

EIGHT

Writing a Research Proposal



Before you have to do an undergraduate dissertation or any other research project, you will normally be asked to produce a proposal of what you are planning to research and write about. This will enable your tutor to make sure that the subject is suitable and that the planned project is 'do-able' within the time and resources available.

We have already discussed the literature review that forms a part of the proposal, but what about the rest? Here is a summary of what you need to write.

A proposal is a careful description of what your dissertation or research project will be about and how you intend to carry out the work involved until its completion. It is a really useful document that challenges you to think very carefully about what you are going to do, how you will do it and why. It will be required in order to inform your supervisor of your intentions so that he or she can judge whether:

- The subject and suggested format conforms to the requirements of the course
- It is a feasible project in respect to scope and practicality
- You have identified some questions or issues that are worth investigating
- Your suggested methods for information collection and analysis are appropriate
- The expected outcomes relate to the aims of the project.

Do: When you write your proposal, it not only gives you an opportunity to crystallize your thoughts before you embark on the project, but it also allows you to consider how much you will actually be able to achieve within the few weeks/months allowed.



You will not be able to sit down and write your proposal without referring to your background research. A good proposal will indicate how your chosen topic emerges from issues that are being debated within your subject field, and how your

work will produce a useful contribution to the debate. At this level of research, you do not have to produce any earth-shattering discoveries, but it is necessary to produce some useful insights through the appropriate application of research theory and methods.

Because the proposal must be quite short (usually not more than one or two sides of paper) a lot of thought needs to be put into its production in order to cover all the matter that needs to be conveyed in an elegantly dense manner. Several redrafts will be needed in order to pare it down to the limited length allowed, so don't panic if you cannot get it all together first time. A really informative proposal will not only impress your supervisor, but will also give you a good guide to the work. It will also help you to focus on the important issues if (and probably, when) you get diverted on to branching paths of investigation later on in the project.

There is a fairly standardized format for writing proposals that, if followed, ensures that you cover all the important aspects that must be included. The following advice will help you to focus on the essential matters and help you to make the hard choices required at this early stage in the project.

THE SUBJECT TITLE

The subject title summarizes in a few words the entire project. You will probably not be able to formulate this finally until you have completed the proposal, but you will need something to be going on with in order to focus your thinking.

A title should contain the key words of the dissertation subject, that is, the main subjects, concepts or situations. Added to these are normally a few words that delineate the scope of the study. For example:

Temporary housing in the suburbs: the expansion of residential caravan sites in British cities in the 1970s.

Start, therefore, by summing up the core of your chosen subject by its principal concepts. To find these, refer to the background reading you have done. What words are mentioned in the book titles, the chapter headings and the contents lists? These may be quite esoteric, but should represent the very heart of your interest. They should also, when linked together, imply an issue or even a question.

This part of the title will, by its nature, be rather general and even abstract. In order to describe the nature of the project itself, more detail will be required to state its limitations, such as the location, time and extent. Locations can be countries or towns, types of place or situations. Time might be historical periods, the present or during specific events.

The previous delineations help to define the extent of the project, but further factors can be added, such as under certain conditions, in particular contexts, etc.

A few examples here will give you the general idea:

- In Brazil
- In market towns
- In one-to-one teaching lessons
- In the sixteenth century
- Contemporary trends
- During the General Strike
- After motorway accidents
- High-altitude mountaineering

THE AIMS OR OBJECTIVES

The aims or objectives of the project should be summarized in three or four bullet points. This then provides a very succinct summary of the thrust of the research and provides an introduction to the rationale that follows.

Don't: Ignore the importance of your aims. If you find it difficult to write your aims, then you have probably not thought sufficiently about what you are actually going to do.

Some useful indicative words you can use are: to explore, to test, to investigate, to explain, to compare, to predict. Ensure that there is an indication of the limits of the project by mentioning place, time, extent, etc. Here is an example:

Social interaction in children's playgrounds in parks

Aims

- To examine the range of social interactions that occur in children's playgrounds in four different parks.
- To compare the design of the playgrounds and types of park in which they are situated.
- To explore the possible connections between characteristics of the playgrounds and parks, and types of social interactions.

THE BACKGROUND

Anyone reading your proposal for the first time needs to be informed about the context of the project and where it fits in with current thinking. Do not assume that

the reader knows anything about the subject, so introduce it in such a way that any intelligent person can understand the main issues surrounding your work. That is the one function of the background section. The other function is to convince your supervisor that you have done the necessary reading into the subject, and that you have reviewed the literature sufficiently. This is why it is necessary to have a good range of references in this section. See Chapter 5 on how to write a literature review.

DEFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Based on the issues explained and discussed in the background section you should be able to identify the particular part of the subject that you want to investigate.



Do: Every subject could be studied for a lifetime, so it is important that you isolate just one small facet of the subject that you can manageably deal with in the short amount of time that you are given.

Once you have explained the topic of your study, and argued why it is necessary to do work in this area, it is a good idea briefly to state the research problem in one or two clear sentences. This will be a direct reflection of your title, and will sum up the central question or problem that you will be investigating.



Do: Devise a clear definition of the research problem, as this is an essential ingredient of a proposal; after all, the whole project hinges on this.

The nature of the problem also determines the issues that you will explore, the kind of information that you will collect and the types of analysis that you will use. The main research problem should grow naturally and inevitably out of your discussion of the background. You can state it clearly as a question, hypothesis, etc. Then explain briefly how it will be broken down into sub-problems, hypotheses, etc. in order to make it practicable to research. There should be a connection between these and the aims or objectives of the project – everything should link up neatly.

THE MAIN CONCEPTS AND VARIABLES

Every subject has its own way of looking at things, its own terminology and its own ways of measuring. Consider the differences between analysing the text

of a Shakespearean play and the data transmitted back from a space probe. You will certainly be familiar with some of the concepts that are important in your subject – just look at the title you have chosen for examples of these. It will probably be necessary to define the main concepts in order to dispel any doubts as to their exact meaning. There might even be some dispute in the literature about terminology. If so, highlight the nature of the discussion.

A mention of the indicators that are used to make the concepts recognizable will be the first step to breaking down the abstract nature of most concepts. Then a description of the variables that are the measurable components of the indicators can be used to demonstrate how you will actually be able to collect and analyse the relevant data to come to conclusions about the concepts and their nature.

You do not need to write much here, just enough to convince the reader that you are clear as to how you can investigate the abstract concepts with which you might be dealing, for example, suitability, success, creativity, quality of life, etc. Even well-known terms might need to be broken down to ensure that the reader understands just how you will study them.

METHODS

What exactly will you do in order to collect and analyse the necessary information? This is the practical part of the proposal where you explain what you will do, how you will do it and why. It is important to demonstrate the way that your research activities relate to the aims or objectives of your project and thus will enable you to come to conclusions relevant to the research problem. Different methods will be required for different parts of the research. At this stage you need not know in detail just how you will implement them, but you should quite easily be able to choose those that seem appropriate for different aspects of your enquiry. Consider the following actions that you might need to take:

- Do a literature search and critical analysis of sources.
- Consult with experts.
- Identify research population(s), situations, possible case studies.
- Select samples - size of sample(s), location of sample(s), number of case studies.
- Collect data (quantitative, qualitative and combination of both) - questionnaires, interviews, study of documents, observations, etc.
- Set up experiments or models and run them.
- Analyse data - statistical tests, enumerating and classifying, data displays for data reduction and analysis.
- Evaluate results of analysis - summarizing and coming to conclusions.

It is best to spell out what you intend to do in relation to each sub-problem or question when they require different methods of data collection and analysis.

Try to be precise and add reasons for what you are planning to do (i.e. add the phrase 'in order to ...'). This methods section of the proposal can be in the form of a list of actions.



Do: This whole process will need quite a lot of thought and preparation, especially as you will not be familiar with some of the research methods. But time spent now to make informed decisions is well spent. It will make you much more confident that you can plan your project, that you have not overreached yourself and that you have decided on activities that you will enjoy doing.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

It is a good idea to spell out to the reader, and to yourself, just what you hope will be achieved by doing all this work. Since the proposal is a type of contract to deliver certain results, it is a mistake to 'promise mountains and deliver molehills'. Although you cannot predict exactly what the outcomes will be (if you could, there would be little point in carrying out the research), you should try to be quite precise as to the nature and scope of the outcomes and as to who might benefit from the information. Obviously you should make sure that the outcomes relate directly to the aims of the research that you described at the beginning of the proposal. The outcomes may be a contribution at a practical and/or theoretical level.

PROGRAMME OF WORK

A simple bar chart showing the available time in weeks and the list of tasks you will need to complete, and their sequence and duration, will be a sufficient programme of work. Don't forget to give yourself plenty of time to write up and present your dissertation. You will quickly spot if you have been too ambitious in your intentions if the tasks just will not fit realistically into time allowed. If you see problems ahead, now is the time to adjust your proposal to make it more feasible. Reduce the scope of the investigations by narrowing the problem still further (you can do this by becoming more specific and by reducing the number of sub-problems or questions), being less ambitious with the amount of data to collect and by simplifying the analytical stages.



Take it further

Start to write your proposal! The biggest danger is that you agonize for ages over what to do before you even write anything down. This is a mistake, for if you try to work out everything in your head you cannot realistically review it. Committing yourself to paper

not only relieves your memory from having to retain all your decisions, but also forces you to construct an argument to structure your intentions. Once you have something written down, you can review it, build on it, add detail to it and alter it as required.

The best way to start is by sketching out your ideas, perhaps as a series of headings or points, and you don't have to worry too much what you write down, as it can so easily be altered, moved, expanded or even deleted. You can work like a painter who first sketches out a few indicative lines, then builds on these to produce, stage by stage, a finished picture. Assuming you have a good idea of the sort of problem you wish to address, you don't even have to start at the beginning. You could work back from the desired outcomes and create a rationale on how you would get there. Or you could select the activities that you enjoy doing most and explore how you could exploit these to devise a project. Once you have a framework that looks feasible, you can add the detail - work that will require rather more reflection and reference to further information.

You should set out the final version according to the structure outlined above. You will also need to add a list of references that give the details about the publications cited in your text. Check with any coursework instructions you have been given to make sure that you are fulfilling the requirements. When you have finished, why not give a copy to your supervisor and request his or her comments? Be prepared to alter your proposal in response to any comments you receive, but first think carefully about the implications of these changes. The comments should help to make life easier for you, or clarify the implications of your proposals. It is also in the interest of your supervisor that you do well and enjoy the experience of writing your dissertation.

Once finalized and approved, the proposal will form a firm foundation for your research work. You should refer to it from time to time during the next weeks when you get into the detail of your work, in order to check that you are not going astray, getting too bogged down on one particular aspect or missing out on an essential detail.

Ask yourself



What is the connection between words in the title of your project and the research questions?

The words you use in your title will be the main concepts at the heart of the research, and perhaps something about their relationship. Your main research question should definitely contain all of those concepts, and the sub-questions should be expressed in such a way that in answering them, you will examine those concepts and their relationships. Do make sure that you always use the same terminology - never different words in different parts of the dissertation even if they mean much the same thing.

How can you relate the research methods to the research questions?

You should select the research methods for collecting and analysing data based on their suitability for finding answers to the research questions, not the other way round.

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When a student comes to me and says 'I want to do a survey', I always ask 'why?' Actually, it makes it much easier to decide on the methods to use from the huge choice in front of you when you can identify the functions that they will have to fulfil.

What is the sequence of sections of a typical research proposal?

The sections should follow a logical sequence, going from the general to the particular, after the introduction consisting of the title and aims and objectives. The background research and literature review (general) should result in the identification of the problem and identify the research questions (getting more specific). The explanation of selection of research methods details how these research questions will be answered (even more specific). The expected outcomes and programme of work tie the project down to results and timing (bang on specific to this project).



Further reading

There are books that are solely dedicated to writing academic proposals of all kinds. The principles are the same for all of them; it is the extent and detail that vary. All are reasoned arguments to support a plan of action. If you want to read more, or find different approaches to proposal writing, you can explore some of these books. Some will be rather too detailed for your purposes, but you will undoubtedly find something useful. Every book on how to do dissertations will also have a section on writing a proposal. Several have been mentioned in previous chapters.

Denscombe, M. (2012) *Research Proposal: a Practical Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

This explains the basic principles and gives clear guidance on what to include in your proposal.

Locke, L.F. (2007) *Proposals That Work: a Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals* (5th edn). London: Sage.

Another clear guide to all the aspects of proposal writing.

Coley, S.M. and Scheinberg, C.A. (2008) *Proposal Writing* (3rd edn). London: Sage with the University of Michigan.

This book is written for employees in the non-profit sector who are asked to write a proposal and for students who may ultimately have careers that require this skill.

Punch, K. (2006) *Developing Effective Proposals* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Dealing with both qualitative and quantitative approaches to empirical research across the social sciences, this book comprehensively covers the topics and concerns relevant to the subject and is organized around three central themes: what is a research proposal, who reads proposals and why? How can we go about developing a proposal? What might a finished proposal look like?

Denicolo, P. and Becker, L. (2012) *Developing Research Proposals*. London: Sage.

This will help you to understand the context within which your proposal will be read, what the reviewers are looking for and will be influenced by, while also supporting the development of relevant skills through advice and practical activities.

Vithal, R. and Jansen, J. (2010) *Designing Your First Research Proposal: A Manual for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (2nd edn). Cape Town: Juta.

This manual presents a simple, clear and coherent strategy for preparing research proposals. It is a practical, application-focused guide to writing a proposal for basic and advanced research projects.