

# Creating a conceptual framework

In this guide, we take a look at conceptual frameworks. What are they? What role do they play in writing up your research? How do you go about creating one? Thus, we hope to offer you some insights into its purpose and the best way to put one together.

## What is a conceptual framework?

The definition of a conceptual framework might differ slightly in its emphases across disciplines, but – broadly speaking – it may be defined as an outline, usually expressed via graphics, of the key factors, ideas, concepts or variables in your research and the relationships or links between them, together with the relevant theories that underpin these elements.

In short, it provides an overview of variables within your research, your perspective on the research itself, and the approach you're taking to it; in doing these things, it also points to the position of your research within existing knowledge on the subject area.

There are minor differences between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework. We've chosen to focus on the conceptual framework, interpreted broadly, as it is the term most often used in our conversations with staff and students.

## When do you need to use a conceptual framework?

Conceptual frameworks tend to be associated with larger research projects at postgraduate level, particularly PhD theses in social sciences. It's not restricted to postgraduate use though; you might find it helpful as an undergraduate, when working on your dissertation, as a way of developing your understanding and helping you to form a clear and strong argument.

## Conceptual frameworks and literature reviews

Conceptual frameworks go hand-in-hand with literature reviews in larger pieces of research. They are usually placed after a literature review as a way of distilling the various arguments presented there to provide a springboard for a discussion of the research itself. Understanding the link between the conceptual framework and the literature review is key to the process of creating one, as we shall see.

## How do you create one?

Most conceptual frameworks have what can be called a narrative flow: they have both start and end points. Confusingly, it's often easier to begin at the end! What is it exactly you're researching? Having identified that, you can then work backwards, step-by-step, through each layer of the research, until you arrive at the broader, over-arching ideas that provide the context of the project. You can use the latest draft of your literature review to help with this. Look at the way it's structured; can you identify the different layers of the research?

## Using graphics in a conceptual framework

We've noted that the purpose of a conceptual framework is to illustrate relationships or links between variables. In light of this, adopting a consistent approach towards representing these connections in the framework is very important. We suggest keeping it simple:

-  use an outlined box for each variable
-  use lines to illustrate links
-  use arrows to illustrate relationships of cause / consequence

These graphics can be found in MS Word or MS PowerPoint, for example; we recommend using something like PowerPoint to do it, with its easier-to-manage canvas, and then exporting the slide on which it is presented as an image file.

## What does a conceptual framework look like?

In its finished form, the conceptual framework should reflect all of the key elements of your research, including relevant theories; these elements, and the relationships between them, should be clearly arranged; and their arrangement should be logical, coherent and easy to follow. We recommend looking at master's dissertations or PhD theses in your discipline via MetSearch to see how others have done it. Use these exemplars as guides; remember, each piece of research is unique and so there is no 'one-size-fits-all' conceptual framework. It's up to you to devise one that is relevant to your own research.