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Writing your Research Proposal



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Introduction

At some stage in your academic life, it is likely that you will need to produce a research proposal. This could be for your undergraduate dissertation, your Master's thesis or for PhD research. Although these types of research project might end up being very different lengths, the basic rules of writing a research proposal apply to all of them. This guide runs through the various things you will need to include in your proposal.

Note that Schools may have particular requirements, so check the guidelines you've been given.

How long does it need to be?

Most research proposals are between 1500 and 2000 words long. You may have been given different instructions by your tutor, so do check this carefully before you start.

What's a research proposal for?

Your proposal gives a relatively brief overview of what you would like to study. You will demonstrate how and why you have chosen to do this particular research, so that the University or School can see whether it is a viable project.

What do I need to include?

A research proposal will include the following (note that this is a general guide and that you may have been given more specific instructions by your tutors):

A working title: this might not be the finalised title of your project, but must show that you have thought about what you are hoping to achieve. Make sure any key words appear in the working title.

A general overview: a brief section about the subject area you are looking at, and how it fits into which discipline(s). This will be most important in PhD research proposals where you are applying for funding, as you will need to show how your topic fits into the disciplines funded by the body.

A review of relevant literature: this isn't an enormous literature review, but you need to show that you are aware of the important issues, themes and debates in the relevant literature. You must refer to key texts and briefly show that you understand how they are relevant to your research area. You are therefore summarising what has been

done before on this topic. Remember that a PhD is original research, so for PhD proposals you will also need to show that what you'll be studying hasn't been done before.

Key research questions: the aims and objectives of the research. What are the questions you'll be looking to answer? What are you hoping to find out? If undertaking original research, your hypothesis can be explained in this section. Be careful not to include an unachievable number of goals or be over-ambitious. Ambition is good but you must be able to actually carry out the things you have described.

Methodology: how are you planning to do this research? What methods will you use? Are you looking for qualitative or quantitative data, or both? Will you be carrying out laboratory experiments or questionnaires? What options are open to you or what different methods could you use, and why have you chosen the ones you have?

Expected results: obviously you can't say what the results will be, because you haven't done the research yet. You can, however, explain what kinds of results you hope to achieve, such as a greater

understanding of the way something works, a new method of doing something and so on. Think about how your research will affect or impact the subject area.

Timescale: include a timescale, showing that you understand the need to plan your research carefully and have thought about how long the different tasks might take you. It doesn't need to be very detailed and it may of course change later, but it's essential that you show you've thought about whether your project is achievable in the time available.

References: include a list of the key texts you've referred to, in the format required by your School (in most cases at the University of Salford, this will be the APA 6th (Harvard) system.

Some things to bear in mind

Don't choose something too broad: your research must be achievable. Your project might feel like it's going to last a long time, especially if it is a PhD, but be aware of how long different aspects of your research might take. You won't be able to answer every question about the topic, or look into every single aspect of a subject.

Don't choose something vague: your proposal needs to be as defined as possible, as a proposal which is too vague will look like you haven't thought it through.

Is there enough University expertise? Make sure there's somebody available to supervise your research. Don't propose to study a topic if there isn't a suitable supervisor within the School/University.

Make sure you find it interesting: be sure to choose something you are interested in and passionate about. You'll spend an awful lot of time studying it, so you must be committed to the topic.