



Writing a Research Proposal

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What is a Research Proposal?

A research proposal is a short document (usually 3-7 pages) written to inform others of a *proposed* piece of research. This intended research is usually a masters or doctorate by thesis, but it can be work for a corporate purpose. University students usually write research proposals for academics who may eventually supervise the work based on the proposal.

Note that a research proposal can be rejected as "unsuitable" or "poorly designed", and a piece of research can be rejected on the basis of the proposal—so the proposal is obviously an important document. It is therefore worthwhile spending some time getting it exactly right. Another reason to get the proposal right to start with is that it will save you time in the long run. This is because, if it is well-designed, the proposal forms the outline of the thesis to follow. Ideally, the proposal can be mapped onto various parts of the final thesis.

The following things must be included in any proposal:

- Introduction or background to the research problem or issue (including the "gap" in the current research—the latter is most important)

- A research question and—if possible—a thesis statement answering the question
- Justification for the proposal research i.e., why the research is being done and why it is needed
- Preliminary literature review (covering what others have already done in the area)
- Theoretical framework used in the proposed research
- Contribution of the research to the general area
- Proposed research methodology used
- Research plan and outline
- Timetable of proposed research
- List of references used in preparing the proposal

The following things may *also* be included in the proposal:

- Limitations of the research (what the research is *not* intended to do—i.e., the "scope" of the research)
- Resources to be used in the research (e.g., equipment, etc)
- How the research will be evaluated or tested
- Where and how the results of the research will be disseminated or distributed
- The background of the researcher and their suitability for the task.

In this Help Sheet we will go through the main sections only.

1. Introduction

This should be as brief as possible (a paragraph or two). Whatever you do, don't ramble on for pages—you need to make this part of the proposal clear and crisp. Get to the main focus quickly. You need to give a sense of the **general field** of research of which your area is a part. This needs to narrow down to the **specific area** you are concerned with, and this should lead logically to the **"gap"** in the research that you will fill. When the gap is identified then a **research question** can naturally be raised. The answer to this question is called the **thesis statement**.

It may be helpful to think of these parts in the following way:

- The general area is a particular "conversation" among academics in the field of study
- The specific area is you—the student—focusing in on a particular part of the bigger "conversation" (a sub-set of a larger conversation)
- The "gap" is you noticing that something needs to be said in the conversation (which has not

been said before, or which needs addressing in more detail)

- The research question is the question asking something that precisely addresses what needs to be said (the gap)
- The “thesis statement” is your tentative or proposed answer to this question.

Note that the thesis statement may only be tentative at this stage as the research has not been carried out yet. It is not expected in a proposal that you have an answer to your research question. This is what the thesis provides. It helps if you have a tentative answer, however. A *hypothesis* is useful for this purpose, though this might only be necessary for more empirical subjects (Economics, for example). (See **TLU Help Sheets: Hallmarks of Scientific Research and The Research Process**).

Further points to note:

- You should outline any controversies that are in the literature briefly without giving full details (as this will be covered in the literature review section)
- You should use simple and jargon-free language as your supervisor may not be aware of all the language in your focus area
- The introduction must actually *narrow down*—not get wider. You must demonstrate how you have command of the issues in the area and that you are focussing on a particular issue
- The Introduction generally forms (roughly) **Sections 1.1 to 1.3** of the final thesis.

2. The Research Question

This forms **Section 1.4** of the final thesis. Note that the research question may not necessarily be a “question” as such, but can be a statement of a problem to be investigated. Here is an example. Note the move from general area, to specific focus area, to the gap in the research (the first italicised passage) and then to the proposed thesis statement (the second italicised passage):

According to business marketing theory, businesses are more likely to succeed if they utilise marketing management approaches or techniques. For example, the marketing concept, a cornerstone of business marketing thought, stresses the importance of determining the needs and wants of consumers and delivering the desired satisfaction more effectively and efficiently than competitors (Kotler, 1986). *Philosophies from marketing management have recently been applied to almost every industry from insurance to travel and hospital services, but not often to farming.* Concerns have been raised about the distinction which appears to exist between agricultural and business marketing theory (Bartels, 1983; Bateman, 1976; Muelenberg, 1986).

In this research proposal the role of marketing management in agricultural marketing theory and practice is described. *It is argued that the marketing strategies of farmers are not adequately described by either the business or agricultural marketing disciplines, and a methodology for analysing the farm business marketing strategy process is outlined.*

(Adapted from McLeay and Zwart, 1993)

- The **general area** is business marketing theory
- The **specific research area** is marketing management concepts (especially the difference between agricultural and business marketing theory)
- The “**gap**” is the application of these concepts to the farming sector
- The **research question** is whether the distinction between agricultural and business marketing theory is justified in the case of the farming sector (**Section 1.4** of the final thesis.)
- The **thesis statement** is that neither agricultural marketing nor business marketing concepts are appropriate in the farming sector and that a new methodology is needed (this is what the research will provide). (**Section 1.5** of the final thesis.)

Note that the “research question” in this case is really a statement of what needs to be investigated. This is a perfectly acceptable way of putting this part of the introduction. However, it could also be phrased in the form of a question or formal hypothesis.

3. Justification for the proposed research

One page is usually sufficient for this. Perry suggests that writers need to tell the reader that the research can be justified along four main criteria:

- The size of the industry/area involved
 - The gaps in the literature demand attention
 - The unusual or improved methodology being used
 - The benefits in terms of policy and practice
- (Perry, 2003)

The example above could clearly be justified along all criteria.

4. Preliminary Literature Review

This is where you provide more detail on what others have done in the area, and what you propose to do. You will need to write around 2 pages. You need to cover the following:

- The major issues or schools of thought
- The gaps in the literature (in more detail than that provided in the introduction)

- Research questions (for qualitative research and hypotheses (for quantitative research) which are connected carefully to the literature being reviewed
- Definition of key terms (this can be done when you introduce each idea, or in a definition sub-section)
- Questions arising from the gaps that can be the focus of data collection or analysis
- This section eventually becomes **Chapter 2** of the thesis.

Perry suggests that potential candidates read a thesis in a similar area to get a feel for what is required in this section. (See also **TLU Help Sheet: Writing a Literature Review**).

An example of a literature review:

An examination of textbook definitions of business and agricultural marketing provides the most general guide to theoretical content. Although there is no generally accepted definition of agricultural marketing, it is frequently viewed as part of the economic system (Ritson, 1986; Bateman, 1976) and is widely recognised as involving the exchange process. A typical definition is given by Shepard and Futrell (1982) who state: '...'. By this definition agricultural marketing theory focuses on the workings of the distribution system, and is typically viewed as a process that begins after produce leaves the farm gate. ... Thus production planning is frequently excluded from the marketing process. ...

Although there is no universally accepted definition of business marketing, it is generally accepted that business marketing, like agricultural marketing, involves the exchange process. For example, Kotler (1972, p. 12) defines marketing as: '...'.(adapted from McLeay and Zwart, 1993) ...

NB: Note how the writers are using definitions of key terms, and making distinctions in this area, to eventually arrive at the contribution of their own research to the debate.

5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework usually forms the final part of the Literature Review section. It describes the model that you are using in the thesis to demonstrate your point. See Sekaran, 1992, Chapter 3 for a useful account of theoretical frameworks.

6. Contribution of the research

This forms **Section 1.6** of the final thesis. In this section you outline how your research will make a *change* to an area of study. This is different from the justification of your research. The justification explains *why* the research should be done. The contribution section explains how

what you will do will lead to certain outcomes. You need to outline:

- The importance of the research outcome(s)
- The practical or theoretical nature of the outcome(s)

The outcome could be the extension of a theoretical model to a new area, or it could be something practical like the development of a checklist for managers, for example.

The Limitations of research section, if you have one, can go in this section. This will become **Section 1.7** of the final thesis.

7. Proposed Research Methodology

This section should be about 1-2 pages. It forms **Chapter 3** in the final thesis.

You do not have to describe the methodology used in great detail (this will be done in the thesis) but you should justify its use over other similar methodologies. For example, you could explain:

- Why you are using a certain paradigm or theory
- Why you are using qualitative or quantitative research
- Why you are using a case study of a specific kind
- Why you are using surveys, correlational experiments, field studies, specific statistical measurements, etc.
- Why you are using a certain dependent or independent or moderating variables (see **TLU Help Sheets: The Research Process and Hallmarks of Scientific Research**)
- Why you have chosen a sampling frame and the size of a certain sample
- How you are proposing to have access to the data
- How you are proposing to analyse the data (This is usually **Chapter 4** of the thesis).

You also need to provide operational (testable—or at least well-supported in the literature) definitions of key terms used such as “firm size”, “business marketing theory”, etc (see Sekaran, 1996; Perry, 2003).

8. Research plan and Project Timetable

The research plan or outline can be discussed in conjunction with a research timetable. However note that they have a different function.

The research plan or outline simply lists what will be covered in each Chapter or Section of the proposed thesis. This helps you as well as the reader:

- It gives you a framework on the direction your proposed thesis will take
- It shows the reader that the project is well-organised and achievable in the time available.

You need only provide one or two lines for each. This becomes **Section 1.7** of the final thesis.

The timetable should indicate the weighting of each part of the proposed thesis (in percentage terms), the topics covered, approximate word limit and—importantly—the approximate length of time it will take to complete them. You might consider providing a graph for convenience.

Chapter	Topic	%	Words	Months
1	Introduction	5	3,500	3
2	Literature Review	30	21,000	6
3	Methodology	20	14,000	4
4	Data analysis	25	17,500	5
5	Conclusions and Implications	20	14,000	6
TOTAL		100	70,000	24

(From Perry, 2000; see also Phillips and Pugh, 1987)

Note that:

- The timetable is approximate only and things always take longer than you think!
- Allow extra time and the start and finish of the project
- The timetable does not commit you to anything (though obviously it helps if you can follow it).

9. List of References

This must be provided in the usual scholarly fashion. It helps to convince your reader that your proposal is worth pursuing if you can identify literature in the field and demonstrate that you understand it. It makes a very strong impact if you can identify where there is a research “gap” in the literature (that your proposal hopes to fill). This is your contribution to the scholarly “conversation”.

In-text references should be provided for all sections of the proposal with the exception of the research plan and timetable.

Relationship between the Proposal and Final Project

Note finally that while the proposal can be mapped onto the final thesis, much work needs to be done. The proposal merely provides a “shell”. The thesis fills in the details. Parts of the proposal are not required in a final thesis (for example, resources and evaluation, and timetable). The order and arrangement of each document is slightly different too as the diagram shows.

Proposal	Thesis/Final Project
1. Introduction	1. Introduction
- General area	- General area
- Specific topic	- Specific topic
- Gap	- Gap
- Research Question	-Research Question
- Thesis Statement	- Thesis Statement
	- Contribution
2. Literature Review	- Thesis outline/Limitations
3. Theoretical Framework	2. Literature Review
4. Methodology	3. Methodology
5. Contribution	4. Data Analysis
6. Research Plan and Timetable	5. Conclusions and Implications
7. References	6. References
	7. Appendices

NB: Variations in the above are possible

Sources:

McLeay, F. J. and Zwart, A.C. (1993) *Agricultural marketing and Farm marketing Strategies* Australian Agribusiness Review Volume 1 No 1

Perry, Chad (2003), 'Research Proposal Structure Keyed into the Thesis Structure'. Date accessed 24/6/03.

[URL: http://www.usq.edu.au/library/PG_Toolbox/PhD%20proposal.htm]

Phillips, E. M. and Pugh, D. S. (1987) *How to get a PhD*. Open University Press: Milton Keynes.

Sekaran, U. (1992), *Research Methods for Business: A Skills Building Approach*. Wiley: New York.