

Writing a Thesis Proposal: A Systems Approach

A thesis proposal is...

A thesis proposal is a document that proposes a research project. A research project addresses a research problem. This problem is framed as a research question for which the thesis will offer an answer or solution.

Goal of a thesis proposal

A thesis proposal seeks to convince a thesis supervisor or thesis committee that the research project is **feasible**. *Feasible* means

- that the project should be undertaken, i.e. that it is an important question for your field that should be researched,
- that it is possible, i.e. that you know how to approach and execute the project,
- that you know that there is sufficient data, and
- that you can do the project in the required timeframe.

Importance of writing a strong thesis proposal

A clearly defined research problem (or question) is central to the success of a research project. It helps you to determine that your project is doable before you begin writing the thesis (or memoir).

In addition, if you take the time to clearly describe your project in your proposal, you will be able to write your thesis faster and more easily because you will have solidified key elements. Also, the thesis proposal can be used as a guide to help you stay on track while writing your thesis.

Sections of a thesis proposal

A thesis proposal usually contains some formulation of the following sections:

- statement of the research question
- rationale for the research project
- literature review
- theoretical / conceptual framework
- methodology
- research design – a plan outlining how and when each step of the project will be done

Writing a thesis proposal: a systems approach

A systems approach to proposal writing means picturing your research project as a system made up of several elements. In a systems approach, each element is **essential** to the system as a whole. If an element is removed or missing, the system fails.

Each of the sections of your proposal represents an element of the larger project. Accordingly, **each section you write should represent an essential element of your thesis project.**

This approach will help you to think about each section as you write it. When writing each section,

- Always keep in mind the project as a whole. Make sure that everything you write helps to make that project possible.
- Ask yourself,
 - What does the section contribute to the project?
 - How is the section essential to the project as a whole?
 - How would the project look without the section?

Statement of the research question

The research question drives your entire research project, so it is important to state it clearly. Students often know what they want to argue but don't know how to formulate it into a research question. Usually, the question that inspired you to take up the research will then be your research question. To identify your research question, it may be useful to respond to the following questions:

- What do you want to argue?
- Why? Why is this important? Why do you think you should argue it in a thesis?
- What directed you to this argument?
- What question sparked your research into your topic?

Rationale

After stating the research question, you must convince your supervisor or supervisory committee that your research project is worthwhile. Think about the present factors, such as a lack of research on your topic. Then consider the future implications, what your project will contribute to your field, in order to demonstrate the validity of your project.

- Why is it important that a study be done on this topic? What new insights would this bring?
- Have no studies been done by other people (which will be revealed in a literature review)?
- Have some studies been done which missed aspects of the problem you think are important?
- Would the results of such a study provide valuable information needed to solve a certain problem?
- Would the results open up possibilities for further research?

Literature Review

A literature review allows you to show that you are familiar with the literature pertinent to your topic. In addition, by identifying elements of your topic that have **not** been written about, a literature review helps you to show the importance of your decision to conduct research and write on your topic with the approach you have chosen.

- What kinds of literature do you have to read in order to determine what has been written on your topic? Why?
- What has been written on your topic? By whom?
- In all that you read, what does it tell you? What does it not tell you? Why are both of these important for your topic?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is the viewpoint or angle from which you are approaching your topic. This framework should enable you to ask questions of a topic that could not be asked (or could not be asked as effectively) without it.

- On what basis are you making your arguments?
- What assumptions or presuppositions are you bringing to your work? Why?
- How are these based in a theoretical framework?
- What does your theoretical framework enable you to do with your topic?

Methodology

Your methodology comprises the various methods and material that you will use to obtain and analyze the information necessary to answer your research question. Be careful not to simply describe your methodology—you must also justify it. This means explaining why a particular choice of methodology will enable you to do a project that will produce results that are new or unique.

- How are you going to do your project?
- What research methods will you use? (Qualitative? Quantitative?) Why?
- What material will you use? (Types of books? Interviews? Analytical tools?) Why?
- How do particular methodologies allow you to address different questions?
- What are the strengths of your methods and materials? What are their weaknesses?

Tips for Presentation

Always make it clear to the reader what you are proposing and why it is important.

It is not enough to simply describe things. Do not assume that the reader can figure out what you are proposing to do and the relevance of what you are doing if you only describe and do not explicitly explain these things.

- For example, if you want to argue that an article does not address the question you seek to address, it is not enough to describe what the article does address. You need to explicitly tell the reader what the article **does not** address and why this omission is significant.
- Strategy: Talk about the article; do not just summarize. *"Although the article addresses many pertinent questions, it remains silent on this particular question:"*

Use verb tenses strategically.

- **Present** tense is used for **relating** what other authors say and for discussing the literature, theoretical concepts, methods, etc.
"In her article on biodiversity, Jones stipulates that"

In addition, use the present tense when you **present your observations** on the literature.
"However, on the important question of extinction, Jones remains silent."

- **Past** tense is used for **recounting** events, results found, etc.
"Jones and Green conducted experiments over a ten-year period. They determined that it was not possible to recreate the specimen."
- **Future** tense is used for **describing how you will accomplish** your research.
"This thesis will challenge Jones and Green's conclusions about biodiversity and will propose a new approach to the problem of species extinction."

For further reference

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