Writing a Thesis Proposal
Part One: Getting Started

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this presentation (Part One), you should be able to:

- See the proposal as a *persuasive* document that makes claims about your research.
- Avoid pitfalls commonly made by students in thesis proposals.
Overview of Presentation (Part One)

- Definition of a proposal
- The role of the proposal in the thesis/dissertation process
- Standard parts of the proposal
- Common weaknesses of proposals
- Tips for writing a proposal
What Is an Academic Proposal?

An academic proposal is a step in the dissertation or thesis process. According to Locke, Spirduso and Silverman,

“... [a] proposal ... sets forth both the exact nature of the matter to be investigated and a detailed account of the methods to be employed. In addition, the proposal usually contains material supporting the importance of the topic selected and the appropriateness of the research methods to be employed.”

The Thesis Proposal at the University of Saskatchewan

- The proposal marks the first step in the preparation of the thesis.
- Not all departments at the U of S require proposals.
- For some departments, the proposal is short and informal; for others it is long and detailed.
- Many departments require a proposal and regular yearly updates and committee meetings on thesis work.
Think About the Kind of Thesis You Will Write

There are different types of theses (or dissertations):

- A “standard” thesis, which follows the typical IMRD format (introduction, methods, results and discussion/conclusion).
- A “manuscript-style thesis”: a series of manuscripts suitable for publication.
- Other types of theses, which may have chapters or a more personal and creative narrative structure.
The Proposal as a Communication Tool

The proposal communicates your research plans to your advisory committee. Your committee members will use the document to do the following:

- Provide guidance.
- Offer feedback.
- Approve the thesis.

The Proposal As an Action Plan

Your proposal is typically also a step-by-step action plan for your research, which:

- Anticipates problems.
- Includes contingency plans.
- Provides a blueprint for your work.
- Outlines expectations on which you will be evaluated.

The Proposal as a Contract

Your proposal is a contract between you and the University of Saskatchewan. It typically commits you to do the following:

- Research your problem in the way you have set out.
- Conduct your research in an ethical manner.
- Meet timelines set out in the proposal.
Reducing the Anxiety

- Make a list of all the things you think you’ll need help with.
- Talk to others – your supervisor, professors, fellow students, librarians.
- Take detailed notes from all your meetings with others.
- Figure out what you need to learn – e.g., citation styles, citation management systems and data analysis techniques.
- Look at models of previous theses and proposals – ask your supervisor and committee members for models.
Reducing the Anxiety *(continued)*

- Attend thesis/dissertation defenses if possible.
- Decide if the project will involve ethics approval. [http://research.usask.ca/for-researchers/ethics/index.php](http://research.usask.ca/for-researchers/ethics/index.php)
- Prepare a detailed work plan, working backwards from your expected date of completion.
- Plan to work on your proposal at the same time each day.
- Start with the part that you will find easiest to write.
Your Audience – the Committee

Think clearly about your audience. Consider the following:

- Who are your committee members? Get to know them *before* the proposal meeting. Influence the selection of the committee.
- What are their backgrounds?
- What do they know about your research area?
- Are they likely to be amenable to your study?
- What do they consider to be successful proposals and theses?
Standard Parts of a Proposal

- Title and Sub-Title
- Table of Contents
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Expected Findings
Standard Parts of a Proposal (continued)

- Research Significance
- Research Limitations and Constraints
- Real World Implications
- Research Communication
- Draft Table of Contents of Thesis
- Timeline
- Budget
- References
Numbering Headings in a Proposal

1. Main Heading (Section One)
   1.1 Second-level heading
   1.2 Second-level heading
      1.2.1 Third-level heading
      1.2.2 Third-level heading
         1.2.2.1 Fourth-level heading

2. Main Heading (Section Two)
   2.1 Second-level heading
Common Weaknesses of Proposals

- Poor organization: longer sections fail to start with a roadmap for readers.
- Claims not presented in a logical order.
- The writing is unclear and wordy, and sentences are too long.
- Not up-to-date with the literature.
- Problems with citations and references.
- Contradictions among parts of the proposal.
- No case made for the student’s research.
- Not innovative or interesting.
Tips for Writing Your Proposal

- Pay attention to the order in which you present ideas.
- Pay attention to the development of your paragraphs.
- Use content bridges to link sentences and paragraphs.
- First impressions count: pay attention to the title, abstract and introduction.
- Be consistent – e.g., headings, font size, use of numbers and spellings.
- Present material in visuals if they can make explanations simpler.
- Ensure your references are correct.
Recommended Resources


The Graduate Writing Center of the Centre of Excellent in Writing. *Writing thesis and dissertations proposals.*
http://pwr.la.psu.edu/resources/graduate-writing-center/handouts-1/ WritingProposals.pdf/
Summary

- Before you start writing, research not only your topic but also the proposal and thesis processes and your audience.
- The proposal should persuade your committee that your research matters and that your methods are the right ones for answering your question.
- Each part of a proposal has particular requirements and pitfalls. Think carefully about these before completing your proposal.