

WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The goal of a research proposal is to present and justify the need to study a research problem and to present the practical ways in which the proposed study should be conducted. The design elements and procedures for conducting the research are governed by standards within the predominant discipline in which the problem resides, so guidelines for research proposals are more exacting and less formal than a general project proposal. Research proposals contain extensive literature reviews. They must provide persuasive evidence that a need exists for the proposed study. In addition to providing a rationale, a proposal describes detailed methodology for conducting the research consistent with requirements of the professional or academic field and a statement on anticipated outcomes and/or benefits derived from the study's completion.

Your supervisor may assign the task of writing a research proposal for the following reasons:

- Develop your skills in thinking about and designing a comprehensive research study;
- Learn how to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature to ensure a research problem has not already been answered [or you may determine the problem has been answered ineffectively] and, in so doing, become better at locating scholarship related to your topic;
- Improve your general research and writing skills;
- Practice identifying the logical steps that must be taken to accomplish one's research goals;
- Critically review, examine, and consider the use of different methods for gathering and analyzing data related to the research problem; and,
- Nurture a sense of inquisitiveness within yourself and to help see yourself as an active participant in the process of doing scholarly research.

A proposal should contain all the key elements involved in designing a completed research study, with sufficient information that allows readers to assess the validity and usefulness of your proposed study. The only elements missing from a research proposal are the findings of the study

and your analysis of those results. Finally, an effective proposal is judged on the quality of your writing and, therefore, it is important that your writing is coherent, clear, and compelling.

Regardless of the research problem you are investigating and the methodology you choose, all research proposals must address the following questions:

1. **What do you plan to accomplish?** Be clear and succinct in defining the research problem and what it is you are proposing to research.
2. **Why do you want to do it?** In addition to detailing your research design, you also must conduct a thorough review of the literature and provide convincing evidence that it is a topic worthy of study. Be sure to answer the "So What?" question.
3. **How are you going to do it?** Be sure that what you propose is doable.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Failure to be concise; being "all over the map" without a clear sense of purpose.
- Failure to cite landmark works in your literature review.
- Failure to delimit the contextual boundaries of your research [e.g., time, place, people, etc.].
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
- Failure to stay focused on the research problem; going off on unrelated tangents.
- Sloppy or imprecise writing, or poor grammar.
- Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.

Beginning the Proposal Process

As with writing a regular academic paper, research proposals are generally organized the same way throughout most social science disciplines. Proposals vary between ten and twenty-five pages in length. However, before you begin, read the assignment carefully and, if anything seems unclear, ask your professor whether there are any specific requirements for organizing and writing the proposal.

A good place to begin is to ask yourself a series of questions:

- What do I want to study?
- Why is the topic important?
- How is it significant within the subject areas covered in my class?
- What problems will it help solve?
- How does it build upon [and hopefully go beyond] research already conducted on the topic?
- What exactly should I plan to do, and can I get it done in the time available?

In general, a compelling research proposal should document your knowledge of the topic and demonstrate your enthusiasm for conducting the study. Approach it with the intention of leaving your readers feeling like--"Wow, that's an exciting idea and I can't wait to see how it turns out!"

In general your proposal should include the following sections:

I. Introduction

In the real world of higher education, a research proposal is most often written by scholars seeking grant funding for a research project or it's the first step in getting approval to write a doctoral dissertation. Even if this is just a course assignment, treat your introduction as the initial pitch of an idea or a thorough examination of the significance of a research problem. After reading the introduction, your readers should not only have an understanding of what you want to do, but they should also be able to gain a sense of your passion for the topic and be excited about the study's possible outcomes. Note that most proposals do not include an abstract [summary] before the introduction.

Think about your introduction as a narrative written in one to three paragraphs that succinctly answers the following four questions:

1. What is the central research problem?
2. What is the topic of study related to that problem?
3. What methods should be used to analyze the research problem?
4. Why is this important research, what is its significance, and why should someone reading the proposal care about the outcomes of the proposed study?

II. Background and Significance

This section can be melded into your introduction or you can create a separate section to help with the organization and narrative flow of your proposal. This is where you explain the context of your proposal and describe in detail why it's important. Approach writing this section with the thought that you can't assume your readers will know as much about the research problem as you do. Note that this section is not an essay going over everything you have learned about the topic; instead, you must choose what is relevant to help explain the goals for your study.

To that end, while there are no hard and fast rules, you should attempt to address some or all of the following key points:

- State the research problem and give a more detailed explanation about the purpose of the study than what you stated in the introduction. This is particularly important if the problem is complex or multifaceted.
- Present the rationale of your proposed study and clearly indicate why it is worth doing. Answer the "So What?" question [i.e., why should anyone care].
- Describe the major issues or problems to be addressed by your research. Be sure to note how your proposed study builds on previous assumptions about the research problem.
- Explain how you plan to go about conducting your research. Clearly identify the key sources you intend to use and explain how they will contribute to your analysis of the topic.
- Set the boundaries of your proposed research in order to provide a clear focus. Where appropriate, state not only what you will study, but what is excluded from the study.
- If necessary, provide definitions of key concepts or terms.

III. Literature Review

Connected to the background and significance of your study is a section of your proposal devoted to a more deliberate review and synthesis of prior studies related to the research problem under investigation. The purpose here is to place your project within the larger whole of what is currently being explored, while demonstrating to your readers that your work is original and innovative. Think about what questions other researchers have asked, what methods

they have used, and what is your understanding of their findings and, where stated, their recommendations. Do not be afraid to challenge the conclusions of prior research. Assess what you believe is missing and state how previous research has failed to adequately examine the issue that your study addresses.

Since a literature review is information dense, it is crucial that this section is intelligently structured to enable a reader to grasp the key arguments underpinning your study in relation to that of other researchers. A good strategy is to break the literature into "conceptual categories" [themes] rather than systematically describing groups of materials one at a time. Note that conceptual categories generally reveal themselves after you have read most of the pertinent literature on your topic so adding new categories is an on-going process of discovery as you read more studies. How do you know you've covered the key conceptual categories underlying the research literature? Generally, you can have confidence that all of the significant conceptual categories have been identified if you start to see repetition in the conclusions or recommendations that are being made.

To help frame your proposal's literature review, here are the "five C's" of writing a literature review:

1. **Cite**, so as to keep the primary focus on the literature pertinent to your research problem.
2. **Compare** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Who applies similar approaches to analyzing the research problem?
3. **Contrast** the various arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches, and controversies expressed in the literature: what are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, or debate?
4. **Critique** the literature: Which arguments are more persuasive, and why? Which approaches, findings, methodologies seem most reliable, valid, or appropriate, and why? Pay attention to the verbs you use to describe what an author says/does [e.g., asserts, demonstrates, argues, etc.].
5. **Connect** the literature to your own area of research and investigation: how does your own work draw upon, depart from, synthesize, or add a new perspective to what has been said in the literature?

IV. Research Design and Methods

This section must be well-written and logically organized because you are not actually doing the research, yet, your reader has to have confidence that it is worth pursuing. The reader will never have a study outcome from which to evaluate whether your methodological choices were the correct ones. Thus, the objective here is to convince the reader that your overall research design and methods of analysis will correctly address the problem and that the methods will provide the means to effectively interpret the potential results. Your design and methods should be unmistakably tied to the specific aims of your study.

Describe the overall research design by building upon and drawing examples from your review of the literature. Consider not only methods that other researchers have used but methods of data gathering that have not been used but perhaps could be. Be specific about the methodological approaches you plan to undertake to obtain information, the techniques you would use to analyze the data, and the tests of external validity to which you commit yourself [i.e., the trustworthiness by which you can generalize from your study to other people, places, events, and/or periods of time].

When describing the methods you will use, be sure to cover the following:

- Specify the research operations you will undertake and the way you will interpret the results of these operations in relation to the research problem. Don't just describe what you intend to achieve from applying the methods you choose, but state how you will spend your time while applying these methods [e.g., coding text from interviews to find statements about the need to change school curriculum; running a regression to determine if there is a relationship between campaign advertising on social media sites and election outcomes in Europe].
- Keep in mind that a methodology is not just a list of tasks; it is an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best way to investigate the research problem. This is an important point because the mere listing of tasks to be performed does not demonstrate that, collectively, they effectively address the research problem. Be sure you explain this.
- Anticipate and acknowledge any potential barriers and pitfalls in carrying out your research design and explain how you plan to address them. No method is perfect so you need to describe where you believe challenges may exist in obtaining data or accessing information. It's always better to acknowledge this than to have it brought up by your reader.

V. Preliminary Suppositions and Implications

Just because you don't have to actually conduct the study and analyze the results, it doesn't mean you can skip talking about the analytical process and potential implications. The purpose of this section is to argue how and in what ways you believe your research will refine, revise, or extend existing knowledge in the subject area under investigation. Depending on the aims and objectives of your study, describe how the anticipated results will impact future

scholarly research, theory, practice, forms of interventions, or policymaking. Note that such discussions may have either substantive [a potential new policy], theoretical [a potential new understanding], or methodological [a potential new way of analyzing] significance.

When thinking about the potential implications of your study, ask the following questions:

- What might the results mean in regards to the theoretical framework that underpins the study?
- What suggestions for subsequent research could arise from the potential outcomes of the study?
- What will the results mean to practitioners in the natural settings of their workplace?
- Will the results influence programs, methods, and/or forms of intervention?
- How might the results contribute to the solution of social, economic, or other types of problems?
- Will the results influence policy decisions?
- In what way do individuals or groups benefit should your study be pursued?
- What will be improved or changed as a result of the proposed research?
- How will the results of the study be implemented, and what innovations will come about?

NOTE: This section should not delve into idle speculation, opinion, or be formulated on the basis of unclear evidence. The purpose is to reflect upon gaps or understudied areas of the current literature and describe how your proposed research contributes to a new understanding of the research problem should the study be implemented as designed.

VI. Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates the importance or significance of your proposal and provides a brief summary of the entire study. This section should be only one or two paragraphs long, emphasizing why the research problem is worth investigating, why your research study is unique, and how it should advance existing knowledge.

Someone reading this section should come away with an understanding of:

- Why the study should be done,
- The specific purpose of the study and the research questions it attempts to answer,
- The decision to why the research design and methods used where chosen over other options,
- The potential implications emerging from your proposed study of the research problem, and
- A sense of how your study fits within the broader scholarship about the research problem.

VII. Citations

As with any scholarly research paper, you must cite the sources you used in composing your proposal. In a standard research proposal, this section can take two forms, so consult with your professor about which one is preferred.

1. **References** -- lists only the literature that you actually used or cited in your proposal.
2. **Bibliography** -- lists everything you used or cited in your proposal, with additional citations to any key sources relevant to understanding the research problem.

In either case, this section should testify to the fact that you did enough preparatory work to make sure the project will complement and not duplicate the efforts of other researchers. Start a new page and use the heading "References" or "Bibliography" centered at the top of the page. Cited works should always use a standard format that follows the writing style advised by the discipline of your course [i.e., education=APA; history=Chicago, etc] or that is preferred by your supervisor. This section normally does not count towards the total page length of your research proposal.

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