

Writing an Academic Research Proposal

Getting Started

When beginning a research proposal, start by carefully reading your professor's assignment instructions for the proposal. A research proposal is an opportunity to help keep your research on track and to summarize what you plan to do, how you plan to present the content, and why it is important. The proposal is necessary to show your professor the value of the research and the ability of your research process to be able to answer the research problem or question. The proposal should be developed with proper planning since the professor will be reviewing it for approval to move forward with the full paper.

Depending on the professor's instructions, a research proposal may be written in a condensed format, offering only the research topic and purposes, or the proposal could be presented in a more formal and extended version to include several typical research components. Every discipline (subject area) could have a different format; you should follow the format provided by your professor. This instructional handout will provide tips for both formats to help you get started.

Identify your Topic

The first step in any research project is to identify the topic of exploration. Usually the topic is suggested or provided by the professor. Sometimes a broad topic is provided, and you, as the student, will narrow down a specific area of interest to explore more fully. Think about areas that have most interested you in your studies and what you would most like to analyze further with deeper research. Consult the professor if you are uncertain about topic selection.



Tip: It is better to research a narrow topic in well-developed detail than to research a broad topic with little, or inadequate, detail.

Form the Research Problem or Questions

Next, you will need to think about your research topic and form the research problem or question. Your research should provide a problem or question that can be explored, supported by already conducted research, and added to by you with analysis. When you think about your problem or question(s), ask yourself what you actually wish to find out about the topic. Once you have brainstormed possibilities, check that the topic is interesting, valuable, and suitable for further exploration.

Draft a Research Title

When getting started, think about a title for your research project. A title page will be included in the finished product, so begin by drafting a title to gear your research focus. The title may change later; do not worry about changing the title because it is a part of the research process to question your true focus and research topic. Drafting a title helps to narrow down the main idea and offers an opportunity for creative thought about your topic. A title should broadly cover your research question and summarize your research.

Typical Components of Formal Research Proposals

Abstract

- A paragraph to provide a very brief overview of the research paper
- Starts with one or two sentences about the topic/problem/question focus
- States the objective of what you plan to do and how you will present the research
- Finishes with two or three sentences about the significance of the research and your focus

Introduction

- The place to tell the reader what your research is all about
- Clearly states the problem you have chosen to address
- Points out why your research is important
- Discusses others' research related to your topic
- Could identify any gaps in previous research that yours would help expand upon

Specific Aims or Objectives

- Provide concise, clear points to summarize the aims/objectives of the research proposal
- State very specifically in complete sentences the aims or objectives of the research
- Could be bulleted or numbered to clearly present the research goals

Background and Significance

- Explains relevant background information necessary to understand the proposal
- Includes critical evaluation of existing knowledge and importance to further research

Literature Review

- Reviews relevant literature as you prepare for the research paper writing
- Develops the context of your research
- Establishes the significance of your research
- Refines your idea and approach
- Identifies literature you will cite in your paper
- Places your research within the context of existing knowledge and other studies related to your chosen topic
- Presents other scholars' research and connects that research to yours
- Offers an opportunity to discuss whether your research builds upon existing research and/or fills in gaps
- Generally offers at least three to five other studies for discussion (Consult your professor for number of required sources and how to format the literature review.)

Formatting the Research Proposal

Your professor should provide instructions for formatting your proposal. Ensure you use APA or MLA or other formatting guidelines as instructed. You will include proper headings/subheadings, usually in bold text. Know what will go into each section, and type the proposal according to the professor's requirements for font, text, spacing, etc.



A less formal, more condensed research proposal may contain only the proposed research topic and the purposes for the research. An example of a condensed research proposal is provided on the next page. Note that this example directs students to add details

under both the **Proposed Research Topic** heading and the **Purpose** section. That means it is cut short to save space, and a completed version would include more content.

Research Proposal (Example)

Proposed Research Topic: Brain-based learning and practice in the classroom and their effects on learners' brains and their retention of knowledge (*A research question can be proposed here.*)

Notice the instruction to provide a research question.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of practice within a classroom setting using focused research questions to contribute to teachers' knowledge of best practices. Since practice is not something that every classroom teacher gives to students prior to a classroom assessment on a new skill, students face problems. According to recent research, "Practice builds neurological connections and thickens the insulating myelin sheath necessary for fluency, chunking of information, brain efficiency, and deep learning" (Hill, 2006). If sufficient practice time is not provided to students, they may not be able to understand and retain information gained from new learning as well as they could if given adequate practice time. With concepts of practice and brain-based learning becoming more popular in teaching methodology and best classroom practices, new research is being conducted to show how the brain functions best in various learning situations. Researchers are looking for answers to questions about brain-based learning and the art of practice in all levels of education from preschool to secondary education.

(Expand on the topic/question by describing what you hope to accomplish, along with the desired outcomes, including the practical and theoretical benefits.)

Notice the instruction to include goals and outcomes.



Final Tips

- ✓ Follow the instructions!
- ✓ Have a clear focus and title.
- ✓ Break down your proposal into appropriate sections with headings.
- ✓ Know your audience.
- ✓ Make an impact with your writing early in the proposal.
- ✓ Show that the research is relevant and related to the context of the problem/question.
- ✓ Get the proposal reviewed by others.
- ✓ Know that nothing is final yet; changes may come later as the research develops.