

# Writing Thesis and Dissertation Proposals

Keep in mind that the goal of writing proposals is to argue two things:

1. Your project is worth doing.
  - Is it substantial?
  - Is it interesting?
  - Is it original?
2. You are well-prepared to do it.
  - Do you know enough about previous research on the topic?
  - Do you offer an appropriate assessment of what hasn't been done yet?
  - Is your method carefully considered and well-planned?

The proposal also functions as a contract between you and your committee members. If you stick to your approved proposal, your final thesis or dissertation project will most likely be approved.

In most cases, the department will provide clear guidelines about the content and order of the proposal. Read and re-read these guidelines, and follow them closely in your writing process.

## The Structure

In general, a proposal contains an Introduction, a Problem Statement, a Theoretical Framework, a Methods section, some Initial Findings, Limitations, and Implications.

### Introduction

This section positions your project within the field. You need to show/share your knowledge by offering a lucid summary of your topic. Your introduction should point out the knowledge gaps that your project seeks to address.

### Problem Statement

This section should contain a clear explanation of your research question(s). The more details you offer here, the better. Remember, in essence, this is an argument to point out the importance of these questions.

### Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This section is vitally important and probably the most time-consuming part of your proposal. It shows your committee that you've read widely in the field and you know what you're talking about. This is the part where all the reading hours and the endless note-taking activities pay off.

### Methods

This section should provide a detailed description of how you plan to carry out your project. It should give your readers confidence that you have thought it through carefully. In addition to description, you may need to offer a clear rationale for choosing certain methods of research.

## **Initial Findings**

If you have conducted a pilot study, describe your findings. If you haven't, describe what you expect to discover.

## **Limitations**

Every study has its limitations. Show your ability to be reflective and self-critical by clearly pointing out the limitations that you see. You may also need to argue why your study is important and valuable regardless of its limitations.

## **Implications**

This is the section that answers the “so what” question. Why is your topic important? How does answering your research question benefit your field? In other words, why is it useful to know what you want to know?

## **The Writing Process**

- Writing a proposal is a time-consuming task. Allow sufficient time, and have realistic expectations.
- Break the writing task into manageable and specific components. Scheduling a two-hour block on Monday to work on your Methods section is much more manageable than telling yourself, “I’ll work on the proposal a little bit on Monday.”
- Proposals go through lots of drafts. Make each draft count by getting useful feedback from your peers, advisors, and consultant. If some of your readers have concerns, discuss these concerns with them.
- The purpose of the proposal is to prove that you are on the right track, so take this opportunity to get on the right track. A well-written proposal that generates enthusiasm can make your life much more enjoyable during the implementation stage.

## **References and Useful Resources**

Krathwohl, D. R., & Smith, N. L. (2005). *How to prepare a dissertation proposal: Suggestions for students in education and the social and behavioral sciences*. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press.

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (2000). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.