

Writing a Research Proposal

Writing up a strong research proposal is a task that calls on you to win your supervisor over and persuade them that what you're planning is a great idea. This means that your dissertation proposal needs to be **persuasive, attractive, and well-planned**.

1. What exactly is a proposal?

The research proposal is a written document that communicates what you propose to research, in a concise format. It's where you put all that stuff spinning around in your head down onto paper, in a logical, convincing fashion.

Convincing is the keyword here, as your research proposal needs to convince the assessor that your research is **articulated** (i.e., a [clear research question](#)), **worth doing** (i.e., is unique and valuable enough to justify the effort), and **doable** within the restrictions you'll face (time limits, budget, skill limits, etc.). If your proposal does not address these three criteria, your research won't be approved, no matter how "exciting" the research idea might be.

Before starting the writing process, you need to **ask yourself 4 important questions**. If you can't answer them succinctly and confidently, you're not ready – you need to go back and think more deeply about your [dissertation topic](#).

You should be able to answer the following 4 questions before starting your dissertation or thesis research proposal:

1. **WHAT** is my main research question? (the topic)
2. **WHO** cares, and why is this important? (the justification)
3. **WHAT** data would I need to answer this question, and how will I analyze it? (The research design)
4. **HOW** will I manage the completion of this research within the given timelines? (Project and risk management)

2. How to Write a Research Proposal

Research proposals can vary in style between institutions and disciplines, but the following **5-section structure** can be useful.

Topic/Title Header

Your research proposal's title should be your main research question in its simplest form, possibly with a sub-heading providing basic details on the specifics of the study. For example:

"Compliance with equality legislation in the charity sector: a study of the 'reasonable adjustments' made in three London care homes"

This title provides a clear indication of what the research is about, in broad terms. It paints a high-level picture for the first-time reader, which gives them a taste of what to expect. **Always aim for a clear, concise title**. Don't feel the need to capture every detail of your research in your title – your proposal will fill in the gaps.

Section 01: Background Section

The background section has to provide the **context** of the study. It has to talk about the broader research area, what the current literature says about the research area, what some of the gaps in existing studies are, and how this led to the [gap](#) or need you intend to examine in your study. The background for a proposal has to provide a solid start and foundation for the proposal. Therefore, it helps to **cite** relevant literature and provide necessary **statistics** to show why your study is needed. Note, however, that the detailed literature review has to come later in the paper, after the introduction.

Section 02: Introduction

The introduction has to present and discuss the [research question](#), the specific aspect of the broader research area or topic you will be examining in your study. It has to talk about how you arrived at and why you have chosen to study this particular research question. You will have to provide the necessary [rationale](#) here because your proposal and study hinge on this. Then, you need to present and discuss the [problem statement](#), which talks about the present state concerning your research topic, the ideal state, and how your research will attempt to provide a solution to attain the ideal state. Finally, you need to present and discuss your [hypothesis](#).

Section 03: Delimitation of the Problem

Next, you'll need to specify what the scope of your research will be – this is also known as the **delimitations**. In other words, you need to make it clear what you **will** be covering and, more importantly, what you **won't** be covering in your research. Simply put, this is about ring-fencing your research topic so that you have a laser-sharp focus.

All too often, students feel the need to go broad and try to address as many issues as possible to produce comprehensive research. Whilst this is admirable, it's a mistake. By tightly refining your scope, you'll enable yourself to **go deep** with your research, which is what you need to earn good marks. If your scope is too broad, you're likely going to end up with superficial research (which won't earn marks), so don't be afraid to narrow things down.

Section 04: Literature Review

In this section of your research proposal, you need to provide a (relatively) brief discussion of the existing literature. Naturally, this will not be as comprehensive as the **literature review** in your actual dissertation, but it will lay the foundation for that. If you put in the effort at this stage, you'll make your life a lot easier when it's time to write your actual literature review chapter.

There are a few things you need to achieve in this section:

1. Demonstrate that you've done your reading and are **familiar with the current state of the research** in your topic area.
2. Show that **there's a clear gap** for your specific research – i.e., show that your topic is sufficiently unique and will add value to the existing research.
3. Show how the existing research has shaped your thinking regarding **research design**. For example, you might use scales or questionnaires from previous studies.

When you write up your literature review, keep these three objectives front of mind, especially number two (revealing the gap in the literature), so that your literature review has a **clear purpose and direction**. Everything you write should contribute towards one (or more) of these objectives in some way. If it doesn't, you need to ask yourself whether it's truly needed.

Top Tip: *Don't fall into the trap of just describing the main pieces of literature, for example, "A says this, B says that, C also says that..." and so on. Merely describing the literature provides no value. Instead, you need to **synthesize** it and use it to address the three objectives above.*

Section 05: Research Methodology

Now that you've clearly explained both your intended research topic in the introduction and the existing research it will draw on in the literature review section, it's time to get practical and explain exactly how you'll carry out your research. In other words, your research methodology.

In this section, you'll need to **answer two critical questions**:

1. **How** will you design your research? What **research methodology** will you adopt, what will your sample be, how will you collect data, etc?
2. **Why** have you chosen this design? I.e., why does this approach suit your specific research aims, objectives, and questions?

In other words, this is not just about explaining what you'll be doing; it's also about explaining why. In fact, the **justification is the most important part** because that justification is how you demonstrate a good understanding of research design (which is what assessors want to see).

Some essential design choices you need to cover in your research proposal include:

- Your intended research philosophy (e.g., **positivism, interpretivism, or pragmatism**)
- What methodological approach will you be taking (e.g., **qualitative, quantitative, or mixed**)
- The details of your sample (e.g., sample size, who they are, who they represent, etc.)
- What data do you plan to collect (i.e., data about what, in what form?)
- How do you plan to collect it (e.g., **surveys, interviews**, focus groups, etc)
- How do you plan to analyze it (e.g., regression analysis, **thematic analysis**, etc)
- Ethical adherence (i.e., does this research satisfy all **ethical requirements** of your institution, or does it need further approval?)