How to Write a Proposal

Why write a Research Proposal?

The research proposal will need to be written in such a way as to demonstrate your intellectual and communicative competence, your expertise so far in your particular area of study and your potential contribution to knowledge. You will need to prove that something is genuinely at stake in your enquiry and so justify the academic and financial support and resources you are seeking. It is crucial that your proposal is well written and makes the case clearly and convincingly. Make sure that there are no errors in spelling, punctuation or syntax, as you need to convince your reader that you can WRITE. The quality of your writing is almost as important as what you say. A good Research proposal has an additional advantage; with appropriate revisions, the chapters in the proposal can give you a start on similar sections for the research paper. Good work on the proposal has two advantages: planning for effective resource use when doing the project, and getting a jump ahead on the final report. Some faculty use the project proposal as an informal "Contract" to establish an agreement about the content and limits of the final project report.

Basic Sections of a Proposal

In addition to specifying the needed allocation of resources to complete the project, proposals have four major sections:

1. **Title**: the title should give a clear idea of your topic as it currently stands: you may well change it once engaged in your research.
2. **Introduction** (Thesis Statement)
3. **Literature Review (or Background)**
4. **Methodology**

The "Introduction" tells the reader

1) what your project is about?
2) why the project is worth doing? and
3) why your project is a good topic for fulfilling the objectives of the course requirement.
The Introduction must also state clearly and completely the specific objectives of your project -- in some detail, what you intend to accomplish (Thesis Statement: this first sentence or short paragraph should explain in clear language the aims, focus and argument of your research as well as the field and primary sources it will cover).

The "Literature Review" tells your reader (your advisor) what the state of the art in your topic is. You probably should tackle the "Literature Review" first since mastering it will give you the background you need to write other sections.

The "Methodology" lays out the method you have selected to conduct your research. It is the body of the proposal; referring methodically to the secondary sources and identified gaps, this section should mention methodology, chapter content and breakdown

**How to start?**

**What is a research question?** The research question is your object of study. It is a question, a problem worth basing your paper around. After a reasonable amount of time you should be able to explain in one (long) sentence the central question which your research addresses. Why do you need to identify dilemmas or gaps or problems? Your research question should posit a problem or a controversial issue, one that is still under debate or has not yet been pinpointed. Your work will need to be new and interesting. The question may be based on a hunch, an insight, a contradiction, a noted gap or flaw or unquestioned assumption in your subject area. In order to do this, you need to make the transition from a broad topic to specific focused research question(s). For example, focusing on how the Spanish films of the 1980s and 1990s mediate and represent the political climate of the time can be narrowed to specific kinds of films. You have started to understand your topic better, although there are lots of things that still puzzle you. This is a good sign that your topic has the necessary complexity. You begin to elaborate arguments and generate insights guided by a series of unfolding questions.

**The following questions will help you in the process:**

- What would you like to investigate about your topic? Which aspects? Why?
- Are there any problems or issues that strike you? Why?
- Which are the unresolved dilemmas that you may have come across?
- Which of these dilemmas / problems would be worth pursuing? Why?
- Can you take an idea and distill it into a question? Develop filters (what?, so what?, why?, how?) so you will be able to turn your idea into a 'provisional' research question, a proposition or hypothesis that will give you a clearer focus. A question that will help you focus your research strategy. The question may lead you to discover, to explore, to explain, to describe.

If you are not ready yet, take the research question through the problems or gaps or dilemmas indicated above and generate some more ideas. The outcome may be new ideas or sub-questions to your original proposition. Use your imagination and your experience.

- What would you like to demonstrate? Why?
- How is your research going to be different from previous findings, i.e. in its specific approach, in the aspect(s) of the topic explored or in the theories applied?
- In what way(s) does your question allow you to test different ideas?
- How does your question allow you to make critical use of published sources?
- Keep your question under review! You can expect your research question(s) to evolve and change during your study. Be prepared to change direction, or develop more than one question. You will learn as time goes on and improve your question at each point and turn. You will streamline your research, your ideas, your analyses, your evidence. Also your needs will change and your skills will develop.

**The thesis statement**

Have you thought of writing a potential answer to your research question? Although you are still working on a tentative or hypothetical proposal, writing a brief thesis or dissertation statement or a kind of possible answer to the research question might help you focus more. Also a thesis statement is the essential first step in writing your research proposal.

- What is the controlling idea of your research question?
- Have you considered the What, Why, How and So What of your research question?
- Have you thought about the concepts, issues and contexts surrounding your topic?
- What is the purpose of your research? Why is it important?
- What are the short and/or long-term objectives?
- What contribution to knowledge will your research make?
- What is the overall objective or purpose of your project?
Literature Review (or Background)

A literature review or critical survey is the next important task in developing your proposal. To show your advisor that you know what your talking about concerning your project, you need to demonstrate that you know the background and context of your topic. Good questions to answer in this section are:

- What kinds of research have been done before?
- How have others gone about trying to solve problems you want to tackle, and in what ways will your approach build on and vary from previous work?
- Think of the background section as the place where you identify and discuss the most important books, articles, or any other kind of source materials for your project. If you wanted to bring another student up to date on what you're doing, what would be the most important thing to read?
- A well written review will provide a sense of critical issues and debates which form the background for your own original work.

Everything in your literature review section should be mentioned in your bibliography, BUT not everything in the bibliography is important enough to be mentioned in the literature review. In other words, this section is a comment on the most valuable material you have identified which you will need to assimilate to do your project. The literature review thus provides a guide to all material you list separately as footnotes or bibliography.

Methodology

The procedure or the methodology is the heart of the proposal because it must tell the reader how you propose to carry out your project. It must convince your advisor (or in industry your manager or potential client) that you clearly understand your task, have a logical time plan for solving your problems, and have identified all the resources you need. This third stage of your proposal process (Methodology) is about detailing how you will carry out your research. It is your opportunity to specify what you will be looking at, the way you will engage with the primary material of your project and also how you intend to do this. The methodology section of your proposal will specify in detail the research operations and instruments you intend to employ to address your research question(s) or test your hypotheses. This stage is about using your research proposal to demonstrate feasibility. Of course, if you are proposing a more traditional e.g. literary critical thesis, then there may be
less to say as regards methodology than if your proposal involves amassing quantitative or qualitative raw data (for example via interviews or questionnaire analysis). **When outlining your methodology ask yourself the following questions:**

- in what ways can your chosen methodology be applied to your proposed materials?
- can you show that your methods can be used to explore your key problem satisfactorily?
- how will you convince the reader of your research proposal that your approach is the most appropriate one?