Wiring a research proposal guidelines

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This manual aims to lay out guidelines when you write a proposal for academic writing. The guidelines build on multiple sources: long-term experience of colleagues,[1] useful websites[2] as well as my own experience as a former student, scholar and reviewer.

A research proposal is a description of a scientific project, be it a term paper, a thesis, or an academic article. They may appear too heterogeneous at first sight. However, the starting point and the process of working it through, down and up, and up and down, are surprisingly similar.

In a nutshell, the proposal generally aims to answer to three questions:

- **What** do I want to deal with specifically in my work? Which question and which thesis am I working on?
- **Why** is this topic and the specific question or thesis important and exciting? (contribution to academic debates as well as societal relevance)
- **How** do I want to work on the question and come to conclusions?

Additionally, writing a research proposal helps you to organize your thoughts in a systematic manner.

On the part of reviewers (i.e. us, instructors), we use the proposal to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, whether you are able to think critically and whether you have a grasp of the relevant literature. It also tells us about the perspectives you are planning to take on your research area, and helps us to assess a "fit" between your envisaged project and our fields of expertise.

Three general remarks:
First, after you have started their literature research, it is quite usual to refine your original proposal in light of detailed literature reviews, further consideration of research approaches as the research progresses, and comments received from the supervisors (and peers). Second, the length is set by your instructor, or an institution, which you are seeking an admission/ a scholarship from. Third, unless otherwise specified, the proposal should include the following points in the table of contents usually in the order listed.

[1] I especially thank Prof. Dr. Ludger Pries for graciously allowing me to adopt his original guidelines with my own modifications.
[2] E.g. https://www.southampton.ac.uk/sociology/postgraduate/research_degrees/apply/how_to_write_an_MPhil_PhD_research_degree_proposal.page

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1 A working title on a cover page

Your title should give a clear indication of the intent of your project, directing attention explicitly to the central issue that you address. Avoid a title that is too general, for example: "The influence of the level of education on the advocacy strategy of migrant workers in Germany". A more clearly defined “problem”/topic would be: “The influence of education and ethnicity on interest representation among migrant workers in the 1990s: German rural and urban milieus in comparison” instead.
“Transnationalism and Identity in Germany and France” is also too general. An example that is easier to handle would be: “Transnational identities? Identity formation among young people of the third generation in a German-French comparison". It is specific and focused, and sounds more refreshing.

2 Table of contents

Provide a table of contents of the proposal. Use a word function for this and remember updating before submission.

3 Brief outline of the problem/central research question

This section should provide a short overview of your research: the key issue(s) that you wish to investigate. At the beginning, indicate whether it is primarily a theoretical or an empirical work and what the topic of your work is. Also, you need to state which question you want to provide an answer to or which scientific “problem” you aim to work on. Note that the question should be formulated as precisely as possible, which allows clear delimitations and limitations both in terms of space and time.

One of the don’ts is to pose a too broad a question that cannot be answered theoretically or empirically, such as “Why is there social inequality among people?” Instead, you should ask,

for example, “Why did the level of social inequality in youth’s access to education increase again between 1980 and 2005?”

The art of formulating an appropriate problem or central question lies in avoiding asking questions which cannot be answered due to their too general nature (recall the question “Why is there social inequality among people?”), or because you lack time and financial resources or methodological techniques required. Conversely, refrain from asking exactly the same questions which have long been answered. Why spend time on probing into the same questions? There is hardly any added value to it—unless a) you have a different methodological approach to utilize, b) you want to argue for an opposite case, taking a different stand, or c) you want to probe it from a different conceptual perspective. A scientific question should always be based on the existing literature, the so-called “state of the art,” and you are expected to add new knowledge to, and engage with, the ongoing debates. For example, this can be a new interpretation of widely used datasets, a synthesis of different findings in the existing literature, and/or own data that you have gathered by yourself. For this reason, the problem and research question can only be formulated in a reasonable manner when the other steps of the proposal have been well conducted and thought through.

4 State of the art

This section briefly explains how the question outlined (see Section 2) can be justified as suitable. One kind of justification can and should be done with reference to the **scientific and societal relevance** of the question. Secondly, you need to show that the **relevant knowledge** to your question is **not yet available**. A review of the current state of research (the “state of the art”) should justify and show that the proposal writer (you!) know(s) what is already known and what good enough reason for you to make progress to advance knowledge. Ultimately, the point is to show that your research question is “cutting-edge”, i.e. on the edge of current knowledge, and that is precisely why it is promising to advance knowledge.

Frankly, it feels overwhelming. But it is unlikely that you can review all the relevant literature at this stage, but you should be able to reflect **some major debates and issues** and to **show your familiarity** with **some of the main works** addressing the research issue that you are proposing. In this part of the proposal, you **should reference the most important texts** related to the research, demonstrate your understanding of the research issues, and identify existing gaps (both theoretical and practical) that your research is intended to address. You should demonstrate that your proposed topic has not been studied before, or that you are taking a new perspective on an issue. This aspect of innovation is key particularly for an MA thesis and onwards.

Two errors frequently happen here, namely **poor literature review** and **infeasibility**. First, questions and topics are presented as scientifically interesting and not yet researched. But, in reality, they have long been researched and documented. In particular, as for the latter point, a proposal should under no circumstances reflect the ignorance of the proposal writer regarding the subject by stating that s/he has not found anything substantial on her/his subject. Of course, the proposal is a proposal and it has not yet developed into a full chapter/section "the State of the Art" in the submitted version of your research paper/thesis. Nevertheless, you need to demonstrate in the proposal that you have conducted thorough and systematic literature search (and datasets search, if applicable) and know the major contours in the academic debates in the

field of your research. If you are not that far yet at the stage of submission, you should at least state that, for example, relevant journals *X* and *Y* are still to be thoroughly reviewed.

The second frequent error concerns infeasibility: an inadequate research design, often too large in scale, or too difficult to operationalize. In addition to the danger of 'carrying owls to Athens'—placing your own question too deeply in already known and secure knowledge—, there is also the danger of formulating a completely unrealistic task 'in the stars'. The proposal writer must show that s/he has come up with a procedure, which can also be implemented within the scope of the given possibilities. Also the question is grounded in the existing literature and extends it a bit by asking/addressing a specific question or problem.

The proposal must make it clear that the topic has already been dealt with at least to the extent that the envisaged problem or question has neither fully been researched nor completely outside the scope of the given financial, conceptual and time resources possible.

5 Research question, assumptions or hypotheses

Only if the state of research is well conducted, you can formulate a strong assumption/question or hypothesis. One of the elements of a strong research proposal is a clear statement of a hypothesis or a more open-ended research question: "a strong thesis is better than a weak argument." You really need a strong, interesting, important assumption/thesis for a scientific work, which is well founded, but can also be risky - even if the assumption cannot then be confirmed empirically, a great advance in knowledge may have been achieved. That's the reason why it is necessary to formulate a research question, guiding assumption or strong hypothesis, which, on the one hand, establishes the relevance and value of the proposed research question in the context of current academic thinking. On the other hand, your envisaged aim should be presented as realizable (see next section).

We know from scientific theory and methodology that hypotheses are refutable statements, and assumptions about areas of reality. The criterion of falsifiability is therefore crucial. It is not uncommon for rejected hypotheses to provide more valuable insights than the fifteenth failure to reject a completely harmless, non-risky research guideline. This section of the proposal must give a clear answer to the question every supervisor and reviewer asks to a scientific paper: **What is the central research question and the central argument to it?**

6 Methodology

This section should identify the information or data that you will need in order to address the central question of your research, how you are going to access the material and the possible research methods or techniques that you will use. Above all, you need to state whether this is a primary empirical data collection—and if so of what kind, qualitative, quantitative design, or a mixed method—a secondary analysis, or a theoretical work. As for the former two, outline the methods required **in line with the research question/hypothesis** and discuss your choice of the methods. In case of primary data collection, you should discuss the planned/confirmed field access.

In addition, you should also include some reflections on potential problems that you may face in the research process (access to interviews, primary material etc.). Here a few examples: it

makes little sense to aim for a representative survey of the population in Germany if it is not clear, who it is supposed to target, how it is to be organized or to be financed. If you want to study ethnic segregation in the redlight district of the north of Dortmund, you have to indicate which field accesses are appropriate and do-able. If you want to conduct research on the relationship between trust and control in terrorist networks, you should consider carefully how such an extremely exciting topic can be methodologically dealt with at all.

7 Preliminary outline

A proposal, especially one for a degree thesis, should include an indicative structure of the envisaged work. If possible, provide information about the approximate scope of the individual parts of the work. A general scheme can include the following structure according to the typical scheme "introduction, main part, conclusion":

Introduction

First Section

- Walk the reader through your topic. Imagine: you are a travel guide of your intellectual journey;
- How you got interested in the topic (societal and political relevance, and current media coverage with some personal anecdotes can be a powerful and refreshing start

Second section

Why exciting, important, interesting (not just for you but also for others)? Lines of connection to other topics or knowledge, embedding; research question

Chapter 1 XXXX (Don't be cryptic, name it)

2.1 Problem/central research question
2.2 The state of the art
2.3 Research assumptions / hypotheses, and central argument/thesis

Chapter 2 XXX (name it. In case of a thesis, consider organize the main part of your work into multiple chapters)

3.1 Methodology
3.2. Data analysis 1
3.3. Data analysis 2
…

Conclusions

4.1 Summary of the reasoning and key findings / findings
4.2 Relevance to society, policies, etc.
4.3 Limitations of the study, open questions and potential next research questions

8 Time schedule

Provide a realistic time plan for the completion of your project. Describe which work packages are planned when: in which month what is carried out using which methodological procedure (secondary analysis, document analysis, interviews, participant observation etc.) and under which conditions (finance, field access, institute or university connection, exchange or cooperation with others, attending specialist conferences, summer schools etc.)?

It’s usually a good idea to visualize your plan by using a Gantt chart.

9 Literature and sources

As for a term paper, here you should list the literature you have cited in the earlier section, the main published literature that you envisage using to guide your research (so-called “indicative list of references”; with reference to the theoretical framework and the substance of the research), as well as any available data sources you may draw on.
For a degree thesis, provide a complete list of literature and sources cited in all the previous sections.

Remember using one specific citation style throughout. Popular styles are Chicago Manual, APA, Harvard, etc.

For the sake of time and knowledge management, I would highly recommend you to use a literature management tool, e.g. citavi, endnote (both tools are available for free for PLUS students through the Uni. library), zotero, and Mendeley (both an open source/freeware and mac user-friendly).

Final notes

Just like any academic writing, I would highly recommend you to have your proposal read by someone else before submission. This could be a fellow student, friend, or your family.

Be consistent about the UK or US spelling.

Remember to run spell-check before submission.