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How to Write a Research Proposal

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1 General Introduction

The starting point for every paper, be it a term paper, research poster or a final thesis, should be a thoroughly worked-out research proposal. Investing sufficient time and thought into writing a research proposal will yield a good return and can save you a lot of time, confusion and disappointment when actually writing your paper.

A research proposal serves several purposes:

- It gives an overview of the relevance and objective of a research project.
- It gives an overview of the content, the procedure and the timing of a research project.
- It shows whether a research project is manageable in scope and timing.

A research proposal has six key components:

- A title page
- An abstract which summarizes the project
- A detailed description of the project
- A time schedule for the project
- An overview of the structure of the paper (*Gliederung*)
- References

The following sections give an overview of each component. Although each research proposal should follow this guideline, you will find that not all sections are (equally) applicable for each project, since every research project is different. For instance, a paper that focuses on literature review or a theoretical analysis requires a somewhat different research proposal than a paper that reports an empirical study. Identify the aspects in each section that are relevant to your paper. In total, the research proposal should not exceed 4-5 pages (1000 – 1500 words). Useful resources are listed at the end of this guideline.

2 Titel Page

Give the title of your research paper, your name, your student ID, your course of study, the semester you are in, your contact details and the course details for which you are submitting the proposal.

3 Abstract

The purpose of the abstract is to give the reader a brief introductory summary of the project. The abstract should not be longer than 100-150 words. It should address the following questions:

- What is the topic of research?
- What is the research question?
- Why is this relevant?
- How do I study the topic?
- What kind of findings do I anticipate?
- How will I interpret the findings?
- What are the implications of my research paper?

Even though the abstract comes first in a research proposal, it is advisable to write it last, i.e., once you have spelt out all information in detail in the later sections. Remember that the abstract is an independent piece of text (like a teaser). The main project description should not presuppose that the reader knows the abstract.

4 Project Description

In this section, you give a detailed account of what, why and how you are going to write about. Write this section in a goal-directed manner. Do not attempt to give an exhaustive overview of the literature you have read and do not try to look at every angle of a problem. Rather, everything in this section should relate clearly to your research question.

4.1 What is the Research Question?

In the research question, you succinctly express the objective of your paper. If you feel your project cannot be formulated in a research question, there is something wrong with it. Every suitable project addresses a clear research question!

4.2 Why is this Relevant?

In this section, you briefly explain why you consider the research question to be relevant. What does your paper add to previous research in the field? Consider that research can be relevant for theoretical (developing or validating a theory), methodological (replicating/testing a method), empirical (collecting new data) and/or practical (solving a practical problem) reasons.

4.3 What do you want to Study/Write About?

Here, you zoom in on the particular topic/phenomenon/problem your paper addresses to answer the research question. Make clear why your topic, etc. is suitable for answering the research question. Make sure to define the key concepts/variables of your research and introduce the terminology.

4.4 What did Previous Research find?

In this section, you provide a brief overview of the relevant literature. Typically, you (1) outline the different positions/approaches/theories/research methods in the field, (2) identify flaws or lacunae in previous research, (3) pinpoint open questions and (4) show how your study follows up on or relates to previous research.

It is important to keep this section goal-oriented and brief. Typically, you do not need to cite more than 5-7 sources in this section.

4.5 What is your Hypothesis?

Formulate one or more clear and testable hypotheses. Unlike the research question, which is open, a hypothesis is a testable, declarative statement.

4.6 How do you want to Test the Hypothesis?

In this section, you outline the set-up of your study. If you adopt or adapt methods and materials from previous research, which is a useful strategy, make this explicit and cite references.

If you write a **paper based exclusively on previous literature**, this section should include information about:

- a) **Sources:** Which texts/approaches/analyses are you going to use?
- b) **Method and Analysis:** How are you going to analyze the texts/approaches/analyses? What do you look for? Which criteria do you apply? How are you going to compare several texts/approaches/analyses?
- c) **Procedure:** In which order (of research subquestions) do you tackle the texts/approaches?

If you carry out an **empirical study**, this section should include information about:

- a) Give a very brief **overview** of the study and state the **research design** (e.g., correlational, 2x2 between-subjects design, etc.).
- b) **Participants:** How many and why? What are their characteristics or the selection criteria? Where and how are you going to recruit them?
- c) **Materials:** What are your experimental items, questionnaires etc. like? If you already have prepared materials, add them in an appendix to the research proposal.
- d) **Design of study:** How are you going to construct your items? What are the conditions? What is/are the independent variable/s? What is/are the dependent variable/s?
- e) **Method:** Name the method and explain why you opted for it. What task are you going to use?
- f) **Procedure:** How does the task work? How do the items get presented? What do the participants do? It may be useful to visualize the procedure in a flow chart.
- g) **Predictions:** Break down the hypothesis into experimental predictions according to the design, materials and method of your study.
- h) **Analysis:** State how you are going to classify, group and analyze the results. Which comparisons are you going to make? Which statistical analyses, if any, are you going to use (e.g., frequencies, comparison of means, correlations, etc.)?

4.7 What are the Expected Findings?

In this section, you anticipate the findings you think you are going to obtain. Typically, these should be consistent with the prediction flowing from your hypothesis. Write this section in future tense. Do not make up fake data or conclusions!

4.8 How do the Findings Speak to the Hypothesis?

In this section, you explain how you interpret the findings in relation to the hypothesis and how they confirm or disprove the hypothesis. It is interesting to think about unexpected findings: What if the findings turn out differently? Are there any alternative interpretations?

4.9 What is the Expected Contribution of your Study to the Field/Research Question?

Here, you briefly summarize the impact you think your project will have. What will be the theoretical/methodological/empirical/practical contribution of your work?

5 Time Schedule

Many projects fail because they could not be carried out within the set time limit. Hence, working out a time schedule is essential. In most cases, you can use a table for the time schedule as in the example table (Table 1). Your table may contain more or fewer points. Other formats (timelines, etc.) may also be appropriate. Plan backwards from the date your paper is due and allow for enough time.

Table 1. Example time schedule for a research project.

Total time available	<i>3 months (dd.mm.yy – dd.mm.yy)</i>	
Activity	Time period	Dates (from X until Y)
1) Finding and reading previous literature	<i>3 weeks</i>	<i>1 October – 21 October</i>
2) Designing materials	<i>1 week</i>	<i>22 October – 31 October</i>
3) Learning how to use method	<i>2 weeks</i>	<i>22 October – 6 November</i>
4) Designing questionnaire		
5) Finding participants		
6) Running tests		
7) Analyzing data		
...		
...		
8) Writing up		
9) Rewriting		
10) Thorough proof-reading (if possible also by someone else)		
11) Submission/presentation		

If you work in a team, state how you are going to divide work, and who does what when?

6 Structure of Paper

In this section, you provide a preliminary Table of Contents of your paper that illustrates the structure of the paper. For each section, indicate how long it will approximately be, and what the main points are in it.

7 The Final Steps

Read through your proposal and use this guideline as a checklist. Make sure you have addressed all relevant points. It is important that everything you write is clear and clearly relates to your research question.

8 References

You should list all references cited in the proposal. Make sure these references are up-to-date and conform to the department's ABC's of style (see departmental website).

9 Further Reading on Research Design and Statistics

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th edition, international student edition). Los Angeles et al.: Sage.

Loerts, H., Lowie, W., & Seton, B. (2020). *Essential statistics for applied linguistics: Using R or JASP* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke, Hampshire: Red Globe Press.

<https://socialresearchmethods.net/kb/>

10 Selected Useful Software (free for Students)

OpenSesame: <https://osdoc.cogsci.nl/> (design face-to-face experiments, reaction time experiments)

SociSurvey: <https://www.socisurvey.de/> (design online surveys)

JASP: <https://jasp-stats.org/> (run standard statistical analyses like ANOVAS, regressions)

R-Studio: <https://rstudio.com/> (a graphical interface for R)