How To Write A Research Proposal

The starting point for every paper, be it a term paper or a finals' paper, 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 focusses 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. Useful resources are listed at the end of this guideline.

I. TITLE 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.

II. 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.

III. 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.

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!

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?

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.

4) What did previous research find?
In this section, you provide a brief overview of the relevant literature. Typically, you outline the different positions/approaches/theories in the field, identify flaws or lacunae in previous research, pinpoint open questions and 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.

5) What is your hypothesis?
Formulate a clear and testable hypothesis. Unlike the research question, which is open, a hypothesis is a testable statement.

6) How do you want to test the hypothesis?
In this section, you outline the set-up of your study.

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) Participants: How many? What are their characteristics or the selection criteria? Where and how are you going to recruit them?
(b) Materials: What are your experimental items like?
(c) 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?
(d) Method: Name the method and explain why you opted for it. What task are you going to use?
(e) Procedure: How does the task work? How do the items get presented? What do the participants do?
(f) Predictions: Break down the hypothesis into experimental predictions according to the design, materials and method of your study.
(g) 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)?

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!

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?

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.

IV. 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. Plan backwards form the date your paper is due and allow for enough time.

Total time available	*4 months (until 31 January 2???)*	
Activity	**Time period**	**Dates (from X until Y)**
1) Finding and reading previous literature	*3 weeks*	*1 October – 21 October*
2) Designing materials	*1 week*	*22 October – 31 October*
3) Learning how to use method	*2 weeks*	*22 October – 6 November*
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		

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

V. 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.

VI. 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).

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.

Selected and annotated references on general and linguistic research methods

Albert, Ruth & Koster, Cornelis J. (2002). *Empirie in Linguistik und Sprachlehrforschung: ein methodologisches Arbeitsbuch*. Tübingen: Narr. (methodology is outdated (skip it) but some useful tips on basic statistics and Excel)

Bell, Judith. (1999). *Doing your research project.* Buckingham: Open University Press. (practical advice, first steps)

Bortz, Jürgen. ([6]2005). *Statistik für Human- und Sozialwissenschaftler*. Berlin: Springer. (reference book)

Clapham, Caroline & Corson, David (Eds.). (1997). *Encyclopaedia of language and education. Volume 7: Language testing and assessment.* Dordrecht: Kluwer. (contains many concise articles)

Hatch, Evelyn & Lazaraton, Anne. (1991). *The research manual: design and statistics for applied linguistics*. New York: Newbury House. (very comprehensive, but less linguistics than one might expect)

http://4teachers.homestead.com/writing.html (tips on academic writing, avoiding plagiarism)

http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/ (almost a whole book online; similar to Marczyk et al. (2005) and based on the theory by Shadish et al. (2002))

Marczyk, Geoffrey R., Dematteo, David & Festinger, David. (2005). *Essentials of research design and methodology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. (highly recommended, comprehensive and accessible)

McDaniel, Dana, McKee, Cecile & Cairns, Helen Smith (Eds.). (1996). *Methods for assessing children's syntax*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press. (selection of carefully described experiments etc.)

Rietveld, Toni & Van Hout, Roeland. (1993). *Statistical techniques for the study of language and language behaviour*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. (tough statistics, but sometimes you need it)

Shadish, William R., Cook, Thomas D. & Campbell, Donald T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized casual inference*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (standard work on validity, but not easy)

Wray, Alison, Trott, Kate & Bloomer, Aileen. (1998). *Projects in linguistics: a practical guide to researching language.* London: Arnold. (very accessible, but a bit shallow)