

Guide to Writing a Research Proposal

Abdul Rashid Moten

In general, a research proposal should include the following sections:

I. Introduction

Introduction is the initial pitch of an idea. After reading the introduction, your readers should have an understanding of what you want to do and why. It is a narrative written in one to three paragraphs that answers the following questions:

1. What is the central research problem?
2. What is the topic of study related to that problem?
3. Why is this research important?

II. Background and Significance

This section can be melded into your introduction or you can create a separate section to help with the organization and flow of your proposal. There are no hard and fast rules but you should attempt to deal with some or all of the following:

- State the research problem and give a more detailed explanation about the purpose of the study than what you stated in the introduction. This is particularly important if the problem is complex or multifaceted.
- Present the rationale of your proposed study and clearly indicate why it is worth doing.
- Describe the major issues or problems to be addressed by your research.
- Clearly identify the key sources you intend to use and explain how they will contribute to your analysis of the topic.

III. Literature Review

Connected to the background and significance of your study is a more deliberate review and synthesis of prior studies related to the research problem under investigation. The purpose here is to place your project within the larger whole of what is currently being explored demonstrating that your work is original. A good strategy is to break the literature into "conceptual categories" [themes] rather than systematically describing groups of materials one at a time.

To help frame your proposal's literature review, here are the "five C's" of writing a literature review:

1. **Cite:** keep the primary focus on the literature pertinent to your research problem.

2. **Compare** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Who applies similar approaches to analyzing the research problem?
3. **Contrast** the various arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies expressed in the literature: what are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, or debate?
4. **Critique** the literature: Which arguments are more persuasive, most reliable, valid, or appropriate, and why?
5. **Connect** the literature to your own area of research and investigation: how does your own work draw upon, depart from, or synthesize what has been said in the literature?

IV. Research Design and Methods

Describe the overall research design by building upon and drawing examples from your review of the literature. Be specific about the approaches you plan to undertake to gather information.

- Keep in mind that a methodology is not just a list of tasks; it is an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best way to investigate the research problem.
- Be sure to anticipate and acknowledge any potential barriers and pitfalls in carrying out your research design and explain how you plan to address them.

V. Preliminary Suppositions and Implications

The purpose of this section is to argue how and in what ways you believe your research will refine, revise, or extend existing knowledge in the subject area under investigation. Will the results influence programs, methods, and/or forms of intervention? How might the results contribute to the solution of social, economic, or other types of problems? Will the results influence policy decisions?

VI. Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates the importance or significance of your proposal and provides a brief summary of the entire study. This section should be only one or two paragraphs long, emphasizing why the research problem is worth investigating, why your research study is unique, and how it advances knowledge.

VII. Citations

As with any scholarly research paper, you must cite the sources you used in composing your proposal. In a standard research proposal, this section can take two forms:

1. **References** -- lists only the literature that you actually used or cited in your proposal.
2. **Bibliography** -- lists everything you used or cited in your proposal with additional citations to any key sources relevant to understanding the research problem.