

How to Write a Research Proposal:

A Formal Template for Preparing a Proposal for Research Methods

Insert Name Here

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Abstract

The abstract is a brief summary of the entire proposal, typically ranging from 150 to 250 words. It is different from a thesis statement in that the abstract summarizes the entire proposal, not just mentioning the study's purpose or hypothesis. Therefore, the abstract should outline the proposal's major headings: the research question, theoretical framework, research design, sampling method, instrumentation, and data and analysis procedures. A good abstract accurately reflects the content of the proposal, while at the same time being coherent, readable, and concise. Do not add any information in the abstract that is not previously discussed throughout the proposal. Notice this paragraph is not indented; the abstract will be the only paragraph in the entire proposal that is not indented. Because it highlights the entire proposal, it would be wise to wait and write the abstract last. This way, one merely has to reword information that was previously written.

How to Write a Research Proposal:

A Formal Template for Preparing a Proposal for Research Methods

When social scientists desire to conduct an experiment, they first develop a proposal. A proposal introduces the problem, purpose, and significance of a study as well as the experimenter's research question and hypothesis. It also gives a brief explanation of the theory guiding the study, a review of relevant literature pertaining to the theory, and the procedure for the experiment. The proposal should be written in American Psychological Association (APA) format. Without an elaborate Introduction, the experimenter will leave his or her readers wondering what exactly the purpose of the experiment is. The introduction explains in detail several components of the experiment that must be included in any proposal. After reading the Introduction, the reader should conclude why the experimenter is conducting the research and how this research will affect the academic community and society at large. For this paragraph in particular, it is sufficient to grab the reader's attention, introduce the topic at hand, and provide a brief definition of the theory from which the study is based.

Statement of the Problem

The "Statement of the Problem" is an imperative part of the proposal, for in order for research to be conducted, one must notice a problem in the existing literature that has not been previously addressed. For this section, the following questions should be answered: Why does this research study need to be conducted? What *specific* issues does this study raise that have not been observed in other literature pertaining to the topic? Answering these questions will allow readers to understand why this particular study is important and how the study will attempt to answer new, never-before asked questions.

Purpose of the Study

It is appropriate include a sentence saying “The purpose of this study is...” under this section. Clearly identify the goal of the study in one precise sentence. For example, the sentence could look like this: “the purpose of this study is to determine whether the decision of first-semester male students to live with or reject living with their roommates is related to whether their roommates affirm their self-views or not.” Why is this an important area of study? Answer this question under this section. Also, identify the unit of analysis or specific inquiry used. Examples of different units of analysis include self-report surveys, observational studies, etc.

Research Question/Hypothesis

Research questions *ask* what relationships exist between the different variables in the study, while the hypothesis *predicts* the relationship between variables. List all the research questions in the study, and then include the researcher’s hypothesis for the study. Format this section as seen below.

For the purpose of this study, the following question were addressed:

1. List the research question here. For example, based on self-verification theory, will a college student’s preference to stay with his roommate increase or decrease depending on whether his roommate sees him as he sees himself?

As part of this study, investigation included one research hypothesis:

1. List the study’s hypothesis here: The more invested college students are in their self-views, the more they will express a desire to verify these self-views by preferring roommates who see them as they see themselves.

Definition of Terms

In experimental research, it is essential that one defines the central ideas or concepts of the research study. Therefore, carefully define each concept/variable that will be used in the study, citing other research studies as much as needed. List each term, italicize it, and use a hyphen to define the term as seen below:

1. *Target self-views*—the target’s “thoughts and feelings about themselves that are derived from past experiences, especially the reactions of others” (Swann & Read, 1981, p. 352).
2. *Perceiver self-views*—the perceiver’s “thoughts and feelings about themselves that are derived from past experiences, especially the reactions of others” (Swann & Read, 1981, p. 352).

Theoretical Framework

This section will detail the theory that is guiding the proposed study. From this theory, the researcher is able to inform the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the questions and hypothesis, the choice of instruments, and methodology of the study. In this section, explain the major tenants of the theory as well as how the theory relates to the proposed study. Remember that the eventual findings of the experiment will be discussed in terms of how they relate to the theory. It should be a brief explanation of the theory, as the details of particular experiments will be discussed later in the Literature Review.

Literature Review

The Literature Review provides the background for the research problem and illustrates to the reader that the researcher is knowledgeable about the scope of the theory. Research as many studies pertaining to the theory as possible, and summarize them in a succinct manner. Review various dissertations, as they may help one to understand how to write and summarize

previous research. When writing the literature review, it is wise to separate the various studies one finds into different categories. Under these categories, create “Level 2 subheadings” in APA style. These subheadings are formatted just like Level 1 headings, but they are aligned left. See the subheadings below for an example.

1st Subheading

Choose one evident theme or that became apparent when researching the theory. Briefly share the results of the various studies, including the most pertinent information such as the studies’ hypotheses, population, methodology, and results. Relate the study to an ongoing dialogue of the literature pertaining to the research topic. This means that each study one lists should relate to new, proposed study in some way. Report the studies sequentially if possible, building upon the findings of prior studies. Remember to separate each category of studies with a new subheading. Do this as many times as needed.

Methodology

The “Methodology” section is the most important section in the entire proposal, as it explains each step the experimenter will take in order to conduct his or her research. This section discusses what measures the researcher will take in order to test the study’s hypothesis. In this section, it is vital to include the following subheadings while expanding on them in as much detail as possible.

Research Design

Include the proposed research design of the study, whether it is a survey, experiment, observation, secondary data of analysis, etc. Then, explain how this design will derive results. Briefly discuss how the data will be administered and collected, including how the subjects will

participate in the study. Also, briefly discuss which theoretical model will guide this study and what the model predicts will be the results of the study.

Sampling

This section should include an expanded discussion of the sample. First, discuss the population under consideration. From where will participants be selected? Second, give the sampling method to be used. Which *specific* sampling method will be used to select participants? Lastly, list the elements that will be characteristic of the sample, such as sex, age, etc.

Instrumentation

In this paragraph, briefly outline the instruments that will be used in the study, including any and all surveys, interviews, or observation grids. Discuss how the instrument(s) will measure the study's independent and dependent variables. Each instrument should be discussed below in more detail under separate subheadings.

Instrument #1

List the first instrument that will be used in the study. Bold and indent the name of instrument once to the right, as seen in the example above. For this paragraph in particular, include why the instrument is considered to be valid and/or reliable as well as how it will be useful for the proposed study. Repeat the same procedure for all other instruments.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Explain the general plan for how the data will be collected, especially how the letter of consent will be administered and collected. Include any survey, interview, or observation procedures, and identify any incentives for students participating in the study. Also, include what statistics or analytical tools will be used for analyzing the data, such as ANOVA, SPSS, or SAS statistics, if applicable.

Protection of Human Rights

Discuss what efforts will be taken to protect human subjects. Reiterate that subjects' participation is voluntary and that they can choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Describe how the subjects' confidentiality will be protected and how they may receive a copy of the study when it is finished.

Discussion

This section is often labeled "Significance of the Study." In formal proposals for graduate study, the Discussion may be placed near the end of the Introduction. The Discussion focuses on the implications of the proposed study, such as how the study's results will affect future research, theory, counseling, policy, etc. Therefore, write this section with the focus on how the study's results will benefit others. Identify any weaknesses to the proposed study and why they were not addressed. Address how well the study will do in terms of internal and external validity, and discuss the implications of the study affecting practice, policy, and scholarly/future research. When the proposal is finished, be sure to include a reference list for all sources used at the end of the proposal. See the APA Manual for formatting "Abstract" and "References" pages.

References

Pajares, F. (2007). Elements of a proposal. Emory University. Retrieved from
<http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/proposal.html>