Writing a Research Proposal

Undergraduate Research Hub
What is a research proposal?
• Outlines (in narrative form) the plans for your research project

Why write a research proposal?
• To plan your research study, convey it to others
• To apply for funding for your research
• To request approval for your research from an IRB
Basic Elements of a Research Proposal

Abbreviated versions of:
• Introduction
• Literature review
• Methodology
• Theoretical framework
• Preliminary list of references

Ask your faculty mentor for guidance.
Introduction

Purpose
• to place your study in the context of ongoing research

Consider
• How does it fit into a broader investigative process?
• What are you contributing to the existing body of knowledge?

Ask your faculty mentor about whether your literature review should be incorporated into the introduction or whether it should be a separate section.
Introduction

1. the central issue(s)
2. key concepts / terms
3. the specific research question or problem you’re trying to discover or investigate
4. the purpose/goal of your research
   • e.g. test a hypothesis, fill a knowledge gap, explore patterns/inconsistencies
5. the significance
   • why does this matter; why should we care?
   • what makes this worth investigating?
   • what are the consequences of complete/incomplete knowledge?

6. Investigative approach (methods)
7. Situate your study within the context of scholarly research
   • Briefly highlight key previous findings relevant to your study
   • Lead into your literature survey

This can take a few paragraphs.
Literature Review

Purpose

• Places your study in the context of previous work
• Establishes your credibility
  • Show your awareness of relevant research
  • Indicate that you are basing your work on previous work that has received the approval of your academic peers
• Shows how your work relates to and/or differs from previous studies
• Recognizes the work of other scholars
In the literature review

• Give a coherent overview of existing research (narrative, not many summaries)

• Trace a trajectory (key discoveries and/or new directions)

• Include the most significant / relevant sources
  • most frequently-cited studies
  • groundbreaking studies that set the direction for later research

• Highlight controversies or debates, fairly presenting alternative perspectives.
Literature Review (cont.)

• Take note of gaps, ambiguities, or questions that still need to be addressed.

• Prepare your reader to recognize your position within the research community: how are you intervening in the scholarly conversation?

• What sources? Relevancy, ask mentor, repeated citations, etc.

• How many references? ~5-10
Methodology / Theoretical Framework

Purpose
• Explain the process of your investigation

General
• Use the appropriate heading for your discipline
• Provide diagrams, charts, and illustrations as appropriate for your discipline
• Refer to sources as appropriate
  • *e.g.*, you’re following a method, or a theoretical approach described by a previous researcher.
Methodology / Theoretical Framework (cont.)

Content

• Be specific about your theoretical or procedural approach
  • e.g. field observation, experimental study, critical analysis

• Provide as much detail about your methods as possible
  • How did you recruit your study participants?
  • How did you make measurements? What instruments or tools did you use?

• If applicable, describe your theoretical approach or type of analysis, if applicable (feminist, functionalist, Marxist, Freudian, etc)
Methodology / Theoretical Framework (cont.)

• Justify your approach – how will it contribute to the academic conversation?
  • filling a gap, offering an alternative, confirming or replicating, problematizing common understandings, etc.

• Acknowledge potential limitations or challenges you face
  • Will your results be reliable? How widely applicable will they be?
  • How will you attempt to address these limitations / challenges?
References

• Reference page
  • List only what is used
  • Follow discipline citation style

• Consider using a citation tool.
  • e.g. Endnote, Mendeley, RefWorks, Zotero
Reminders

• Be orderly
• Be thorough, but succinct
• Talk to your mentor
• Discipline and project design can impact the proposal (and paper)