



## University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

### Writing a Thesis or Dissertation Proposal

Adapted from the Penn State Graduate Writing Center

Your dissertation or thesis proposal explains what you want to study, how you will study this topic, and why this topic needs to be studied. Proposals are designed to

- justify and plan (or contract for) a research project.
- show how your project contributes to existing research.
- demonstrate you understand how to conduct discipline-specific research within a reasonable time-frame.

Proposals generally include some form of the sections outlined in this handout. But because proposals vary across disciplines, also seek advice from your advisor and examples of past successful proposals in your program!

**Title:** Although you can finalize your title when you are closer to completing your thesis, aim at the start to create a draft title that communicates the central idea of your investigation. A good title should

- orient your readers to your topic, e.g., *Geographic Representations of the Planet Mars, 1867-1907*
- indicate the type of study you will conduct, e.g., *Role of the Hydrologic Cycle in Vegetation Response to Climate Change: An Analysis Using VEMAP Phase 2 Model Experiments*

**Abstract:** Check with your advisor to see if you are required to include an abstract. Consider too that while the abstract comes first, many writers write it last after the proposal is fully drafted. The abstract should

- signal the significance of the problem and the promise of your approach.
- briefly summarize (e.g., 100-350 word) your statement of the problem, research questions or hypotheses, and methods and procedures.

**Introduction/Background:** The introduction gently introduces the problem or question you are taking up within the field or subfield that informs your work. While it should contain the signal moves of *establishing your research territory, identifying a gap or niche*, and signaling how you will *occupy that niche or address the gap*, its role is to prepare readers for and draw them into the rest of your proposal.

**Statement of the Problem:** Depending on the field, this section may conclude your introduction or it may stand independently. Regardless, at some point you need to

- address “What is the gap to be filled?” and/or “What is the problem to be solved?”
- state the problem clearly and early in a paragraph.
- limit the variables you address in stating your problem or question.

**Purpose/Aims/Rationale/Research Questions:** Most proposals include a clear statement of the research objectives. This may follow be integrated into an introduction following the state of the problem, or it may be a separate section. Although your aims may change as you proceed with your thesis, it is essential to specify what at this point is your specific focus. A clear statement of purpose will answer or imply an answer to these questions:

- What do you hope to find? (Research goals and objectives)
- What will you add to the field? (Differentiating your research from previous research)
- Why should we study this? (Rationale for this study)

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 (especially important if you are applying for competitive funding).
- provide a rationale for the particular subjects of the study.

**Review of Literature:** The literature review illustrates the uniqueness, feasibility of, and need for your project by telling the story of existing research that informs your project and presents a gap that your research will address. Although you are not likely to have read everything related to your research questions, you should still be able to identify the key texts with which you will be in conversation. Your literature review should

- 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.
- communicate why this topic warrants (further) study and what you are poised to contribute.
- avoid “Smith says X, Jones says Y”; instead, categorize the literature by themes tied to specific facets of *your problem*.

**Methodology:** This section includes a description of the means through which the goals of the study will be achieved. 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 case study?
- show a clear connection between your methods and your research questions and/or hypotheses—that is, your methods will actually help you to answer your questions.
- describe the specific methods of data collection you are going to use—e.g. surveys, interviews, questionnaires, observation, archival research.
- explain how you intend to analyze and interpret your results. Will you use statistical analysis? A theoretical perspective to help you analyze a text or explain observed behaviors?
- address potential limitations including practical limitations that could affect your data collection or steps you might need to control for potential confounding variables and errors.
- use supporting literature as necessary and anticipate/address readers’ methodological concerns.

**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.

**Overview of Chapters and Timeline/Plan of Work:** Some proposals include a brief description of relevant chapters. Many proposals also include a schedule with anticipated completion dates for specific parts of the project so your committee can determine if your project is realistic given available methods and institutional deadlines. Setting a schedule can also help you manage your time by setting specific goals for yourself. An effective timeline

- demonstrates 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 and redrafting.
- shows awareness of other important dates such as Graduate College deadlines.
- anticipates and builds in time to account for some stages taking longer than initially planned.

**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.

Remember that proposals are program specific. Be sure to seek one or more good “mentor texts”—examples of recent successful proposals for your program—that can help you imagine and structure your own!