

Dissertation Proposal Format

Much like an essay, a dissertation is a long-form piece of academic writing. However, it differs to an essay in that you are usually responsible for deciding on the topic or focus of the piece yourself.

The first step, therefore, is to choose your topic (also known as a dissertation title). After that, you'll need to formulate a research question, which is where the dissertation proposal comes in.

A dissertation proposal should cover in detail the research question you are going to analyse and how you plan to conduct your primary and secondary research. It should include the reading you have done up until this point and any outcomes of discussions with your supervisor. To help guard you from criticism when your work is marked, it should also cover any expected limitations in your research, ethical considerations and reasons for your choice of data sample.

The dissertation proposal structure

A dissertation proposal usually comprise the following sections:

- Introduction
- Aims, objectives, and research questions / hypotheses
- Methodology
- Literature review
- Limitations
- Ethical considerations
- Timeframe
- Conclusion
- References

Structure clarification

Introduction

This is where you will need to introduce your topic. It should provide a 'backdrop' to your more specific research by exploring the background to the wider subject area. You should also lay out your main thesis/hypothesis here, and explain why you feel that research into this area is important.

Aims, Objectives, and research questions or hypotheses

Here you will highlight the main issues that you are attempting to explore. What is it that you want to achieve? What are the main questions that you are looking to answer? What predictions can you make?

Methodology

The methodology section of your proposal is where you will outline the methods through which you will collect and process your data. You should include how and what you are going to do. If your research is quantitative in nature, this will probably include a reference to a questionnaire, survey, or data source, and you should make clear the scope of your research (e.g how many participants are going to be involved). You will also need to explain why you have selected the methods that you have – are they more specific to your research area? How?

Literature Review

The literature review gives you the opportunity to make a really good argument for the importance of your research, and connect it to similar research, or present it as an extension to other existing studies. You will need to list the most important sources that you have consulted thus far in your research, and how they helped you to guide your own research. If you can, placing your work alongside others to show how it further elaborates or contributes to the more general field will show that you have adequately prepared for your proposal. There is potential to include any flaws that you may have identified within this existing work, and how you will avoid this in your own dissertation. Only include sources that you can show will add value to your work.

Limitations

Part of writing an effective and informative piece of research is recognising the limits that are imposed upon your ability to explore and present your findings. Some limitations may refer directly to the word count, explaining that there are further issues that you will not have a chance to or space to address. Completing this section clearly shows that you have engaged with your subject matter and are familiar with the wider concepts relating to your topic.

Ethical Considerations

Are there any ethical concerns relating to your research? Have you secured permission from your subject(s)/participants to be interviewed or included in your research? More information on ethics can be found in the following section below.

Timeframe

Often, dissertation proposals will include an estimated timeframe for the delivery of work to their supervisor. This may be on a chapter-by-chapter basis, or you may begin with the actual research, so that you are able to perfect this part before moving on to writing about it. Make sure that you are realistic, and allow some time for your initial research before jumping straight in to getting words on the page.

For UWTSD, a Gantt chart is required to present the Timeframe

Conclusion

You do not necessarily need to include a 'conclusion' in your proposal, but it might be a good idea to round off with a reminder of your reasons for choosing the topic, the type of research you will be carrying out and your expected outcomes. For example:

"I have chosen to investigate the relationship between ____ and ____ since I believe that proving a positive correlation would have serious implications for ____, and that carrying out further qualitative research in this area will be integral to improving understanding. After having identified the limitations of previous studies in this field, I have worked on producing a methodology that will avoid these same pitfalls, and predict that the research will portray a strong enough relationship between the two factors to encourage further scholarship."

References

You need to provide a list of references at the end of your work. It must follow the UWTSD Harvard style which can be found at Cite Them Right.