

How to Prepare a Research Proposal

In this document, we will address the following:

- What is a research proposal?
- What purpose does it serve?
- Some models for proposals
- Sections of the research proposal
- Some tips, tricks, and suggestions

What is a Research Proposal?

Proposal writing is important to any scholarly pursuit. The proposal is, in effect, an intellectual scholastic (not legal) contract between you and your readers (i.e. instructors, your thesis committee, potential publishers, etc.). Research proposals specify what you will do, how you will do it, and how you will interpret the results. In specifying what will be done it also gives criteria for determining whether it is done. In approving the proposal, your readers give their best judgment that the approach to the research is reasonable and likely to yield the anticipated results. They are implicitly agreeing that they will accept the result as adequate for the intended purpose of earning a passing grade or getting funding, or granting a degree. (Of course you will have to write the thesis in acceptable form, and you probably will discover things in the course of your research that were not anticipated but which should be addressed in your thesis, but the minimum core intellectual contribution of your thesis will be set by the proposal.) Both you and your readers benefit from an agreed upon plan.

What Purpose Do Research Proposals Serve?

As noted above, the objective in writing a proposal is to describe 1) what you will do, 2) why it should be done, 3) how you will do it, and 4) what you expect will result. Being clear about these things from the beginning will help you complete your research in a timely fashion. A vague, weak or fuzzy proposal can lead to a long, painful, and often unsuccessful research writing experience. Accordingly, a clean, well thought-out, proposal forms the backbone for the research project itself. The structures are identical, and through, when properly done, the outline your proposal provides will evolve seamlessly into your final draft.

Of course, a good thesis proposal hinges on a good idea. Once you have a good idea, you can draft the proposal in an evening. Getting a good idea hinges on familiarity with the topic. This assumes a longer preparatory period of reading, observation, discussion, and incubation. Read everything that you can in your area of interest. Figure out what are the important and missing parts of our understanding. Figure out how to build/discover those pieces. Talk about it with anyone who is interested. Then just write the important parts as the proposal, filling in the things that we do not know and that will help us know more: that is what research is all about.

Furthermore, proposals help you estimate the size of a project. Don't make the project too big. A common problem with research projects is that ambitious students can bite off more than they can chew, which leads them to write projects that gloss over many things inadequately rather than cover a few, specific, ideas in detail. Most proposals are relatively short, ranging between five and fifteen pages long (depending on whether the intended audience is an instructor, a publisher, or a funding organization). Remember: it is the merit of the proposal which counts, not the page length. It is better to write five or so concise pages that indicate to a relatively well-informed audience that you know the topic and how its logic hangs together than to put together a fifteen or twenty pages

document that indicates that you have read a lot of things but not yet boiled it down to a set of prioritized and linked questions.

Some Models of Research Proposals

Different Projects, Similar Proposals

This guide includes an outline that looks like a "fill-in the blanks guide" and, while in the abstract all proposals are similar, each proposal will have its own particular variation on the basic theme. Each research project is different and each needs a specifically tailored proposal to bring it into focus. Different advisors, committees, and agencies have different expectations, and you should find out what these are as early as possible. Ask your instructor for advice on this. Furthermore, different types of research projects require slightly different proposals.

Characterizing theses is difficult. Some research projects involve qualitative or quantitative data analysis. Some are essentially opinion pieces. Even others are policy oriented. In the end, they may well all be interpretations of observations, and differentiated by the rules that constrain the interpretation (for example, different readers will have different preferences about how to approach and execute research.)

In the abstract all proposals are very similar. They need to show a reasonably informed reader why a particular topic is important to address and how you will do it. To that end, a proposal needs to show how your work fits into what is already known about the topic and what new contribution your work will make. Specify the question that your research will answer, establish why it is a significant question, show how you are going to answer the question, and indicate what you expect we will learn. The proposal should situate the work in the literature, it should show why this is an (if not the most) important question to answer in the field, and convince your committee (the skeptical readers that they are) that your approach will in fact result in an answer to the question.

Research projects that address research questions (which can be answered by making plan-able observations) are preferred and perhaps the easiest to write. Because they address well-bounded topics, they can be very tight, but they do require more planning on the front end. Conversely, research projects that are largely based on the synthesis of observations, rumination, speculation, and opinion formation are harder to write—often because they address questions which are not well-bounded and it is therefore hard to know when you are "done" answering them.

A Couple of Models for Proposals

A Two Page (Preliminary Proposal) Model:

Here is a model for a very brief (maybe five paragraph) proposal that you might use to interest faculty in sitting on your committee. People who are not yet hooked may especially appreciate its brevity.

- In the first paragraph, the first sentence identifies the general topic area. The second sentence gives the research question, and the third sentence establishes its significance.
- The next couple of paragraphs gives the larger historical perspective on the topic. Essentially list the major schools of thought on the topic and very briefly review the literature in the area with its major findings. Who has written on the topic and what have they found? Allocate about a sentence per important person or finding. Include any preliminary findings you have, and indicate what open questions are left. Restate your question in this context, showing how it fits into this larger picture.
- The next paragraph describes your methodology. It tells how you will approach the question and what you will need to do it.
- The final paragraph outlines your expected results, how you will interpret them, and how they will fit into our larger understanding i.e., 'the literature'.

The (Longer) Standard Model:

The two outlines below are intended to show both what are the standard parts of a proposal and of a research paper. Notice that the only real difference is that you change “expected results” to “results” in the paper, and you usually leave the budget (if applicable) out, of the actual paper.

A Basic Proposal Outline	The Basic Thesis Outline	Research Grant Proposal Outline
<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic area • Research question • Significance to knowledge <p>Literature review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous research • others & yours • Interlocking findings and Unanswered questions • Your preliminary work on the topic • The remaining questions and inter-locking logic • Reprise of your research question(s) in this context <p>Methodology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach • Data needs • Analytic techniques • Plan for interpreting results <p>Expected results</p> <p>Budget</p> <p>Bibliography (or References)</p>	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic area • Research question (finding?) • Significance to knowledge <p>Literature review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous research • others & yours • Interlocking findings and Unanswered questions • Your preliminary work on the topic • The remaining questions and inter-locking logic • Reprise of your research question(s) in this context <p>Methodology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach • Data needs • Analytic techniques • Plan for interpreting results <p>Results</p> <p>Discussion and Conclusions</p> <p>Bibliography /References</p>	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic area • Intellectual merit of research • Broader impact of research <p>Literature review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous research • Your preliminary work on the topic • The remaining questions and their inter-locking logic • Reprise of your resulting question in this context <p>Methodology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach to answering the question • Data needs • Analytic techniques • Plan for interpreting results <p>Budget</p> <p>Expected results</p> <p>Bibliography / References</p>

Each of these outlines is very similar. You get the idea of what the proposal does for you and organizing your thoughts and approach. The section below goes into slightly more (boring) detail on what each of the points in the outline is and does.

The Sections of the Proposal

The Introduction

Topic Area

A good title will clue the reader into the topic but it cannot tell the whole story. Follow the title with a short introduction. The introduction provides a brief overview that tells a fairly well informed but perhaps non-specialist reader what the proposal is about. It might be as short as a single page, but it should be very clearly written, and it

should let one assess whether the research is relevant to their own work. With luck, it will hook the reader's interest.

What is your proposal about? Briefly describe the general topic and quickly come to the question that your research will address. Show why this research question is important to answer.

Research Question

Once the topic is established, come right to the point. What are you going to do? What specific issue or question will your work address? What will we learn from your work?

Significance of Research

Why is this work important? What are the implications of doing it? How does it link to other knowledge? How does it stand to inform policy making? This should show how this project is significant to our body of knowledge. Why is it important to our understanding of the world? It should establish why I would want to read on. It should also tell me why I would want to fund the project.

Literature Review¹

State of our knowledge

The purpose of the literature review is to situate your research in the context of what is already known about a topic. It need not be exhaustive; it needs simply to show how your work will benefit the whole. It should provide the theoretical basis for your work, show what has been done in the area by others, and set the stage for your work.

In a literature review you should give the reader enough ties to the literature that they feel confident that you have found, read, and assimilated the literature in the field. It should probably move from the more general to the more focused studies, but again, it need not be exhaustive, only relevant.

Outstanding questions

This is where you present the holes in the knowledge that need to be plugged and by so doing, situate your work. It is the place where you establish that your work will fit in and be significant to the discipline. This can be made easier if there is literature that comes out and says "Hey, this is a topic that needs to be treated!" "What is the answer to this question?" and you will sometimes see this type of piece in the literature. A good place to start any literature review process is to see whether an expert in your field has written "state of the discipline" paper on your topic of interest. The *Annual Review of Political Science* (<http://www.annualreviews.org/loi/polisci>), for example, publishes these types of papers, and you should read "Annual Reviews" carefully and, more importantly, pay attention to their bibliographies.

Research Questions in Detail

Your work to date

Tell what you have done so far. It might report preliminary studies that you have conducted to establish the feasibility of your research. It should give a sense that you are in a position to add to the body of knowledge.

¹ For further details about writing literature reviews, see [\[\[link to document about literature reviews\]\]](#).

Methodology

Overview of approach

This section should make clear to the reader the way that you intend to approach the research question and the techniques and logic that you will use to address it.

Data Collection

This might include the field site description, a description of the instruments you will use, and particularly the data that you anticipate collecting. You may need to comment on site and resource accessibility in the time frame and budget that you have available, to demonstrate feasibility, but the emphasis in this section should be to fully describe specifically what data you will be using in your study. Part of the purpose of doing this is to detect flaws in the plan *before* they become problems in the research.

Data Analysis

This should explain in some detail how you will manipulate the data that you assembled to get at the information that you will use to answer your question. It will include the statistical or other techniques and the tools that you will use in processing the data. It probably should also include an indication of the range of outcomes that you could reasonably expect from your observations.

Interpretation

In this section you should indicate how the anticipated outcomes will be interpreted to answer the research question. It is extremely beneficial to anticipate the range of outcomes from your analysis, and for each know what it will mean in terms of the answer to your question.

Expected Results

This section should give a good indication of what you expect to get out of the research. It should join the data analysis and possible outcomes to the theory and questions that you have raised. It will be a good place to summarize the significance of the work.

It is often useful from the very beginning of formulating your work to write one page for this section to focus your reasoning as you build the rest of the proposal.

Bibliography

This is the list of the relevant works. Some advisors like exhaustive lists. I think that the Graduate Division specifies that you call it "Bibliography". Others like to see only the literature which you actually cite. Most fall in between: there is no reason to cite irrelevant literature but it may be useful to keep track of it even if only to say that it was examined and found to be irrelevant.

Tips, Tricks, and Suggestions

Read. Read everything you can find in your area of interest. Read. Read. Read. Take notes, and talk to people (particularly, your instructor) about the topic. Email has the advantage of forcing you to get your thoughts into written words that can be refined, edited and improved. It also gets time stamped records of when you submitted what to readers (and how long it took to get a response).

Write about the topic a lot, and don't be afraid to tear up (delete) passages that just don't work. Often you can re-think and re-type faster than you can edit your way out of troublesome sentences. The advantage is in the re-thinking.

Very early on, generate the research question, critical observation, interpretations of the possible outcomes, and the expected results. These are the core of the project and will help focus your reading and thinking. Modify them as needed as your understanding increases.

Use some systematic way of recording notes and bibliographic information from the very beginning. The classic approach is a deck of index cards. You can sort, regroup, layout spatial arrangements and work on the beach. Possibly a slight improvement is to use a word-processor file (like Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, or its analogues in other operating systems) that contains bibliographic reference information and notes, quotes, etc. that you take from the source. This can be sorted, searched, diced and sliced in your familiar word-processor. You may even print the index cards from the word-processor if you like the ability to physically re-arrange things.

Even better for some, is to use specialized bibliographic database software. Papyrus, EndNote, and other packages are available for PCs and MacIntoshs. The bib-refer and bibTex software on UNIX computers are also very handy and have the advantage of working with plain ASCII text files (no need to worry about getting at your information when the word processor is several generations along). All of these tools link to various word-processors to make constructing and formatting your final bibliography easier. If they help you organize your notes and thinking, that is the benefit.

Another pointer is to keep in mind from the outset that this project is neither the last nor the greatest thing you will do in your life. It is just one step along the way. Get it done and get on with the next one. Again, the goal is to be concise: cover your topic, but don't confuse it with too many loosely relevant side lines.