



Writing Research Proposals

Why care about research proposal writing? Although you may not be planning on pursuing a career in research or a career as a scholar, you may still need to write proposals of sorts in your work. You may need to “pitch” ideas to your boss or clients. You may have to apply for project funding (think “Kickstarter”). Even if this is simply a course assignment, treat it as practice for “pitching” an idea or project. Your goal is not only to help readers understand what you want to do, but also to communicate your passion for your topic and get readers excited about your work.

Prewriting:

Before you write, ask yourself these questions:

- What do I want to study?
- Why is the topic important?
- How is it significant and related to the theories I have been learning?
- What problems will my research contribute to solving?
- How does it build upon [and hopefully go beyond] research already conducted on the topic?
- How can I go about studying the topic?

“Moves” in Research Proposals

Introducing the Theoretical Framework: This section should provide the theoretical underpinnings of the research you will do. It should show clearly how your study fits within the broader scholarship about the research problem.

Overview of Your Research Objective: What is your proposal about? Introduce the topic, but get to your specific focus quickly. This section should not review everything you have learned about the research problem/topic; choose only what is relevant to help explain the focus and goals of your study.

Explain the Significance: Why is this research important? How does it link to other knowledge? This section argues how and in what ways your research will refine or extend existing knowledge in the subject area. It should establish why funders would

want to spend money on your research study. The section should answer the following questions:

- What might the results mean in regards to the theoretical framework underlying the study?
- What suggestions for future research might come out of your study?
- Will there be any practical implications of the research – for the way people behave? For policies or laws?
- How might the results contribute to solving a problem?
- What will be improved or changed as a result of the proposed research?
- Can the results of the study be implemented, and if so, what stakeholders will benefit?
- Why are the outcomes of the research important to our understanding of the world?

Writing Tip: This section can be placed in several places – after you discuss your research objective or at the end of the entire proposal – after your hypothesis/predictions and methods sections.

Explain What Research Has Already Been Done on Your Topic: This section should answer the question: How does my research question fit into the field as a whole? You are entering an academic dialogue when you begin a research paper. Contextualize your research question by providing background research. Here are several tips for reviewing literature/research related to your topic:

1. **Focus:** cite only literature related to your research problem.
2. **Compare/contrast** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Which articles apply similar approaches to analyzing the research problem that you will take? What do experts in the field seem to disagree on or approach differently? What are the debates or controversies in the field?
3. **Identify** the gaps in the existing knowledge/research that your research can fill. What has the previous research NOT done that your study will do? How does your research depart from what has been done before?
 - “The previous research has mistakenly assumed that...” or “Although most experts in the field believe, they have overlooked ...”
 - “None of the previous research has examined”
 - “Despite prior observations of, it remains unclear why/how.....”

OR

Connect the existing knowledge/research to your own area of research and investigation: what does your research draw upon from previous research? How

does your own work draw upon or synthesize what has been said in the literature?

- “Consequently, these factors need to be examined in more detail....”
- “Evidence suggests an interesting correlation, therefore, it is desirable to survey different respondents....”

Writing Tip: This is the most “dense” section of your proposal because it is a kind of “knowledge dump.” For that reason, it should be carefully structured so that “non-expert” readers (readers who aren’t familiar with the literature) can understand the key arguments underpinning your study in relation to that of the work done by others in your field. A good strategy is to break the literature into THEMES OR TOPICS instead of going in chronological order by date of publication or in some other order. These themes or topics can be organized around the various positions taken by researchers or the various methods/findings of previous research. Build on conclusions from previous research that lead to your project. Also demonstrate places where there are gaps in previous research because of incomplete methodology or flawed assumptions.

Research Question/Hypothesis: What are you doing? What specific issue or question will your paper address? What do you predict you will find? Very briefly provide your hypothesis or the answer to your research question that your data will support. In other words, what will we find from your research?

Overview of Your Approach: Make clear to the reader the way that you intend to approach the research question and the techniques and resources that you will use to address the question.

- Specify the steps you will take and the methods you will use to carry out your research. Also, explain how you will interpret the results that you find. Explain how you will spend your time while applying these methods [e.g., observing behavior and coding the behavior, using coding method Y].
- It is important to acknowledge potential limitations in your research design and explain how you plan to address them.

Writing Tip: The methodology is not just a list of tasks, but it is an argument about why your methods are the best way to investigate the topic. As you list the tasks/methods, you should also be arguing why this is the most feasible or effective method to answer your research question(s).

Bibliography: List relevant books, articles, audio or music recordings you have already found and plan to use.

Final Writing Tip (Organizing the “Moves”): These moves represent “pieces” of the research proposal. They might be written as separate sections with subheadings. They might be combined together in sections. For example, an introduction may contain the theoretical framework, the overview of the research objective AND the significance of the proposed research OR the literature review section might contain the theoretical framework and the research that has already been done on the issue/problem. The ordering of the "moves" is usually specified by the institution for which you are writing the proposal.

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