

How to Write a Research Proposal

When applying for a PhD position or a research grant in Germany you will usually be asked to submit a research proposal, at least in part, since individually led research is still the norm in most subject areas. Even if you are applying to an established research project, you will probably be expected, as a part of the university application procedure, to explain how your particular research would develop the basic aims of the overall project.

The purpose of the proposal is to ensure that the candidates have done sufficient preliminary reading/research in their area of interest, that they have thought about the issues involved and are able to provide more than a broad description of the topic which they are planning to research. The proposal is of course not a fixed blueprint. Findings cannot be predicted beforehand and often the research may need to be modified as you go along. There is also no fixed formula for writing a proposal. However, your proposal will have to convince members of the academic community that you have identified a scientific problem and a methodical approach to solve the problem within a realistic time frame and at a reasonable cost.

Please note: The following recommendations are suggestions only. They do not guarantee a successful research application. They may, however, help you prepare a carefully conceptualized proposal. This may not only be important to the professors or the members of the selection committee who have to decide on your application, but also to yourself, giving you a clear structure for your own work, a rough idea of where you are going and a timetable in which to accomplish your research successfully.

General Information

Most research proposals are between 4 and 15 pages, but some institutions or departments specify a word limit. It is rarely possible to write a comprehensive proposal in fewer than 1500 words. The proposal should have a proper layout (typeface and line spacing) as well as a table of contents and page numbers. Remember that professors often have to read large numbers of research proposals. Therefore good legibility and conciseness of your proposal will be appreciated.

Keep in mind that your research proposal has to be written by you. Any passage from another source has to be appropriately cited. This applies even to single sentences taken from other authors. Plagiarism may result in your disqualification.

Title Page

On the title page, state your personal data, such as: name, academic title (if applicable), your position at your own university, e.g. junior lecturer, your date of birth, nationality, your work and private address including telephone and e-mail address. This should be followed by the title of your planned dissertation (or research project). Keep in mind that at this stage, the title can only be a working title. Nevertheless, all words in the title should be chosen with great care, and their association with one another must be carefully considered. While the title should be brief, it should be accurate, descriptive and comprehensive, clearly indicating your research area. Note that you will only be ready to devise a title once you are clear about the focus of your research. You should also state the area of your research, e.g. Political Science - Theory of International Relations - or Empirical Social Science etc. You may also want to give a realistic time frame in which you plan to complete your project. For a PhD this should not normally exceed three years.

General Overview of Research Area and Literature

Give a short and precise overview about the current state of research that is immediately connected with your own research project. Name the most important contributions of other scientists. The proposal should contain a clear and logical discussion of the theoretical scope of the framework of ideas that will be used to back the research. The proposal needs to show that you are fully conversant with the ideas you are dealing with and that you grasp their methodological implications. Your research review should indicate an open problem which then will be the motive for your project.

Key Research Questions and Objectives

Give a concise and clear outline of what you intend to find out in your project and what objectives you want to achieve. Research questions may take the form of a hypothesis to be tested against a specific set of criteria or a more open-ended inquiry. Together with the general overview this section should establish the relevance and value of the proposed research in the context of current academic thinking. Your proposal needs to show why the intended research is important and to justify the reason for doing the research.

Methodology

This is a very important part of your research outline and should receive a lot of attention. It may well be the longest section of your proposal. Give detailed information about how you intend to answer your research questions. Anyone who reads your proposal will want to know the sources and quality of evidence you will consult, the analytical technique you will employ, and the timetable you will follow. Depending on the discipline and the topic, suitable research strategies should be defined. You will need to describe for example the intended methods of data gathering, the controls you will introduce, the statistical methods to be used, the type of literature or documentary analysis to be followed and so on. Ethical issues as well as difficulties in gathering data and other material could also be discussed in this section.

Tentative Timetable

Give information about your estimated timetable (if possible in table form), indicating the sequence of research phases and the time that you will probably need for each phase. Take into account that at this stage, it can only be estimated, but make clear that you have an idea about the timespan that will be needed for each step.

Selective Research Bibliography

List the academic works which you have mentioned in your research outline. At least some of them should be recent publications, indicating that you are aware of the current discourse in your area of research. List only publications which you have actually used for the preparation of the research outline. Never ever just copy bibliographies from other papers. In case important publications are not available in your home country, list them separately and make clear that you have had no possibility to read them.

Editing

Once you have finished the conceptual work on your proposal, go through a careful editing stage, in which you make sure your proposal does not contain any grammatical mistakes or typing errors. Check whether the title, the abstract and the content of your proposal correspond with each other. If possible, ask someone within the academic community to proofread your proposal in order to make sure it conforms to international academic standards.

Checklist for a Research Proposal

In most cases your research proposal will need to include the following:

- Table of Contents
- Abstract
- Introduction to the General Topic
- Problem Statement and Justification of the Research Project
- Hypothesis and Objectives of the Study
- Literature and Research Review
- Research Method(s)
- Data Collection, Analysis and Evaluation of Data (in empiric research)
- Analysis of texts and documents
- Expected Results and Output of the Study
- Bibliography
- Appendix, e.g. Tables, Graphs, Questionnaires etc.
- Timetable