You might be asked to write a research proposal for a course assignment, a dissertation or thesis, or a funded project.

Writing a research proposal can be particularly challenging because proposals tend not to be public documents, so you may not have seen an example. Also, proposals are written for a variety of purposes and audiences, so there is more than one acceptable format.

This guide provides an introduction to writing a proposal, to help you make some decisions about the type of proposal you need to produce.

**Why write a research proposal?**

A research proposal is an essential step in any research project. It helps you, as a researcher, to:

- Clarify your ideas by reflecting on and refining your proposed research project
- Plan to create a guide and a way of monitoring progress during the research
- Write early to develop good writing habits (and to start writing some parts of your final report)
- Communicate your proposed research so others can give you feedback

The LTL Learning/Research Advisors can provide advice on:

- searching for information,
- managing your sources once you’ve found them
- writing clearly
- managing your time
- ... and more

We offer workshops, individual appointments and “drop in” times. For more information on how we can help you improve your research and writing skills, see our website at [http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/](http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/)
What is the reader looking for in your proposal?

Your research proposal helps your supervisor and faculty (and, sometimes, a funding body) to:

- assess the worth of the proposed research
- assess your capacity to complete the research
- assess the institution’s capacity to support the research

So, the proposal must convince the reader of two things:

- that the research is worthwhile
- that the research is feasible

The reader will ask themselves a series of questions as they are reading – so, you need to ensure your proposal provides answers to questions such as these:

- Is this problem or issue worth studying?
- Are the questions/objectives/hypotheses clear?
- Will the study contribute significantly to our knowledge of the issue?
- Will the expected research outcome meet the requirements of the degree?
- Is the researcher aware of the key schools of thought relevant to the study?
- Has the researcher critically engaged with the literature, and used the literature to justify the research?
- Is the methodology appropriate?
- Does the researcher have the necessary skills to complete the project successfully (or is further training required)?
- Are the required budget and resources (including supervision) available?
- Have potential risks been identified and managed?
- Is the timeline feasible?
Developing the structure

The proposal should include three key elements:
- what you intend to do
- why you intend to do it
- how you intend to do it

The exact format for the proposal varies amongst faculties; your faculty will have specific guidelines and/or a template, and may have example proposals.

Regardless of the format, most research proposals contain:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preliminary sections</th>
<th>Research background &amp; discussion</th>
<th>Methodology / approach</th>
<th>Programme / management</th>
<th>Supplementary sections</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Title page</td>
<td>• The research problem and the rationale for the study</td>
<td>• Methodology (a description of, and rationale for, the methodology, design, and methods)</td>
<td>• Ethical considerations (if appropriate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Abstract</td>
<td>• Discussion/ literature review that provides context (i.e. literature and theory relevant to the study) and a justification for your research question</td>
<td>• Data analysis (a description of, and rationale for, the proposed method of data analysis)</td>
<td>• Potential risks or problems (and how they would be addressed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Table of contents (optional)</td>
<td>• Objective(s) or research question(s) or hypothesis(es)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research programme: time frame, budget, resources, health &amp; safety considerations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• (Perhaps a glossary or other useful preparatory information)</td>
<td>• Significance or expected contribution of the study</td>
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<td>• References</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Scope and/or limitations of the research area</td>
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<td>• (Perhaps Appendices)</td>
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Some sample proposal outlines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>Example 2</th>
<th>Example 3</th>
<th>Example 4</th>
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<td>• Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Timetable, budget, health &amp; safety</td>
<td>• Project description</td>
<td>• Design / Method</td>
<td>• Timetable &amp; budget</td>
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<tr>
<td>• References</td>
<td>• Thesis Outline</td>
<td>• References</td>
<td>• Appendices</td>
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Tips from proposal writers

- Don’t forget to find out about the different requirements for each degree – check the House Rules and discuss with your supervisor.
- Start writing early – it forces you to clearly articulate your ideas, and helps you get good writing habits.
- Get feedback from a variety of people – it helps you stay “on track” and improve your writing skills.
- Ask other research students who are 1 or 2 years ahead of you for advice on timelines (e.g. how long might it take you to analyse data? to write a chapter?)
- Read widely and talk to others.
- If you need to sharpen up your stats, or improve your writing skills – now is the time to start!
- Spend as much time as you need on the proposal – it will pay off later!

Resources

To find out more about writing research proposals, check out:

[Focuses on the sciences; includes annotated examples of proposals]

[Focuses on social sciences; includes annotated examples of proposals]

[Provides detailed advice on writing proposals]

[Advice on writing proposals for action research; includes examples]

[Detailed advice on structure and language]

(NB. Resources on research methods usually also provide advice on proposals.)