

## **Stepping stones of a Research Proposal**

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Most students and beginning researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means, nor do they understand its importance. To put it bluntly, one's research is only as good as one's 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 you plan to accomplish, why you want to do it and how you are going to do it.

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 pays if your writing is coherent, clear and compelling.

### **Title:**

It 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 favorably towards the proposal.

### **Abstract:**

It is a brief summary of approximately 300 words. It should include the research question, the rationale for the study, the hypothesis (if any), the method and the main findings. Descriptions of the method may include the design, procedures, the sample and any instruments that will be used.

### **Introduction/ Background/ Significance/ Literature Review:**

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 players” 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, remember that reviewers will not be convinced by poetic rhetoric or political statements.

Sometimes the literature review is incorporated into the introduction section. However, most professors prefer a separate section, which allows a more thorough review of the literature. The literature review serves several important functions:

- Ensures that you are not “reinventing the wheel”.
- Gives credits to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
- Demonstrates your knowledge of the research problem.
- Demonstrates your understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question.
- Shows your ability to critically evaluate relevant literature information.
- 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).

### **Methods:**

The Method section is very important because it tells your 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.

Describe in detail data you will use and how will you use them. Be explicit about measurement of variables. Make sure that there is a connection between your specific aims and the hypothesis to be tested & the design and analyses. Identify the strength and weakness of your design and approach. Convince the reviewer that you can do this research.

For quantitative studies, the method section typically consists of the following sections:

**Design** -Is it a questionnaire study or a laboratory experiment? What kind of design do you choose?

**Subjects or participants** – Who will take part in your study? What kind of sampling procedure do you use?

**Instruments** – What kind of measuring instruments or questionnaires do you use? Why do you choose them? Are they valid and reliable?

**Procedure** – How do you plan to carry out your study? What activities are involved? How long does it take?

**Results:** Obviously you do not have results at the proposal stage. However, you need to have some idea about what kind of data you will be collecting, and what statistical procedures will be used in order to answer your research question or test your hypothesis.

**Discussion:** It is important to convince your reader of the potential impact of your proposed research. You need to communicate a sense of enthusiasm and confidence without exaggerating the merits of your proposal. That is why you also need to mention the limitations and weaknesses of the proposed research, which may be justified by time and financial constraints as well as by the early developmental stage of your research area.

**References:** Take a note of all sources you use in literature review and data search. Note Web address of all information from the internet.

### **Common Mistakes in Proposal Writing**

- Failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question.
- Failure to delimit the boundary conditions for your research.
- Failure to cite landmark studies.
- Failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers.
- Failure to stay focused on the research question.
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
- Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.
- Too much rambling — going “all over the map” without a clear sense of direction.
- Too many citation lapses and incorrect references.