

How to write your research proposal

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The writing of a research proposal is generally understood to be a part of the process for registering for a higher degree or PhD with an educational establishment. There are other reasons why a proposal may be written such as an academic exercise, for business funding, as an application for funding for ethical approval, or simply, as an educational exercise.

The purpose of writing the proposal should drive the way in which the proposal is set out. The proposal must therefore be tailored to the audience in an attempt to secure the appropriate approval. The aim of this particular guide is to consider the research proposal as a part of the process of registering for a higher degree or PhD and to aid you, as a student researcher, in developing and planning your proposal from start to finish, to secure the best possible chance of getting your proposal approved by a panel or committee.

Writing a research proposal is not solely a formal exercise, it has value as a tool for learning and future marketability. It is an opportunity for you as a writer to develop a reasoned argument and to prove to the panel that you are capable of making an

original and worthwhile contribution to that particular area of knowledge. It could also be seen as a vehicle for evaluation and feedback, when experienced researchers and those with specialist interests, offer comments or further guidance on your proposed research topic and outline.

The proposal has other functions in as much as it is a framework in which you set out the timing and resourcing of the proposed research. It has budgetary elements and expected time scales, which allow the committee to decide on whether the proposed research is going to provide value for money and is worthwhile investing in.

When writing your proposal, remember to present it in a clear, legible, grammatically correct style. This will work in your favour as a nicely presented piece of work does not offend those reading it and after all, how could you hope to convince a committee that you are the right person to undertake the research if you could not even put together a proposal in a professional manner. Paying attention to detail and presentation may help convince them of your overall capability. You may also find it helpful to ask those with more experience to look at your proposal and offer up any suggestions.

The first step in writing your proposal should be engaging in a meeting with your supervisor, this will allow you to discuss your ideas and all the possible issues you need to consider. Your supervisor may have been initially chosen by you or allocated to you by your university, they may have expertise in your methodological area or be eminent in your research area. They will be valuable in raising your awareness of the steps you will need to take in developing your research proposal and although

you will need to have a certain level of autonomy, you need the support and regular interaction with your supervisor(s).

It is useful when considering the various aspects of writing a research proposal to set the main areas out under headings, which in turn provide a schema, directing work to proceed in a structured and logical fashion. Organisation has been described as an essential element of developing research, with careful attention to detail and writing up of all parts of the process, essential in formulating good habits. The ability to be flexible, whilst resisting being overwhelmed by other events is crucial. A clear idea of the plan of work is a vital element of developing the research and not an obstruction to originality. Being flexible and responsive to new ideas is not the same thing as having no plan.

A plan is essential and there are a variety of styles you could adopt when laying out the content. Some organisations may have specific requirements which will be set out in the application criteria and it is essential to follow the guidelines, tailoring the proposal to address the specific guidelines. There is however an expected level of content and headings that can be broadly applied to most research proposals and these are set out below for your benefit so you can read through them, compare them with your expected style and choose the most appropriate ones.

Title



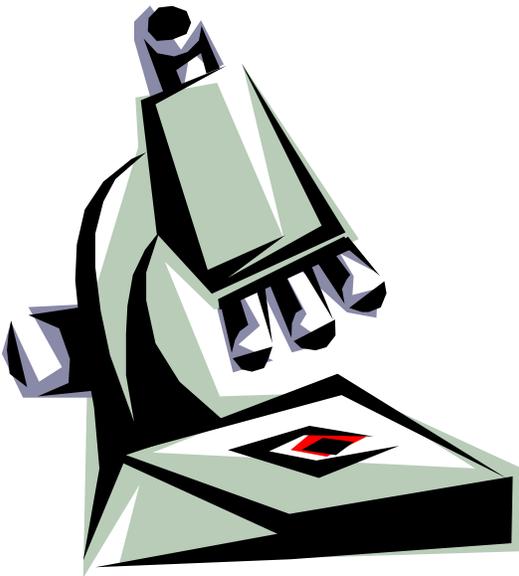
What is the research dissertation/thesis to be called? The title should have the dual capacity to portray the essence of the study whilst being flexible enough to convey the same meaning, even if the

content changes, for example if you have to adjust your experiment or research method. A title should ideally be the tool to captivate the reader. An interesting, catchy and well thought out title will encourage the reader to engage with your proposal and set your application in a positive light. A dull title may have the opposite effect, and bring about a negative reaction, before your proposal has even been considered. The title needs to suggest an idea, a complexity of thoughts, a functional relationship between the variables or a hint at the possibilities of researching the topic further, all of which, if used creatively, should encourage the reader to delve further.

Abstract

The abstract follows on from the title and should set out your piece of work contextually. It encourages the reader to look further, it may attract using links that may provoke interest or curiosity. An abstract or summary is usually written after the work has been carried out so cannot be too detailed at this point because it will develop further following the research. It allows the opportunity to set out the proposed argument in a preliminary way. Abstracts should be a brief summary of around 300 words. It should be informative and include the research question, the rationale for the study, the hypothesis (if applicable), the design method and the expected findings. It should be clearly titled.

Aim and focus of study (may be used instead of abstract)



If you are asked to set out content using study aim and focus, this should include expected study area, with questions to be asked. A cautionary note here is to remember to write realistically, do not be over ambitious and imply greater or more complicated things than you can deliver. The area being

explored should be clear, with expected line of argument and analysis and what the results you expect to acquire will suggest. This area should give clarity of what is to be expected of the research, however it should not be so restricting that it suffocates the research content because the title and how it is set out at the beginning may not be exactly the same at the end of the research project. The area of study may be accompanied by your chosen study method and expected research population.

Literature review



The literature review is essential in positioning your planned research and framing your research problem. To develop original study in a topic area

you must first be aware of what knowledge others have developed and how this can be groundwork for your research, ultimately assisting you and preventing repetition. Through the process of literature review, you must also demonstrate knowledge of landmark studies and may have the opportunity to identify gaps in pre-existing knowledge. Do not use jargon or abbreviations that an individual with a different specialist background would find difficult to understand. Research is more tenable when undertaken to answer an intellectual problem, filling in gaps in knowledge as a result of, rather than a reason for, research. An intellectual paradox as a result of a gap in knowledge may be highlighted during your research, which may then encourage you to perform further research.

Undertaking a comprehensive literature review will indicate your ability to analyse and evaluate relevant literature. It will also facilitate the demonstration of how your study will 'fit' into a topic area and in itself may underpin the development of your proposed work. It will enable this through the acquisition of knowledge relating to the relevant subject area. Through dialogue and analysis of various works, assessing the relationship between 'object' and 'subject' you can begin to set your own work in the subject area. To perform this review it is important to look at the available literature from a broad perspective and then define the key contributors relevant to the proposed study area. It may be beneficial to identify the literature or articles that your proposed research may ultimately build on.

The literature review may need to have its own sub headings and these may enhance clarity as you progress through your inquiry. This can also help you organise your theory base and distinguish separateness or links between schools of thought.

Theoretical perspectives



This should describe the areas in which the dominating theory resides. It should indicate the perspective and the methods utilised to underpin the research and where they connect. Some research undertaken is designed to test theory, known as a deductive approach, whereas other research attempts to generate theory and is known as inductive. A theoretical perspective can also be a safety net for you to relate your research to a known theory, enhancing your research and giving it validity. Certain theory may outlive its usefulness in an ever-changing society. This might necessitate using different theories and you must take care that whilst using theory to put your research on a solid footing, the actual act of using a specific theory does not act as a blinker and prevent you seeing other perspectives.

Research question/objectives



The research problem (often described as the purpose of the study) should be discussed and clear boundaries of the proposed research detailed. This allows a clear focus and sets the stage as to why your research in particular can be contributory to unravelling information and providing answers. It presents the

rationale of why this specific piece of research is worth doing. Objectives should always be achievable and set out in some order of importance. The question or problem should be deconstructed and the aspects of it challenged. The major question should be asked in such a way that allows inquiry and investigation.

The testing of relationships between the information, phenomenon or the independent and dependent variables must be noted. These will lead to sub-questions and a description of how these will be tested should be included. This process is similar to the process of operationalising, where we dissect the whole idea into various layers, asking questions that lead to further questions. If a hypothesis is to be used, how it will be tested and the relationships should be clearly discussed.

Research design and method



The chosen research method should be described and discussed and this is where the panel can observe how you plan to address the research question or problem and

whether or not it is feasible, given your research title. Your timescale must be realistic and be practicable in relation to your work schedule. Research methods may utilise a singular approach such as descriptive, exploratory, predictive, explanatory or action (Wisker 2001 p118) or a combination of these approaches, all of which will depend on the choice of research and the expected aim of undertaking the research. Whichever method you will be

utilising it is useful to place the method or design, population/sample, data collection procedures, pilot studies (if any), analysis and work plan under distinct headings.

It is vital that the researcher demonstrates a sound methodological approach. You should show how you have planned to research the problem and through what channels. If using a design which will tend to evolve and so does not lend itself automatically to pre-planning such as ethnography, interpretive or case study for example, the researcher has to satisfy the panel that they are capable of carrying out this type of research design. The proposal must also substantiate why this design and the chosen method is the most suitable for the chosen research. Describe how you will carry it out and perform a critical path analysis, which will aid the visualisation of your process. This should include your subject and sample size, methods you will incorporate to reduce bias and the currency of data.

Methods can be basically divided into qualitative (interviews, questionnaires) and quantitative (statistics, number crunching). Some research projects necessitate qualitative, some quantitative and others a mix of the two. The type of data that the researcher expects to collect should be detailed and what statistical tools or data analysis packages they intend to use to interpret the data. This is also the opportunity to divulge any specialist statistical support that the researcher hopes to employ, such as statistical departments in their organisation.

The previous idea of placing the proposed research within limitations and boundaries can be mentioned again here, with the justification for these possible weaknesses, for example there may be resources available to look at only one aspect and you should explain why you have chosen that in particular. It is

helpful to discuss the methods in as much detail as possible as this will give the committee an insight into how thoroughly you have prepared your proposal and your comprehensive understanding of the possible strengths and challenges that will become apparent during the research.

The methodology does not have to be set in stone and you may find that you need to review your chosen method to gather new information as your research progresses. The approach to methodology may often be looped rather than a linear process. You may start your research method and begin to observe from your data that you have not chosen the right approach, meaning you have to go back to your original proposal and review your methodology. The need to revise your method could be interpreted as a strength and if preceded by a clear methodology in your original research proposal, shows how you are open to new material and have the best interests of undertaking the research topic at heart. The descriptions of possible problems you may expect to experience can be given and your strategy for dealing with these and possible contingency plans, this will also show your attention to the focus of your research, lessening the possibility that you will be put off track by unexpected obstacles.

Ethical considerations



These may be relevant to your proposal and there is a standard university code of practice relating to ethics, which you must read and understand. There are also ethical considerations and protocols outside the university and

these should be sought out in any organisation you wish to involve in your research.

The value of ethics is to protect individuals and their identity, both in verbal and written form and applies also to data collection, which is governed by its own Data Protection Act. You should include copies of how you will be obtaining written consent from the individuals and the documentation you plan to use to research and collect relevant data. The management of ethical considerations needs to be in place prior to you starting the work and you should aim to get approval as soon as you have settled on your proposal. If you are going through channels such as health or education you may need to participate in several meetings or present to more than one committee before you get your approval.



Resource requirements

This relates to the cost of your proposed research and the budget required for you to undertake the

study. It must be comprehensive, complete and consider all aspects of the financial picture. It should be carefully specified, not undervalued and it must also demonstrate value for money. Staffing levels need to be worked out and any backfill costs or secretarial support added if necessary. If you are a one man

band and performing this research in your own time you will still need to detail some resource implications. Research takes time and money and even if you are funding your own research time, you still need to consider the impact on things such as your subject's time, travel or equipment needed and any permission required to access these resources.

Potential outcomes and applications from your contribution



This is your chance to sell yourself and your research proposal. Tell the committee how valuable your work will be to the body of existing knowledge and how significantly your findings will add to the

theoretical base.

It is an opportunity for you to detail how you will disseminate your research findings, for example you plan to present your findings throughout the research process in academic writing, presentations, planning a video or through attending conferences. The method may be using a new research instrument which will be of interest to those other than those in your subject area. You may have a clear idea of who will be interested in your findings and what advantages this may bring to your working environment or research department. You may plan to use your findings to author a book to be available to the general public or specialist

academic area, whatever your plan, project it in this section. This is where you get the chance to convince the committee that your research is worthwhile.

References/Further Reading

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Dunleavy P (2003) Authoring a PhD. Hampshire: Palgrave

Robson C (1993) Real World Research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers Oxford Blackwell

Hull University Study Advice via:

<http://www.study>

[advice.hull.ac.uk/documents/WritingResearchProposals.pdf](http://www.studyadvice.hull.ac.uk/documents/WritingResearchProposals.pdf)

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