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# The PhD Concept Paper

## Template & Self-Review Checklist

*A fill-in-the-blank template covering all nine sections your department expects — plus a checklist to self-review before you submit.*

### HOW TO USE THIS TEMPLATE

Work through each section in order. The italic prompts under every heading tell you exactly what belongs there — replace them with your own content. When you're done, run through the checklist at the end before you send anything to your supervisor or department.

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# Concept Paper Draft

Fill in each field below. Word counts are guides, not hard limits — check your department's handbook.

## Working Title

Name the variables of your study and, if relevant, the relationship between them. Keep it under 15 words. Add a subtitle after a colon for extra specificity.

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### SECTION 1 Background to the Study

Cover: the history of the topic (globally and in your study location) → what other researchers have already found → the gaps they haven't addressed → how your study helps close those gaps.

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### SECTION 2 Statement of the Problem

What specific issue will this study address? Why does it matter? What's the benefit of addressing it, and how will you go about it?

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### SECTION 3 Goal and Objectives

Goal (one broad statement)

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Objectives (3–4, each starting with an action verb)

Use verbs like "to identify," "to examine," "to establish," "to measure." Make each one SMART — Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound. Each objective can later become its own journal paper.

Objective 1: to \_\_\_\_\_

Objective 2: to \_\_\_\_\_

Objective 3: to \_\_\_\_\_

Objective 4 (optional): to \_\_\_\_\_

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#### **SECTION 4    Research Questions & Hypotheses**

Questions should be explorable in depth and defensible with evidence — avoid anything with a yes/no answer. Confirm the data you'd need is realistically accessible.

Question 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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#### **SECTION 5    Preliminary Literature Review**

Show the current state of debate on your topic, name the key researchers in the field, and point to the gap your study will fill.

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#### **SECTION 6    Proposed Research Design, Methods & Procedures**

Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods? Primary or secondary data? Where will it come from, is it accessible, will you need ethical clearance, and how will you analyze it?

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## SECTION 7 Contribution to Knowledge

*Pick the lane that fits: a new application of an existing idea, a new interpretation of prior findings, testing an existing issue in a new context, a new theory, or a new technique.*

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## SECTION 8 References / Bibliography

*List only what you directly cited (reference list) or everything cited and consulted (bibliography). Confirm your required style — APA, MLA, Chicago, or Harvard — with your department.*

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# Self-Review Checklist

*Run through this before you submit your concept paper to your supervisor or department.*

## Title & Framing

- ☐ Title is under 15 words and names the key variable(s)
- ☐ Title clearly signals what the study is about

## Background & Problem

- ☐ Background moves from global context → local context → gap → your contribution
- ☐ Problem statement names the issue, its relevance, and its benefit if addressed

## Goal & Objectives

- ☐ There is exactly one goal
- ☐ Each objective starts with an action verb
- ☐ Each objective is SMART
- ☐ You have 3–4 objectives — not fewer, not many more

## Research Questions

- ☐ No question can be answered with a simple yes/no
- ☐ You've confirmed the data needed to answer each question is realistically accessible

## Literature & Methodology

- ☐ Preliminary review names key researchers and the specific gap
- ☐ Methodology choice (quant/qual/mixed) matches your research questions
- ☐ You've noted whether ethical clearance will be required

## Contribution & References

- ☐ Contribution to knowledge is stated in one of the five recognized forms
- ☐ Reference list/bibliography matches your department's required style

## Overall

- ☐ Total length falls within 2,000–2,500 words (or your department's stated limit)
- ☐ A peer or your supervisor has read it before submission



## Concept paper approved? Here's what's next.

Once your concept paper is accepted, you move into the full thesis proposal — a longer, more demanding document with its own structure, checklist, and defense. The PhD Thesis Proposal Toolkit gives you the templates, guides, and defense prep to get through that stage without the guesswork.

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