

Developing a Thesis Proposal

A thesis proposal specifies clearly and concisely what you will accomplish during your thesis research. The development of a written research proposal is beneficial for a number of reasons.

First, for many students, the hardest task in writing a thesis is narrowing the topic from a broad, wide-ranging area to a focused, specific issue. Attempting to specify clearly on paper the particular issue you plan to address will provide you with an understanding of exactly what you have managed to accomplish and what remains fuzzy or ill-defined. In addition, this effort on your part will make it easier for your adviser to understand and discuss the topic with you in greater detail.

Second, the proposal helps you move from a short outline of your area of research to an expanded program of work. Many researchers revise and re-revise an outline of a contemplated project, each time putting in more detail and adding consistency to the parts of the project.

Finally, the more organized you are from the beginning, the easier the later phases of your thesis work will be, with the work involving mere perspiration rather than continuing great inspiration! Breaking the thesis down into smaller, feasible tasks is an important goal of the research proposal. Thesis research must involve originality and inspired thoughts; but, pragmatically, one has to finish! The research proposal becomes a road map toward the ultimate goal of completing the thesis successfully.

Having made the case for why a proposal is beneficial, exactly what should it contain? The following items should be included:

- (1) A Statement of the topic you are covering in sufficient detail so that a reader who is unfamiliar with the details of the topic can understand why your work is interesting and important. The introductory section of the proposal is the best place for covering this. In this section, you also should state the major hypotheses that you plan to test in your work.
- (2) A Review of the literature in the area of your topic. This review should be concise and should focus on the most important work related to your topic. The review describes how your research will build upon and extend existing knowledge on the topic.
- (3) A Methodological section that presents the methodology you will apply to the topic described in part (1). This methodology is the tool or tools you will use to answer the

questions and hypotheses associated with the topic you are studying. Methodology can be empirical using data and econometric techniques and/or it can be qualitative. In this section you should describe any data you plan to use and how you plan to obtain it. If a mathematical model is appropriate for your work, you should present at least a preliminary version of your model in this section.

- (4) A Preliminary results section in which you present any results from your work. Not everyone will be able to include this in their proposal since this section obviously depends on having obtained and analyzed your data described in section (3).
- (5) A Concluding section that summarizes the main hypotheses to be tested, your methodological tools, and your data sources. Here you also may want to emphasize the originality and relevance of your work to the literature in the field.
- (6) A Reference section in which you list the references and citations given in the text of your proposal. I urge you to use the “author-date” method for citations. For example, Murphy (1999) would be listed in the text and the full citation would be given in the reference section. If you are quoting a specific passage, the author-date reference should be followed by the page numbers, e.g., Murphy (1999), pp. 34-35. References to Web sites are not acceptable. You must be able to attribute the work to an author or organization.

This outline provides you with the essential segments of a thesis. By the time you have put your proposal together (15-20 pages), you will have completed a substantial portion of the thesis itself! One final rule is never giving your adviser a “first draft” of any portion of your thesis. Always rewrite the initial draft (at least several times) before forcing it on another person!