

Research frameworks—HDR

There are three main kinds of frameworks used in thesis writing: **theoretical** frameworks, **conceptual** frameworks and **analytical** frameworks. They are subtly different though the terminology is often conflated and used interchangeably.

- **Theoretical framework:** This consists of the use of a pre-established theory that can be used to explain some phenomenon. It is an “off-the-shelf” theory that is generally “selected”. Theoretical frameworks are used in both quantitative and qualitative studies. They provide a *lens* through which the data is viewed, informing the writer about the themes and patterns that might be relevant. A candidate may create their own theory, though this is less common.
- **Conceptual framework:** This consists of combinations of different conceptual approaches used together to investigate a phenomenon of interest. It is an amalgam of approaches when an off-the-shelf theory is unsuitable. In other words, conceptual frameworks are “built” from various, sometimes heterogeneous, concepts. They are often used, for example, in qualitative studies when one theory alone cannot fully explain the phenomenon under consideration. It is a set of concepts and variables that jointly guide an investigation and provide insight into something.

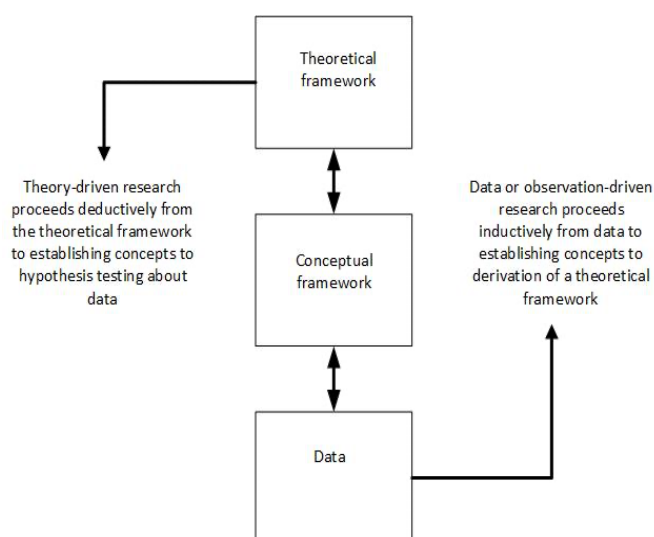
A house metaphor is helpful: A theoretical framework is a modular house made *off-site* and then erected on site to suit the site location. It precisely fits the location (the research aim). Rarely, it can be self-designed blueprint of the house-builder’s own making (i.e., one’s own theory). A conceptual framework is a structure assembled *on-site* from various building materials (concepts) that are suitable for the job. Different parts of the house might need different construction methods as the build is complicated (i.e., the research problem is multi-faceted).

A theoretical framework sometimes leads to the *need* for a conceptual framework and vice-versa. One starts with an overall lens through which one approaches the research problem drawn from established theories, i.e., the “house” design (theoretical framework), and from this one develops a set of concrete variables and concepts that are needed, i.e., the modifications required to the house design (conceptual framework). In this case, the “house” one is building is partially prefabricated, but also partially assembled on-site!

A theoretical framework is typically adopted *prior* to one’s analysis. It’s taken off-the-shelf as it is most useful for what one is investigating. It inspires the **research question** and helps to make predictions about what one will find. It is generally part of the literature review or follows the literature review in a section titled:

Theoretical Framework or Theoretical

Background. As an amalgam of concepts, a conceptual framework can emerge *during* the analysis as one adopts and combines various approaches to inform one’s investigation. This can appear throughout the thesis in separate sections or chapters.



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The theoretical framework of Piagetian cognitive development, for example, allows one to develop concepts that help frame the phenomenon under investigation, concepts such as ‘assimilation’ and ‘accommodation’. These concepts can be used to determine constructs of interest. Alternatively, study on workplace satisfaction might be informed by a theoretical framework of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs that sets out concepts such as ‘self-actualisation’, ‘safety’ and ‘esteem’. However, if one is combining elements of Maslow’s theory with another theory such as, say, a theory of human rationality or gender theory this is a conceptual framework.

Why do I need a theoretical or conceptual framework?

A theoretical/conceptual framework is important for the **research gap** you are investigating. The job of the **literature review** is to *expose* the gap; the job of the theoretical or conceptual framework is to show the reader the conceptual tool or tools you will use to *address* or *make sense* of the gap.

To return to the house metaphor, the gap is the absence of a place to live. One needs a structure to make sense of this. The theoretical/conceptual framework tells the reader: ‘This is the structure I am using to provide shelter and warmth’. It could be an igloo, a skyscraper, a tent, or a three-bedroom brick veneer house (theoretical framework) or it could be “bespoke” (conceptual framework).

When explaining your theoretical/conceptual framework, you don’t need to outline every possible use of the theor(ies), you only use the elements of the theor(ies) you need to do the job. If the theor(ies) have been used with a different purpose from that originally intended, you also need to explain *why* they have been adapted to suit your purpose.

Writing a theoretical/conceptual framework

There is no specific format for writing a theoretical/conceptual framework. But you do have to think about the following questions as you write it.

1. Are the theor(ies) linked clearly to your aims?

You will need to restate your aims prior to writing the theoretical/conceptual framework section(s). They need to be addressed by the framework(s) and you need to say how this will occur. Do this directly: *‘This thesis aims to ... The theory of ... will be used to address this aim as follows: ...’*

2. What theor(ies) are you using? And what element(s) of the theory will be used?

State the theory clearly and precisely: *‘Hendrickson’s theory of X will be used to His notion of Y will be adopted to explain how ...’*

3. Why have you chosen those theor(ies) as opposed to another approach?

Again, be clear and direct: *‘The theory of XYZ was chosen because it provides a ... This has advantages over the ABC theoretical approach because it enables ...’*

4. Can the theor(ies) be distinguished by different positions or schools of thought?

If so, these need to be made clear and the approach you are taking should be singled out. *‘Hendrickson’s approach to X can be divided into several different approaches. These are as follows: ... The X approach will be adopted for this study because it ...’*

5. What concepts are you using?

Again, single out the relevant concept(s) and state why they are being used: *‘Maslow’s concept of “self-actualisation” will be employed to explain how ...’*



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6. How do the concepts link to your aims?

It's one thing to identify the theories with the aims, but the concepts too must link to the aims of your thesis: *'Given that the aim of this thesis is to ... the use of the concept of ... is clearly important because it shows that ... It also provides a way of empirically analysing ...'*

7. How are the concepts related to each other?

Again, be clear and specific: *'The concept of "assimilation" is Piaget's notion that... This is different from his concept of "accommodation" in the following three ways: First ...'*

8. What ontological and epistemological outlook is implied by your theoretical/conceptual framework?

"Ontology" refers to the things you take to exist in your study; "epistemology" refers to how you create knowledge and the basis for knowledge claims. The theoretical/conceptual frameworks should make this clear. For example, do the theor(ies) presuppose naïve realism, structural or critical realism, relativism, or pragmatism? Is the basis for **your** knowledge claims objectivism? constructivism? subjectivism? interpretivism? Make this clear in your theoretical/conceptual framework section too.

9. What are the potential limitations of the theor(ies) you are adopting?

Acknowledge the likely limitations of your framework as well: *'While the XYZ approach has value in explaining ..., it has a number of deficits in dealing with other phenomena such as A, B and C.'*

What is an analytical framework?

An analytical framework is used to explain how a type of analysis will be conducted. While theoretical and conceptual frameworks guide the investigation and conceptual understanding of a phenomenon of interest, the analytical framework is focussed on the method of data analysis. The analytical framework appears in the methodology section of a thesis and is grounded in the theories used. Both theoretical and conceptual frameworks inform the method of analysis used (i.e., the analytical framework).

References

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