

WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL: *JUST DO IT*

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Many Master's students find it very scary to write a research proposal, not knowing where to start and fearing that they will make a hash of it, thinking this might condemn themselves and their research to eternal ridicule and failure. Supervisors and lecturers with a tendency to emphasize the crucial importance of THE PROPOSAL who make statements such as "your research is only as good as your proposal" are often to blame for instilling the 'fear of failure' syndrome into upcoming researchers. It is true however that most students and beginner researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means or how to begin to write one.

The purpose of this brief note is to a) de-mystify "THE PROPOSAL"; and b) provide advice on where to start. It is based on the experiences of the authors in their own proposal development and/or student supervision processes.

A few initial words of comfort:

- Your proposal is not case in concrete, even after its acceptance. You are allowed to modify your research afterwards, as you learn new skills or new information is gained
- Don't worry about being an expert – this is an outcome of your degree, not a start condition
- The normal pathway to a proposal is "vague and confused" -> "clear but over-simplified" -> **"clear, to the point, nuanced and insightful"**
- Your supervisor is an important partner and sounding board
- Feel comfortable with critical conversations and feedback
- Make peace with imperfection
- It's normal to, at the start, feel "it's too big for me". That feeling will soon subside, but only if you knuckle down and 'just do it'
- Don't dream of reading or cover all the literature on your topic at the proposal stage. You and your supervisor need to pick a) the low-hanging and b) the juiciest 'fruit' and use that as a basis for your proposal.
- The best proposals have their origins in the researcher's mind and not in the literature. Don't dream that ideas will jump out at you from the literature. You have a beautiful mind – use it well.

The purpose of a research proposal

A research proposal should show others that you have a feasible research project and that you have the competence and the plan to finish it. It should include all the key elements involved in the research process and provide enough information for the readers to assess the proposed study.

The purpose of a research proposal is to inform yourself, and others, of a) what you want to do; b) justifying why you should do it; c) what others have done or thought about the issue; d) how you plan to do it, and where; e) which obstacles you anticipate and how you will overcome them; f) what your time frame and milestones are; g) what your anticipated costs are and h) which literature and from what particular disciplines you have read. It merely plots the way and, if done properly, can also help reduce 'surprises' in subsequent phases of the project.

The proposal serves as a flexible 'navigation plan' for the journey ahead and helps you orientate yourself within the field of concern. It also gives you the 'I-can-do-it' courage in the realization that others have been able to complete similar work, and is an entry point with text and references which you can re-use when writing the final dissertation.

Where to begin

The process normally starts when the supervisor asks: "so, what would you like to do research on?". At this point the student often acts surprised and feels intimidated by the prospect of inventing a valid research topic. It is important, though, to find a topic which holds your interest. After all you will be learning about it for two years, if not more.

Before one even begins to embark on any writing a lot of reading needs to happen. This is the beginning of the process of writing a research proposal. You could start by asking yourself: "what have I heard, read or done in my career, or during my previous degree, that interested me?" or "where would I like to make a difference?" and "what questions do I have about that topic?". Then you begin to talk to others who are knowledgeable about the topic and read about it. Thus you read, think and debate yourself through your research, always adding to your current understandings and constructing new ones, asking more questions and entering into dialogue with others (and yourself). At this point it is really valuable to keep a journal, to see how your thoughts and insights have evolved. Remember you should aim to *understand* and not merely describe the issues that have attracted your attention. A further important consideration is whether your study is feasible within the allocated time (e.g. two years for a full-time Masters). Some of the most exciting topics in complex issues such as ecosystems and society are unfortunately just too thorny to be solved through a single post-graduate research project.

Finding Mr Right: your supervisor

Another way to look at selecting your research project is to see what topic will be a good fit with the university, department and supervisor of your choice, and with the available funding. Choosing the “right supervisor for you” is quite important because a complementary relationship with your supervisor will be a significant boost for your progress. This relationship is likely to be different to relationships that you have had with lecturers during undergraduate studies. For example, during undergraduate studies you probably worked relatively independently on assignments before handing them in for marking. Working on the various “assignments” (e.g. proposal and chapters) that form part of your post-graduate studies is likely to be much more interactive, where you and your supervisor exchange ideas to enable you to progressively improve the product that you are working on.

While your supervisor is there to support and help you, remember that they might be very busy. The student-supervisor relationship is extremely important and should ideally be a mutually beneficial one. In general, if you help them they are likely to help you. Make an effort to work out how you can make their lives easier and how to interact with them so that you both benefit. Do they welcome interruptions and informal updates on progress, problems and concerns, or do they prefer pre-arranged meetings and written reports? Do they work by email? If so, give a lot of thought to the structure and wording of your email so that your supervisor can easily grasp what you are trying to convey and what is expected of them. Written summaries of your evolving ideas, experimental plans, and of recent publications can be extremely useful. Build trust and confidence by sticking to deadlines both of you have agreed to (Rothman 2002).

Fear of flying

Have you ever had the feeling: “this is too big for me” and “where could I start”, as our ancestors must have felt when deciding to leave familiar territories in search of new land? Guess what: you are not alone. Many students who have completed Masters and PhDs confess that they viewed their proposal with trepidation and, because of this, initially struggled to make progress. Yet this need not be the case: a proposal is actually quite straight-forward, it's just the *fear* that is complicated. So, if one can overcome the fear then the proposal will happen. It's a bit like the fear of flying: many people postpone vacations (and post-graduate studies) because of this.

Common fears of proposal writing, like fears of flying include:

- a) the fear of choosing the wrong project (“Oh – wrong journey”);
- b) the fear of starting at the wrong place (“Oh - wrong flight”)

- c) the fear of it being incomplete (“Oh – where’s my toothbrush”)
- d) the fear of leaving out something important (“Oh –my passport and suitcase”)
- e) the fear of not being smart enough (“Oh - never been overseas before”).

But think of it like this: a thesis is not like an overseas trip. With research, it is OK to change journeys in mid-flight if necessary . It’s OK to stop and change direction if there is good reason to do so. It’s OK to leave some stuff behind and to bring it in later. And surely you must be smart enough, else why would you be here in the first place? So the first step is to lighten up and not take it so seriously. You have embarked on a road trip. Pack lightly, stop often to smell the flowers, look around, spend time in unplanned places, and above all: never stay in one place. There is no such thing as a *wrong* Master’s proposal.

So:

- Break it into small chunks / doable bits
- Understand the first signs of anxiety and immediately take a step back, reflect on your considerable achievements, and only start again when the signs have faded
- Build up momentum and keep it. Avoid long breaks away from your work.

Seven rules of thumb

1. Be inspired by the success of others.
 - **Rule of thumb: *forward-looking students read at least 10 papers a week but let go quickly and pick up another if it gets boring***
2. Work twice as hard as in your previous qualification.
 - **Rule of thumb: *it takes 45 hours a week for 10 weeks to write a successful Masters proposal* (Wingfield 2010, 2011). Thinking, talking (*outside the open-plan office*) and reading are also work.**
3. Use others as sounding boards.
 - **Rule of thumb: *talking to someone knowledgeable at least once a week about one’s research leads to innovation and creativity***
4. Write daily.
 - **Rule of thumb: *writing at least a page a day inspires, even if most of it will eventually be discarded***
5. Keep record of your thinking.
 - **Rule of thumb: *self-fulfilled students save each day’s work as a separate file and often look back at their progress. Besides, disk space is cheap, losing track of weeks of thinking isn’t.***

6. Keep record of your reading.

- **Rule of thumb:** *students who use a reference management programme finish faster and produce more publications than those who do not. Also consider keeping a reading journal to document your readings and what they mean to your research.*

7. Ask often.

- **Rule of thumb:** *dumb questions do not exist, especially not in research.*

A simple recipe to write a quick research proposal

First, prepare an “elevator story” about your thesis by imagining someone asks you in an elevator what your research is about, and you have to tell them before they get out on the 4th floor. How about completing the bits in italics: **I aim to** *<state your main purpose of your research>* **by** *<use verbs [the Afrikaans werkwoord is so descriptive] to state how you plan to do it>* **at** *<state the place where you want to do the research>* **so as to** *<state the two main outcomes of your research>*.

Second, choose a working title of less than 10 words. Forget about catchy or overly descriptive phrases or clever questions – just say it as it is. “*Factors affecting the success of butterfly conservation in the Knysna Municipality*” is much better than “*An investigation of the impact of skills, resources and governance on biodiversity conservation in urban areas: a multivariate study of the success and failure of butterfly conservation in parts of the Western Cape Province, South Africa*”. Avoid titles starting with the phrase “An investigation of...”. They are unnecessary words which could be omitted. You can be pretty sure that the title you start with will be developed through your research process.

Thirdly, make a mind-map with a condensed version of the title at the centre, and the various sections of the proposal arranged around it, either as tentacles or polygons.

Now use the following as a guideline for content (Eve 2008) and *just start writing*.

- **Introduction/Context of study**

- The purpose of an introduction is to contextualize your research by providing the necessary background (setting the stage) to your research question. It frames or sets the boundaries of the problem for the reader.
- Why it is relevant and important, what need it addresses, and what others have found or stated when they looked at the same issue. Cite relevant policy documents and / or seminal literature. Remember, you do not have to do anything revolutionary. Every bit of knowledge makes a contribution. Innovative ways of comparing existing knowledge (e.g.

using matrices, or other visual means) often helps to get the bigger picture, and is an easy way to convey a lot of information.

- Stick to the relevant issues which are likely to crop up in your thesis. *“Don’t chase up any rabbits you don’t plan to catch later”*.
 - Ideally, the Introduction should start a golden thread of issues and logic which will flow through the entire thesis. The introduction, methods, results and discussion together make up a story.
- **Aims and Objectives.** Look back at your first step (the elevator phrase) and work from there. Keep it simple – one or two short aims are better than too many elaborate aims. You should find an imaginary golden thread running through you aims, objectives, hypothesis or key questions. You will achieve this if your key questions help you reach the objectives which then will help you achieve your aim.
 - Follow it up with 3-5 objectives which hone in on the issue identified in the aims in more detail.
 - Some people start with questions and then convert them to objectives. This is cool.
 - **Literature Review.** You should have at least begun the reading of the relevant literature before you even start writing your proposal. The literature review section explains how your research fits into existing theories and published results. It also indicates the gaps that your research aims to address. The literature review should focus on a specific theme or issue within the bigger theme. In the title above you would write a paragraph about butterfly conservation yet shy away from a comprehensive review (books have been written about this) and quickly hone in on the causes of effective and ineffective conservation. Take note that a literature review in a proposal is written in a different way to the literature review in the actual thesis or a review paper. In the literature review section of the proposal you explain what literature is being reviewed and why, yet in the thesis document you provide the greater review of the actual literature. Use the most up to date and relevant literature and try to avoid “grey literature” which means documents that have not been through some sort of peer review process. Sometimes a literature review is incorporated into the introduction section. The literature ensures that you are not “reinventing the wheel” and gives credit to the work done before you. It furthermore demonstrates that you have knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework related to your research and the ability to critically review, integrate and synthesize the literature. Consider using sub headings to organize your literature review.
 - **Research design/Methods.** The methods section shows how you plan to answer your research question. It is in service of the research question, not the other way round. Aim

for methods that will be appropriate within the spatial and time scales, feasible, and where there is a good fit with your interests and aptitude, while you can simultaneously learn something new but not too much. The methods should not dominate the study (unless the aim of the study is to develop a method of course). And if you are not yet sure and want to experiment with several methods then don't shy away from saying so. All research has limitations – just be honest about it. Will the research design be quantitative and empirical, or qualitative? Will you use a modelling approach, or an inductive method where the data are first collected and the results derived from this? Will you use case studies, or replicated large samples? Will the study be comparative? In many multi-disciplinary studies it is difficult to identify detailed data analysis methods beforehand. Don't be scared to refer to possible methods, drawing on the literature.

- **Ethical considerations:** Any research involving experiments with animals or humans requires ethics approval from the ethics committee of your institution. The following three principles should be addressed when considering the ethical nature of your research. The primary principles include 1) respect for person where the researcher recognized the human subjects are autonomous being capable of decision making. The principal includes ensuring the person has the freedom to voluntarily participate and provide informed consent in this regard. It furthermore it involves respecting the confidentiality of the participant; 2) beneficence which refers to the concept of maximizing benefits to the research participants and minimizing risks for the research participant. In other words it is designed to protect the persons participating in your research from any harm; and 3) Justice which emphasizes the need for fairness
- **Project timetable:** a simple 3-column table with DATE; TARGET; OUTPUT always works.
- **Statement of costs:** a 2- column table with column headings ITEM and AMOUNT; rows can include RESEARCH EQUIPMENT; CONSUMABLE MATERIALS; TRAVEL; ACCOMMODATION AND MEALS; RESEARCH ASSISTANCE works well.
- **Reference list:** (you know how to do this).

Where to next

Your research proposal is an important step towards a successful Masters or PhD but it is not the alpha and omega you think it is, need not be daunting or complicated and, above all, is not the same as an airline ticket into the unknown. Writing a research proposal is like playing a game. Put your feet firmly on the ground, take a deep breath, say this to yourself and then *just do it*.

Evaluation of research proposal

Name:

Topic	Laudable aspects	Areas for improvement
Over-all relevance of the proposal:		
The proposed research will meet the requirements for academic research on that level.		
The rationale and background explain why the research is relevant.		
The main and dominant schools of thought, explanatory frameworks and problems within the field of enquiry are understood.		
The research aims and objectives, and where appropriate the research hypothesis or hypotheses, are outlined appropriately. Objectives are achievable. Questions are answerable.		
The delimitation of the scope of the study is evident from the research aims, objectives and study area.		
The methods are consistent with the aims and objectives of the research.		
The title is unambiguous and conveys the focus of the study.		
Research Design and Methodology:		
There is a logical link between the problem statement, rationale, research aims and objectives, and methods.		
The scale and scope of proposed data collection are appropriate.		
The suggested techniques are appropriate to meet the objectives/aims/hypotheses of the study.		
Technical Presentation:		
The overall linguistic and technical presentation is acceptable.		
Referencing is appropriate.		
The reference list is appropriate.		
General comments by the panel:		

The proposal requires: (tick one)	a) A major re-write and resubmission
	b) Substantial modification and re-submission
	c) Moderate modification
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-submission required
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To supervisor's satisfaction without the need for re-submission
	d) Minor modification to supervisor's satisfaction, no need to re-submit
Next steps:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisor and DOS sign UM7D, and forward to Faculty Management Committee (FMC).

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