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How to Write a Research Proposal: A Practical Guide

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Abstract

Most postgraduate research begins with a proposal that a supervisor, committee or admissions panel must accept before the study can go ahead, yet students often find it hard to see what the document is for and what its readers check. This article defines the research proposal as a statement of research intent that sets out what will be studied, why it is worth studying and how it will be done, and that persuades its readers that the study can be completed with the time and resources available. It treats these three elements as three questions (what, why and how) and takes each in turn, using one example topic throughout. For each, it sets out what is asked of the writer: a specific topic and aims, a research gap together with the value of filling it, and an outlined methodology with a feasible plan. It then describes the sections that most proposals contain, the usual outcomes of proposal review, the ethics approval that must normally follow before data are collected, and what changes when a proposal becomes a dissertation or thesis. The article is intended for students and early-career researchers preparing a proposal, and for the educators and supervisors who teach and assess them.

Keywords: what is a research proposal; research proposal format; parts of a research proposal; research proposal structure; what is a dissertation proposal; what is a thesis proposal; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Before a dissertation or thesis can begin, the student usually has to persuade someone that the study is worth doing and can be done. The document that makes this case is the research proposal. It is often the first piece of research writing that a supervisor or committee assesses formally, and a proposal that does not persuade them is returned for revision, which takes time away from the study itself.

The term is used in two settings. In an application for a research degree, the proposal is a short document that presents the applicant's idea. The University of Edinburgh (2026), for example, uses it to judge both the applicant's suitability for a research degree and whether the university can offer supervision. Once a student is enrolled, the proposal is the plan that a supervisor or committee approves before the research starts. This article concentrates on the second setting, although the core of the argument applies to both. Depending on the institution, the same document may be called a dissertation proposal, a thesis proposal or a prospectus.

Section 2 defines the research proposal and the three questions it answers. Sections 3 to 5 take those questions in turn, using one example topic throughout. Section 6 describes the parts that most proposals contain. Section 7 covers what happens after submission, including ethics approval, and Section 8 sets out what changes when a proposal becomes a dissertation or thesis.

2. What a Research Proposal Is

A **research proposal** is a structured, formal document that explains what a researcher plans to study, why the study is worth doing and how it will be carried out. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014) describe the same three elements and the persuasive purpose that binds them. Writing a proposal, they say, helps the researcher organize ideas

> into a coherent statement of research intent regarding what is to be investigated, how it will be investigated, and the significance/importance of what is to be investigated. It also offers him an opportunity to convince an assessor or any other reader that the proposed research can be conducted within a given time frame and resources.
>
> Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 3)

The second sentence matters as much as the first. A proposal is judged not only on its idea but on whether its author can deliver the study. Sudheesh et al. (2016) make the same point: a proposal has to convince the evaluation committee that the research design is credible, achievable and practical, and it should show that the writer has thought about the time each stage of the research will need. A strong idea paired with a vague method is therefore still likely to be sent back.

The rest of this article is organized around the three questions: **what** will be studied, **why** it is worth studying, and **how** it will be done. Figure 1 applies all three to one example topic, a study of why Generation Y British women recommend a makeup brand, and shows the question that a reviewer is likely to ask at each.

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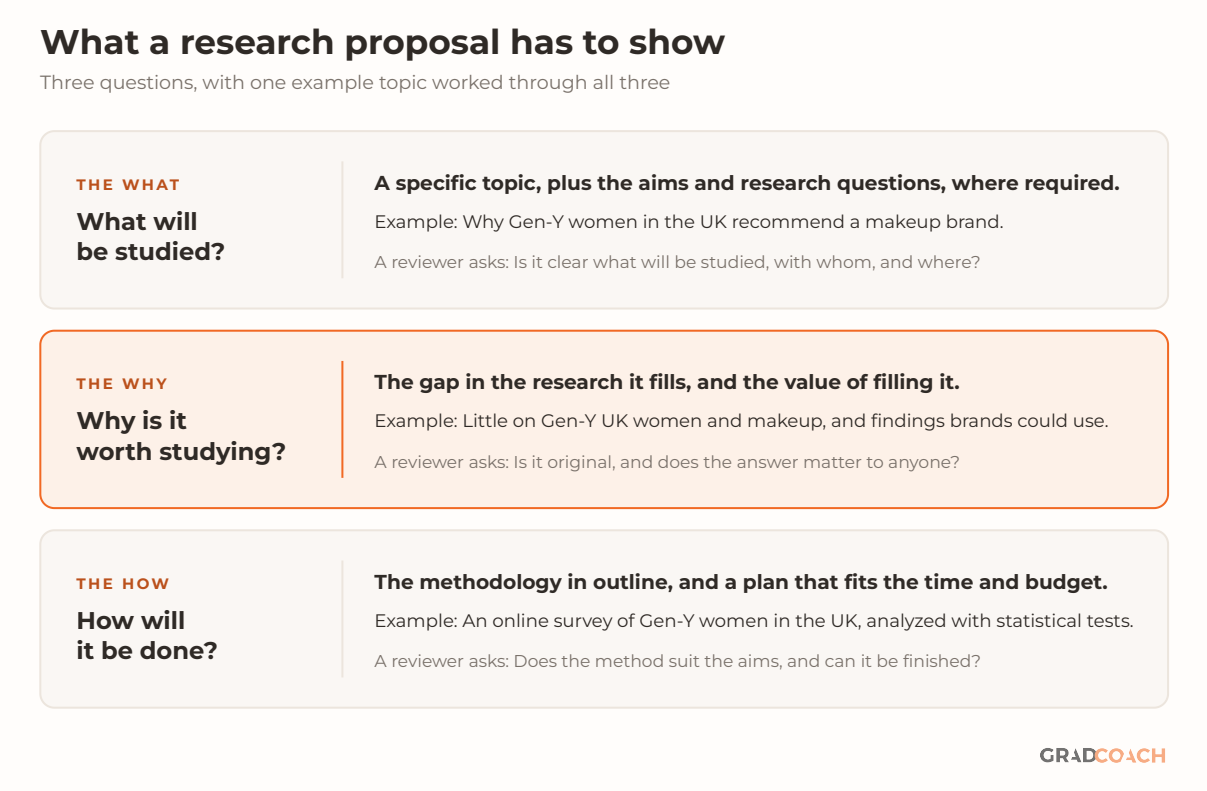


Figure 1. The three questions a research proposal answers, with one example topic.

The three questions are closely linked. In the model that Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 7) set out, the research gap found in a preliminary review of the literature gives rise to the research problem or question. The aim is formulated to address that problem, and the objectives turn the aim into specific, achievable steps. Ellis and Levy (2008, p. 19), following Leedy and Ormrod (2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008), similarly describe the research problem as a "unifying thread" that runs through every element of a study, from its goals and research questions to its methodology and conclusions. A proposal in which the topic, the justification and the method do not connect is therefore weak, even if each part is sound on its own.

3. The What: Topic, Aims and Questions

A proposal first has to state its topic clearly. The topic should be specific and unambiguous, so that a reader can see exactly what will be studied, with whom and in what setting. Box 1 gives an example.

Box 1. A specific research topic and what it tells the reader.

> *An investigation into the factors that affect female Generation Y consumers' likelihood of recommending a specific makeup brand to their peers: a British context.*
>
> From this one line a reader can see what is being investigated (the factors that lead consumers to recommend a particular makeup brand), who is involved (female Generation Y consumers) and where the study is set (the United Kingdom).

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A useful test is whether a reader unfamiliar with the field could picture the study from the topic alone. If not, the topic needs narrowing. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 3) describe this narrowing as moving from a broad area of interest, through preliminary reading, to a topic that can be investigated thoroughly within the time available. They advise checking at the same stage that the data the study needs exist and can be obtained.

The proposal then explains the topic in more detail and, where the program expects them, sets out the research aims, objectives and research questions. Some programs do not require firm research questions until later in the project. Where research questions are stated, they should use the same key terms as the title and aim, because readers check whether the parts of the proposal align. As Ellis and Levy (2008) put it, drawing on Kerlinger and Lee (2000, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008), "there has to be an identifiable connection between the answers to the research questions and the research problem inspiring the study" (p. 20).

4. The Why: Gap, Originality and Significance

A clear topic is only the start. The proposal also has to justify the study, and a justification has two parts: the study must be original, and it must be worth doing.

Originality is usually shown through a research gap: something that existing research has not yet established. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, pp. 5–6) treat the gap as the basis of the research problem. They note that the gap is identified through a short review of the literature and must rest on cited literature rather than on personal, unsubstantiated statements. How much originality is expected depends on the level of study. The UK's frameworks for higher education qualifications, for example, expect a master's degree to show "originality in the application of knowledge" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2024, p. 24), whereas a doctorate requires "the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship" (QAA, 2024, p. 27). Under these frameworks, applying established ideas to a new context or population can be enough at master's level, while a doctoral proposal needs to point to a clearer contribution to knowledge.

Significance is the second part. A gap shows that something is unknown, but not that knowing it matters. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 13) ask a proposal to explain how the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge and how its outcomes are likely to benefit stakeholders, where applicable, such as academia, individuals and communities, industry and commerce, or policymakers. For a student proposal, the lesson is that a gap on its own is a weak justification. The wider literature also notes the limits of what Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) call gap-spotting, in which research questions are formulated from gaps in existing literature. In a review of 52 articles in organization studies, they found that identifying gaps was the most common way of constructing research questions. However, they argued that research which challenges the assumptions of existing literature is more likely to produce interesting and influential theory.

Both parts can be seen in the makeup-brand example. Suppose that a review of the literature finds that most studies of brand recommendation treat Generation Y consumers as a single group, with little attention to Generation Y British women and cosmetics. That is the gap. If the study can show what leads these consumers to recommend a brand, cosmetics marketers could use the find-

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ings, which gives the study practical value. Together, the gap and its value make a clear justification. A proposal usually makes this case in the problem statement, the short passage that sets out the problem a study addresses. The problem statement should set out both parts explicitly rather than leave the reader to infer them.

5. The How: Methodology and Feasibility

A topic that is original and valuable can still be rejected if the proposal does not show how the study will be carried out. At this stage a complete methodology is not normally expected. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 12) note that a detailed treatment of every methodological issue is not needed in the proposal, because it belongs in the methodology chapter of the dissertation or thesis. What the proposal needs is a brief, logical account of the approach and a justification for choosing it. The main exception is a program in which the proposal forms the first chapters of the dissertation (Section 8). For the makeup-brand topic, a brief account might be an online survey of Generation Y women in the United Kingdom, analyzed with statistical tests.

Whatever the study, the methodology outline should answer a small set of questions:

- Will the study take a qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods approach?
- What sampling strategy will be used, and who or what will be sampled?
- How will the data be collected, for example through interviews or surveys?
- How will the data be analyzed, for example with descriptive and inferential statistics, or with thematic or content analysis?
- What are the main limitations of the approach?

Final answers are not required, but a basic plan is. The plan must also be tied to the aims. Sudheesh et al. (2016) stress that the research design and methods should be shown to address the research problem and be clearly tied to the study's specific aims. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 13) also ask the writer to explain how each objective will be investigated, especially where different methods serve different objectives.

The other half of the *how* is **feasibility**: whether the study can be completed with the time, money, skills and access that the researcher has. In clinical research, feasibility is one of the FINER criteria, under which a good research question is feasible, interesting, novel, ethical and relevant. Under these criteria, feasibility covers matters such as the budget, the complexity of the design, the recruitment strategy and an adequate sample size (Fandino, 2019). A proposal can address feasibility directly by saying how participants or data will be reached and what training or experience the method requires, for instance how the researcher will learn an analysis technique that is new to them. A timeline helps too: Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 13) recommend a schedule of milestone activities and dates, which they call a research program. It can be set out in a table or in a diagram such as a Gantt chart (a bar chart of tasks against time), and the supervisor can later use it to monitor progress.

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6. The Structure of a Research Proposal

The structure of a proposal varies between institutions, and the program's handbook or template takes precedence over any general model. Sudheesh et al. (2016) note that what a proposal must contain, and in what form, is usually laid down by the evaluating committee or the institution. Most proposals are nevertheless built from the same core sections, each with its own job. Table 1 summarizes them.

Table 1. The core sections of a research proposal and what a reviewer looks for in each.

Section	What it answers	What a reviewer looks for
Title and abstract	What is this study, in brief?	A specific topic in the title, and the whole study in a paragraph
Introduction and background	What is the problem, and what are the aims, questions and scope?	A problem that matters, in practice and in the literature
Literature review	What is already known, and where is the gap?	Knowledge of the key studies, and a gap that is real
Methodology	How will the data be collected and analyzed?	A design that fits the aims and can be carried out
Practicalities	When will the work be done, what will it cost, and is it ethical?	A timeline, budget and ethics plan that can be delivered
References	Whose work has the proposal drawn on?	Consistent citations in the required style

The proposal sections in Table 1 map onto the three questions of Section 2. The *what* is stated mainly in the title and introduction, the *why* in the introduction and literature review, and the *how* in the methodology and practicalities. Published guidance divides the material in similar ways. Sudheesh et al. (2016), for example, list an introduction, a review of literature, aims and objectives, research design and methods, ethical considerations, a budget, appendices and citations. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 3) work through the topic, the background and gap, the aim and objectives, the methodology, the significance of the research, a research schedule and references.

Not every proposal has all six sections of Table 1, and their names and order vary. Some programs do not ask for an abstract, some fold the literature review into the introduction, and others give the scope of the study (what it covers and what it leaves out) a section of its own. Reading complete proposals in the same field is one of the quickest ways to see how the parts fit together. Two annotated sample proposals, one at master's and one at doctoral level, are linked from the web edition of this article.

7. Review, Approval and Ethics

Once submitted, the proposal is reviewed. Depending on the institution, this step may be called proposal approval or a proposal defense, in which the student presents the proposal to the committee and answers its questions. At the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, for instance, the committee decides whether to approve the proposal after a short presentation and questions (Uni-

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versity of Tennessee at Chattanooga [UTC], n.d.). Who reviews the proposal also varies. In some programs the supervisor approves it alone; in others a committee does, as in the two US doctoral programs cited in this section (University of Michigan School of Kinesiology, 2022; UTC, n.d.). Figure 2 shows the usual route from submission to the first data.

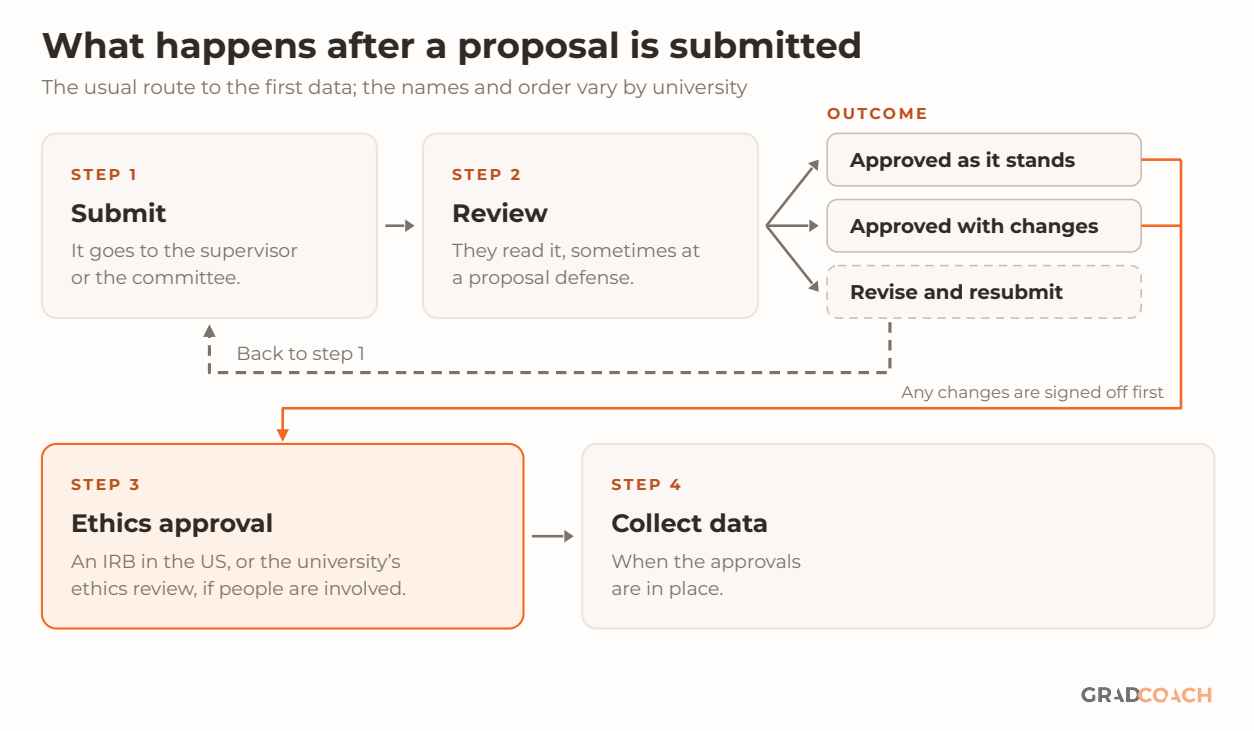


Figure 2. The usual route from submitting a proposal to collecting the first data.

The outcome of the review usually falls into one of three groups, although the labels vary. The University of Michigan's School of Kinesiology, for example, records each committee member's decision on a doctoral proposal as "Pass", "Pass with Revisions" or "Repeat Proposal", the last meaning that the student "must repeat the presentation following changes to the proposal document" (University of Michigan School of Kinesiology, 2022, p. 1). Each outcome implies a next step:

- **Approved as it stands:** the student moves on to ethics approval, where the study needs it, and then to the research.
- **Approved with changes:** the changes are made and signed off before the student continues.
- **Revise and resubmit:** the proposal is reworked and submitted for review again.

A request for changes is a normal part of the process rather than a sign of failure. It is most useful when treated as a list of tasks, and when the student and supervisor agree on what a satisfactory revision looks like before rewriting begins.

Approval of the proposal does not usually mean that data collection can begin. A study that involves people also needs **ethics approval**. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, p. 12) state that this approval must be obtained from the researcher's institution before data collection begins. In the United States, this review is carried out by an institutional review board (IRB). Under the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects, which apply to research conducted or support-

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ed by federal agencies, an IRB has the "authority to approve, require modifications in (to secure approval), or disapprove" the research the regulations cover (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018, §§ 46.101(a), 46.109(a)). The regulations also name student investigators explicitly, referring to an investigator "whether professional or student" (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018, § 46.102(e)(1)). Approval and required modifications resemble two of the outcomes of proposal review. In many programs the ethics application follows proposal approval. The doctoral program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, for example, does not allow data collection to start until the committee has approved the proposal at its defense and the IRB has approved the study (UTC, n.d.).

In the United Kingdom, who reviews the ethics of a student project depends on the university and on the level of risk. For taught programs the course team may manage ethics approval: at the University of Huddersfield's business school, a taught student's research is normally approved by the project or dissertation supervisor, and approval must be sought before data are collected. A project that meets the page's low-risk conditions, such as no direct contact with human or animal participants, no access to identifiable personal data and no sensitive topic, does not require ethics approval; instead, the student completes a form and obtains the supervisor's confirmation that its ethical implications have been considered (University of Huddersfield, n.d.). Whatever the arrangement, the rule on timing is the same: no data are collected from people until approval is in place.

8. From Proposal to Dissertation

A proposal is a plan, and the dissertation or thesis is the record of the completed study. In some programs the two overlap closely. In the doctoral program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, for example, the proposal consists of the first three chapters of the dissertation (introduction, literature review and methodology), together with references and appendices such as surveys and measurement scales (UTC, n.d.). Elsewhere, the proposal is a shorter, separate document from which the dissertation is later built. Table 2 sets out what changes between the two.

Table 2. What changes between a research proposal and a dissertation or thesis.

	Research proposal	Dissertation or thesis
Tense	Methodology in the future tense: what will be done	Past tense for what was done, such as the methods and results
Literature review	Enough to show the gap and justify the study, or a full chapter where the proposal forms the first three chapters	Usually fuller, and updated as the study proceeds
Methodology	A plan	A record of what was done, including any changes and the reasons for them
Results and discussion	Not yet written	The core of the document

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The change of tense is easy to overlook. The methodology of a proposal is normally written in the future tense because the study has not yet been carried out. Walden University's guidance for its doctoral students, for example, is to write the proposal's methodology chapter this way and to move it into the past tense when revising it for the final study (Walden University, 2023). The content changes too. Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah (2014, pp. 13–14) caution against reproducing the whole proposal in the dissertation's introductory chapter. In their account, the background, aim and objectives, methodology and significance carry forward, but may need amending, because by then the main literature review and the research itself have been completed.

9. Conclusion

A research proposal is a statement of research intent: it explains what will be studied, why the study is worth doing and how it will be done, and it persuades its readers that the study can be completed with the time and resources available. The *what* calls for a specific topic and, where the program expects them, aligned aims and research questions. The *why* calls for both a research gap and an account of why filling it matters, with the expected degree of originality rising with the level of study. The *how* calls for an outlined methodology tied to the aims and a plan that can be delivered. Structures vary between institutions, so the program's own template takes precedence, but most proposals share the same core sections. Review typically ends in approval, approval with changes, or a request to revise and resubmit, and a study involving people then needs ethics approval before any data are collected. When the proposal becomes a dissertation or thesis, its plan becomes a record, and its methods move into the past tense.

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