Writing a research proposal

You might be asked to write a research proposal for a course assignment, a dissertation or thesis, or a funded project.

Writing a research proposal can be particularly challenging because proposals tend not to be public documents, so you may not have seen an example. Also, proposals are written for a variety of purposes and audiences, so there is more than one acceptable format.

This guide provides an introduction to writing a proposal, to help you make some decisions about the type of proposal you need to produce.

This guide includes:
- How writing a proposal helps a researcher
- What readers are looking for in a proposal
- What to include in a proposal
- Some further helpful tips and sources

Why write a research proposal?

A research proposal is an essential step in any research project.
It helps you, as a researcher, to:

Clarify your ideas	**Plan**	**Write** early	**Communicate**
… by reflecting on and refining your proposed research project	… to create a guide and a way of monitoring progress during the research	… to develop good writing habits (and to start writing some parts of your final report)	… your proposed research so others can give you feedback

The LTL Learning/Research Advisors can provide advice on:
- *searching for information,*
- *managing your sources once you've found them*
- *writing clearly*
- *managing your time*
- *… and more*

We offer workshops, individual appointments and "drop in" times.
For more information on how we can help you improve your research and writing skills, see our web site at http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/

What is the reader looking for in your proposal?

Your research proposal helps your supervisor and faculty (and, sometimes, a funding body) to:

- assess the worth of the proposed research
- assess your capacity to complete the research
- assess the institution's capacity to support the research

So, the proposal must convince the reader of two things:

- that the research is worthwhile
- that the research is feasible

The reader will ask themselves a series of questions as they are reading – so, you need to ensure your proposal provides answers to questions such as these:

Is this problem or issue worth studying?

Are the questions/objectives/hypotheses clear?

Will the study contribute significantly to our knowledge of the issue?

Will the expected research outcome meet the requirements of the degree?

Is the researcher aware of the key schools of thought relevant to the study?

Has the researcher critically engaged with the literature, and used the literature to justify the research ?

Is the methodology appropriate?

Does the researcher have the necessary skills to complete the project successfully (or is further training required) ?

Are the required budget and resources (including supervision) available?

Have potential risks been identified and managed?

Is the timeline feasible?

Developing the structure

The proposal should include three key elements:

- what you intend to do
- why you intend to do it
- how you intend to do it

The exact format for the proposal varies amongst faculties; your faculty will have specific guidelines and/or a template, and may have example proposals.

Regardless of the format, most research proposals contain:

Preliminary sections

- **Title page**
- **Abstract**
- **Table of contents** (optional)
- (Perhaps a **glossary** or other useful preparatory information)

Research background & discussion

- **The research problem** and the *rationale* for the study
- **Discussion/ literature review** that provides *context* (i.e. literature and theory relevant to the study) and a *justification* for your research question
- **Objective(s)** or research *question(s)* or *hypothesis(es)*
- **Significance** or expected contribution of the study
- **Scope** and/or *limitations* of the research area

Methodology / approach

- **Methodology** (a description of, and rationale for, the methodology, design, and methods)
- **Data analysis** (a description of, and rationale for, the proposed method of data analysis)

Programme / management

- **Ethical considerations** (if appropriate)
- **Potential risks or problems** (and how they would be addressed)
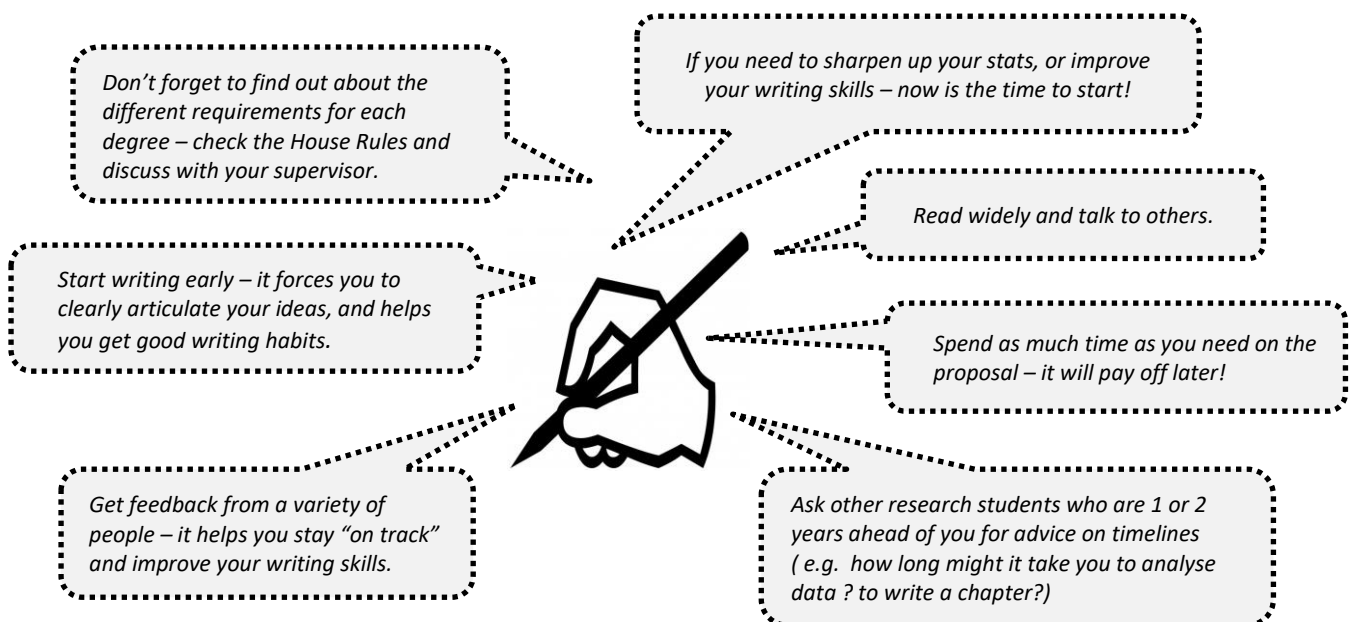- **Research programme:** time frame, budget, resources, health & safety considerations

Supplementary sections

- **References**
- (Perhaps **Appendices**)

Some sample proposal outlines

Example 1	Example 2	Example 3	Example 4
• Title • Abstract • Table of Contents • Introduction • Method • Timetable, budget, health & safety • References • Appendices	• Title • Abstract • Table of Contents • Introduction • Literature review • Research question(s) • Methodology • Timetable, budget, health & safety • References • Appendices	• Title • Abstract • Table of Contents • Introduction • Research question(s) • Literature review • Model or theoretical framework • Design / Method • Timetable & budget • Thesis Outline • References • Appendices	• Title • Table of Contents • Abstract • Project description • Methodology • Timetable & budget • References • Appendices

Tips from proposal writers

Don't forget to find out about the different requirements for each degree – check the House Rules and discuss with your supervisor.

If you need to sharpen up your stats, or improve your writing skills – now is the time to start!

Read widely and talk to others.

Start writing early – it forces you to clearly articulate your ideas, and helps you get good writing habits.

Spend as much time as you need on the proposal – it will pay off later!

Get feedback from a variety of people – it helps you stay "on track" and improve your writing skills.

Ask other research students who are 1 or 2 years ahead of you for advice on timelines (e.g. how long might it take you to analyse data ? to write a chapter?)

Resources

To find out more about writing research proposals, check out:

Divan, A. (2009). *Communication skills for the biosciences.* Oxford: OUP. [Q223 Diva 2009]
[Focuses on the sciences; includes annotated examples of proposals]

Hart, C. (2005). *Doing your masters dissertation.* London: Sage. [LB2369 Har 2005]
[Focuses on social sciences; includes annotated examples of proposals]

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (2007). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Q180.55.P7 Loc]
[Provides detailed advice on writing proposals]

McNiff, J. (2009). *Doing and writing action research* London: Sage. [LB1028.2 Mac 2009]
[Advice on writing proposals for action research; includes examples]

Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2007). *Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for supervisors.* London: Routledge. [*LB2369 Pal 2007*]
[Detailed advice on structure and language]

(NB. Resources on research methods usually also provide advice on proposals.)