Research proposal

Proposals are a necessary step in a research project; they allow you to refine your objectives and explain how you plan to investigate them. Proposals include both theoretical information relevant to the topic (the literature review) and practical details (timeline and budget, for example).

Research proposals can be set as an assignment, they can lead to a thesis or dissertation, or they can be necessary for funding and grant applications.

Writing a research proposal

- **Writing a proposal is a process**

It takes time to work through all the sections you need to complete. It takes time to think about how you are going to do something, justify why you are doing it, and the details of the process. It is impossible to write a good proposal in a day!

- **Revise**

Don't be afraid to revise and narrow your topic. Most of us start off with a great big concept in mind. When it comes to figuring out how we are going to tackle it and the resources required, we suddenly realise that it is too big. Sometimes this requires going back to the library, doing more reading, and re-thinking your proposal.

- **Keep your aims clear**

It is a good idea to write your aims on a slip of paper and keep this in front of you as you write your sections. It will help ensure that the methods that you use will achieve your aim, or that your literature review is relevant.

- **Provide details**

Provide details, especially in your methodology and data analysis section. These are the two areas where most proposals come unstuck. If you are working with different groups of people (according to age, gender, ethnicity), state why you are going to do this. Be explicit in explaining how you will analyse the data. It is not enough to say "the data will be collated and analysed." How will you do this? (What software or theories will be applied?)

- **Stand up for your proposal**

Don't be humble about what you are doing. Believe that it is great research that **has** to be conducted. Imagine that you are writing a proposal for funding from a very important agency. It has to stand up to scrutiny and it has to be convincing.

Research proposal structure

There are three key messages to communicate when writing a research proposal:

- what you are doing
- why it is important
- that you are competent to do it

You may be asked to write a proposal that includes all of these sections. Particularly at undergraduate level, your proposal may focus on three or four of the following sections. This is the general order that proposals follow; however, you should refer to any specific guidelines on structure from your lecturer or supervisor.

Research proposal structure

1. Title
2. Abstract
3. Introduction and/or background
4. Research question
5. Literature review
6. Theoretical framework
7. Methodology
8. Research design and method
9. Ethics
10. Communicating the results
11. Significance of research
12. Timeline
13. Budget
14. References
15. Appendices

1. Title

Your title should answer the question: What is your research about? It should be a short, concise phrase.

2. Abstract

An abstract for a proposal should include the topic, aims of your study, who will be involved in the research, the methods and the timeframe. It is usually concluded with a statement that explains the relevance of the research (why it is needed). Abstracts for proposals are generally in the future tense in that you outline what you intend to do.

3. Introduction and/or background

In some proposals, the introduction and background are separate; in others they serve the same purpose and are combined. An introduction and/or background section outlines why you chose your topic.

The section should include:

- what prompted your interest in the topic

- relevance to previous research (literature)
- what your research will contribute to the research and the field

It may include (if not under separate headings):
- your research objectives/questions or hypothesis
- literature review

4. Research question

What is the research question you are trying to find the answer to? This can also be termed as the aim or purpose of the research.

Think about how to finish this statement: "**The purpose of this research is …**"

5. Literature review

The literature review for a research proposal may draw on a detailed review that you have already conducted, or may be specific to the development of your proposal.

Your literature review needs to demonstrate that you have read broadly on the topic and wider context. It should highlight trends in the literature relating to your research topic, including research areas, methodology, theoretical approaches and findings. Information such as where the literature is mainly coming from or countries/areas that it is focused on could be considered.

Your review should outline some of the limitations and/or gaps in the literature that you have identified (a critique). You need to draw on your literature review to justify your own research. Indicate the gaps your research is addressing and note the original contribution it will make the field in general.

The literature review helps inform and set up your theoretical framework, methodology and research design.

Please note: Some assignments request that students list the literature they will include in their research (rather than reviewing or evaluating). Ensure that your literature review section reflects the requirements of your assignment.

6. Theoretical framework

Drawing on the different theories you have identified in your literature review, you need to identify which theoretical approach (or approaches) will be employed in your research and why.

7. Methodology

Some proposals distinguish between methodology (the why of how you will gather your data) and the method or research design (the how).

In discussing the methodology, you need to draw on reviewed literature and consider the different methodological approaches used. Your methodology may

include your research paradigm and epistemologies that underpin your research and your rationale for this.

8. Research design and method

As with the theoretical framework (methodology), it is important to demonstrate that you have read other studies in your area of research. You should be able to address the strengths and limitations of the methods in similar research and justify why you have chosen the method that you have.

In your method, you should discuss the following aspects:

- *Participants:* who will you be doing your research with (individuals, businesses, organisations)? What is your sample size and its parameters?
- *Data collection:* how will you go about collecting your information (surveys, experiments, inter- views)? This should also include any equipment or instruments that you will need.
- *Data analysis and discussion:* once you have the information, what will you do with it? Include any tools you will use to assist you with analysis (for example, programmes, models). Indicate how analysing the data in this way will answer your research question.
- *Limitations:* look at your methodology and consider any weaknesses or limitations that may occur as a result of your research design. Address the limitations by indicating how you will minimise them.

9. Ethics

Almost all research needs to consider ethics. In most cases this relates to the ethical consideration of how the data will be collected. In this section you should outline your awareness and understanding of ethical issues associated with your research proposal. You should consider the rights of those being researched (including informed consent), your responsibility, and how the data will be collected, stored and disposed of. You should indicate whether your proposal will require approval from an ethics committee and if so, which one.

For more information about research and ethics at Massey University, visit the "Research Ethics" section of the Massey website.

10. Communicating the results

You may need to consider how the information you discover will be shared with the wider (research/ academic) community. In most cases, a written document (report, research paper, thesis or journal article) is an appropriate means of communicating your findings. If your research is intended to assist a broader audience, for example specific members of the community, other forms to disseminate your knowledge could include conference presentations, pamphlets, film or general media articles.

11. Significance of Research

It is important to convince your reader of the validity of your research. You need to communicate enthusiasm and confidence for the research, arguing clearly as to the contribution it will make to the subject area and discipline in general. This is

sometimes a separate section; in other instances, it forms part of the introduction or background.

12. Timeline

A timeline that estimates how long each task will take helps determine the scope of your research and if it is achievable within a given timeframe. Your research proposal timeline should include time allocation for a detailed literature review, time for approval from ethics committee, reviewing or testing of research design, data collection and analysis, and writing up of findings.

It is important to be realistic with the timeframe; consider whether you are able to dedicate full time work to the research, or if it is to be conducted while you are studying other papers, working part or full time or have family commitments.

13. Budget

Often when requesting funding for research, a budget is included to indicate where funds will be allocated. A budget may include items such as the cost of survey design and printing, transcribers, software or research assistants. This could be included in the appendices.

14. References

It is important to include all references you have used when writing your proposal. This demonstrates that you are serious about your research and have invested both time and thought into the process.

15. Appendices

This may include copies of letters seeking participants, consent forms and draft surveys/questionnaires.

Material that is complex and/or detailed (sometimes raw data, or a copy of a questionnaire) is collected at the end of the report in the appendices section (to not distract readers from the main theme). Appendices should always be given a number or letter, and title (for example, Appendix A: Map of the Manawatu region).

Academic writing and study skills support

1. Academic Q+A

If you have a quick question about study skills or academic writing, then they can ask it on the **Academic Q+A forum**, which can be accessed via the **Academic Support Stream site**.

2. Consultations

One-to-one consultations with learning advisors and writing consultants are **available online and on campus**. Consultants can answer your questions about academic writing and study skills or give you feedback on your assignment's

5

structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, presentation, use of sources, and referencing.

3.   Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)

Develop your academic writing and study skills with the **Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)** website from Massey University. OWLL includes information on assignment writing, assignment types, referencing, study skills, and exam skills.

4.   Pre-reading Service

The **Pre-reading Service** is a free service, which gives students an opportunity to send their draft assignment to **CLS consultants** for review and advice. Students receive individual written feedback on their assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, style, presentation, referencing, and use of sources. The service can be accessed via the **Academic Support Stream site**.

5.   Workshops

Free study seminars and workshops are run on campus and online. See **Workshops page on OWLL** for **programmes and registration details**.