What (Exactly) Is A Research Proposal?

If you're nearing the end of your degree program and your dissertation or thesis is on the horizon, or you're planning to apply for a PhD program, chances are you're going to need to craft a convincing **research proposal**. If you're on this lecture, you're probably unsure exactly what the research proposal is all about.

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a simply a structured, formal document that explains **what** you plan to research (i.e. your research topic), **why** it's worth researching (i.e. your justification), and **how** you plan to investigate it (i.e. your practical approach).

The purpose of the research proposal (it's job, so to speak) is to **convince** your research supervisor, committee or university that your research is **suitable** (for the requirements of the degree program) and **manageable** (given the time and resource constraints you will face).

The most important word here is "**convince**" – in other words, your research proposal needs to *sell* your research idea (to whoever is going to approve it). If it doesn't convince them (of its suitability and manageability), you'll need to revise and resubmit. This will cost you valuable time, which will either delay the start of your research or eat into its time allowance (which is bad news).

What goes into a research proposal?

As we mentioned earlier, a good dissertation or thesis proposal needs to cover the "what", the "why" and the "how" of the research. Let's look at each of these in a little more detail:

The WHAT

Your proposal needs to clearly articulate your research topic. This needs to be **specific** and **unambiguous**. Your research topic should make it clear exactly what you plan to research and in what context. Here's an example:

Topic: An investigation into the factors which impact female Generation Y consumer's likelihood to promote a specific makeup brand to their peers: a British context

As you can see, this topic is extremely clear. From this one line we can see exactly:

- **What's** being investigated – factors that make people promote a brand of makeup
- **Who** it involves – female Gen-Y consumers
- In what **context** – the United Kingdom

So, make sure that your research proposal provides a detailed explanation of your research topic. It should go without saying, but don't start writing your proposal until you have a crystal-clear topic in mind, or you'll end up waffling away a few thousand words.

The WHY

As we touched on earlier, it's not good enough to simply propose a research topic – you need to justify why your topic is original. In other words, what makes it **unique**? What gap in the current literature does it fill? If it's simply a rehash of the existing research, it's probably not going to get approval – it needs to be fresh.

But, **originality** alone is not enough. Once you've ticked that box, you also need to justify why your proposed topic is **important**. In other words, what value will it add to the world if you manage to find answers to your research questions?

For example, let's look at the sample research topic we mentioned earlier (factors impacting brand advocacy). In this case, if the research could uncover relevant factors, these findings would be very useful to marketers in the cosmetics industry, and would, therefore, have **commercial value**. That is a clear justification for the research.

So, when you're crafting your research proposal, remember that it's not enough for a topic to simply be unique. It needs to be useful and value-creating – and you need to convey that value in your proposal.

The HOW

It's all good and well to have a great topic that's original and important, but you're not going to convince anyone to approve it without discussing the **practicalities** – in other words:

- How will you undertake your research?
- Is your research design appropriate for your topic?
- Is your plan manageable given your constraints (time, money, expertise)?

While it's generally not expected that you'll have a fully fleshed out research strategy at the proposal stage, you will need to provide a high-level view of your **research methodology** and some key design decisions. Here are some important questions you'll need to address in your proposal:

- Will you take a qualitative or quantitative approach?
- How will you collect your data (interviews, surveys, etc)?
- How will you analyse your data (e.g. statistical analysis, qualitative data analysis, etc)?

So, make sure you give some thought to the practicalities of your research and have at least a basic understanding of research methodologies before you start writing up your proposal.

How long is a research proposal?

This varies tremendously, depending on the university, the field of study (e.g., social sciences vs natural sciences), and the level of the degree (e.g. undergraduate, Masters or PhD) – so it's always best to **check with your university** what their specific requirements are before you start planning your proposal.

As a rough guide, a formal research proposal at Masters-level often ranges between **2000-3000 words**, while a PhD-level proposal can be far more detailed, ranging from **5000-8000 words**. In some cases, a rough outline of the topic is all that's needed, while in other cases, universities expect a very detailed proposal that essentially forms the first three chapters of the dissertation or thesis.

The takeaway – be sure to check with your institution before you start writing.

How is a research proposal structured?

While the exact structure and format required for a dissertation or thesis research proposal differs from university to university, there are five "**essential ingredients**" that typically make up the structure of a research proposal:

1. A descriptive **title** or title page
2. A rich **introduction** and background to the proposed research
3. A discussion of the **scope/delimitations** of the research
4. An initial **literature review** covering the key research in the area
5. A discussion of the proposed **research design** (methodology)

Example A: Traditional Approach Headings

Title Page
Table of Contents
Abstract**
Introduction
1. Introduction to the research topic
2. Statement of the research problem
3. Summary of prior literature
4. Statement of the purpose of the study
5. Research question(s)
6. Research hypotheses (if a quantitative study is being proposed)

Method
1. Research participants
2. Apparatus and/or instruments
3. Research design***
4. Procedure

Data Analysis
References

Example B: "Three-Chapter" Approach Headings

Title Page
Table of Contents
Chapter 1: Introduction
1. Statement of the purpose of the research study
2. Statement of the research question(s)
3. Limitations of the proposed research
4. Key terms

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature
1. Insert major headings relevant to identifying the different segments of the literature review.
2. Statement of the research hypotheses

Chapter 3: Method
1. Participants
2. Instrumentation
3. Research design
4. Procedure
5. Data analysis

References
Appendixes

I. The introduction section of the proposal.

- The purpose of this section is to introduce the research idea, establish its importance (i.e., to "sell" it to the reader), and explain its significance.

Flow of the introduction:

- Start with a general introduction that

  • defines the research topic.

  • demonstrates its importance.

- Then review the relevant literature.

- This review should lead directly into a statement of the purpose of the study and the research questions.

II. The method section of the proposal.

- This provides a written description of the specific actions, plan, or strategy the researcher will take to answer the research questions.

- It includes information about the proposed

  – Research participants

  – Design

  – Apparatus or instruments, and

  – Procedure.

*** Participants:** The subsection of the method section, entitled "participants," the researcher should provide a written description of the individuals who will participate in the research study and how they will be recruited.

Be sure to specify the following:

- Their demographic characteristics such as age and gender.
- Inclusion and exclusion criteria that will be used.
- Any inducements for participation that the researcher is planning to use.
- Where the participants are located.

*** Design:** In this subsection of the method section, entitled "Design," the researcher presents the plan or strategy to be used to investigate the research questions.

• A separate design section must be included if the design is complicated; otherwise it can be put in the procedure section.

• The following is included in the design section:

  – Type of design and design layout of the study (e.g., a pretest–posttest control-group design).

  – Description of all the variables being examined in the study.

  – Description of how the variables are to be combined.

– Description of the points of measurement and manipulation in the design.

*** Apparatus and/or Instruments:** In this subsection of the method section, the researcher describes any apparatus and/or instruments he or she proposes to use in the research study.

- The following information should be included:
  - General description of the apparatus or instruments.
  - Variables measured by instruments.
  - Reliability and validity of instruments.
  - Why the instruments or apparatus are used.
  - Reference indicating where apparatus or instruments can be obtained.

*** Procedure:** In this subsection of the method section of the proposal, the student carefully describes how the study will be executed.

- The following information should be included in the procedure section:
  - A description of the design if it was not previously described.
  - A detailed step-by-step description of how the study will be executed.

The reader should know exactly what the researcher intends to do after reading this description. It should include enough information to tell the reader how to do the study if he or she wanted to replicate it.

III. The <u>data analysis section</u> of the proposal:

- describes exactly how the researcher <u>proposes</u> to analyze the data he or she plans on collecting.

- A quantitative study will use some type of statistical analysis. The researcher needs to specify those analyses.

In a qualitative study, there is no one or "right" way of analyzing the data. The researcher must explain the approach he or she proposes to use and justify its use. In general, qualitative analysis will involve coding and searching for relationships and patterns in qualitative data.

Mixed research uses multiple data analysis methods (quantitative and qualitative).

An <u>abstract</u> is required in completed research studies; it is an optional section in a research proposal. Students will need to determine if one is needed in their cases.

The elements of the abstract will include the following:

- Concise statement of research hypothesis or research questions.
- Statement of expected number and characteristics of participants.
- Brief summary of procedure or way data will be collected.
- Brief statement of how the researcher will analyze results.