

## How to Write a Research Proposal (Part 1)

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Most students and beginning researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means, nor do they understand its importance. To put it bluntly, one's research is only as good as one's proposal. An ill-conceived proposal dooms the project even if it somehow gets through the Thesis Supervisory Committee. A high quality proposal, on the other hand, not only promises success for the project, but also impresses your Thesis Committee about your potential as a researcher.

A research proposal is intended to convince others that you have a worthwhile research project and that you have the competence and the work-plan to complete it. Generally, a research proposal should contain all the key elements involved in the research process and include sufficient information for the readers to evaluate the proposed study.

Regardless of your research area and the methodology you choose, all research proposals must address the following questions: What you plan to accomplish, why you want to do it and how you are going to do it.

The proposal should have sufficient information to convince your readers that you have an important research idea, that you have a good grasp of the relevant literature and the major issues, and that your methodology is sound.

The quality of your research proposal depends not only on the quality of your proposed project, but also on the quality of your proposal writing. A good research project may run the risk of rejection simply because the proposal is poorly written. Therefore, it pays if your writing is coherent, clear and compelling.

This paper focuses on proposal writing rather than on the development of research ideas.

Title:

It should be concise and descriptive. For example, the phrase, "An investigation of . . ." could be omitted. Often titles are stated in terms of a functional relationship, because such titles clearly indicate the independent and dependent variables. However, if possible, think of an informative but catchy title. An effective title not only pricks the reader's interest, but also predisposes him/her favorably towards the proposal.

Abstract:

It is a brief summary of approximately 300 words. It should include the research question, the rationale for the study, the hypothesis (if any), the method and the main findings. Descriptions of

the method may include the design, procedures, the sample and any instruments that will be used.

#### Introduction:

The main purpose of the introduction is to provide the necessary background or context for your research problem. How to frame the research problem is perhaps the biggest problem in proposal writing.

If the research problem is framed in the context of a general, rambling literature review, then the research question may appear trivial and uninteresting. However, if the same question is placed in the context of a very focused and current research area, its significance will become evident.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules on how to frame your research question just as there is no prescription on how to write an interesting and informative opening paragraph. A lot depends on your creativity, your ability to think clearly and the depth of your understanding of problem areas.

However, try to place your research question in the context of either a current "hot" area, or an older area that remains viable. Secondly, you need to provide a brief but appropriate historical backdrop. Thirdly, provide the contemporary context in which your proposed research question occupies the central stage. Finally, identify "key players" and refer to the most relevant and representative publications. In short, try to paint your research question in broad brushes and at the same time bring out its significance.

The introduction typically begins with a general statement of the problem area, with a focus on a specific research problem, to be followed by the rationale or justification for the proposed study. The introduction generally covers the following elements:

1. State the research problem, which is often referred to as the purpose of the study.
2. Provide the context and set the stage for your research question in such a way as to show its necessity and importance.
3. Present the rationale of your proposed study and clearly indicate why it is worth doing.
4. Briefly describe the major issues and sub-problems to be addressed by your research.
5. Identify the key independent and dependent variables of your experiment. Alternatively, specify the phenomenon you want to study.
6. State your hypothesis or theory, if any. For exploratory or phenomenological research, you may not have any hypotheses. (Please do not confuse the hypothesis with the statistical null hypothesis.)
7. Set the delimitation or boundaries of your proposed research in order to provide a clear focus.
8. Provide definitions of key concepts. (This is optional.)

#### Literature Review:

Sometimes the literature review is incorporated into the introduction section. However, most professors prefer a separate section, which allows a more thorough review of the literature.

The literature review serves several important functions:

1. Ensures that you are not "reinventing the wheel".
2. Gives credits to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
3. Demonstrates [your knowledge](#) of the research problem.
4. Demonstrates your understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question.
5. Shows your ability to critically evaluate relevant literature information.
6. Indicates your ability to integrate and synthesize the existing literature.
7. Provides new theoretical insights or develops a new model as the conceptual framework for your research.
8. Convinces your reader that your proposed research will make a significant and substantial contribution to the literature (i.e., resolving an important theoretical issue or filling a major gap in the literature).

Most students' literature reviews suffer from the following problems:

- Lacking organization and structure
- Lacking focus, unity and coherence
- Being repetitive and verbose
- Failing to cite influential papers
- Failing to keep up with recent developments
- Failing to critically evaluate cited papers
- Citing irrelevant or trivial references
- Depending too much on secondary sources

Your scholarship and research competence will be questioned if any of the above applies to your proposal.

There are different ways to organize your literature review. Make use of subheadings to bring order and coherence to your review. For example, having established the importance of your research area and its current state of development, you may devote several subsections on related issues as: *theoretical models, measuring instruments, cross-cultural and gender differences, etc.*

It is also helpful to keep in mind that you are telling a story to an audience. Try to tell it in a stimulating and engaging manner. Do not bore them, because it may lead to rejection of your worthy proposal. (Remember: Professors and scientists are human beings too.)

Methods:

The Method section is very important because it tells your Research Committee how you plan to tackle your research problem. It will provide your work plan and describe the activities necessary for the completion of your project.

The guiding principle for writing the Method section is that it should contain sufficient information for the reader to determine whether methodology is sound. Some even argue that a good proposal should contain sufficient details for another qualified researcher to implement the study.

You need to demonstrate your knowledge of alternative methods and make the case that your approach is the most appropriate and most valid way to address your research question.

Please note that your research question may be best answered by [qualitative research](#). However, since most mainstream psychologists are still biased against qualitative research, especially the phenomenological variety, you may need to justify your qualitative method.

Furthermore, since there are no well-established and widely accepted canons in qualitative analysis, your method section needs to be more elaborate than what is required for traditional [quantitative research](#). More importantly, the data collection process in qualitative research has a far greater impact on the results as compared to quantitative research. That is another reason for greater care in describing how you will collect and analyze your data. (How to write the Method section for qualitative research is a topic for another paper.)

For quantitative studies, the method section typically consists of the following sections:

1. Design -Is it a questionnaire study or a laboratory experiment? What kind of design do you choose?
2. Subjects or participants - Who will take part in your study ? What kind of sampling procedure do you use?
3. Instruments - What kind of measuring instruments or questionnaires do you use? Why do you choose them? Are they valid and reliable?
4. Procedure - How do you plan to carry out your study? What activities are involved? How long does it take?

Results:

Obviously you do not have results at the proposal stage. However, you need to have some idea about what kind of data you will be collecting, and what statistical procedures will be used in order to answer your research question or test your hypothesis.

Discussion:

It is important to convince your reader of the potential impact of your proposed research. You need to communicate a sense of enthusiasm and confidence without exaggerating the merits of your proposal. That is why you also need to mention the limitations and weaknesses of the proposed research, which may be justified by time and financial constraints as well as by the early developmental stage of your research area.

Common Mistakes in Proposal Writing

1. Failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question.
2. Failure to delimit the boundary conditions for your research.
3. Failure to cite landmark studies.
4. Failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers.
5. Failure to stay focused on the research question.
6. Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
7. Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.
8. Too much rambling — going "all over the map" without a clear sense of direction. (The best proposals move forward with ease and grace like a seamless river.)
9. Too many citation lapses and incorrect references.
10. Too long or too short.
11. Failing to follow the APA style.
12. Slopping writing.

### **How to write a research proposal (Part 2)**

When you are applying for a research [degree](#), like the PhD, you will very probably have to write a research proposal as a part of your application file. A [PhD](#) is awarded mainly as the result of your making a genuine contribution to the state of knowledge in a field of your choice. Even though this is not the Nobel Prize yet, getting the degree means you have added something to what has previously been known on the subject you have researched. But first you have to prove you are capable of making such a contribution, and therefore write a research proposal that meets certain standards. The goal of a research proposal (RP) is to present and justify a research idea you have and to present the practical ways in which you think this research should be conducted.

When you are writing a RP, keep in mind that it will enter a competition, being read in line with quite a few other RPs. You have to come up with a document that has an impact upon the reader: write clearly and well structured so that your message gets across easily. Basically, your RP has to answer three big questions: what research project will you undertake, why is important to know that thing and how will you proceed to make that research.

In order to draw the researcher's attention upon your paper, write an introduction with impact, and that leads to the formulation of your hypothesis. The research hypothesis has to be specific, concise (one phrase) and to lead to the advancement of the knowledge in the field in some way. Writing the hypothesis in a concise manner and, first, coming up with a good hypothesis is a difficult mission. This is actually the core of your application: you're going to a [university](#) to do this very piece of research. Compared to this, the rest of the application is background scenery. Take your time to think of it. When you have an idea, be careful at the formulation. A well-written hypothesis is something of an essay's thesis: it provides a statement that can be tested (argues ahead one of the possible answers to a problem), it is an idea, a concept, and not a mere fact, and is summed up in one phrase. In some cases, you will have no idea what the possible answer to a problem worth being researched is, but you will be able to think of a way to solve that problem, and find out the answer in the meantime. It's ok in this case, to formulate a research question, rather than a hypothesis. Let those cases be rare, in any way.

Another piece of advice when writing your hypothesis, regarding the trendy [research fields](#): chances are great that they're trendy because somebody has already made that exciting discovery, or wrote that splendid paper that awoke everybody's interest in the first place. If you're in one of these fields, try to get a fresh point of view upon the subject; make new connections, don't be 100% mainstream. This will make the project even more stimulating for the reader. Imagine that you are writing about the trendiest subject, with absolutely no change in the point of view, and you are given the chance to make the research. Trends come and go, fast; what are the chances that, in four years' time, when your research is done and you are ready to publish your results, one of those well-known professors who dispose of huge research grants has already said whatever you had to say?

Remember how, in a structured essay, right after the thesis you would present the organization of your essay, by enumerating the main arguments you were going to present? Same thing should happen in a RP. After stating your thesis, you should give a short account of your answers to those three questions mentioned earlier. State, in a few phrases, what will be learned from your research, that your project will make a difference, and why is that important to be known. You will have to elaborate on both of these later in the paper.

The next step in writing your proposal is to prove that that particular piece of research has not been done yet. This section is usually called Literature Review. Inside it, you have to enumerate and critically analyze an impressive list of boring bibliography. The conclusion you should - objectively! - reach is that your idea of research has not been undertaken yet. Even more, you use this opportunity to prove solid theoretical knowledge in the field, and build the theoretical bases of your project. One tip: don't review all the articles and books in the fields even if you mention them in the bibliography list; pay attention in your analysis to those you will build on. Another one: avoid jargon when writing your RP. The chances are great that the person(s) who will read your and another 1000 research proposals are not specialists in that very field - niche you are examining. If you are applying for a grant with or foundation or something similar, it might happen that those reading your paper are not even professors, but recruiters, donors, etc. And even if they actually are professors, one of the reasons busy people like them agree to undertake a huge, and sometimes voluntary, work, is the desire to meet some diversity, some change from their work - so maybe they'll read applications for another specialization. The capacity to get your message across in clear, easy-to-grasp concepts and phrases is one of the winning papers' most important advantages.

So far, you have proven you have a research idea, that you are familiar with the field, and that your idea is new. Now, why should your project be worth researching? Because it advances knowledge, ok. But is this knowledge that anybody will need? Maybe nobody knows for sure how the shoelaces were being tied in the Sixth century, but who cares, beyond two lace-tying specialists? Find arguments to convince the reader that s/he should give you money for that research: practical use, accelerating the development of knowledge in your or other fields, opening new research possibilities, a better understanding of facts that will allow a more appropriate [course](#) of action are possible reasons. Be clear and specific. Don't promise to save the world, it might be too much to start with. Even James Bond succeeds that only towards the end of the movie.

We approach now one of the most difficult parts of writing a research proposal: the methodology. In short, what actions are you going to take in order to answer the question? When will you know whether the hypothesis has been proven wrong, or has survived enough tests to be considered, for now, valid? Those tests and the way you are supposed to handle them to give rigor to your research is what is understood under methods. Methods divide in qualitative (interviews, questionnaires) and quantitative (statistics, stuff that deals intensively with numbers). For some projects qualitative methods are more appropriate, for some quantitative, while for most a mixture of the two is adequate. You should pick your methods and justify your choice. Research methodology, however, is too a complicated thing to be explained here. And this is why it's so tough: not much attention is given to teaching it in Eastern Europe. Try, before writing your RP, to read a bit more about methodology - on the Internet you will find for sure some articles -and decide which methods suit your project best. Don't forget: reading theoretical pieces of your work and providing a critical analysis of those is also a kind of research. It's fine to provide a rough schedule of your research; some grant programs will also require a detailed budget, even though for scholarships this is unlikely.

Conclusions: After working your way through the difficult methodological part, you only have to write your conclusions. Shortly recap why your hypothesis is new, why it advances knowledge, why is it worth researching and how, from a practical point of view, are you going to do that. Overall, the capacity of your project to answer the research question should come out crystal clear from the body of the paper, and especially from the conclusions. If this happens, it means you have a well-written RP, and you have just increased your chances for having a successful application.

One last word: how big should your RP be? In most cases, this is specified in the application form. If it is not, we suggest that you keep it at about 1500 words (that's 3 pages, single-spaced, with 12size Times New Roman). In fewer words it can be really tough to write good RP. With more you might bore your readers. Which we hope will not happen.

Good luck!

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