

Writing Proposals for Theses and Dissertations

Writing a proposal for a thesis or a dissertation is a process that is equally exciting (because it marks your transition from student to scholar) and daunting (for the same reason). Many writers struggle with these documents because they require, in some senses, talking about what you will find before you've had a chance to look for it. Nevertheless, proposals are opportunities to focus your thinking, and successful documents of this sort demonstrate clarity of purpose and thoroughness of preparation. Proposals (often called 'prospectuses') serve to convince your committee that you are capable of developing and executing an effective and meaningful research agenda. Although the immediate audience of the document is your advisor and the rest of your dissertation committee, a well-executed proposal is also useful for grant and scholarship applications, Institutional Review Board (IRB) petitions, and perhaps eventually, queries of publishers that you might want to review your manuscript.

Note: Preferences and procedures for proposals can vary widely by discipline and advisor. Check with your director or department chair to clarify policies, deadlines, and expectations before beginning.

Components of the Proposal

Most prospectuses will have versions of the following sections, though the length, details, and relative importance of each will vary by project and discipline. Proposals are very short documents, relative to the projects they outline. Most will be 20-30 double-spaced pages plus a bibliography; this requires you to make strategic choices about when to be brief and when to elaborate. Always check with your advisor if you are unsure of how to proceed.

1) Review of Relevant Literature

Your literature review, an extended version of which will likely appear in the thesis or dissertation itself, shows that you have read the relevant literature and are conversant with key debates and issues in your field(s). This summary should make clear that your inquiry will be meaningful within your scholarly discourse community. In order to do this, you should:

- Explain the concepts that readers might need in order to appreciate the significance of your project and the problems or issues it addresses.
- Demonstrate one or more of the following things:
 - Scholars in your chosen field recognize the import of what you are researching
 - You will be able to supplement or resolve the weaknesses or limitations of earlier research on the subject
 - Previous researchers have not explored the questions of interest to you, despite their relevance.
- Contextualize your research by engaging with other scholars' findings and/or methods.



Your literature review should lead logically into the next section, so that the background for and significance of your project will begin to come into focus.

2) Research Questions

This section should clarify what you want to learn in your study. Although you may modify or dramatically overhaul your questions (and many researchers do) once you've formally begun your inquiry, having clearly defined goals at the beginning will help guarantee a strong and purposeful start to your project. To utilize this section effectively, you should:

- Be as specific as possible about what you seek to learn (without constraining yourself).
- Allude to the importance (the "so what?") of your questions.
- Compose questions that are answerable within the scope of a thesis or dissertation.

There should be a clear correspondence between this section (in which you describe what you want to know), and the next one (in which you describe how you will learn it).

3) Methods

An effective methods section will convince your readers of your ability to answer your research questions ethically and within the bounds of your discipline. Specificity in this section will help demonstrate that you know what you're doing, provide direction for your inquiry, and give readers an opportunity to offer advice on your research design. In this section, you should:

- Clearly indicate who and what you will study, including how you've selected these objects of inquiry and how you will access them.
- Consider how many approaches you will need to gain a full understanding of your subject, and how these modes of inquiry complement one another.
- Identify methods as precisely as possible, showing that you know what they are and how to use them.
- Provide explanations of how you will address each of your research questions.
- Be prepared to justify your choice of method(s).

Once your readers have a clear sense of what you're doing and how you're going to do it, they will want to know why it's worth doing, and so it is often helpful to make this explicit.

4) Significance

Because the thesis/dissertation signals your transition from student to producer of knowledge, your proposal must show a variety of readers what this first contribution will be. To best represent your scholarly intervention, you should:

- Think about your audience, and consider what aspects of your project will be most interesting and persuasive to various readers in terms of tone and content.
- Reflect on the background of the issue and, accordingly, why your work is unique.
- Emphasize that your completed research will be a concrete contribution to knowledge in your field(s).

Once you have persuaded readers of what you already know (that your scholarship is innovative and compelling), it is helpful to develop a plan for how you will achieve it.

5) Timetable

Writing this section is an opportunity to think about what a long project entails. Although very few people actually follow their original timetable, and most faculty know this, offering an outline in good faith will convey to your committee that your project is manageable and that you have a nuanced understanding of how time-consuming research and writing will be. To construct an accurate and plausible timetable, you should:

- List all of the steps of your dissertation, from data collection to defense, and indicate how long each will take, and when you plan to start and finish them.
- Experiment with different ways to convey this information; for example, a chart or a table might be more succinct and efficient than a long narrative.

Among other things, this basic schedule should tell readers how much time you plan to devote to each chapter. With this established, you can begin to provide a bit more detail about what you will actually write.

6) Tentative Chapter Outline

Although most dissertation writers ultimately deviate from the original chapter outline, having a sense of the major components of your project will help you organize your research and your data. Some disciplines are very open in terms of the organization and content of each chapter; others require that dissertators follow a general template. Check with your advisor before getting too far into this section of your prospectus. To make the most of this section, you should:

- Find out (and adhere to) the standards for dissertations in your field.
- Clearly indicate how many chapters your work will have and what you will cover in each. Because prospectuses tend to be rather short documents that cover a lot of ground, you may not be able to provide much detail on each chapter, so try to give your readers a general sense of what you will do, and where.
- Remember to indicate where you will offer your literature review, when you will introduce your methods, how you will outline your research questions, in addition to discussing your findings and their implications.

All of the previous sections should reflect your substantive engagement with the relevant literature, and so you can use the final part of the prospectus to make that explicit.

7) Bibliography

The bibliography will showcase both what you already know and what you plan to research, and to do this, you should:

- Begin by reviewing the reading list you prepared for your candidacy exams; cut and paste as needed.
- List all the works you expect to consult, whether or not you have read them yet.
- Be prepared to accept additions from your committee members and remember that they will use this section in part to verify that you are aware of and versed in the relevant scholarship.