

# Writing a Master's Thesis or Dissertation Proposal

---

The proposal for a thesis or dissertation is essentially an outline of the research - kind of like an architectural blueprint for building a house. The clearer the plan, the more timely and successful the completion of the house. And the clearer the plan, the more likely it is that it will be approved by your advisor or dissertation committee, with a high probability that the final paper will also be accepted. A well - done, acceptable proposal, therefore, is a kind of personal contract between you the candidate, and your committee.

The challenge lies - as usual - in deciding exactly what topic you want to propose! It is true that some fortunate students may be offered a specific topic or problem to pursue by a mentor whose preferences agree with the student's own. But more often, your job is to come up with a specific topic or research question that shows promise for extended study. Do not worry if a topic does not suggest itself to you immediately. Be ready and willing to try out a number of possibilities to see how they develop. How do you "try out" a topic? - by doing a topic analysis.

This is really a simplified proposal form that includes the following parts:

1. Problem, hypothesis, or question
2. Importance of research
3. Significant prior research
4. Possible research approach or methodology
5. Potential outcomes of research and importance of each

(thanks to Davis & Parker)

Analyzing a potentially useful topic in this step-by-step way forces you to look at it objectively and precisely within two to four pages. Here are some points to watch for:

1. If you are unable to write your topic in either the form of a hypothesis or a clear statement, you need to refine and clarify the topic. It must be stated specifically, not in vague, imprecise terms.
2. You'll need to be able to justify what you're doing and prove that it's worthy of your time and energy. It's always handy if you can quote a major authority who is stating a need for the research. But if you don't have an authority on hand, try to demonstrate that your research is in some way significant to a major activity.
3. Be sure you have a reasonable (if not exhaustive) grasp of what's been done before. This will help support #2.
4. Extremely important part! Exactly how do you plan to approach the research? Try to explain as precisely as possible, and include an alternative methodology. This part may still be in rough form, but it should indicate the likely nature of your approach.
5. This will be important in assessing the worth of your topic. For example, let's say you might propose the use of a questionnaire to collect evidence. You would then need to analyze the results of the questionnaire. Your potential outcomes (speaking generally) might be a positive correlation between two factors, a negative one, none at all, or unsatisfactory responses. Perhaps only one of these outcomes could lead to a dissertation. That result could suggest the need for a different approach to the issue, which in turn could lead you down a more productive path.

Let's say that's what has happened, and you're now in the happy position of writing the first draft of your formal proposal. This is an expansion of the topic analysis and will be your final work plan, so it will probably end up being anywhere from ten to forty pages. Again, here's a generally accepted proposal with an idea of expected page length:

<u>Section of Proposal</u>	<u>Page Length</u>
1. Summary	1-2
2. Hypothesis, problem or question	1-3
3. Importance of topic	1-2
4. Prior research on topic	1-7
5. Research approach or methodology	2-8
6. Limitations and key assumptions	1-2
7. Contributions to knowledge (for each potential outcome, if there are more than one)	1-3
8. Descriptions of proposed chapters in dissertation	2-3

(again, thanks to Davis & Parker)

Note: A master's thesis can often be less detailed and elaborate than the above plan. Also, individual departments usually have their own unique preferences. The above plan is meant only as a general guide. Always check with your own department for specific Guidelines!

(1-4) the first four sections are about the same as those in your topic analysis, only amplified and refined. The prior research section in particular must be more comprehensive, although you may certainly summarize your report of prior research if there is a great deal of it. Your actual dissertation will be the obvious place to go into more detail.

The research approach or methodology section (5) should be explained explicitly. For example, what questions will you include on your questionnaire? If your work includes an experiment, what apparatus will you use, what procedures will you follow, what data do you intend to collect, and what instruments will you use in data collection? List any major questions yet to be decided.

In the limitations section (6) make clear what your study will not attempt to do.

The contributions section (7) will simply be more detailed than in your topic analysis, and your chapter descriptions (8) should be as specific as possible. Just remember this is a proposal, so keep descriptions brief, and try to highlight the structure of each chapter. Most dissertations follow a standard chapter format:

1. Introduction (general problem area, specific problem, importance of topic, research approach, limitations, key assumptions, and contribution to research)
2. Description of what has been done in the past. (a.k.a. literature review; this documents that your own research has not already been covered.)
3. Description of the research methodology. (how your research was conducted).
4. Research results. (What you found out).
5. Analysis of the results (explains the conclusions that can be drawn from data, and implications of a theory).
6. Summary and conclusions (emphasize the results obtained and contribution made. Outline suggestions for further research.)

With this general framework in mind, along with the specific characteristics of your own dissertation, you can define your chapters clearly for your formal proposal.

Remember that it's often necessary to refine the first proposal, most likely by narrowing the scope of your study. But this is all part of the essential process of formulating a working plan for a dissertation that will yield a successful result. If you think of your proposal in this light, you're more apt to remain patient as you work your way to the final draft.

## A checklist for self-appraisal, from Davis & Parker:

1. Does the proposal have imagination?
2. Is the problem stated clearly?
  - (a) hypothesis clear? testable?
  - (b) if no hypothesis, are objectives clearly stated? Can they be accomplished?
  - (c) problem perhaps too large?
3. Is the methodology feasible?
  - (a) can data be collected?
  - (b) how will data be analyzed?
  - (c) will the analysis allow the acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis?
  - (d) is the sample population overused?
4. What might the results of the analysis look like? (tables, graphs, etc.)
5. What are the consequences if
  - (a) the experiment fails;
  - (b) data cannot be obtained;
  - (c) analysis is inconclusive;
  - (d) hypothesis is rejected or a
6. Can major research activities be listed?
7. Can a time estimate be made for each activity?
8. Again, are the dimensions of the project realistic?



Staff Login (<https://gwr.sites.arizona.edu/cas>)

© Dr. Kendra Gaines All Rights Reserved

(<http://oia.arizona.edu>)