

Guidelines on a Research Proposal¹

A research proposal should specify clearly and concisely what you are trying to accomplish in the course research project. It can also serve as a basis for your Dissertation project and workshop presentations.

The development of a research proposal can be beneficial in a number of ways. First, the most difficult task for many students is the narrowing of their interests from a wide area of broad issues to a practical, worthwhile, and manageable topic. Attempting to specify clearly on paper what particular issues you are going to address will provide you with an understanding of just what you have managed to put together—and what yet remains fuzzy. Furthermore, this effort on your part will make it possible for other people (e.g., potential faculty advisors) to discuss your proposed project's feasibility and worth with precision.

Second, a proposal should help you move from a short outline of your area of research to an expanded program of work. Many researchers will try to revise and re-revise an outline of a contemplated project, each time putting more detail into a consistent framework. This will help you determine exactly what issues *must* be included in your research and what issues will probably not be touched upon.

Third, early development of a proposal for your projects will aid you in applying for external resources: dissertation fellowships and research grants. With the usual competition for these funds, it is imperative that you present a complete, carefully planned project to have a good chance.

Fourth, the sooner you develop a proposal, the easier to assess your planned time to completion. Having a well-developed proposal makes it easy to a seminar and convince potential audiences and employers that you have thought ahead to the completion of your research. In general, it is better to show you know how much work remains in a credible way than presenting voluminous early empirical findings but with little assurance on how much work remains.

What should a proposal contain? it should include the following eight items:

(1) A ***Statement of the problem*** you are addressing in sufficient detail to bring the reader unfamiliar with this area to understand why this is an interesting and worthwhile topic.

¹ Taken and adapted from Boston College Economics' dissertation guidelines.

(2) A *Review of the literature* in the area: a *concise* discussion of the seminal and recent work in the area that enables the reader to evaluate whether your study will be able to build upon and extend the frontier of the field.

(3) A *Plan of research*—essentially, a verbal outline describing what you are planning to present as a theoretical framework and sketching the empirical implementation of that framework (if applicable). It should also contain a statement of what conclusions you hope to draw and indicate how dependent they are on narrow issues.

(4) A *Statement of feasibility and originality*: you should specifically indicate in what sense this project is feasible—doable within a reasonable horizon—and evaluate how this research involves sufficient originality. That is, how exactly are you improving on the current literature?

(5) A *Preliminary outline of the research* containing section headings (and sub-headings).

(6) The *Model*: The proposal should contain at least a preliminary theoretical modeling that will serve as a basis for your thesis.

(7) If the study has **empirical components**, a *Technical Appendix* should spell out the estimation techniques and how you plan to obtain the data and/or computer programs needed to carry out the study. If data must be obtained from original sources and constructed “by hand,” or obtained in machine-readable form, you should indicate how much time that is expected to take—and then multiply that estimate by three (conservatively). The same caveat applies to the use of unfamiliar computer programs or the construction of special-purpose programs.

Note: (6) and (7) assumes the paper has both a theoretical and empirical component. Some papers have only one of these; if that is the case merge these two sections into a section showing preliminary work (if theoretical) or explorations/results (if empirical).

(8) A list of *References* used in the body of the proposal.

Final remarks: It may appear that by the time you have completed this lengthy task (15-30 pages), you will be well on your way in your research project. That is precisely the point. The outline of components above is geared to providing you with expandable segments of the actual project. For instance, the statement of the problem and plan of research may be expanded to form introductory material for your paper. The review of the literature might provide the nucleus of a stand-alone document. The outline becomes the table of contents, and references become the dissertation’s bibliography. Working with this structure in mind, much of the work ahead becomes merely that—

filling in the gaps. You also should be able to construct a detailed timetable for yourself from a good outline.

Last, it should be mentioned the advisability of writing the proposal using programs for technical typing, graphics, and econometrics, such as LaTeX, Mathematica, R, Stata, and MATLAB (among others). Early familiarity with these tools will make working on your projects a less onerous task.