

Your Research Proposal

Introduction

A research degree is a challenging undertaking and many academic departments demand some evidence of productivity within the first year of candidature. In most cases, this evidence takes the form of a research proposal. A research proposal is not the one page abstract that you cunningly wrote to placate the enrolments and admissions people. The proposal is a significant piece of work that is formally presented to an audience of academic staff and your fellow postgraduate students. This paper sets out information on why proposals are required, the logistics of presenting a proposal, and tips on how to make the experience a successful one.

Why is a proposal necessary?

Although it is doubtful that any research higher degree student will jump for joy at the thought of going through the proposal process, there is value to be gained from treating it as a serious part of your candidature. Some benefits related to the proposal process are:

- the prospect of having to perform in front of a critical audience does seem to galvanise most people into action. Hypotheses and research questions become sharper, the philosophy of methods is explored, and the probable validity and reliability of the study is considered. This does serve to focus and improve the study, particularly if the proposal is completed before fieldwork commences.
- the critical audience has its uses. Many members of the audience have probably had some experience of what you are proposing, and will often come up with suggestions of varying usefulness. Equally, the criticisms and comments that they make can be noted and addressed in the thesis itself. It can be a valuable exercise to use the proposal process to vent a problem or issue that you are grappling with, and obtain the thoughts of your audience.
- the proposal helps you identify problems early in the research process and establish whether your project is feasible.

- the proposal document can be used as a basis for the final thesis. Some academics claim that a good proposal can form Chapter One of the final thesis. While this may not always be the case, the proposal can certainly be cut and pasted into the chapters.
- the proposal gives the impetus to create timelines, milestones and contingencies, which will help you keep on track. If you have not started fieldwork in August, and you planned to start it in January, then you know that you have a problem.

When should the proposal take place?

The proposal needs to be presented within a certain time of the commencement of candidature, as follows:

PHD - 6 months from the commencement of candidature;

MA – 4 months from the commencement of candidature.

It must occur before you commence your fieldwork.

A word of warning – writing the proposal will always take longer than you think.

How long should the proposal document be?

The proposal document should be around six pages, excluding references. If you include a lot of diagrams, it may be a little longer. Remember that it is a bad idea to annoy the academic panel by a document that is too long or too short.

What is the usual procedure?

Your supervisor should coordinate the composition of a panel of academics, who will read the proposal document thoroughly and attend the presentation. This panel may include academics from outside your Department depending on your topic and methods of research.

About two weeks before the presentation date, your proposal document will be sent to the panel and made publicly available to the postgraduate students and staff of the Department. You should also provide a couple of copies of the proposal document at the presentation. Sometimes supervisors press their students to set a date and work towards the presentation. This can be a mistake because it means that you can go into the presentation feeling (and being) underprepared.

After the proposal, the academic panel will meet and determine whether:

- a) you should do more work on your research design before commencing field work;

b) you need to make a number of alterations as you conduct field work.

c) you can proceed as you outlined in your proposal.

What should be included in the document?

A key point to remember when planning your proposal is why you are doing the research in the first place. A major requirement of a research degree is that the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Your proposal should show where the existing gaps in the knowledge base of your discipline lie. The format of the document will usually be:

<i>Topic Heading</i>	<i>Content</i>
Introduction	Overview of the paper Research questions
Background	An overview of the development of the topic.
Significance of the study	Summarise the ways that your study will add to the body of knowledge and explain whether and how any person could find this study of use or value.
Literature review	A critical review of the literature which shows, as far as possible, the range and depth of opinion on the topic. This is where you highlight the gaps in the existing field of knowledge that you intend to address.
Consultation and Ethics Approval	Consult with the appropriate community or communities, obtain the necessary permits and gain the approval of the University Ethics Committee
Methods	Explain and discuss the methods that you will be using and the reasons for using them and discussions on the validity and limitations of the study.
Time line	It can be useful to do this in a graphical form. This should set out the times that you plan to start and finish each stage of the study, ie proposal, data collection, data analysis, write up, submission.
Glossary	Definition of terms
References	Reference list in the Harvard Author-Date system.

It is a useful strategy to ask your Department's office and your supervisor whether they have copies of previous proposals. A range of proposals, particularly any exemplars that you can find, will give an indication of the usual information included, such as how much you need to go into the philosophical underpinnings of your methods.

What should be included in the presentation?

The presentation should always reflect the content of the proposal document. Once your document is made accessible to staff and students, you need to stay with that content. You may wish to add in a little new information if it seems particularly relevant and supportive of your case, but this should be kept to a minimum. The task is to give a presentation supporting the document.

Some handy tips for proposal presentations:

- ALWAYS ascertain exactly how long you have to present as opposed to the duration of the session. Many people have a nasty surprise when they find out that, for example, they are only allowed to present in the first thirty minutes of an hour-long session. The focus of this task is for the student to defend their proposed research, and this usually means an extensive question time.
- ALWAYS summarise the content of the document. A good rule of thumb is to aim at covering the research questions, literature review in the first half of the presentation time, and the methods in the second half. A summary of why the study is significant makes a solid ending.
- ALWAYS rehearse your presentation to ensure that you stick to the time allowed.
- NEVER try to read your document verbatim. You simply will not have time.
- NEVER use the presentation as an opportunity to experiment with your technology. Even the most experienced public speakers find this experience nerve-racking, and

this is not the time to be using advanced web-technology or multi-media for the first time. If you want to use some sophisticated equipment, practice and play with it for weeks beforehand, preferably on the machine that you will be using during the presentation. Never change platforms at the last minute, from IBM to Macintosh or vice-versa. This is a sure recipe for disaster.

- If using Powerpoint or some other presentation application, test the actual presentation file on the machine to be used during the presentation. Testing, by the way, involves scrolling through each screen of the presentation, not just seeing if the software loads on that particular machine.

Question Time

The question time can be when you impress everyone with your grasp of the topic, or it can convince everyone that you need to spend a lot more time in the library. To deal with question time effectively there are some things you can do to prepare.

- Be very clear on what your topic does NOT cover. It is quite common for people in the audience to be enthusiastic about their own topic, or a topic distantly related to your thesis, and to pressure you to include it. You need to be very clear about the boundaries of your thesis. You cannot cover everything. You do not have to appease your audience, only impress them.
- Check recent journals in your area to make sure you are up to date. If someone comments on an author or method that you have never heard of, just thank them and make a note of the reference for the future. There is no need to feel embarrassed - chances are that it will not be relevant, and no-one can read everything.
- Ask informed family, friends and colleagues to read your proposal paper and give you feedback and questions.
- Review your proposed fieldwork to identify where any possible problems or drawbacks may lie, and mentally prepare contingency plans. Questions such as “What will you do if the permission is not granted?”; “How will you ensure a significant number of surveys are returned?” are both valid and common in proposal presentations. If you can’t think of how to prepare for a contingency, you may wish to raise it in the presentation yourself, and ask the audience to help to generate ideas.

- If someone asks a question that you do not understand, ask them to rephrase it. If you still do not understand, ask for help from the rest of the audience.
- Be polite to everyone. You may think that some of the questions or comments are ridiculous, but a month after the presentation they may spark a thought that will take you in exciting new directions.
- If your supervisor believes that something in your paper is contentious or sensitive, either prepare to strongly argue your case or delete the contentious section of your work.

Conclusion

The proposal process is a significant milestone in your research higher degree candidature. It is also valuable practice in presenting your work to a critical audience. The effort you spend on preparing a quality presentation and document will add value to your thesis and may identify possible issues and problems in time for you to avert them.

Good luck!