Research proposals


There are various situations in which a research proposal is produced: 1) prior to enrolment (perhaps as part of an application for a scholarship and/or as an application for entry to study at a particular institution); 2) prior to beginning the research component of a degree that includes both coursework and research; 3) not long after enrolment in a research degree; and 4) at various stages in the first year or so of a research degree.

There are also various synonyms for a ‘research proposal’ produced during the course of a research degree, eg ‘position statement,’ ‘statement of intent’ or even ‘progress report.’

The different purposes of proposals

Research proposals have different purposes depending on:

- the stage of the degree at which they are being produced (eg prior to or after enrolment)
- disciplinary requirements.

Proposals produced prior to enrolment or in the very early stages of a degree may be quite limited and general, perhaps 2-3 pages. Those produced 6 months or more after commencement of, say, a PhD may be extensive and detailed. The timing of production as well as the level of degree in which you are enrolled will affect the purpose, and therefore the coverage in your proposal. You will also need to check whether there are any special disciplinary requirements.

Below I quote what one supervisor had to say about purposes because it focuses well what you can get out of writing the proposal:

*The purposes of preparing a proposal are to plan your investigation and to seek helpful comments and suggestions from other people [in the department] and elsewhere. More importantly, it provides a point to check whether the investigation you propose to conduct will provide you with the evidence you need to prove your thesis [as in argument].*

The implications of this statement are that the proposal serves:

- to clarify what you are investigating, and how you want to go about the research
- to get feedback
- to determine whether the overall thesis design will allow you to establish the argument you want to present (assuming you know what this is).

Another way to see the proposal is as a marketing exercise, its main function being to sell the research. In this perspective, the purposes are: to allow a reader to assess the viability of the proposed research and to provide useful feedback on this.

The objective is to convince a reader that the following apply:

- The research proposed is worthwhile for the level of the degree, ie the research will warrant the award of that particular degree.
- The scope of the research is suited to the level of the degree; clearly the breadth and depth of research expected will be different for shorter and longer theses.
• The research as outlined is appropriate for the length. Again there is a vast difference between the extent of research required for a shorter thesis of, say, 15,000 words and that appropriate for, say, a PhD of 80,000 words.

• The methods proposed to complete the research are appropriate, that it will be possible to access the resources needed to complete the research, to conduct interviews proposed, to carry out field research, to access needed equipment, etc.

• The proposed research is viable in terms of time available to complete the degree.

These kinds of matters will be taken into account in assessing proposals, so bear them in mind.

Focussing a proposal

Below are questions to think about when focussing a proposal. Again though, which questions are relevant and the amount of detail included in answering them will depend on the degree in which you are enrolled, the nature of your research, the stage you are at in your degree and disciplinary requirements, if any.

What is your field of research or topic of investigation?

The answer to this question tells what you are intending to investigate, what you want to look at or focus on. This could take the form of identifying the field of research in which you are interested, the general topic area, or laying out a specific topic. These distinctions are indicated below by way of an example from Linguistics, which you can adapt to your own situation:

— **Field of research**: Second language acquisition
— **General topic area**: Forms of address in different cultures
— **Specific topic**: Intercultural problems in teaching forms of address to Thai learners of English as a second language.

A proposal is just that. What is proposed is not fixed for all time. Do not be overly concerned when proposing a topic that you will have to stay with it, particularly not early in your degree. Topics are sometimes changed or the focus shifts, along with other aspects of the study, during the first phase of a research degree. Do take care though, as a radical change of topic might mean that an appropriate supervisor cannot be found, or that your designated supervisor no longer feels able to supervise your project, or that, if this occurs too far into the degree, time-to-completion becomes compromised.

What is the research context of your study?

It is usual to provide relevant background information so as to contextualise your research. This can be done by way of a mini-literature review, which also allows justification of the foci and interests of the research you are proposing. If you have done little reading, provide general background information by way of topic generalisations.

Ask yourself:

• What extent of background information on my topic am I able to provide?

• How does what I want to do fit in with research already done in the field? It may be that you have only a limited, general knowledge of what research has been done, but that would be sufficient for a proposal accompanying an application.

Your purpose here is to describe the broad context of your study—the BIG PICTURE—and, in the process, communicate which aspects of the research field you want to consider. With a PhD, this part of the proposal can be very important in communicating the nature and value of your intended contribution to research (see next point).

What is the value of your research project?

This question needs addressing if you are doing a PhD and perhaps a Masters by Research, but not necessarily for a shorter thesis. A PhD requires an original contribution to the research field. Answering this question allows you to
convey the nature of your contribution and say why you think it important to conduct the research. The significance of your research project can be conveyed through discussion of the existing literature—its strengths and weaknesses and how your research fits in, the issues, problems, etc that you will be addressing.

Apart from providing information on the contribution you expect to make to research, it may also be important for you to mention practical or professional value attaching to your proposed research, eg industry application, commercial uses, reform recommendations, etc.

**What is the primary research objective or central research question?**

The answer to this question tells why you are undertaking your proposed research. There are different language forms encapsulating the why. Again, I am drawing on the Linguistics example above to illustrate my point.

- **One language form: stating the primary research aim or objective**
  My aim is to determine the range and nature of the intercultural problems in teaching Thai learners of English as a second language, and the reasons for these.

- **An alternative language form: setting up the central research question**
  What are the types and causes of intercultural problems in teaching Thai learners of English as a second language?

You may also be testing a hypothesis (even more than one), which is defined as ‘a proposition put forward merely as a basis for reasoning or argument, without any assumption of its truth’ (New Shorter OED). Or you may be expected to ‘lay out a problem’ in some detail.

Having clarified your major aim or central question, you might want to break this down into a set of subsidiary aims or questions, like so:

- **Central question:**
  How are social identities being constructed by highlands migrants living in the urban areas of X [country named]?

- **Subsidiary questions:**
  What conceptions are held by Y migrants about the village and the people who remain there?
  What concepts are held about ethnic ‘others’ who are the neighbours of Y migrants in the urban settlements and how do these conceptions influence multi-ethnic social interactions?
  What appeals are made to broader ethnic, class or even national identities and what are these appeals based on (eg as highlanders, the poor, as people of X country)?
  What do these examples of the practice of identity suggest about processes of nation-making in X?

If yours is an early proposal, there is unlikely to be such clarity about the questions driving your research, so just do your best.

**Do you need to discuss theory or methodology?**

If theory, modelling or methodology is likely to be a special consideration in your research, provide information to this effect:

- Do you need to, and can you, discuss your theoretical framework or your choice of model?
- Do you need to discuss issues of methodology relevant to your research? It may be appropriate, for example, to discuss your choice of statistical methods for analysing data, issues relating to selecting a sample population for study, the research instruments or measurement devices you will use, experimental procedures, or the different methodologies—their strengths and weaknesses—available for comparative research along with your preference. Give reasons for your choices and decisions.

Methodology should not be confused with procedure (the next point discussed):

* A *rationale* for the methods used to gather and process data, in what sequence and on what samples, taken together, constitutes a research methodology. This is not a grand term for ‘list of methods’, but
an informed argument for designing research in a particular way. A research methodology needs to be appropriate for the research problem, and the justification that this is so should form part of a thesis.


While it is impractical to include an entire methodology section/chapter, the extract below points towards Cryer's meaning:

When states promote industrial development they assume direct involvement in processes of capital accumulation, even as their effectiveness in this pursuit is strongly determined by the international division of labor. For this reason, X's [reference] suggestion linking states' activities to development outcomes requires, first, taking states as transformative actors in their own right, and second, examining state agencies' transformative activities as they are embedded in definite networks of social relations. To meet these methodological challenges, my study will incorporate a comparative institutional approach [reference], as well as the sectoral approach of Y [reference] and the commodity chains approach of Z [reference]. In addition to their value as theoretical frames of reference, these approaches offer unique methodological insights for procedures of data collection and analysis. (my emphasis)

This is a typical way to present an argument for a particular approach to the exclusion of other possibilities, though your discussion of methodology may be altogether more detailed and comprehensive, even constituting an entire chapter.

How do you intend to proceed with your research?

If yours is an early proposal, say something about procedure. The answer to this question tells how you intend to go about your research, what activities you will need to carry out and in what order. It might be appropriate, for example, to provide information about general plans for fieldwork if this applies (eg locations, populations targeted, data-gathering instruments, etc), to discuss experimental or test plans, or to identify primary sources to be accessed (eg archival materials). Of course, in a more comprehensive proposal, all these matters might be covered in a methodology chapter, justifying and validating your approach.

The idea is to give a general overview of what you think needs to be done to complete your research. Include as much information as you can so that a reader can determine any likely problems, unforeseen by you, in carrying out the research (eg difficulty accessing and using materials or equipment, locating suitable source materials, undertaking fieldwork or anything else). Mention any potential problems you anticipate so as to get feedback.

Is it appropriate to include a substantial review of the literature?

The inclusion of a substantial literature review is only likely if you are six months or more into your degree. In an advanced proposal the literature review may constitute an entire chapter.

Do you need to discuss relevant work experience?

Where appropriate, give a brief account of any work you have done and are presently doing, putting special emphasis on anything, including courses you might be teaching, relevant to the research you are proposing. Work experience may feature prominently, particularly if this is a key reason for receiving strong support in the proposed research from academic referees, and/or this experience is highly relevant to your type of degree (eg a Professional Doctorate).

Should you include a timetable for completion of your research?

Probably yes, if you are at the end or beyond the first year of research, but no if it is a proposal accompanying an application for entry.

Do you need ethics clearance for your research?

Ethics clearance is needed for various types of research using animals and humans, including, at times, conducting interviews and doing surveys on human populations. This will not concern you at the point of applying for candidature, but discuss the matter with your supervisor before writing a proposal when you are on course.
Are you likely to need special training to undertake your research?

It is usual in a research degree to undergo training of various types. But if you are likely to need special training that could impact on time to completion (eg learning a new language), then mention this.

Are there other questions you should add given your research interests?