

Doctoral thesis at the SFU: research proposal

What is a research proposal?

One of the most important qualities of scientific research is the development and elaboration of one's own research questions. Depending on the context this can take the shape of a master or diploma thesis or a doctoral thesis. Although these scientific papers differ considerably regarding their extent and requirements, they all rely on the same technique of scientific research. The beginning of such a paper is the research proposal which presents and explains the research question, theoretical approach, method and the outline. The following guidelines and criteria are based on the requirements for a diploma or master thesis. A research proposal is always the sketch of a paper that has not been completed yet, but is still at the planning stage. The aim of a research proposal is to give the readers an impression of the project, so that they can form an opinion about the originality and relevance of the research question as well as the coherence and feasibility of the doctoral thesis. More than other text types (e.g. minutes, literature reviews) the research proposal is directed to third parties. At the same time writing a research proposal is also an important act of self-reflection. Normally, a project, whose research question, method and schedule (see below) cannot be conveyed by means of a sketch, has not fully matured yet. The shape and style of a research proposal also depends on the predominant impression that shall be conveyed to the readers. If decisions on scholarships or research grants are based on research proposals, the 'marketing' of the student's project comes to the fore, i.e. you emphasise the originality and relevance of the project. However, if the research proposal serves colleagues or fellow students as basis for a consultative conversation, open questions and possible problems are more prominent. However, regardless of the context, a good research proposal makes clear, which questions will be investigated and how the paper will try to answer them. In doing so, it is vital that one central question becomes apparent. Apart from that it shows the readers why these questions are important and to what extent the project is promising and feasible.

How to write a research proposal?

First of all it is important to gain an overview of the topic under discussion and the relevant research. It is advisable to approach the object of research by means of recent and topical publications. Thereby ideas develop almost on their own, which, in turn, lead to specific questions.

The second step is to narrow these questions down. The aim is to pose a clear and problem-oriented research question. Here, it is essential to constantly scrutinise the developing assumptions about possible answers to the research question.

The author should be aware of the question he/she wants to investigate and by means of which method this question shall be answered. If this is not sufficiently clear, the question should be reconsidered and specified. This step is decisive – contrary to the widespread opinion that writing the thesis is the real scientific activity.

The type of research question and the selection or development of an appropriate research design depend on the research area and, particularly, on the theoretical perspective.

What should a research proposal contain?

A research proposal should provide answers to five questions.

- (1) Which area of research do you study? Which question, relating to this area of research, would you like to investigate? To what extent is this question sufficiently creative?
- (2) Which scientific and/or societal/political problems and developments is this question based on?
- (3) Are there any research papers about this question, and if so, what is the current state of research?
- (4) Which theoretical premises guide the response to the research question, and do they result in a coherent, convincing argumentation?
- (5) Is it possible to answer the question you have formulated by applying the reflections on methods? How do you want to achieve this? Here, the samples as well as the instruments should be described.

The structure of a research proposal

Although the answers to these five questions do not require a uniform structure of the research proposal, it must contain statements about the following items:

1. Introduction

A research proposal must point out its subject → overview of the topic and the relevant research. Short introduction to the topic and the research question: What do you want to investigate and why?

1.1. Theoretical background

Which theoretical assumptions will you apply? Which theoretical approaches will you mostly refer to?

The theory is the framework of your study. There has to be a good description and a critical understanding of the theories of reference. Moreover, it is necessary to show how clearly and consistently the theory is connected with the focus of your doctoral thesis.

1.2. Current state of research

The purpose of covering the current state of research concerning the topic of the doctoral thesis is to familiarise oneself with the set of problems and to delimit the status quo of scientific research regarding the chosen topic. Later stages of the thesis will benefit from recording of what is known about the object of research and how related problems have been treated so far. Thus, the central questions of this section are:

- Has the problem been researched before?
- What are the most important scientific positions on the topic?
- What are the important research approaches and results in the area around the research question? How does your research question refer to it?

An overview of the current state of research expresses what has already been published about the topic, which is the centre of the project. It is particularly important to note which aspects have already been treated and which not. Moreover, it is essential to gain an overview of the main controversies in a given area of research and the dominant methods applied, so that you can provide reasons for the project. Therefore, the statements about the current state of research are in a close connection with the formulation of the

research question. On the one hand, the corpus of relevant literature results from the subject matter and the research question, on the other hand the meaning of the research question and the importance of the planned project often become clear against the backdrop of this current state of research. Readers of the overview of the current state of research who are already experts shall get an impression of the quality of insights into the topic that the author of the research proposal has gained. However, readers who have little or no knowledge of the subject matter have to get an impression of the current state of research.

Applicants have to present the current state of research concisely and precisely in its immediate connection to their research project and indicate the most important, relevant research papers of other scientists. The presentation should illustrate previous research projects in such a manner that the goal, the context and the innovative content of the applicant's project become apparent.

1.3. Aims of the study

Knowledge of the area and of the current state of research lead to the next step, i.e. the applicants will draft their own research questions and basic hypotheses, which helps to delimit their own topic exactly. The following aspects have to be precisely defined:

- Which research question does your thesis follow?
- Which hypotheses are deduced in order to answer the research question?
- What are the assumptions about possible results?

A clear, specific and problem-oriented research question shows the readers clearly which characteristics of a subject matter will be investigated and from which angle. The research question should follow the current state of research.

On the one hand, the research question should be relevant, i.e. the intended answer should be interesting to other people as well. On the other hand, it should also be creative, i.e. it should not repeat what others have already investigated.

2. Method

Scientific research requires the application of methods. They can be seen as the route a researcher takes in order to solve a problem. The autonomous work on a doctoral thesis at SFU requires that methods of psychotherapy research are used to answer research questions designed by the applicants. In the section on method the sample and the instruments have to be described.

2.1. Sample

A sample is defined as the subset of a population (also the set of all potential objects of study), which will be investigated to answer a certain research question. Samples are used because it is often impossible to study the population. If a thesis is to be empirical, a research proposal should explain which sample will be investigated (e.g. individual case vs. groups). It is particularly important to carefully select such cases that will enable the applicant to answer the central question. This case selection results from the overview of the current state of research.

2.2. Instruments and material

The selected sample has to be investigated by means of certain instruments. The selection of suitable instruments can only be successful if the applicant has already gained an overview of possible instruments and their purposes. Knowing about the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches is particularly important. This overview has to focus on the instruments that are relevant to the research questions.

The research proposal has to state clearly which instruments will be used in the scientific paper and why these instruments will be helpful or necessary in order to investigate and answer the research question. This may also include a short explanation as to why certain instruments will not be applied.

The application of one or several instruments to the sample results in a certain material (data). It consists of what the sample “produces“, which will subsequently be the subject of the analysis.

Normally, psychotherapy science deals with a wide range of data (e.g. texts – i.e. transcriptions of therapeutic conversations, interviews etc. as well as the analysis of questionnaires) that can be investigated qualitatively or quantitatively.

3. Schedule

It is reasonable to draft a schedule because it helps to convince the readers and the author of the feasibility of a project and to improve the structure of the applicant’s thesis.

An overview or a table shall indicate in which sequence the applicant intends to treat his/her topic and how much time he/she estimates for dealing with each part within the complete schedule.

4. Bibliography

A bibliography is important because it shows which literature has already been read or is considered as relevant and which titles may be missing. The bibliography can contain all pertinent titles or only the works quoted in the text.

How detailed should a research proposal be?

The appropriate length of a research proposal depends on the extent and the complexity of the project. It should focus on the most important pieces of information.

The more precise and informative a research proposal is, the sounder the remarks of the readers can be. Since a research proposal is above all a precise presentation of a student's research project, lengthy introductions, embellishments, long quotations or anecdotes are usually not required. However, a research proposal should use style to attract the reader's attention.

Which other formalities have to be observed?

A research proposal should be as formally correct as an elaborate research paper. Apart from spelling and grammar, correct quotations and exact annotations have to be provided.

The research proposal consists of a coversheet, which contains personal details about the author (surname, first name, address, academic degree), a date, the (proposed) title of the thesis and a table of contents.

From a linguistic point of view, a research proposal should meet the same demands as every scientific (or scholarly) text: it should be written in good German (or in good English etc.). This means that you should write as clearly and simply as possible. Scientific texts often express complex thoughts. The language should help readers to follow these ideas. The author should elucidate terms, in case a great number of potential readers is not familiar with them. In a German text students should avoid very long sentences, a nominal style as well as overusing the passive voice. A quite reasonable rule of thumb is: as complex as necessary, and as simple as possible. The appendix of this text contains several hints to literature about how to write scientific texts.

The research proposal should have an attractive layout, which makes reading easier, i.e. page numbers should be used, an easily readable font and an adequate margin should be selected.

Summary

Coversheet

- Personal details (surname, first name, address, academic degree)
- Date
- Title of the thesis
- Table of contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Theoretical background
- 1.2. Current state of research
- 1.3. Aims of the study

2. Methodology

- 2.1. Sample
- 2.2. Instruments and material

3. Schedule

4. Bibliography

Where can I find further references concerning research proposals?

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