

A QUICK GUIDE TO RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Before you start writing a research proposal, you need to think about your reasons for conducting the research. What is it about the field you are working in that interests you? In particular, what do you feel you are *contributing* to the field – i.e. what are you doing that has not been done before? Remember that especially in the case of a PhD, you are expected to *add* to the knowledge in a particular field, not merely to summarise the ideas of others.

Once you have some ideas, you can start thinking about structuring the proposal. No matter what your field is, your proposal will need to answer the following questions:

- *What* will I be examining?
- *Why* am I examining it?
- *How* will I examine it?

The first question involves your basic *argument* or *hypothesis*, and is undoubtedly the most important aspect of your proposal. It is worth taking the time to get the hypothesis exactly right. In most cases, your argument should be precise and short – normally no longer than one sentence. “This thesis examines the effects of exercise on health” is not really an argument: firstly, it does not explain the specific way in which you will be contributing to knowledge in the field, and secondly, it is much too vague: what *kind* of exercise? What do you understand by “health”?

After you have written your hypothesis, you need to give background detail: this answers the *why* question. Why do you think your study is important? How does it contribute to knowledge in the field? How does it fit in with what other people have said on the topic? This is your opportunity to show that you are knowledgeable in the field, that you can use its discourse and that you have read widely and appropriately. Throughout, you need to keep your central *hypothesis* in mind: whenever you write something, try to formulate how it helps you to advance your main argument. This not only gives your proposal a strong focus, but helps you to find a good structure for your writing as well. Some departments require a literature review: the literature review is part of the response to the *why* question. In the literature review, you show what other writers have said about a topic in order to explain *why* your thesis is necessary or valuable.

Finally, you need to explain *how* you will examine your topic. This is the nuts and bolts part of the research proposal, where you explain how you will go about gathering information and how you will structure your thesis. Your *research methodology* and *chapter outline* fit under this section: how will you gather information? What are your sources and methods? How will the different chapters or sections of your thesis fit together to help your answer your central research question?