

The Research Proposal in Thirteen Parts¹

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Abstract

A proposal is a serious statement of intent to look into a question or phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. There are seven aspects to completing a written proposal for a graduate thesis or project.

- 1. General and specific focus**
- 2. Relevant literature and conceptual framework**
- 3. Methodology**
- 4. Ethics**
- 5. Timetable and Ways of Working**
- 6. References and Appendices**
- 7. Formal Approval**

To help prepare, and eventually implement a clear, feasible research proposal, there are six relationships that need attention including: (1) relationship with oneself, (2) with a supervisory committee, (3) with representatives of institutions and the institutional expectations, (4) with selected friends, family, advisors, and supporters, (5) with “others” and finally, (6) with pilot or trial research activities.

The Purpose of a Proposal

The proposal is a serious statement of intent to look into a phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. Students engage in research under the supervision of faculty and with the guidance of others. Thus, the proposal is a statement of intent and a plan that needs to be accepted, useful, and feasible for all parties. Some people think of the proposal as a clear star to guide a voyage of discovery; the proposal thus is used to chart a course and avoid undesired detours. Others see the proposal as similar to a proposal to live with a friend or life partner; it indicates a willingness to engage in a significant undertaking that has consequences for both parties.

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But a proposal cannot and should not attempt to specify exactly everything that will be done or what is expected. A graduate thesis or project proposal is not a blueprint or a recipe to build a particular product nor an advertising campaign to convince others of the worthiness of an idea. Nor is it a set of sleuthing techniques to solve a puzzle. The intent of the proposal is to construct a feasible plan for you to explore, understand, or test a concern about which you are curious and do not know the answer.

In brief, a proposal is a careful, thoughtful and feasible plan towards a goal. A good proposal for a project, a group study, or a thesis promotes disciplined curiosity. An excellent proposal also includes arrangements for check-points so that changes can be made when necessary that assist the researcher to stay on course given the realities of life, the excitement of unexpected discoveries, the inevitable mishaps and problems, and the requirements for quality scholarship.

The Seven Aspects of a Written Proposal

1. The General and Specific Focus.

The writer of a proposal can clearly fill in the blanks of the following sentence. Work on all other sections of the proposal are necessary, however, before one can satisfactorily and convincingly complete the following sentence and say it out loud in informal conversation.¹ But, without being able to do so, a proposal is not finished. The sentence with the blanks filled in can be used in the proposal abstract, in the first few pages of the proposal, in informal conversation, in the consent forms, and in submissions for approval to organizations, and if necessary the Human Research Ethics Committee.

The purpose of the study is to _____
-fill in blank with a verb such as test, understand, develop
the _____
-fill in blank with a central concept or two
about _____
-fill in blank with the unit of analysis, whether people, groups, time periods
using a _____
-fill in blank the method of inquiry

Here is an example from a student in Studies in Policy and Practice. The purpose of the thesis is to document the decisions and tensions of one committee of representatives from not-for profit agencies as they engage in the development of a cooperative, using a case study and participant observation, documents, and interviews with key informants within a community action research approach to inquiry.

¹See problem formulation p. 59 of John W. Creswell *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* Sage, 1994.

To reach the specific focus, it helps to describe the nature of the general concern and reason for interest in a specific topic. Introductions or prefaces to proposals can include a description of a client or a coalition approaching you with a problem such as the imminent change in the law affecting taxation in municipalities. Or there is your own pressing interest in the absence of any information about fathers parenting children. Or, the specific focus can emerge from a curiosity of how citizens go about debating health policies in public arenas. Key to a proposal is the transformation of a general line of inquiry into a specific focus, whether a hypothesis testing a directional relationship between two concepts or a clear question about one particular concept that you do not know the answer to. Often early drafts of proposals begin with several questions, and it takes work and several more written drafts to clarify what is the specific line of inquiry. Important but subsidiary questions may become interview questions or frameworks for observations and analysis of documents. It helps to ask oneself: if I had to choose between several questions, which one do I really want to know something about.

2. The Relevant Literature and Conceptual Framework .

One part of the literature review is to examine scholarly and professional publications, both theoretical and empirical, that directly supports or challenges the proposed specific focus. Literature may also be included that bears upon your focus, and sets it in context. Reading the literature helps you differentiate what is known from what is not known. Writing about the literature in the proposal builds the argument of why your specific focus is worth doing.

The second part of the review is sometimes called the conceptual framework. This includes the specific definitions of the unit of analysis, such as the age of the persons in the sample or boundary around a case study. In a quantitative hypothesis-testing proposal, the variables to be tested are clearly defined. In qualitative, exploratory, or hypothesis generating proposals the debates on several, but not more than three or four key concepts are reviewed. For example, a student in Studies in Policy and Practice debated the various ways scholars theorize key concepts such as “for profit” and “public consultation” in the conceptual framework of a thesis proposal on how citizens in British Columbia oppose the framing of “for profit” health care in presentations made to the government committee on the *Patients First: Renewal and Reform of British Columbia’s Health Care System*.

3. The Methodology.

This is often a large section of the proposal. Many books and articles are written about it. How one approaches the following three parts to the methodology depends on how one understands methodology and how to use it, and the characteristics of the specific approach selected. (i)It includes a section on design and matters related to epistemology. Key here is an argument why you picked a design and how that design helps answer your specific research focus. Both you and your committee need to be convinced that the design or methodological approach selected is better or most suitable (and feasible) compared to others that are less relevant or appropriate to the study focus. (ii)There is a section on data collection methods, including sampling procedures, particular methods of collecting what type of data, from whom, how and why, and specific instruments or procedures to collect information. In historical and documentary research, for instance, a careful list of sources are expected and why some are included while others rejected. In quantitative research, it is expected the sample size and recruitment will be justified on particular standards. In observational naturalist inquiry, the decisions taken to select what will be observed, when, where, and how need description. (iii) The third section is on analysis. What will you do with the data? How will you go about

organizing, inspecting, transforming, comparing, and interpreting? Draft possible tables and charts that present possible relationships between several variables or categories. What statistical tests are appropriate, and which ones are not? What analytical processes are relevant to making sense of the information and help to account for patterns? What are the possible points of comparison or juxtaposition of paradoxes that will explicate what is going on in the data?

4. The Ethics.

There are two aspects to ethics: making claims and establishing research relationships with persons. First are the ethics of how will you go about making claims of statistical, policy, or practical significance. Present the criteria of quality that you choose to value and that are appropriate to the design selected for the proposal's specific focus such as rigor and relevance; validity and reliability; thick, rich description; activation of allies and catalytic validity; population or theoretical generalizability. In some methodologies, there are conventions about what results may be stated as significant and what margins of error or mistakes are accepted. For example, if a particular statistical test is appropriate to a certain sample size and type of variable, then a researcher argues a pattern is found in the data beyond what is expected by chance alone. A hypothesis is accepted or rejected with some level of confidence regarding the relationship between two variables. Much research, however, cannot nor should use this approach to making claims of significance. They use other equally convincing and important conventions about relevance to a client, depth and generalizability to theory, and convincingness of the account.

The second aspect of ethics is relationships with the persons in the study. These are not just relationships with "human subjects" as per guidelines and protocols of particular institutions², but also those with oneself and members on the supervisory committee and support groups as described more in the last part of this paper on the six relationships. For instance, a student in graduate program of Dispute Resolution is studying how women in rural Papua New Guinea work on and understand their land. The purpose of the proposal is to explore how the use and knowledge of communal land contributes to the struggles against the World Bank's drive to register land to individuals. This student knows the local language, seeks sponsorship of a respected, non-government cultural organization, and pays a "community representative and guide" to accompany her through all parts of the study. The student did not start collecting information until after she and her guide organized a meal and a village gathering to discuss the proposed research and request community support for her as a person, and for the research. Also, the student used an oral approach to discussing and obtaining consent for individual interviews, with consent witnessed using traditions of the village. The student wrote up a script of the oral consent approval processes for the supervisory committee and the University of Victoria ethics committee. In addition, the ethics of working in the village meant reciprocity: an exchange of labour and food before and during the period of collecting information, as well as conducting a popular education campaign with youth about land registration and World Bank initiatives.

² See University of Victoria Office of Vice Present Research ethics procedures, TriCouncil Guidelines, forms of submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee, and other protocols to a particular community, institution, or group relevant to the study.

5. Timetable and Ways of Making Decisions

This is the section that specifies who is doing what, when, and where. What are the costs in money and time. What check-points will there be for evaluating how the research is progressing, what are the problems, and what changes are required. This section of the proposal may be short; sometimes it isn't written up clearly, especially as it is difficult to know how much time is needed or what decisions are required in the future. Estimates, however, are a good idea. Thinking about time and ways of making decisions, especially a process to check mid-way cannot be ignored. Sometimes writing up a budget about costs for preparing surveys, transcription costs, honorariums for participants, and the time needed for observations are helpful to the committee to clarify feasibility of sampling. This section of the proposal also reflects attention to building the relationships listed below, for example, processes about how the thesis committee will work together, how communicate, and how often they meet. In a research project with a client, it is necessary to clarify what are the responsibilities, contributions, and expectations that the client or community partner has for the student and vice versa. In a project using a community based design, what are the decisions that the community is responsible for, such as the community products from a project, and which ones is the thesis committee responsible for. When an indigenous protocol for conducting research is used, there will be discussions about who owns what information and what happens if there are disagreements about interpretation.

In all thesis and research projects, there can be serious disagreements or unexpected problems. There may also be pleasant surprises, such as finding an unexpected source of excellent data. It is necessary to think about what processes can be used to resolve concerns, respond to opportunities, and revise methodological decisions. It is particularly important to agree about these processes while preparing a proposal, as students have power, but institutionally hold less power than their committee members. The responsibility for anticipating changes and implementing responses should not rest primarily with the student.

6. References and Appendices.

A working bibliography is essential to write a satisfactory proposal. It is the foundation for the completed project or thesis. Appendices may include: (i) drafts of submissions to ethics; (ii) a guide to interviews; (iii) a specific questionnaire or instrument; (iv) draft tables indicating how data may be analyzed, and (v) letters of support of a proposal. Another useful appendix is (vi) a proposed table of content for the completed project or thesis. Some proposals have few appendices, as the students and their committees decide to spend their time clarifying particular details when an ethics review is actually submitted, or drafting the table of contents after data analysis has begun.

7. Final Institutional Approval.

There are usually 2 or 3 drafts written of a proposal. The supervisor, and sometimes other committee members comment on the drafts, and revisions are made by the student. Then a complete written proposal goes to all members of the committee. For some programs and committees the proposal is 30 to 40 pages. Doctoral, but even masters' thesis proposals can include draft chapters of the literature review and methodology prepared as if they will be used in the final thesis. For others, the proposal is shorter and not prepared as draft chapters: the proposal is still formal and substantial, 25 to 30 pages long, plus title page, an abstract, table of contents, references and appendices. There may be a formal presentation or "defense" of the proposal to the full committee, followed by questions and requests for verbal clarification

and written changes. At some point, the committee members indicate approval by signing a form. For other committees, a decision is made to accept a 15 to 25 page proposal, pending clarification. But rather than expecting a revised and re-submission of a proposal, memos of clarification are used to signal student's response to particular matters. Upon receipt of a clarifying memo that responds satisfactorily to issues raised, the supervisory committee indicates the proposal is approved.

Whatever approach is used, there needs to be a clear signal of formal or institutional approval. Approval means the proposal is satisfactory; that faculty, student, and possible other committee members have agreed to it; and that the student and supervisory committee members will work together towards its implementation. If there are significant changes in focus or design once the research has begun, it is the student's responsibility to inform the supervisor, and the supervisor's responsibility to ensure other committee members are aware of, and approve of these changes. Hence, the importance of building relationships of knowledge and trust, so that all parties to a proposal support its implementation, and are willing to negotiate the small and larger changes required to complete the thesis or project.

The Six Relationships Required to Finish a Proposal

Where to start? There is no one best place. There are many ways to prepare oneself to go on a voyage of learning and exploring mysteries and practical problems. What is most baffling and hidden, however, is the actual work of preparing oneself and those with whom one has responsibility to while on the voyage. Each of the following six relationships are all necessary to prepare a proposal. To implement a proposal and complete a project or thesis, further work is needed on each of the six sets of relationships.

1. Relationship with oneself.

This is a relationship that you have the most control over, and that will give you the most sustenance and power. Begin, end, and return to your relationship with yourself. What is it you think is important? What is your intent and what values are important to you as you engage in research? Honesty and kindness are key to this relationship. They help you see that of the many important questions you may want to pursue, it is possible to pursue only one specific focus in the proposal. Early drafts of proposals include several large questions that will take several thesis or lifetimes to answer. To move from the general to the specific focus through drafts of the proposal, ask what you really want to know and what you really are able to work on. An honest look at values and intent can help explore what it is you wish to learn with a particular question compared to another. A kindly relationship with yourself gives you room to pick what is most possible, feasible, amusing or useful according to your own values of what is important, leaving other questions for later studies or other people. Or, you can pick a focus that is most insistent. You may not know why, but you are convinced a question presses you. If you cannot live with yourself if you ignore the question, maybe that is the value you use to pick a focus. Or pick the question that will be the most rewarding or fun to answer.

Take time to revisit this relationship with yourself. Recognize you have power to do the proposal, the project or thesis. Without you, it will not happen. When you are clear on what you want to do and why, it gives confidence. It is also freeing to honestly state privately, if not publically, what is important about the project. What is it that you are prepared and able to give to it.

2. Relationship with a supervisory committee.

At a masters' level there are three members on the committee, four at a doctoral level. If a thesis, the members must be members of Graduate Council at the University of Victoria. If a project, one or more of the members must be members of the community, or a "client organization" for whom the report is prepared. Usually one person serves as supervisor; sometimes there are co-supervisors. Finding committee members who are available, willing to contribute, and keen to work with you and each other on preparing a proposal and then a thesis or project is interesting and tricky. Some people find it helpful to systematically interview students and faculty about experiences, interests, ways of working, and availability. Some students are clear on who they wish to work with and why, and focus on developing those relationships. General and specific conversations are helpful. There is no obligation on a student nor on a faculty to "agree" to be part of a committee until the time is right and an invitation is offered and responded to. Most faculty and students find it helpful to prepare a 2 to 3 page draft of their general focus, why they are interested in their topic, how they wish to do their research, and if feasible. In contrast to the formal written full proposal, this early draft includes why you are considering inviting someone to be a committee member. What is it that you hope they can offer? Or, why are you interested in developing a research relationship with them? It isn't possible to know, articulate or state publically all the reasons for choosing relationships with particular committee members; but it is a good idea to ponder the reasons for selection.

Committees and supervisors vary in how they work. The supervisor is key to ensuring relationships are engaged in appropriately and proposal writing moves to the final approval stage. Some committees work more as a group, meeting several times. Some committees meet but once: to discuss the proposal and ensure steps are clear about what is needed for institutional approval so the student can begin research. In those committees that meet infrequently, the supervisor remains active while the other members act as final readers and occasional consultants. But all must independently approve a proposal and a thesis or project as "ready for oral defense." Check out restrictions on everyone's time, challenges of distance, and individual communication preferences. Explore building relationships and preparing the proposal through the use of electronic, phone, and other mechanisms. At issue is development of sufficient knowledge, clarity, and trust in yourself and committee members so the proposal moves to approval efficiently and it is a helpful document that can be implemented. It makes sense to be as clear as possible early on, and to check mid-way, how available and willing committee members are to be engaged in individual conversations and problem solving. Some students expect far more contact than is possible for committee members; others want far less than may be needed to approve a proposal.

If one is thinking of the committee relationships required to develop a proposal and to complete a thesis, I have found it helpful to think of four committee meetings. (1) An early meeting to examine and approve the proposal and draft ethics submissions; (2) a meeting mid way during the data collection or early analysis to check progress and make changes if necessary to methodology; (3) another meeting to review a good final draft of thesis or project and to indicate clearly what steps must be taken to "approve the thesis for oral examination"; and (4) the defense itself, organized by the supervisor, student, and representatives of the graduate program. Whether four meetings are held, or more or fewer, depends on the practice of the supervisor, the interests of the committee, and the traditions of a graduate program. The student is the person who has the responsibility to set up these meetings in consultation with the supervisor.

3. Relationship with representatives of institutions and their official expectations.

Throughout the process of learning what the expectations are and how to meet them, students and committee members need to build relationships with university representatives, such as the Human Ethics Facilitator, Graduate Advisors, and Graduate Secretaries. It helps to know who they are, what is their job, and how they can assist you in completing a proposal. It is also important to learn what they cannot do, and what helps or hinders them do their work. Official expectations regarding proposals and practices vary by graduate program in HSD, and whether a student is completing a thesis or project, at a masters or doctoral level. Check them out. There are also significant variations by individual supervisory committees that affect a particular student in moving proposal to formal approval. Are you expected to present and “defend” in front of the full committee? Is there a “sign off” step, whereby committee members sign a form indicating their approval of the proposal?

One fundamental university expectation, however, is that students who intend to collect new data from human subjects must submit an application for ethic review, with the exception of research that is naturalistic inquiry, document review, or as part of ‘normal’ activities. The supervisor must sign that ethics application, but cannot sign it unless the committee has agreed to the proposal. See the university websites under graduate studies and research for specific procedures, application forms, guidelines and timelines. Sample consent forms will be posted early in 2004.

4. Relationship with selected friends, family, advisors, and supports.

A reader may glimpse these relationships by reading the acknowledgments in completed thesis or projects. Rarely are these relationships conceptualized as work requiring negotiation during the proposal development. But they are key. What focus is selected and what is considered feasible may be directly, or unconsciously related to obligations and interests one has in family and friends. There may be expectations, mutually negotiated or not, about what time is taken to work on the proposal.

A graduate thesis or project is different than a course paper. It is not like a very long, big course paper. That is one lesson masters’ students talk about needing to learn. A proposal, and a thesis or project, are qualitatively different. It is a rare student who can complete a proposal or thesis in a few long nights or weekends. Recognize the time and energy it takes, whether weeks, months, and years. There are implications for one’s relationships. But it can be quite problematic to negotiate family and friend relationships that are helpful to completing a proposal and do the research. Negotiations are significantly affected by gender expectations, familial obligations, financial entitlements.

Some, but not all, students decide to seek the engagement of a few close family members, friends, advisors, or what one student calls “thesis angels” to accompany them in the journey of discovery, or at a particular stage of the proposal or research. These people are picked for their interest in the proposal and explicit desire to “stand beside” the person and assist them in completing the study. There are thesis groups of students who read each other’s draft proposals, or solve problems. It is important to recognize that these relationships are voluntary and premised on unconditional regard for the student as a person doing a task. But the student is not obligated to take the advice of these persons, nor be accountable to them for proposal decisions.

In some methodologies, research approaches, and ethical approaches to research, such as those in indigenous communities or community action research, there are “advisors” or a “community research committee” explicitly selected by the student and possibly by the community under study to accompany the student on the journey through the proposal and study. These people agree to know what is going on and negotiate what is helpful and relevant to whom. It is best to explicate and revisit from time to time their interest, capacity and responsibility as did a social work student working on a thesis who put together an advisory committee of parents whose sons had completed their probation terms and who wanted to see more help for parents in youth courts. (That same advisory committee later implemented some education workshops based on results of the thesis). What is the thesis committee responsible for in comparison to the community committee? Is there a requirement or desire to ensure opportunities to share data? Jointly interpret? Interpret and write up different aspects of a study for different audiences? Some of the programs in HSD, such as Public Administration, have more experience working through formal negotiations with clients—as members of the supervisory committee. The relationships, however, that I am speaking of here are “outside” the supervisory committee, but part of what the student decides is necessary for their research.

5. Relationship with “others”.

I call attention to relationships with others, whether colleagues, friends, or faculty, who may give solicited or unsolicited advice about a proposal. There are also the others who provide welcome or unwelcome distractions. “Others” may include those you chose to consult with about a specific matter. The “others” may include the vague ‘other’, such as the other student who is perceived as proceeding more quickly, the faculty who appears to have a ‘better’ methodology, or the other graduate programs that appear to give students more money or support for graduate research. The ‘Other’ could be illusive, like a ‘superego’ that hounds a student with large or unclear expectations about what should be done. The point is not to ignore or dismiss what these others may say, as sometimes the information or advice can be helpful and relevant. But, these others do not know you nor your proposal. They are not responsible for the implications of their advice as are members of your supervisory committee or support group. Hence, it is important to be clear and efficient in shifting through what these others say, and how much time you spend on these relationships. Do they add to your work on the proposal? Students can lose energy, time, and focus by listening too closely and trying to respond to the ‘others.’

6. Relationship with pilot or trial research activities.

I end this short paper on the 13 aspects of preparing a proposal by arguing doing pilot work is the most helpful relationship for building confidence and clarity. Pilot work is helpful, crucial, and lively. It is pilot work that ensures a proposal is approved, feasible, and closely related to what the students think they want to do. Engaging in pilot work can be considered building a relationship between oneself and the actual research work.

Pilot activities can be about any aspect of the proposal. They can include:

- speaking out loud the specific focus;
- trying out recruitment procedures,;
- asking a friend to read a draft consent form;
- selecting several sample documents and preparing summaries of them;
- taking an hour to do an interview with a colleague using draft questions;
- transcribing interview results;
- spending a half day observing and taking notes of a possible site of inquiry;

- preparing physical places for holding the information;
- experimenting with possible analytic procedures including draft categories, themes, tables, semiotic squares etc.

Piloting is practicing what you must do to answer your research question. When bored, eager, worried, impatient, stuck, or pressed, try collecting some information closely related to your proposal. What do you learn? What more will you need to do, or what must be done differently? What discard? Why not try some other procedure? What makes sense to start in another direction? Engaging with yourself and pilot activities helps to sort through efficiently what is far too general in a proposal and what is not feasible. Conversely, pilot work promotes curiosity and confidence in what you know is the purpose and value of a proposed project or thesis.