

THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

What is a research proposal? 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 do you plan to accomplish? Why is the research important? 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 is essential that your writing is coherent, clear and compelling.

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

The Proposal - your research proposal should not be more than 2000 words (maximum) in length (excluding references).

Title - the title 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 favourably towards the proposal.

Other key components are:

- **The Introduction** - A description of the research problem

- **The Literature Review** - A review of literature relevant to the research problem (theoretical or conceptual framework)
- **Aims and objectives** - Key Research aims / objectives of your study, arising from the literature review
- **Research Methods** - A description of the proposed research methodology (qualitative, quantitative etc.)
- **Time Schedule**- (a step by step guide to the stages of the research over the time period)

THE INTRODUCTION (SUGGESTED WORD LIMIT 300 WORDS)

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 writers" 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. Define key concepts where appropriate

LITERATURE REVIEW (SUGGESTED WORD LIMIT 500 WORDS)

Sometimes the literature review is incorporated into the introduction section. However, most reviewers will 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. 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.

Examples - the research topic is "the History of Mental Illness in Natal in the period up to 1945":

A Successful Literature Review

"This study will draw on diverse approaches to the history of psychiatry, and to the origins of segregation in southern Africa. Histories of psychiatry and psychology have shown that, although having a probable partial biochemical basis, the criteria for the definition of mental illness have differed across time and place. (Brin, 2000) The history of science and medicine in both Europe and in the colonial order provide a means for exploring the role of biomedicine (including psychiatry) in contributing to racial, class, and sexual discrimination (Brown,2008). Feminist analyses of the centrality of gender, and critiques of psychiatry and psychology, will be a key axis around which this study is formed. For example, while men of all races formed the majority of inmates at the Natal Government Asylum in nineteenth century Natal, women were deemed to be particularly prone to particular forms of mental illness (Knowles, 2001; Keogh, 2004)

Post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches to the construction and representation of identities, and to the articulation of power, will provide a means of deconstructing the 'texts' and discourses which are an important part of this study. In particular, the works of Michel

Foucault (1967) on mental illness, asylums, and the archaeology of knowledge will be considered. I recognise, however, that the application of Foucault's ideas in the African context is problematic (Miller, 1993; Friedman,2003) Post- colonialism's concern with the 'subaltern' and the suppression of 'subaltern voices' will be reflected in attempts to 'hear the voices' of the institutionalized (Miller,1993)."

An Unsuccessful Literature Review

"Foucault's works looked at mental illness, asylums, and the archaeology of knowledge. Roy Porter's and Edward Shorter's histories of psychiatry and psychology show that definitions of mental illness have differed across time and place. Ernst and Swartz record that under colonialism, science and medicine contributed to racial, class, and sexual discrimination. Feminist writers Chesler and Showalter who have written on psychiatry will be important for this study. Post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches to the construction and representation of identities will be used. Post-colonialism's concern with the 'subaltern' and the suppression of 'subaltern voices' will be significant."

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES (SUGGESTED WORD LIMIT 100 WORDS)

Aims are broad statements of desired outcomes or the general intentions of the research, which 'paint the picture' of your research proposal – they:

- emphasize what is to be accomplished, not how it is to be accomplished
- address the long-term project outcomes, i.e. they should reflect the aspirations and expectations of the research topic

Objectives are the steps you are going to take to answer your research questions or a specific list of tasks needed to accomplish the goals of the project - they:

- emphasize how aims are to be accomplished
- must be highly focused and feasible
- address the more immediate project outcomes
- make accurate use of concepts and be sensible and precisely described
- are usually numbered so that each objective reads as an 'individual' statement to convey your intention

RESEARCH METHODS (SUGGESTED WORD LIMIT 1000 WORDS)

The methods section is very important because it tells our 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 the 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 clearly identify the approach to be taken and justify the decision taken. Students should demonstrate an understanding of qualitative and quantitative research methods and clearly indicate how and where these are best employed. The research methods should include: project design; sample and recruitment; data collection plan; data analysis; ethical implications.

COMMON MISTAKES

Here are some of the common mistakes you should look out for when writing a research proposal:

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- You MUST keep to the word limit.
11. Failure to reference appropriately.
12. Poor academic writing.

TIME SCHEDULE (SUGGESTED WORD LIMIT 100 WORDS)

Time schedule - Provide a detailed guide as to how you will complete the work within the time specified. A PhD normally takes 3 years (full time) and 6 years (part time).

Final Review

Once complete, review your proposal and application and think about the following questions:

- Have I checked the School website and is the proposal in an area that staff in the school can supervise?
- Is it written clearly and concisely and is there evidence of critical evaluation?
- Does the proposal demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the main theoretical and research debates in the field?
- Does the proposal focus on a research area that is significant and relevant to the field? - will it make a valuable contribution to knowledge?
- Is there a clear rationale for the study?
- Are the research objectives and research questions arising from the literature clearly set out?
- Does the proposal indicate an appreciation of the research process?
- Does the proposal demonstrate an understanding of research methods and research approaches and is it clear that the research methods identified are appropriate to the research question identified?
- Can the proposed programme of research be studied to the depth required to obtain the degree of PhD?
- Can the proposed programme of research be completed within the time to be designated for it?

MORE INFORMATION

In order to assist you in devising a research proposal you might wish to refer to the following research methods texts:

- LoBiondo-Wood, G, and Haber, J. (2018): Nursing research: methods and critical appraisal for evidence-based practice. (Elsevier, St. Louis)
- Polit D. (2018): Essentials of nursing research. (Wolters Kluwer, Philadelphia)
- Moule P, Aveyard H, Goodman M. (2017) Nursing research, an introduction. (SAGE, Thousand Oaks CA)
- Cryer P. (2000): The Research Student's Guide to Success. (Open University, Milton Keynes)
- Kamler, B and Thompson, P. (2006) Helping Doctoral Students to Write (Oxon Routledge)
- Bentley P. (2006) The PhD Application Handbook (Open University Press, Milton Keynes).