the basis of the background and literature review. This will form an important part of future studies eg. for the proposal or the dissertation/thesis. It gives the theoretical framework for your study.

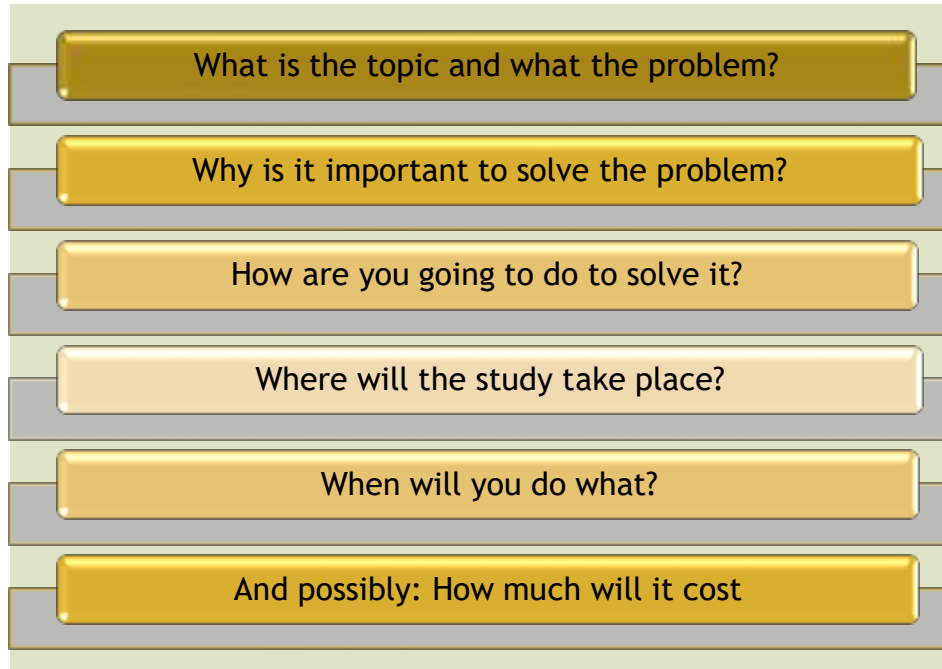
- ✓ Select a topic that is relevant to your own short- and medium-term career prospects.
- ✓ Select a topic that you find interesting, worthwhile and intellectually stimulating.
- ✓ Be realistic about what you can or cannot do.
- ✓ Ensure that your topic is at an acceptable scientific level



**Now that you have identified the broad topic of interest, it is time to start to PLAN the different sections of the Concept Note.**

## 2. PLANNING THE CONCEPT NOTE

The Concept Note consists of a number of different sections. Basically the Concept Note provides **the reader** with information on:



### 2.1 PLANNING FOR THE:



**INTRODUCTION,**  
**AIM,**  
**OBJECTIVES and**  
**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

You should at this stage have an idea of what you want to study. You should also know a lot about the problem and the related research conducted elsewhere. However, this is still just a notion of what you want to research. You should now transform the research idea into a **research problem**. You must try to express this in the form of a **problem statement or a research question**.

Start with the following activities

The first thing to do is to **plan** the contents of the Concept Note. Draw up a **PLANNING DOCUMENT** as follows:

Activity  
1

***Start by writing down the preliminary title of your study.***

The following section i.e. the Introduction or Background and Motivation will eventually form the narrative. However, before you can write anything, you will have to plan the contents. Keep in mind that the reader (the lecturer) does not know what you have in mind. You must therefore **tell them** what this study is about. In order to do this, put yourself in the 'shoes' of the reader and try to **identify what the reader needs to know** in order to understand what your research is about.

Do the following

- ***Make a list of these.***
- ***Now arrange these 'headings' in a logical sequence so that it leads to the research question.***
- ***Write down the research question.***

Activity  
2

The next thing to do is to **indicate what has not been done? i.e. the gap in knowledge**

You should also have a clear idea of **why this problem needs to be solved**. This constitutes the **motivation or rationale** for your study. Reasons such as "because it is interesting" or "because no one else has studied it" or "because someone has suggested it" are not acceptable motivations. If no one has ever studied something it could be because either it does not merit study or the resources to do the study are very expensive or too difficult to come by.

Activity  
3

***Make a list of the points to highlight in the motivation***

As indicated, the literature that you have read will indicate where the gap in knowledge is. Once you have identified where the gap in knowledge is, you will be able to give the **AIM** of the study since this is obviously directed at filling the gap in knowledge.



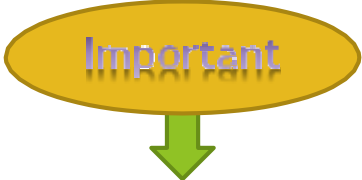
The *aim* spells out precisely **what** you want to research. Formulating the aim as a question helps you to focus on the exact nature of the research. Use scientific action verbs such as **to explore/identify/examine/investigate/audit/describe/evaluate/compare/assess and similar words**. These reflect scientific/mental and not physical activities.

Keep in mind that you are studying towards a master's or doctoral degree. Although there are exceptions, the majority of postgraduate studies will not solve the world's problems. Refrain from vague aims or motivations such as "... to alleviate poverty in Africa". This needs the concerted efforts of many people and will require many years of research. At master's level, try to **limit your study to one problem or one aspect or one area**. You will find that as you progress with the literature study and the research, more questions will be raised than have been answered and the study will inevitably expand.

Ideally **you should be able to indicate what the aim is in a single sentence**. When you can do this, you know precisely what you want to do and will have achieved the first of the major milestones in your research.



**Write the AIM as a single sentence**



The extent of the aim of the study will differ depending on whether you are doing a Master's or a doctoral degree.

- ✓ For a Master's, you must show that you can identify a research problem and solve it by using the scientific method.
- ✓ A Master's usually asks the questions such as WHAT is happening, WHERE is it happening and WHEN is it happening
- ✓ For a doctorate, you need to conduct research that will make a **significant contribution** to your field of study. The research must therefore be novel.
- ✓ A doctorate will have to answer questions relating to HOW is it happening and WHY is it happening.

The next section that you should tackle, is to **determine which steps must be followed so that you can answer the main research question**. Each of these small mini-questions reflects the sub-questions or the Objectives. Usually there is only one aim that

reflects the overarching goal of the study while there are usually more than one objectives. The objectives **MUST** also be written using scientific action verbs.

Action Verbs are To:

- ✓ examine,
- ✓ determine,
- ✓ investigate
- ✓ can you of other action verbs

Each of these objectives might have its own methodology i.e. the technique on **HOW** to achieve the objectives.

Activity  
5



***List the objectives***

You should also be able to point out what the advantage will be of conducting the study, i.e. of finding the solution to the research problem. This reflects the **significance** of the potential outcomes. Be very clear about this. You will have to motivate your study with sufficient evidence for it to qualify as a research project.

Activity  
6



***State the significance of the study***

Activity  
7



***Now you can finalise the title of the proposed study.***

Go back to your preliminary title and ensure that it: accurately describes the exact nature of the main elements of the study

- ✓ communicates a concise, unambiguous picture of the content
- ✓ serves as a good identification of the study for retrieval purposes (all keywords are there)
- ✓ is free from obscure technical terms or jargon

**Important**

## 2.2 IDENTIFY THE STUDY AREA

If your study is to be conducted in a laboratory, then you can just mention where the laboratory is eg. The laboratories at the UNISA, Florida Science Campus. However, if you are going to do field work it is important that you select a *study area* where the specific problem occurs. Ensure that it is large enough to give scientifically meaningful results but small enough so that you can do the fieldwork using your own resources such as time, money and transport. It is always a good idea to choose a study area with which you are familiar and/or can reach easily. Of course, if you use existing data (such as weather data) your study area can be much larger. You should ensure that the study area can be clearly and easily delineated - otherwise you will waste a lot of time trying to define it. Areas such as provinces or municipal wards have clear-cut boundaries, whereas areas such as “the Boland” are difficult to delineate since various people define this area differently.

Activity  
8



**Indicate the study area.**

## 2.3 DRAWING UP THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In some cases, the “activities” or “methodology” is not mentioned in the Concept Note. However, I think that it would be good idea to include just a sentence or two on the methods to be used. You do not have to go into a lot of detail. Just indicate eg. that you will use a questionnaire or specific equipment. If the latter, provide details and ensure that the relevant equipment is available at UNISA. If you already have a clear idea of your project, you may be able to estimate the time frame.

Activity  
9



**Write down each objective and indicate (concisely) how you intend conducting this research**

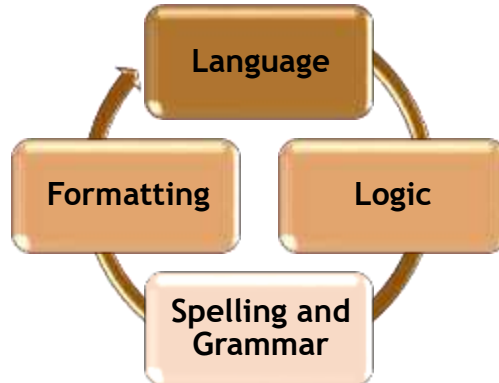
It is vital that you formulate the research problem in such a way that it is feasible in terms of

- ✓ the **time** that you have available. Must you do the research at night and over weekends? Are you married? Do you have other responsibilities that take a lot of your time? Will you only be able to conduct fieldwork during specific times such as long weekends? etc
- ✓ the **financial costs**. Do you have sufficient money to pay for fieldworkers, questionnaires, telephone calls, computer time?
- ✓ other **resources** such as transport, computer facilities, appropriate software packages, photocopier.

### 3. WRITING THE CONCEPT NOTE

Now that you have planned the research project (as well as you can) you will be able to write it. However, there are certain rules that must be followed in the writing process.

#### 3.1 RULES OF GOOD WRITING:



#### Language

A research proposal is a scholarly scientific document. It has to conform to the style and format required by the academic institution.

#### Important

At the same time, the research proposal must be:

- ✓ Brief
- ✓ Clear
- ✓ Concise

In general:

- Try to keep sentences simple and short; no one will be impressed if you use convoluted thinking or jargon.
- Keep in mind that a sentence expresses a single idea. Don't confuse issues. Sentences within a paragraph should follow in a **logical order**, expanding on that idea.
- Don't use the same words over and over again. Don't say: According to Jones (2001)..... According to Smith (2005).... . According to Eloff (2010)..... Replace 'According' with other words such as: According to Jones (2001)..... Smith (2005

found that..... etc. Use a dictionary or a **thesaurus** to obtain alternative words or phrases.

- Don't repeat yourself. There is no place to waste time and space. You only have 2 -3 pages for the Concept Note. Only mention the most relevant information.



**Don't copy text from a book or article without giving the reference. This is plagiarism and is against the law.** You can be taken to court for presenting someone else's ideas as your own. Read articles and see how you should refer to the originators of the ideas or information. It is a good idea to read the part of the literature that is relevant, then put you hand over it and write the contents in your own words.

### Logic

It is important to arrange your material in a logical sequence. Clarify your thoughts. Structure your paragraphs so that they follow each other in a logical way. Supply reasons for any decisions that you make. For example, explain why you have chosen a specific study area or methodology.



After you have written something, take a break for a while and then read what you have written as though you have never seen it before. Ask yourself:

- ✓ Does it make sense?
- ✓ Are there glaring inconsistencies, errors or omissions?

***Ask a colleague to read through your Concept Note and to give you honest critique.***

### Spelling and Grammar

Check your spelling and grammar. Read the document carefully and give it to someone else to read. If you know that you have difficulties with spelling and grammar, consider having your document professionally edited before final submission.

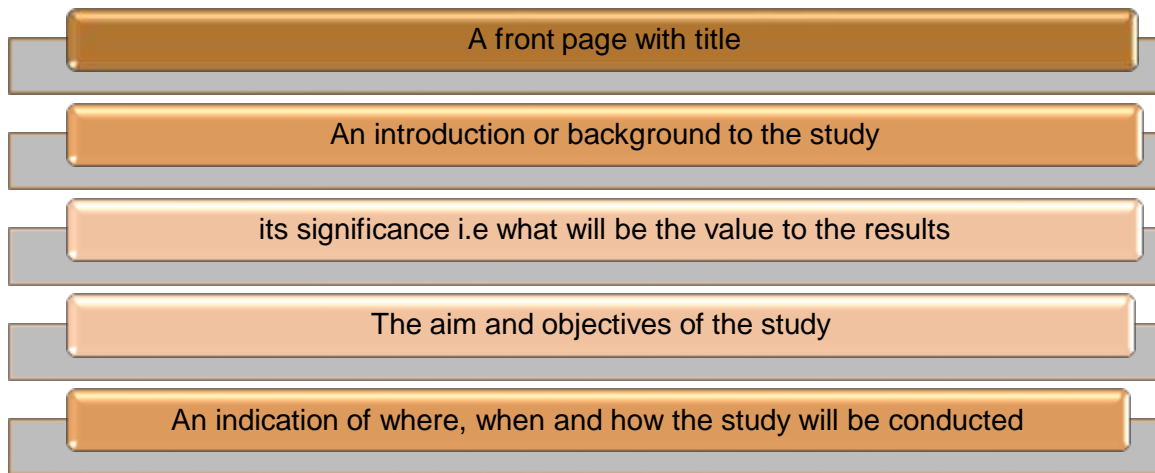
### Formatting

The work should appear neat - so choose an easily legible typeface such as Times New Roman or Arial, an 11 or 12 pt font size, and a line spacing of at least 1,5.



### 3.2 STRUCTURE OF THE CONCEPT NOTE

A concept note consists of a number of sections such as:



It may also be necessary to give some indication of how much the study will cost. This sounds easy but a lot of thought must go into it.

**Important** It is up to you to convince the reader (the prospective lecturer and supervisor) that there is a problem that needs to be solved, that it is important and that you have the know-how and resources to solve the problem.

**Important** The Concept Note should **not be longer than 3 pages**, excluding the front page. It should include at least the following (not necessarily in this order):

<b>The Concept Note should include the following</b>	
Front page also referred to as a covering page (see an example on the last page of this document)	✓
Title	✓
Introduction/background (this may include the literature review)	✓
Gap in the research	✓
Need for the research/motivation	✓
Research question/statement of the problem/hypothesis	✓
Purpose of the research/aim	✓
Sub-problems/objectives	✓
Study area (if applicable)	✓
Research design and methodology	✓
Time frame (possibly)	✓
Reference list	✓

## The Front Page

**The front page** should contain information on the title of the project, the course/degree for which you are enrolling, your name and contact details. This serves solely as an example to help you to understand all concepts discussed. See the *EXAMPLE OF FONT PAGE OF CONCEPT NOTE* at the end of the document.

## The Main Content of the Concept Note

**Use the planning document** when actually writing the document. If you have done your planning thoroughly, you should not find difficulty in writing the sections required.

In the **Introduction/Background and motivation**, you should provide background to the study and identify the research problem. It is important to realise that the lecturer does not know what you want to do. You must therefore **tell the reader the story**: what this study is about (**Background**), what the main questions (**research questions**) are, what has not been researched (**gap**), what the consequences are of not conducting this research and thus why it is vital to conduct this research (**motivation**). (Not necessarily in this sequence). This section will include most of the references cited (**i.e. the sources of information**).

The gap in knowledge will invariably lead to the **AIM**. This should be stated as a single sentence (see rules given above) and is followed by a list of the OBJECTIVES, usually given in the same sequence as that in which the research will be carried out. Thereafter, provide an indication of where the study will be conducted. For example: Plant samples will be collected from the north eastern parts of Limpopo and analysed for ... at the UNISA laboratories in Florida.

The next part of the Concept Note comprises information on the methodology to be used eg. ... A questionnaire survey of households will be undertaken to ....

## References

The final part of the Concept Note provides a list of the **references** that you have cited in the Introduction/Background.

Correct referencing of academic writing is of the utmost importance. There are a number of different referencing systems - each with its own rules and regulations. The Modified Harvard Format - APA style uses the following examples for citing an article or book in **the text**: Beall (2017) recounts some of his experiences when offering critical

commentary on open-access publishing. OR In a recent study on open-access publishing (Beall, 2017), the shortcomings of .....

Since this example originates from an article, the **reference** in this case would have the following format: Beall, J. (2017). Research integrity corner: Special issue on predatory journals Opinion. What I learned from predatory journals. *Biochemica Media*, 27(2), 273-278.

Note the position of the commas, full stops, Italics, and brackets. It is the name of the journal that is italicised.

For a book reference, the rules are essentially the same except that the title of the book is in italics. For example:

Mouton, J. (2001). *How to succeed in your Master's & Doctoral studies*. Pretoria: van Schaik.

When the author of a source is not acknowledged, you are in effect stealing their work and this is regarded as **plagiarism**. This is a criminal act and you can be taken to court. It is therefore important that you keep good record of all the sources that you consult and that referencing be kept up to date. A useful hint to assist you with referencing is to make notes of all the sources you access as you progress through your research by writing down the source details of photocopies and books from the library. It is advisable to print and save pages that you use from websites and indicate the date on which you accessed the information. If you use the exact words used by another author, place it in inverted commas ("") and cite the source.

For the purpose of the Concept Note, it is expected that you should cite at least 5 references for a Master's level study and many more for a PhD. At this stage of the research process we do not expect you to be knowledgeable about all the rules and regulations regarding referencing.

**Important**

Before submitting your concept note, read through it again to make sure you have addressed everything in this document and that you have compiled a document that best represents your research interest and idea.

The College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences wishes you the very best.