Your thesis/dissertation proposal provides an overview of your proposed plan of work, including the general scope of your project, your basic research questions, research methodology, and the overall significance of your study. In short, your proposal explains what you want to study, how you will study this topic, why this topic needs to be studied, and (generally) when you intend to do this work. (Occasionally, you may also need to explain where your study will take place.)

Dissertation/Thesis proposals are designed to
- Justify and plan (or contract for) a research project.
- Show how your project contributes to existing research.
- Demonstrate to your advisor and committee that you understand how to conduct discipline-specific research within an acceptable time-frame.

Proposals across programs generally include at least some form of the following sections: Title, Abstract, Introduction/Background, Problem Statement, Purpose/Aims/Rationale, Review of Literature, Methodology, Significance/Implications, Overview of Chapters, Plan of Work, Bibliography. Sometimes these sections may be combined—in some fields, the problem statement, aims, and review of literature are all part of the introduction.

**Key point:** Because proposals vary widely across disciplines, use the below for general guidance while seeking the specific guidance of advice from your advisor and examples of past successful proposals by thesis and dissertation writers in your program.

**Title**
At this early stage, you need only provide a working title. You can decide on the exact wording for your title when you are nearer to completing your dissertation. Nevertheless, even at the start, aim to create a title that conveys the idea of your investigation. Normally, a title beginning “A study in . . .” is too vague; decide whether you want to compare, collate, assess, etc. Also, don’t worry if you compose a long title. You are preparing to write an academic document, not to devise a snappy headline for a tabloid newspaper. A good title should:
- Orient your readers to the topic you will research.
- Indicate the type of study you will conduct.

Examples:
- Role of the Hydrologic Cycle in Vegetation Response to Climate Change: An Analysis Using VEMAP Phase 2 Model Experiments
- Geographic Representations of the Planet Mars, 1867-1907

**Abstract**
Not all fields require abstracts, so check with your advisor to see if you are required to include one. The abstract should:
- Provide a brief (100-350 word) overview of the proposal that summarizes the Statement of the Problem, Research Questions or Hypotheses, and Methods and Procedures
- Signal the significance of the problem and the promise of your approach.
Example:
- The Black-Bellied Plover (Pluvialis squatarola) is a shorebird species threatened with becoming endangered because of the loss of habitat through twentieth-century urbanization. As a step toward preventing this species from becoming endangered, this report identifies the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana. To identify the habitat, I examined information about Black-Bellied Plover sightings in Louisiana over the last 50 years and the landuse categories derived from satellite imagery of the sighting locations. These examinations indicate that the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana is generally pasture and shrubland. To protect this species, the Louisiana Department of Parks and Wildlife or the private sector should conserve and monitor this habitat, especially in the areas where the most frequent sightings have occurred on Grand Isle and around Caillou Bay.

In some cases, the abstract may need to be very brief—no more than 50 words:
- The Black-Bellied Plover (Pluvialis squatarola) is a shorebird species endangered by habitat loss through twentieth-century urbanization. This report identifies the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana based on previous sightings over 50 years and on landuse categories derived from satellite imagery. The report also recommends conservation techniques to protect this species.

Although the abstract comes first in a proposal, many writers write it last, once the proposal is fully drafted and ready to be summarized and abstracted from!

Introduction/Background
The introduction helps put your project in conversation with other projects on similar topics. Generally, the introduction provides necessary background information to your study and provides readers with some sense of your overall research interest. A good introduction should:
- Establish the general territory (real world or research) in which the research is placed.
- Describe the broad foundations of your study, including some references to existing literature and/or empirically observable situations. In other words, the introduction needs to provide sufficient background for readers to understand where your study is coming from.
- Indicate the general scope of your project, but do not go into so much detail that later sections (purpose/literature review) become irrelevant.
- Provide an overview of the sections that will appear in your proposal (optional).
- Engage the readers.

Example:
- Although they did not know of the germs the animals might carry, residents of US cities in the 1860s and 70s cited the flies, roaches, and rats who swarmed the tenements in arguing for community sanitary programs. In the 1950s vermin provided justification for housing and health agencies to pursue urban renewal, and also gave tenant activists a striking symbol of officials’ neglect of their neighborhoods. Today, though we know that vermin produce indoor allergens, and we have pesticides designed to keep vermin at bay, the fact that both may be hazardous confuses parents, health officials, and other advocates who seek to protect health. As long as people have lived in cities, pest animals have joined us in our homes and buildings, affected our health, and propelled our policies on the urban environment. The social geography of pests, however, reflects the social position and physical surroundings of our neighborhoods. The researcher’s objective is to use the ecological history and social geography of pest animals, which have been blamed for several kinds of disease exposures throughout the past two centuries, to investigate how health and environmental conditions are connected with poverty in cities. (http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/bcs/grs/Cronon-SampleProposal.htm)
Statement of the Problem

This section may be incorporated in your introduction or your purpose section, or it may stand independently (it depends on the field). Some proposals start with the statement of the problem, rather than a more general introduction. Regardless of placement, at some point you need to clearly identify the problem or knowledge gap that your project is responding to. This section should:

- Answer the question: “What is the gap that needs to be filled?” and/or “What is the problem that needs to be solved?”
- State the problem clearly early in a paragraph.
- Limit the variables you address in stating your problem or question.

You may want to consider framing your problem “statement” as a question, since you are really seeking to answer a question (or a set of questions) in your study.

Examples:

- Despite the growing interest in nineteenth-century geographical representation, no geographer has yet seriously examined the remarkable discourses that emerged during the latter half of the century to represent the geographies of worlds beyond Earth. Popular histories of geography (e.g. Sheehan 1996; Morton 2002) indicate that astronomers collected extensive geographic data about the nearby planets, usually recording their findings in detailed maps that were strikingly similar in appearance to many of the well-studied imperial maps produced during the same time period. Although much of this astronomical-geographical knowledge compiled during the late nineteenth century has since been revised or discarded on the basis of twentieth-century remote sensing images, I contend that colonial era discourses had widespread scientific and cultural significance at the time they were created. (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/lane.pdf)
- Reports on the state of freshwater reserves warn that severe local shortages are imminent, and predict that violent conflicts will emerge in water-scarce regions (Ohlson 1995, Elhance 1999). Water scarcity has been shown to cause civil conflict, particularly when accompanied by high population density, poverty, and income inequality (Homer-Dixon 1994, 1996; Hauge and Ellingsen, 1998). Urban migrant communities, where ethnic, religious, and class differences can exacerbate tensions, and community-wide patterns of adaptation to environmental scarcities are not well-formed, may be particularly vulnerable to water conflicts (Moench 2002). To better understand how conflicts develop in water-scarce regions, research is needed on the social and economic factors that mediate cooperation and conflict (Ronnfeldt 1997). I propose to do an in-depth study of Villa Israel, a barrio of Cochabamba, Brazil, where conflict over water is an established part of life. (http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals/wutich_nsf.pdf)
- Historians searching for the causes of the Reformation have long assigned central importance to the role of the printing press. . . . [R]ecent scholarship has produced a number of important studies examining the role of printed media in the spread of the Reformation message. Much of this work tends to focus on the production and reception of Reformation texts and images, with little attention paid to the means by which such texts were distributed and circulated. Such studies are often premised on the assumption that texts and ideas enjoyed a relatively free circulation and that patterns of book production and distribution therefore serve as essentially transparent measures of interest and demand. . . . However, virtually nowhere in sixteenth-century Europe were ideas likely to flow unregulated through some critical discursive field. . . . I propose to examine the censorship of religious texts and images within the imperial city of Nuremberg, from [1513 until 1555]. (http://www.virginia.edu/history/graduate/papers/dispro_example.html)
Purpose/Aims/Rationale/Research Questions
Most proposals include a clear statement of the research objectives, including a description of the questions the research seeks to answer or the hypotheses the research advances. This may be included as part of the introduction, or it may be a separate section. Spend significant time brainstorming before and while you draft this section. Once you begin your dissertation research, you may find that your aims change in emphasis or in number. What is essential for you at this point, though, is to specify for your readers—and for yourself—the precise focus of your research and to identify key concepts you will be studying. A clear statement of purpose will:

- Explain the goals and research objectives of the study (what do you hope to find?).
- Show the original contributions of your study by explaining how your research questions or approach are different from previous research (what will you add to the field of knowledge?).
- Provide a more detailed account of the points summarized in the introduction.
- Include a rationale for the study (why should we study this?).
- Be clear about what your study will not address (this is especially important if you are applying for competitive funding; narrowly focused studies are more likely to win funding).

In addition, this section may:

- Describe the research questions and/or hypotheses of the study.
- Include a subsection defining important terms, especially if they will be new to some readers or if you will use them in an unfamiliar way.
- State limitations of the research.
- Provide a rationale for the particular subjects of the study.

Examples:
- My objectives are twofold. First, I intend to examine the effects of historic shifts in climate on the interactions of the carbon and water cycles as simulated by the constituent models of VEMAP Phase 2. . . . Second, I will investigate how alterations to future climate, as simulated through the end of the 21st century, are predicted to impact those same cycles and interactions. The linkages between the carbon and water cycles at the regional scale have only recently been the subjects of research; hence, much work remains to improve our understanding of the feedbacks between coupled processes. . . .
- Questions I plan to investigate include: How does the water balance of a region, including surface runoff, change as a result of climate alterations . . . ?
- The guiding research question is: Under what conditions do Latinos in Queens, NY, switch their ethnic identification? This involves the following specific objectives: 1) To document the incidence of multiple ethnic identities among research participants. This involves collecting life histories that focus on the ethnic background of informants and their experience with ethnicity. 2) To determine the contexts under which people invoke their ethnic identity. This involves collecting data on characteristics of the community and social networks of communities. It will also involve prolonged shadowing observations of the participants (with their consent) in their day-to-day activities. [etc.]

Review of Literature
The literature review is a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out. Obviously, at this point you are not likely to have read everything related to your research questions, but you should still be able to identify the key texts with which you will be in conversation as you write your dissertation. Literature reviews often include both the theoretical approaches to your topic and research (empirical or analytical) on your topic. Writing the literature review allows you to understand:
• How other scholars have written about your topic (in addition to what they have written).
• The range of theories scholars use to analyze their primary materials or data
• How other scholars connect their specific research topics to larger issues, questions, or practices within the field.
• The best methodologies and research techniques for your particular topic.

The literature review should:
• Illustrate the uniqueness, importance of and need for your particular project by explaining how your research questions and approach are different from those of other scholars.
• Justify methodological choices.
• Demonstrate your familiarity with the topic and appropriate approaches to studying it.
• Flesh out the Introduction’s brief description of the background of your study.
• Critically assess important research trends or areas of interest relevant to your study.
• Identify potential gaps in knowledge.
• Establish a need for current and/or future research projects.

Tips on drafting your Literature Review:
• Categorize the literature into recognizable topic clusters and begin each with a sub-heading. Look for trends and themes and then synthesize related information. You want to
• stake out the various positions that are relevant to your project,
• build on conclusions that lead to your project, or
• demonstrate the places where the literature is lacking, whether due to a methodology you think is incomplete or to assumptions you think are flawed.
• Avoid “Smith says X, Jones says Y” literature reviews. You should be tying the literature you review to specific facets of your problem, not to review for the sake of reviewing.
• Avoid including all the studies on the subject or the vast array of scholarship that brought you to the subject. As tempting as it might be to throw in everything you know, the literature review is not the place for such demonstration. Stick to those pieces of the literature directly relevant to your narrowed subject (question or statement of a problem).
• Avoid polemics, praise, and blame. You should fight the temptation to strongly express your opinions about about the previous literature. Your task is to justify your project given the known scholarship, so polemics, praise, and blame are unnecessary and possibly distracting.

Key Point: You are entering a scholarly conversation already in progress. The literature review shows that you’ve been listening in and that you have something valuable to say. After assessing the literature in your field, you should be able to answer the following questions:
• Why should we study (further) this research topic/problem?
• What contributions will my study make to the existing literature?

Examples:
• Other studies also support the conclusion that traditional teaching methods hinder learning calculus. Selden, Selden, and Mason, conclude that isolated, trivial problems, the norm in many classrooms, inhibit students from acquiring the ability to generalize calculus problem-solving skills (Selden, Selden, and Mason 1994). Similar results are reported by Norman and Prichard (1994). They demonstrate that many learners can not interpret the structure of a problem beyond surface-level symbols. They show that novices have inaccurate intuitions about problems which lead them to attempt incorrect solution strategies (Norman and Prichard 1994). Because they cannot see beyond
• high-level features, they can not develop correct intuitions. On the other hand, successful problem
solvers categorize math problems based upon underlying structural similarities and fundamental
principles (Silver 1979), (Shoenfeld and Herrman 1982). These categories are often grouped based
upon solution modes, which the experts use to generate a forward working strategy (Owen and
Sweller 1989).

• Increasingly, the research community is turning to coupled land-surface-atmosphere-ocean models
with dynamic modules to achieve the realism necessary for climate studies. Most of the studies to date
have incorporated equilibrium vegetation models into climate change simulations (e.g., Neilson and
Marks 1994, VEMAP Members 1995 . . . ; but see Foley et al. 1998 for an example of climate
simulations with a DGVM). It is recognized that the next stage is to include dynamic representations
of the terrestrial biosphere. In this context, VEMAP Phase 2 model experiments will provide a unique
opportunity to assess the effects of climate change on the hydrologic cycle and the water balance of
regions on a continental scale, and how vegetation dynamics mediate those responses.

Methodology
This section is essential to most good research proposals. How you study a problem is often as important as
the results you collect. This section includes a description of the general means through which the goals of
the study will be achieved: methods, materials, procedures, tasks, etc. An effective methodology section
should:

• Introduce the overall methodological approach for each problem or question. Is your study qualitative
or quantitative? Are you going to take a special approach, such as action research, or use case studies?

• Indicate how the approach fits the overall research design. Your methods should have a clear
connection with your research questions and/or hypotheses. In other words, make sure that your
methods will actually answer your questions—Don Thackrey notes that the most common reason for
the rejection of professional proposals is that “the proposed tests, or methods, or scientific
procedures are unsuited to the stated objective.”

• Describe the specific methods of data collection you are going to use—e.g. surveys, interviews,
questionnaires, observation, archival or traditional library research.

• Explain how you intend to analyze and interpret your results. Will you use statistical analysis? Will you
use specific theoretical perspectives to help you analyze a text or explain observed behaviors?

• If necessary, provide background and rationale for methodologies that are unfamiliar for your readers.
(Typically, the social sciences and humanities require more explanation/rationale of methods than the
hard sciences).

• If applicable, you may also need to provide a rationale for subject selection (particularly if you have
not already provided one). For instance, if you propose to conduct interviews and use questionnaires,
how do you intend to select the sample population? If you are analyzing literary texts, which texts
have you chosen, and why?

• Address potential limitations. Are there any practical limitations that could affect your data collection?
How will you attempt to control for potential confounding variables and errors?

Tips on drafting your methodology section:

• Break down your methodology into easily digestible subsections.

• In the physical sciences, these sections may include subjects, design, apparatus, instrumentation,
process, analysis, etc.

• In the social sciences, these sections may include selection of participants, interview process, profiles,
interpretive and analytic framework, methods of qualitative analysis, etc.

• In the humanities, these sections may include scholarly research, archival research, theoretical
orientation, etc.
• Remember that your methods section may also require supporting literature.
• Anticipate and pre-empt the audience’s methodological concerns.
• If the audience might have a problem with a facet of the methodology, admit this difficulty and justify your approach.
• If your methodology may lead to problems you can anticipate (including timeframe problems), state this openly and show why pursuing the methodology outweighs the risk of these problems cropping up.

**Key Point:** If you have demonstrated that you have considered even the downside of your methods, their advantages will seem more carefully developed.

Examples (from the introduction to a longer methods section):

- The research plan will proceed in two phases. During the first phase, I will select a 60-household purposive sample, create and test interview protocols, choose key informants, and train a research assistant. The first phase will lay the groundwork for the second, so that I will be prepared to create a baseline assessment of exchange and social interaction before the dry season begins in May. During the second phase, I will conduct in-depth interviews with key informants and four ethnographic interviews with each household in the sample. At the end of the second phase, I will conduct a series of experimental economic games to determine the norms of trust and reciprocity in the community.

- The research design has several strengths. First, ethnographic study will yield data with high internal validity about how responses to water scarcity evolve over the wet-to-dry cycle (Kirk and Miller 1986). Second . . . (After providing a rationale for the research design, the author goes on to describe in detail the site selection and methods of data collection and analysis).

- My research draws on a three-tiered methodological approach: close textual analysis of primary source material; historical contextualization of both primary documents and broader socio-cultural framework through archival research and secondary histories; and interpretation of primary texts through theoretical frameworks, including spatial theories and gender studies. (Goes on to describe specific theoretical frameworks).

**Significance/Implications**

Some proposals require a separate section stating the significance of the study. A clear statement of significance may:

- Discuss the methodological, substantive, and/or theoretical contribution you anticipate making to existing knowledge in your (sub)field.
- Plainly state the practical and/or theoretical importance of the problem and/or objectives of your study, given current knowledge and practices.
- Explain the usefulness or benefits of the study, if possible (and especially for funding agencies), to both the outside world and the research community.

Example:

- My research on identity and development is innovative because it brings together analysis of national discourses about Indians with a study of the practices and choices of the individual Indians whose identities are at issue. I believe this research can be helpful to the nation, development agencies, and indigenous organizations as Bolivia works out what a multicultural identity will mean for its people. I am particularly committed to sharing the results of my analysis with the Guaraní people with whom I work, in the hopes that my work will not just be an extraction of truths, but will give them information with which they can better control their lives and resources.

http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/examples/PosteroFulb
Overview of Chapters
Some proposals also include a brief description of relevant chapters. Check with your advisor to see if this is required for your proposal.

Timeline/Plan of Work
Many proposals also include a schedule with anticipated completion dates for specific parts of the dissertation. This timeline helps your committee determine if your project is realistic given available methods and institutional requirements (such as deadlines for submission, etc.). Setting a schedule can also help you manage your time more effectively by setting specific goals for yourself. Some suggestions to keep in mind while drafting a timeline:
- Consult your advisor as you develop your plan of work.
- Be aware of important dates that the Graduate College has set for submitting and defending dissertations and theses. Once you have identified a specific time for submitting your project, work backwards and estimate how long each stage will take.
- Do not be overly ambitious; most stages seem to take longer than originally planned.
  o Remember that this is a proposed timeline. What is perhaps most important is that you demonstrate your awareness of the various elements of the study (IRB approval, travel; design, testing, and length of experiments; negotiation of entry into the study site; purchase of necessary equipment; drafting; redrafting; etc).

Bibliographic References and Appendices
Your proposal should include a working bibliography of key texts that inform your study and methodology. You will want to include all sources cited in your proposal, and you may also want to include references that will be cited in the dissertation itself. Your appendices may include Experiment Diagrams, Permissions for Human Subject Testing, etc.

Key point: Both bibliographies and required Appendices are discipline specific: make sure you know what the requirements are for end matter in your discipline.

Creating Coherence and Flow
While your program will have discipline-specific style and citation guidelines, here are tips that can help you create a clear and engaging voice from abstract to implications.

Create coherence or “flow” between sentences in a paragraph by
- Moving from “old” (familiar) information to “new” information.
- Putting the most important information at the end of the sentence (stress position).
- Keeping the subject and verb together.
- Using transitional phrases (“however,” “therefore,” “in addition,” “on the other hand”) that signal to readers a shift in topic or emphasis.
- Using pronouns to refer back to previously introduced information (e.g. this+noun) and/or the use of recycling, or the repetition of key words or phrases.

Example:
- When rocks erode, they break down into sediment—smaller pieces of rock and minerals. These sediments may eventually travel in water to new sites such as the sea or river beds. The water deposits the sediments in layers that become buried and compacted. In time, the sediment particles