WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

When do we write a research proposal?

We write research proposals for different reasons, including the following:
- Before enrolment e.g. when applying for a scholarship
- Before beginning the research component of a coursework or research degree
- When applying for a research grant.

Why write a research proposal?

A proposal serves a number of purposes both for you, the writer, and for the committee members who will read your proposal.

For you, it helps clarify:
- what you are investigating
- how you will investigate it
- if the project will allow you to argue what you want to
- if the project is viable.

For a committee/supervisor, it helps determine whether the project is
- feasible in terms of scope and time
- original (especially for a PhD)
- appropriate for
degree type, e.g. a research Masters or PhD or a degree by research and coursework,
resources available
methods chosen.

What is the purpose of a proposal?

The aim of a research proposal is to persuade those reading it that your project is worthwhile and doable.¹

What do I include?

A possible way to order information in your proposal follows.²

1. Introduction
   1.1 General background
   1.2 Specific topic
   1.3 Gap
   1.4 Research question/problem
   1.5 Thesis statement/hypothesis
2. Literature review
3. Theoretical framework
4. Methodology
5. Contribution
6. Research plan and timeline
7. References

TIP

Disciplines differ so check the proposal requirements for your degree type and discipline area

Honours and Masters 1
Introduction
- Move from general to specific information.
- Provide brief general background.
- Get quickly to your specific topic.
- Mention the ‘gap’, i.e. the area your research will fill or expand on. Explain why your research should be done.
- Formulate a tentative research question or problem you intend to address.
- Develop a hypothesis, if this is relevant for your area of study.

Literature review & theoretical framework
- Cover the major issues, key theories.
- Mention controversies.
- Define key terms.

Methodology
- Explain what methodology you are using and why you have chosen it. Refer to the appropriate literature to back up your choices.

Contribution
- Outline how your research will make a difference, i.e. what changes it will bring about?

Research plan & timetable
- Outline what you intend to cover in each chapter.
- Provide a timetable which shows when you intend to do all the necessary aspects of your research.

References
- Compile a list of all the literature you referred to in your proposal. Make sure you also use in-text references or footnotes and use the reference style recommended by your discipline.

Do you know?
It is important to distinguish between
- your aim/question
- your hypothesis

Compare aim and hypothesis
Aim (what you want to find out), e.g.
- What is the relationship between test anxiety and performance on complex cognitive tasks?

Hypothesis (a proposition that can be tested), e.g.
Performance on complex cognitive tasks will be an inverted U-shaped function of the level of anxiety. ³

Final tip
Write your proposal in plain English which is understandable to an intelligent non-specialist.

Like this Survival Guide? Why not check out...
Survival Guides: Writing a literature review, Writing an annotated bibliography, Quoting, Paraphrasing, Writing critically
1 Adapted from Graduate Research School's Research Proposal Guidelines www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/56890
2 Ideas adapted from Davies, M. 2011, Study Skills for International Postgraduates, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

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