

## Thesis Proposals: A Brief Guide

*This guide is for students who are enrolled in a postgraduate research degree and who have been asked to submit a thesis proposal.*

The aim of the thesis proposal is to convince your school that:

- There is a need for the research; it is significant and important.
- You are contributing something original to the field.
- The topic is feasible in terms of availability of funding, equipment, supervisors, and data.
- The research can be completed in the expected time period. UNSW recommends completing a Ph. D. in 6 sessions (3 years) for full-time candidates.
- Ethical issues have been considered and approval has been given for the research by the University Ethics Committee.
- The topic matches your interests and capabilities.

### What is the Difference between a Masters and a Doctorate thesis proposal?

Your post graduate coordinator and your supervisor are best placed to give detailed clarification of your school's expectations. While differences are likely to be in the length and complexity of the research, the main difference is that a Ph. D. must contain something new.

### Who is my audience?

The proposal will be presented as a written report and is usually presented in a seminar as well. It can be presented to a Postgraduate Committee or to staff more directly involved in your candidature, such as your supervisor, co-supervisor and your school's postgraduate coordinator.

## Originality

Your work will make a worthwhile contribution to the field if it fulfils one or more of the following:

- it provides evidence to support or disprove a concept, theory, or model;
- it contributes new data/information, new or improved solution, analysis procedure or a new improved research methodology;
- it results in a new or improved concept, theory or model.

### Your Goal

The thesis proposal helps you focus your research aims, clarify its importance and the need, describe the methods, predict problems and outcomes, and plan alternatives and interventions.

### Getting It Done

Preparing your proposal will be an iterative process. You will discuss a number of drafts with your supervisors. You should be writing regularly to have your proposal completed by the due date. This can vary from the first 3–9 months of your candidature.



## How should I structure the proposal?

*The following sections are recommended for your thesis proposal report. Check with your supervisors for optional sections, variations and additional sections that may be required.*

### **Routine Information**

This can be a full cover page or a quarter page header.

- Name
- Address, telephone and email details
- Degree for which you are a candidate
- Supervisor's and co-supervisor's names
- Thesis proposal title
- Date

### **Statement of Topic**

Introduce the reader to the recognised general subject area and how your topic is related. Briefly point out why it is a significant topic and what contribution your work will make.

### **Aims of the thesis/dissertation**

Set out specific objectives of the research.

### **Review of the literature**

This, together with the following section on the theoretical orientation, will be the main substance of the proposal and will lay the basis for your discussions of your methods and your total research program.

The literature review should explain the relation of your topic and research aims to significant literature and recent (and current) research in your field. The form of the literature review may vary according to the nature of the field: experimental, philosophical, theoretical, comparative, etc., but its purpose will be the same in all fields. The literature review should place your proposed research topic clearly in its relevant research context, and should demonstrate your awareness of significant similar or relevant research.

You may need to make qualitative judgements concerning the literature.

Be careful not to allow the evaluation of previous work to become a large open-ended task. You should consult with your supervisors on the types of questions you need to be asking and what boundaries you should place on your literature review.

In one sense the literature review for the proposal is incomplete. You will continue to expand and update the literature as your research progresses and as you locate new publications. The final literature review will be included in your thesis.



#### **Ask Yourself . . .**

Which pieces of research seem to have been most successful, the most promising and which less so?

What are the major lines of criticism that can be levelled at previous work?

What major omissions, gaps or neglected emphases can be identified?

## Theoretical Orientation

Your aim here is to state your basic ideas on the topic.

First, state the various theoretical approaches taken in your topic. Which one do you propose to use in your research and why? Where, tentatively do you stand on the topic?

If there are various theories on your topic or in your field, which one(s) will you use in your conceptual framework for your thesis?

Which terms or trends do you wish to follow up from the literature review?

Do you have any fresh suggestions of an explanatory, interpretative, or programmatic kind?

## Think it Through

Perhaps the best way to approach this section is to set down your main insights, hypotheses, hunches, or even hopes about your topic.

In view of past theory and research, and your emerging issues, what are the areas that you expect to have findings?

For empirical theses you may need to formulate explicit hypotheses.

## Methodology

Describe your proposed methods in sufficient detail so that the reader is clear about the following:

- What kind of information will you be using?
- From what sources will the information be obtained?
- What resources will you require?
- What methodology will you be using?
- Why have you selected this approach?
- What ethical and safety issues have you identified and how do you propose to proceed?



## Research program timetable – milestones

This will usually be from the date you began your degree to when you expect to submit the completed thesis/dissertation. For Psychology, a time-line up to the end of your second session is the minimum requirement.

The time-line can be formatted as a table or a list. Include when you will start and finish important aspects of your research, such as: literature research, required training or attending courses, stages of experiments or investigations, beginning and completing chapters, reviews and seminars you will give, and completing the thesis.

## Tentative thesis chapter outline

You should check with your supervisor if this is a required section of the thesis proposal.

Present the chapter outline as a draft contents page with brief annotations of expected content or stages. Follow the standard sections relevant to your type of research. Look at past theses in your area and discuss your ideas with your supervisor.



## References

List all publications cited in your proposal.

Use the style recommended by the school or your supervisor. This may be a standard style the whole school follows or it may be the style of the leading journal in your field.

## Recommended Reading

Here are some of useful resources and texts that you can consult. Your school may also have a postgraduate handbook or specific guidelines on thesis proposals.

Allen, G.R. (1976) *The graduate student's guide to theses and dissertations: A practical manual for writing and research*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass.

Cryer, P. (1996) *The research student's guide to success*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Davis, G.B. & Parker, C.A. (1979) *Writing the doctoral dissertation: A systematic approach*. Woodbury, NY, Barrons Educational Series.

Laws, K. (1995) *Preparing a Thesis or Dissertation Proposal*. University of Sydney.

Phillips, E.M. & Pugh D.S. (1987) *How to get a Ph. D.: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Postgraduate Board, Student Guild (1998) *Practical aspects of producing a thesis at the University of New South Wales*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Available from the Student Guild, First Floor East Wing, Quadrangle Building, The University of New South Wales.

Karathwohl, D.R. (1988) *How to prepare a research proposal. Guidelines for funding and dissertations in the social and behavioural sciences*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. New York, Syracuse University Press.

### **Acknowledgments:**

Thank you to the following academics, staff and students, for their contributions and advice:

Professor David Trimm, Professor John Trinder, Dr. Jacquelyn Cranney, Professor Staffan Kjelleberg, Dr. Tony Partridge, Professor Clive Fletcher, Professor Chris Sorrell, Professor Jason Middleton, Dr. Khosrow Zarrabi, Professor Marilyn Fox, Professor Michael Wootton, Dominic Fitzsimmons, Gwyn Jones.

For suggestions and comments please contact Pam Mort, The Learning Centre 93851150, [p.mort@unsw.edu.au](mailto:p.mort@unsw.edu.au)

**For more resources like this one, visit The Learning Centre Website:**

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au>

