Topic: How to write a Research proposal

Introduction

Research Proposals are an informative description of the planned research project. A good proposal, attempts to educate, to convince the reader that the research project is a worthy endeavor. In the real world the Research Proposal is often an application for funding, personnel or related support, research proposals need to be convincing.

Most students and beginning researchers fail to fully understand what a research proposal is and the huge importance associated with a well written one. A research proposal is intended to convince others that you have a worthwhile research project and that you have the intelligence, the commitment and the work plan to complete it. The research proposal is the only communication the reader will have with you; this will be your only chance to come across as professional and worth granting your request.

1. Main purpose of proposal

When applying for a research grant or a study scholarship, you are expected to hand in a "detailed and precise description of study or research proposal as well as information on any previous study or research projects of particular relevance to a decision of award."

What does that mean precisely? The purpose of the proposal is to ensure that

- the candidates have done sufficient preliminary reading/research in the area of their interest
- that they have thought about the issues involved and are able to provide more than a broad description of the topic which they are planning to research.

The proposal is not a fixed blueprint. One cannot predict one's findings beforehand or mechanically stick to an argument since the research will inevitably

alter or even unseat one's initial expectations. There is no fixed formula for writing a proposal. Furthermore, academic traditions in Russia and in EU (Germany, for example) may differ slightly.

However, your challenge is to convince members of the scientific community that

- you have identified a scientific problem;
- you have a theoretical background and a methodical approach to solve the problem;
- you within a realistic time frame and at reasonable expenses;
- with your research you will add a new aspect to the scientific discourse.

2. Stages of preparing the proposal

1) Define the project (establish a working title).
2) Identify the agency and obtain guidelines and deadlines.
3) Write preliminary material (pre-proposal).
4) Conduct literature search.
5) Write first draft of full proposal.
6) Edit and revise the proposal.

HINT: You have to read the funder's recommendation before writing (stage 5-6). Consult your advisor on length, layout (typeface, line spacing, font, etc.), format, as well as a table of contents and page numbers. Members of the selection committee may have to read a large number of research proposals so good construction and legibility of your proposal is to your advantage.

3. The proposal outline

On the Title Page, you have to submit the next information:

- Personal data (name, academic title, your position at your own university, date of birth, your contact information, institutional contact, etc.).
- Title of your planned dissertation or research report.
    - Words in the title should be chosen with great care, and their association with one another must be carefully considered. While the title should be brief, it should be accurate, descriptive and comprehensive, clearly indicating the subject of the investigation.
    - In order to develop a clear title, you must also be clear about the focus of your research! In order to develop a clear title, you must also be clear about the focus of your research! It's good choice to incorporate in title the keywords that reference the classification of the research subject.
- Indicate a realistic time frame toward project completion, followed by the name(s) of your supervisor(s), the university department where you hope to do your research and, if applicable, information about other academics with whom you plan to collaborate.

HINT: Refer to successfully funded projects to determine whether your topic fits with the granting organization's mission and to mimic their title / proposal structure.

Abstract / summary statement of the research project

This is about one page summary that focuses on the research topic, its new, current and relevant aspects. Strive for clarity; your greatest challenge might be narrowing the topic.

Do a lot of general reading, and, if possible, consult with your supervisor.

Review of research literature

A short and precise overview about the current state of research that is immediately connected with your research project, as follows:

- Reference the most important contributions of other scientists.
- Discuss the theoretical scope or the framework of ideas that will be used to back the research.
- Demonstrate that you are fully conversant with the ideas you are dealing with and that you grasp their methodological implications.
- Indicate the open problem which then will be the motive for your project. State clearly how your research will contribute to the existing research.

Your own Preparatory Work

Summarize the most important impact of your own work on the topic (if applicable).

Attach copies of your own publications that might be seen in relation to your research project.

Objective of the research project

Give a concise and clear outline of the academic (possibly also non-academic, e.g. social and political) objectives that you want to achieve through your project. Your proposal needs to show why the intended research is important and justifies the search effort. Here you outline the significance (theoretical or practical) or relevance of the topic.

Such justification may either be of an empirical nature (you hope to add to, or extend an existing body of knowledge) or of a theoretical nature (you hope to elucidate contentious areas in a body of knowledge or to provide new conceptual insights into such knowledge).

All research is part of a larger scholarly enterprise and candidates should be able to argue for the value and positioning of their work.

Outline of the project

This is the central part of your proposal. You have to submit the next information:

- Detail your research procedure within the given time.
- List sources and quality of evidence you will consult, the analytical technique you will employ, and the timetable you will follow. Depending on the topic, suitable research strategies should be defined to ensure that enough and adequate empirical data will be gathered for a successful research project.
- Describe the intended methods of data gathering, the controls you will introduce, the statistical methods to be used, the type of literature or documentary analysis to be followed, etc.

HINT: Consider your work to be a Work-in-Progress and allow yourself a flexible planning. Stay ready to revise the proposal according to new insights and newly aroused questions and keep on modifying the working hypothesis according to new insights while formulating the proposal and the working hypothesis. Once you have a useful working hypothesis, concentrate on pursuing the project within the limits of the topic.

Timetable

Develop a time table (if possible in table form), indicating the sequence of research phases and the time that you will probably need for each phase. Take into account that at this stage, it can only be estimated, but make clear that you have an idea about the time span that will be needed for each step.

Selective research bibliography

List academic works mentioned in your research outline as well as other important works to which you will refer during your research.

Attachments

List other documents attached to your proposal (references, curriculum vitae[1], etc.).

4. Editing and revising

Once you have finished the conceptual work on your proposal, go through a careful editing / revising stage, in which you make following operation:

1) Verify that the title, the abstract and the content of your proposal clearly correspond to each other!
2) Maintain a clear structure, an intuitive navigational style throughout the document with headings and summaries, enabling the reader to quickly reference where they are for future commenting (Do you know something about skimming?[2]).
3) Summarize significant issues and make no assumptions where possible.
4) Keep a reasonable, clear, declarative writing style (active verbs!) throughout the document.
5) Breakup the narrative with bulleted lists, visuals, etc. demonstrating a command of abstract concepts and relationships. Use white space to highlight and emphasize important sections.
6) Make sure your proposal does not contain any grammatical/spelling mistakes or typos; engage a proofreader.
7) Request an experienced academic to proofread your proposal in order to ensure the proposal conforms to institutional and international academic standards.

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[1] When you write C.V. you have to focusing on educational and scientific background: Publications, Participation in conferences, papers published, co-operations, participation in research projects, research and teaching experiences.

[2] Skimming is a process of speed reading that involves visually searching the sentences of a page for clues to meaning. For some people, this comes naturally, but is usually acquired by practice. It is conducted at a higher rate (700 words per minute and above) than normal reading for comprehension (around 200-230 wpm), and results in lower comprehension rates, especially with information-rich reading material.

5. If your Proposal was been rejected…

If proposals fail, it is often not a problem of writing the proposal according to formal standards, but of explaining the intended project itself, i.e. of the delimitation of topic, of the given research questions, of the data collection etc. according to current academic standards, and of embedding the own project into a broader academic view.

Let's look the common rejection reasons. The National Institute of Health (USA) analyzed the reasons why some research proposal applications were denied. Their findings as to the cause of rejection are worth reviewing:

1. Nature of the Problem (18%)
    а) It is doubtful that new or useful information will result from the project (14%).
    б) The basic hypothesis is unsound (3,5%).
    в) The proposed research is scientifically premature due to the present inadequacy of supporting knowledge (0,6%).
2. Approach to the Problem (38.9%)
    а) The research plan is nebulous, diffuse and not presented in concrete detail (8,6%).
    б) The planned research is not adequately controlled (3,7%).
    в) Greater care in planning is needed (25,2%).
        - The research plan has not been carefully designed (11,8%).
        - The proposed methods will not yield accurate results (8,8%).
        - The procedures to be used should be spelled out in more detail (4,6%).
    г) A more thorough statistical treatment is needed (0,7%).
    д) The proposed tests require more individual subjects than the number given (0,7%).

3. Competence of the Investigators (38,2%)
    а) The applicants need to acquire greater familiarity with the pertinent literature (7,2%).
    б) The problems to be investigated are more complex than the applicants realize (10,5%).
    в) The applicants propose to enter an area of research for which they are not adequately trained (12,8%).
    г) The principal investigator intends to give actual responsibility for the direction of a complex project to an inexperienced co-investigator (0,9%).
    д) The reviewers do not have sufficient confidence in the applicants to approve the present application, largely based on the past efforts of the applicants (6,8%).
4. Conditions of the Research Environment (4,8%)
    а) The investigators will be required to devote too much time to teaching or other non-research duties (0,9%).
    б) Better liaison is needed with colleagues in collateral disciplines (0,4%).
    в) Requested expansion on continuation of a currently supported research project would result in failure to achieve the main goal of the work (3,5%).

The Bureau of Occupational and Vocational Education (USA) comparable study. Its summary is:

- 92% failed to provide resumes of proposed consultants;
- 81% had no abstract;
- 73% forgot to include a table of contents;
- 66% included no plan for project evaluation;
- 25% had no resume for the principal investigator;
- 20% failed to list the objectives of the project;
- 18% forgot to number the pages;
- 17% forgot to identify the project director by name.

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) are pointing that most frequent faults of proposals are these

- The proposal is not focused; the approach is too broad.
- The proposal is predominantly declarative, but it cannot be operated practically as a basis for research.
- The abstract is clearer and more interesting than the title allows expecting.
- There are some aspects in the title that are not dealt with in the abstract and in the proposal.
- The current state of the art even at the home university seems to be unknown to the applicant. Some of the "open research questions" are already dealt with at this very university.
- It remains unclear why a research stay abroad is necessary for this project.
- The statement of the supervisor in Germany is not solid.
- The subject related terminology is not precise.
- The academic level of research questions has not the level of a PhD project.

So then, if your proposal is not accepted by a granting organization, one of the most important things you can do is to request evaluations and reviewer comments. Not only will these evaluations indicate the weak points of your project, but they will be invaluable in submission of future proposals. The best way to get your projects funded is to use the reviewer comments and apply again.

Conclusion

Please note you have heard the suggestions only. They do not guarantee a successful research application. They may, however, help you prepare a carefully conceptualized and comprehensive proposal, giving the process structure and a timetable for you to develop. This may not only be important to the members of the board who have to decide on your application, but also to yourself, by giving you a clear structure for your own work, a rough map of where you are going and a timetable in which to accomplish your research successfully.

Self-study materials

1) Dr. Harald Olk. How to Write a Research Proposal. 2009. URL: http://ic.daad.de/ accra/download/How_to_write_a_research_proposal.pdf
   Abstract: DAAD's guide for grantee.
2) Principles of Good Research & Research Proposal Guide. 2006. URL: http://www.richmond.gov.uk/research_proposal_guide.pdf.
   Abstract: Short list of questions that will simplify the proposal approval process (from South West London Research Governance Consortium).
3) Sample research proposals in Computer Science. URL: http://www.urop.uci.edu/SURP/sample_proposals/SURP%20ICS%201.pdf, http://www.urop.uci.edu/SURP/sample_proposals/SURP%20ICS%202.pdf, http://www.urop.uci.edu/grants/sample_proposals/UROP%20--%20ICS%201.pdf.