



How to write a dissertation proposal

If you've been tasked with writing a proposal for your dissertation, you may be among the many students who at first feel a little overwhelmed by putting it together. What is a proposal? How should it be presented? What should I include? What should I leave out? What is my supervisor looking for? These are all common questions that we hear students ask over and over again.

To help answer these questions and more, this guide will walk you through what a dissertation proposal is, the reasons for its existence and the steps you can take to ensure yours hits the mark.

What is a dissertation proposal?

To answer this, it helps to first touch base on what a *dissertation* is. Much like an essay, a dissertation is a long-form piece of academic writing. However, it differs to an essay in that you are usually responsible for deciding on the topic or focus of the piece yourself.

The first step, therefore, is to choose your topic (also known as a dissertation title). After that, you'll need to formulate a research question, which is where the dissertation proposal comes in.

A dissertation proposal should cover in detail the research question you are going to analyse and how you plan to conduct the research. It should include the reading you have done up until this point and any outcomes of discussions with your supervisor. To help guard you from criticism when your work is marked, it should



also cover any expected limitations in your research, ethical considerations and reasons for your choice of data sample.

A dissertation proposal will usually comprise the following sections:

- Introduction
- Main body, comprised of:
 - o Methodology
 - o Aims and objectives
 - o Literature review
 - o Limitations
 - o Ethical considerations
 - o Time frame
- Mini-conclusion

Not all departments of a university will require you to write a proposal as part of the dissertation, but many will. Once written, you should schedule a meeting with your supervisor to discuss it. You can then use their feedback to make any changes before you begin conducting your research and writing the main body of the dissertation.

Bear in mind that a dissertation proposal can be fluid; it can manifest and develop as you move through your dissertation journey. The research you carry out and the findings you get may prompt you to tweak your research question, or possibly rewrite it altogether.

Tip: *whether you're writing an undergraduate or postgraduate proposal, it's vital you check your course and institution requirements prior to submission. The word count and format can vary between universities and between departments.*



Why is a proposal so important?

Overall, a dissertation proposal is essential in preparing you for the **dissertation writing process**. If done correctly, it will work in much the same way as an in-depth essay plan, providing you with guidance you can use when writing the main body of the work. What's more, it will actually serve to make beginning your dissertation decidedly less frightening.

It's important to note that your dissertation proposal doesn't need to be set in stone. It can and should be subject to much change during the entire dissertation process. You may even find that your original research question changes entirely. Perhaps you'll discover that there's not enough evidence to support your original line of argument, or that your chosen topic is too broad and requires further refinement.

Either way, make sure you a) book in regular meetings with your supervisor, b) adhere carefully to your university's regulations and c) list the sources that you come across as you **do your research**, to make sure that they are ready to be included in your bibliography at the end of your work.

The steps before the proposal: reading and selecting a topic

As mentioned at the top of this article, the first stage in your dissertation process will be to read around your subject area and choose a topic. Sounds simple enough, but deciding what to research can be an overwhelming task for some.

One of the easiest ways to begin honing in on a specific topic is to go back through all of the lecture slides, notes and assignments that you have completed so far. Was there a topic that you were particularly interested in? Was there a concept that you thought could have been developed further? Or have you noticed a stark lack of



scholarship in your research for an assignment, that suggests to you that further research into this particular subject area is needed?

If you answered no to these questions, then try going with a more general area of personal interest. In this case you can start by looking at relevant journals and publications until you find a more explicit direction.

However you go about choosing your topic, make sure that you make notes of all publications that you use in your research. You will need to include them in your bibliography later on, so it makes life easier if you note them now. Depending upon the referencing system preferred by your university department, you will need the following information:

- Book/Journal title
- Author(s)
- Editor(s) (edited books only)
- Chapter Title
- Page(s)
- URL (for online sources only)
- Publisher

Consult your departmental handbook or ask your supervisor if you need clarification of what information to use when referencing.

Tip: Above all, make sure that your topic is something that you find exciting/interesting enough to study in depth over a long period of time – getting fed up halfway through will not help with your motivation!



Getting down to business: narrowing your focus and choosing existing literature to include

The more reading that you do, the more you should be able to refine your research questions. If you aim to address an area that is too broad, you will risk generalisation and run out of space in your word count.

It could be that you identify one particularly interesting study, but realise that its findings are outdated, or are not easily applicable to modern times. You may decide that you want to investigate whether the findings would be the same in more recent research.

Remember: thinking critically about your sources is integral to achieving high marks. You should consider:

- The date of publication – is the source outdated?
- Has there been any significant development that would affect the field of research since the study was carried out?
- Can you identify any methodological errors that would undermine the results that the authors presented?
- Are there any ethical concerns that you believe should be rectified in any future studies of the same topic?
- Is there any other type of bias that you can cite when considering the author's characteristics?
- Are there external factors, or events happening simultaneously to the research, that would affect the author's findings or provide the potential for bias?

Showing that you are able to attribute value to the sources you have used based upon their 'fallibility' will represent critical engagement with the literature and you will be awarded with higher marks.



Putting pen to paper: take a deep breath and...

Don't worry if you are not completely certain of your hypothesis at this point. With the guidance of your supervisor, you will be able to alter the direction of your research as you go. Although by now, you should have a clear idea of the potential for your research, and **what your conclusions might be**. Depending upon whether your course is of a scientific or mathematical nature, meaning that you are likely to be dealing with experiments providing you with definitive results and quantitative analysis; or a more theoretical nature, meaning that your research will mainly be qualitative; your hypothesis will be proven or disproven throughout the course of your dissertation.

The first step in creating your dissertation proposal should be planning its structure. Like the dissertation itself, your proposal will require an introduction, a main section and a conclusion. As a brief guide:

Introduction

This is where you will need to introduce your topic. It should provide a 'backdrop' to your more specific research by exploring the background to the wider subject area. You should also lay out your main thesis/hypothesis here, and explain why you feel that research into this area is important.

Main body

This is usually composed of the following subsections:

- **Methodology**

The **methodology section of your proposal** is where you will outline the methods through which you will collect and process your data. You should include how and what you are going to do. If your research is



quantitative in nature, this will probably include a reference to a questionnaire, survey, or data source, and you should make clear the scope of your research (e.g how many participants are going to be involved). You will also need to explain why you have selected the methods that you have – are they more specific to your research area?

How?

- **Aims and Objectives**

Here you will highlight the main issues that you are attempting to explore. What is it that you want to achieve? What are the main questions that you are looking to answer? What predictions can you make?

- **Literature Review**

The [literature review](#) gives you the opportunity to make a really good argument for the importance of your research, and connect it to similar research, or present it as an extension to other existing studies. You will need to list the most important sources that you have consulted thus far in your research, and how they helped you to guide your own research. If you can, placing your work alongside others to show how it further elaborates or contributes to the more general field will show that you have adequately prepared for your proposal. There is potential to include any flaws that you may have identified within this existing work, and how you will avoid this in your own dissertation. Only include sources that you can show will add value to your work.

- **Limitations**

Part of writing an effective and informative piece of research is recognising the limits that are imposed upon your ability to explore and present your findings. Some limitations may refer directly to the word count, explaining that there are further issues that you will not have a



chance to or space to address. Completing this section clearly shows that you have engaged with your subject matter and are familiar with the wider concepts relating to your topic.

- **Ethical Considerations**

Are there any ethical concerns relating to your research? Have you secured permission from your subject(s)/participants to be interviewed or included in your research? More information on ethics can be found in the following section below.

- **Timeframe**

Often, dissertation proposals will include an estimated timeframe for the delivery of work to their supervisor. This may be on a chapter-by-chapter basis, or you may begin with the actual research, so that you are able to perfect this part before moving on to writing about it. Make sure that you are realistic, and allow some time for your initial research before jumping straight in to getting words on the page.

Conclusion (of sorts)

You do not necessarily need to include a 'conclusion' in your proposal, but it might be a good idea to round off with a reminder of your reasons for choosing the topic, the type of research you will be carrying out and your expected outcomes. For example:

"I have chosen to investigate the relationship between and since I believe that proving a positive correlation would have serious implications for, and that carrying out further qualitative research in this area will be integral to improving understanding. After having identified the limitations of previous studies in this field, I have worked on producing a methodology that will



avoid these same pitfalls, and predict that the research will portray a strong enough relationship between the two factors to encourage further scholarship."

Ethics, ethics, ethics...

A dissertation proposal, or indeed a dissertation, without reference to ethics, leaves itself dangerously 'open' to criticism. It does not matter how groundbreaking your findings are, they can be seriously undermined if you have not allowed room for ethical considerations within your planning, preparation, and research phases.

The term 'ethics' is used academically to refer to moral principles or concerns that can be found throughout any kind of research. You will perhaps have noticed that a large amount of the criticisms of existing studies are in relation to their neglect of consideration for ethical principles. Although this might sound complicated, once you begin to go over the basics, and continue to repeat the process for each of the studies you incorporate into your work, it will soon become second nature. As a 'starting point' for your dissertation proposal, you should consider the following:

Make it clear why you are doing this research. Proving that you have a solid basis upon which to suggest further investigation of your topic, and highlighting what you hope to gain from carrying it out, means that you are justifying your work in this area and the contribution that you will make to your field. Outlining your aims and objectives is also a way to mitigate any claims that you are completing your research for some 'self-serving' purpose. Integrity and value should be upheld throughout your proposal, planning, research, and writing phases.

Keep participants well-informed. Anyone involved at any stage of your research, whether directly included as a participant or not, should be told the reasons for



your work and the way that their 'data' will be incorporated and used in your eventual paper. Participants should be made aware of their participation and should know exactly what to expect, what is expected from them and what the 'risks' of their involvement are. Planning to utilise a 'consent form' and providing participants with a 'fact sheet' reminding them of this information would be two good ways of making sure that you have covered all bases.

Keep it confidential. Confidentiality and anonymity are central to research participation, and it is your duty as a researcher to do everything in your power to ensure that your participants can not be identified within your work and that their information is protected and/or encrypted whilst in your possession. Using pseudonyms such as 'Person A' and 'Person B' can be helpful in writing up and labelling your transcripts.

Your supervisor should be able to help you take all necessary precautions when tailoring your methodology to your specific research proposal.

What should I do differently when writing a postgraduate proposal?

Essentially, there is little difference when [approaching a master's dissertation proposal](#), except that you are expected to present a more in-depth methodology section and perhaps be a little more critical of existing literature within your literature review section. A more complete awareness of the subject area is a requirement, but this should come fairly easily as a result of the extra study you have completed already.