

## Helpsheet

# RESEARCH PROPOSALS

### Use this sheet to help you:

- understand the main elements that comprise a research proposal
- prepare a well-structured and well-written research proposal

## 5 minute self test

### 1. How long should a research proposal be?

- a. 1 – 3 pages
- b. 3 – 7 pages
- c. 7 – 15 pages
- d. 15 – 20 pages

### 2. Which of the following is NOT needed in a research proposal?

- a. a research question
- b. a list of references
- c. a detailed literature review
- d. a research timetable

### 3. How can proposed research be justified?

- a. a gap in the literature needs to be addressed
- b. an unusual or improved methodology is to be used
- c. the research may benefit policy and practice
- d. all of the above

### 4. The research plan:

- a. should commit you to a plan of action
- b. should be a substantial part of the proposal
- c. should show your project is well organised and achievable
- d. is the same as the research timetable

**Check your answers on Page 8**

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## The importance of the research proposal

A research proposal is a document of usually three to seven pages that informs others of a proposed piece of research. This proposed research is usually a Masters or Doctorate by thesis, but it can also be work for a corporate purpose. University students usually write research proposals for academics who may eventually supervise the work based on the proposal.

A research proposal can be rejected as unsuitable or poorly designed and on the basis of this, a piece of research can be rejected. The proposal is, therefore, an important document; one that is worth spending some time on to get right.

Another reason to get the proposal right is that this can save you time in the long run. If the proposal is well-designed, it can form an outline of the thesis to follow, and ideally, can be mapped onto various parts of the final thesis.

### The elements of the research proposal: overview

**The following elements must be included in any proposal:**

1. Introduction or background to the research problem or issue, including an identification of the gap in the current research
2. Research question and, if possible, a thesis statement answering the question
3. Justification for the proposal research, i.e., why the research is needed
4. Preliminary literature review covering what others have already done in the area
5. Theoretical framework to be used in the proposed research
6. Statement of the contribution of the research to the general area
7. Proposed research methodology
8. Research plan and outline
9. Timetable of proposed research
10. List of references used in preparing the proposal

**The following elements 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
- Statement of the means by which the research will be evaluated or tested
- Statement of where and how results of the research will be disseminated
- Background of the researcher and their suitability for the task

This helpsheet addresses the main elements listed above.

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## The elements of the research proposal: detail

### 1. Introduction

The introduction 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.

In the introduction, you need to give a sense of the general field of research of which your area is a part. You then need to narrow to the specific area of your concern. This should lead logically to the gap in the research that you intend to fill. When the gap is identified, a research question can then 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 your focus on a particular part of the bigger conversation
- The gap is what you notice needs to be said in the conversation that has not been said before or that needs addressing in more detail
- The research question asks something to address 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. It is not expected in a proposal that you have an answer to your research question. This is what the thesis provides. However, it helps if you have a tentative answer. A hypothesis is useful for this purpose, though this might only be necessary for more empirical subjects (Economics, for example). (See helpsheets: Research Essentials and The Research Process).

Further points to note:

- Outline any controversies that are in the literature briefly. Further details will be covered in the literature review section
- Use simple and jargon-free language as your supervisor may not be aware of all of the language in your focus area
- The introduction must narrow down, not get wider. You must demonstrate you have command of the issues in the area and that you are focussing on a particular issue
- The introduction generally forms 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 be a question as such, but rather a statement of a problem to be investigated.



Below is an example. Note the move from a general area, to a specific 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)

Let's look at this more closely:

- 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 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.)

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 (2003), 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 that demand attention
- The unusual or improved methodology being used
- The benefits in terms of policy and practice (Perry, 2003)

The example provided above could clearly be justified along all criteria.

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## 4. Preliminary literature review

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

- The major issues or schools of thought
- Gaps in the literature (in more detail than is provided in the introduction)
- Research questions and/or hypotheses which are connected carefully to the literature being reviewed
- Definitions of key terms, provided either 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

The preliminary literature review 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 helpsheet: Literature Reviews).

An example of a preliminary 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)*

Note how the writer refers to definitions of key terms and makes distinctions 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)

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

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 of the final thesis.

You do not have to describe the methodology to be used in great detail, but you should justify its use over other methodologies. For example, you could explain the reasons for using:

- a certain paradigm or theory
- qualitative or quantitative research
- a case study of a specific kind
- surveys, correlational experiments, field studies, specific statistical measurements, etc.
- certain dependent or independent or moderating variables (see helpsheets: The Research Process and Research Essentials)
- a particular sampling frame and the size of a sample

You could also explain how you are proposing to:

- have access to the data
- analyse the data (this is usually Chapter 4 of the thesis).

You also need to provide operational (ie. testable, or at least well-supported in the literature) definitions of key terms (see Sekaran, 1996; Perry, 2003).

## 8. Research plan

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

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

- it gives you a framework for the direction your proposed thesis will take
- it shows the reader 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.

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## 9. Research timetable

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!
- Extra time needs to be allowed for the start and finish of the project
- The timetable does not commit you to anything (though obviously it helps if you can follow it).

## 10. 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.

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## 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 and 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 below 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
2. Literature Review	- Contribution
3. Theoretical Framework	- Thesis outline/Limitations
4. Methodology	2. Literature Review
5. Contribution	3. Methodology
6. Research Plan and Timetable	4. Data Analysis
7. References	5. Conclusions and Implications
	6. References
	7. Appendices

Note that variations in the above are possible.



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## Answers

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1. b
2. c
3. d
4. c

## References

- McLeay, F. J. and Zwart, A.C. (1993), *Agricultural marketing and Farm marketing Strategies Australian Agribusiness Review* Volume 1 No 1
- Perry, C. (2003). *Research Proposal Structure Keyed into the Thesis Structure*, Accessed 24/6/03 from, [http://www.usq.edu.au/library/PG\\_Toolbox/PhD%20proposal.htm](http://www.usq.edu.au/library/PG_Toolbox/PhD%20proposal.htm)
- Phillips, E. M. and Pugh, D. S. (1987). *How to get a PhD*. Milton Keynes, U.K: Open University Press
- Sekaran, U. (1992). *Research Methods for Business: A Skills Building Approach*. New York: Wiley.