



GUIDE TO PREPARING MASTERS THESIS/PUBLISHABLE PAPER PROPOSALS

OVERVIEW

The proposal is an essential step toward the completion of the Masters thesis or equivalent "publishable" paper.¹ At the proposal stage, you are not expected to have explored all the ramifications of your subject -- that's what the thesis itself is for, but you need to establish credibility that the work can be done and that it will make a contribution to existing literature and to societal well being.

The proposal generally follows the outline of what the thesis will become. But it is in itself *not* the thesis. Of course, the more you get done beforehand, the less you have to do later. The principle is that the proposal needs to contain what is necessary to understand the proposal itself, and to provide coherence and continuity to statements of problem, hypotheses, and analysis.

The structure of the proposal is generally as follows:²

- Overall aims and general questions to be addressed
- Background and significance
- Specific research questions and hypotheses
- Methods
- Analysis strategy
- Limitations and implications

¹ "Publishable" does not mean that you actually *do* publish it (although you should if you can)...only that it is of a format and quality equivalent to that found in a reputable journal.

² Remember that this is only a guide, not a formula that need be followed absolutely. Modifications are appropriate according to differences in problems being investigated. Expectations are likely to differ, also, depending on the specific faculty members you're working with.

The first three sections correspond to what the APA Style Manual calls the "Introduction." We suggest breaking them out into these particular headings given their specific importance to a well-planned proposal, as we describe further below.

In general, the proposal need be no longer than 20 pages; if a lot more is required, this is an indicator that the problem is probably too large and/or complicated for a thesis project. Keep it for your dissertation.

The APA manual, officially titled *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Fourth Edition)*, should be regarded as the primary guidebook on style. It is available at the bookstore, and should be part of your library. Most of it makes good common sense; a few parts are rather arcane, but since they're the rules.³ The manual contains rules and/or encouragement's for just about any part of publishable writing. In general it should be considered definitive unless you have an *extremely* strong case for doing things otherwise. We will assume that you have read and understood its precepts.

PROPOSAL COMPONENTS

Overall Aims

This section consists of one to two paragraphs of introduction. It briefly defines your research problem, the study you propose to do, and what you hope to establish. It is essentially an abstract, but one that serves as well as an outline for what follows. It should ensure that there are no major surprises in the remainder of the proposal.

Background and Significance

This section is a description of the general problem area, defining constructs, what is generally thought to be known about your problem, and the key unresolved issue(s) that you are going to be addressing. While literature should be cited, this section is not necessarily the full literature review to be used in the thesis itself. You should cite enough sources to make clear that you've read widely enough in the field to know what the major issues are. Your readers need to know that other people agree that your issue is important, but not necessarily everything they've ever said about it. Each major point should probably have two or three references. At the end of this section, the readers should believe:

³ For example, the manual frowns on both footnotes and ending sentences with prepositions.

- you've identified a question that others are interested in
- there's enough that's been done in the field to give you a solid background for getting into the project (i.e., you're not trying to create a new field all by yourself)
- you know enough about the vocabulary and structure, previous findings, and methodology of the field to be able to understand what you're reading, to use specialized terminology appropriately, and to identify gaps or contradictions in the existing literature to provide the rationale for the study you propose.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This section is where you define specifically what issues you're investigating and what you expect to find. There need be no more than one major research question, and there should almost never be more than three.⁴

The research questions are brief statements of unresolved issues in the field that you plan to investigate. They should be couched in terms of the vocabulary of the field that you've been describing. They are phrased as open questions, such as "What is the relationship between X and Y?" or "In situations characterized by X, what happens to Y?"

Hypotheses, by contrast, are phrased as declarative statements about particular variables: "X is inversely related to Y." Where possible. It is very useful to include a picture of your model showing key relationships that you hypothesize to exist. Remember: it's not a sin to state a hypothesis that later turns out to be unsupported; you don't have to do the analysis to prove it ahead of time. Hypotheses simply have to be plausible given your discussion of the issues. They gain plausibility either from logic or from previous findings or from theoretical predictions.

At the end of these three sections, the readers should be able to understand a clear theoretical framework for your study.

⁴ Again, if there are more, you're probably trying to do too much.

Methods

This section is a description of the data you will use to test your hypotheses, the sources of the data, the variables that you plan to extract from the data, and the operational definitions of the variables. If you are planning a secondary analysis of someone else's data, you need to describe their study in enough detail that the readers do not have to go back and look it up to understand the data. If you are planning original data collection, you need to describe how you are going to go about it and establish that it is feasible to do what you plan to do. Specific techniques such as surveys, interviews, or observation should be described in some detail. If you're taking measurements from someone else, it is helpful to include specific questions used in the previous study. If you're going to construct new items (such as might be included in an original survey), you need to include enough items that you can use them to construct valid scales and give an indication of how these items will be formatted into an instrument.⁵

A clear description of the variables is essential. The constructs should have been introduced in the previous section, so you don't need more conceptual definition. Rather, what you need here is clear *operational* definition -- that is, the specific measures in your data that will represent each concept in your analysis. It is often helpful to present this information in the form of a table, of the general form:⁶

Concept	Variable	How measured
Worker alienation	Personnel turnover	Number of workers leaving the firm in a given year as a percentage of total employment

The readers need to understand just what specific data items you are planning to put into your analysis.

Most Master's theses are quantitative in nature, largely because that's what we've primarily taught. If you are planning a more qualitative study, you still need a careful definition in this section of what you're going to be looking for and how you'll tell if you've found it. For example, you should include a description of how you're going to take your observational or interview protocols and code and/or interpret them.

⁵ Such items or sample instrument generally belong in an Appendix rather than in the body of the proposal itself, although you may wish to include some samples in the text.

⁶ Note that the APA style manual (p. 93) *proscribes* vertical lines in tables while *prescribing* horizontal ones.)

Analysis Strategy

This section outlines what you're going to do with the data when you've got it. It need not be elaborate, but it does need to indicate how you will test each hypothesis. That is, you must propose statistics that match your variables and the kind of inferences you plan to make about them. For example, don't propose to calculate a product-moment correlation coefficient between category variables such as gender and hair color.

It is sufficient to say that a given relationship will be tested with ANOVA, or correlation; you don't have to provide information on all the specific contrasts you might test or all the coefficients you'll examine. The point is that the readers have to be able to understand that you know when specific kinds of statistics are appropriate, and that you know how to interpret them to test your hypotheses.

As we said, if you're working with more qualitative data you still need to provide information on how you're going to treat them -- coding, cross-indexing, pattern matching, or whatever. Again, we have to believe that you're going to be able to get from the data back to your hypotheses in some reasonable fashion.

WRITING THE PROPOSAL

When you've got an initial draft of the proposal, it's often helpful to let your friends look at it. Peer review works as well among students as it does for journals or granting agencies. The important point is to be sure that you've *clearly* described things. If it confuses your friends, you can be certain it will confuse your faculty readers.

Your final draft should be done in a clear and readable font, like this Guide, and in a reasonable font size (this is done in 12-point). It should be printed with a quality printer; if you use a dot-matrix printer, be sure it has a dark enough ribbon to ensure readability. Before printing, run the spell-checker. After printing, read it through carefully; the spell-check can't pick up an error that is a real word but not the one you intended to use. Check the format of tables, figures, headings against the APA style manual and check the References section to be sure all entries exactly match the text. The visual impression conveyed by your proposal predisposes the reader to judgments. Sloppy copy looks like a sign of a sloppy mind.

SUMMARY

The thesis proposal should not be a major stumbling block. If, in your research, things don't turn out exactly as you described in the proposal, no one is going to send you back to Square One. Every researcher knows that the unexpected things that happen during a project are often more interesting than what s/he set out to look at. The main caution in a thesis proposal is to keep the problem *bounded* and *manageable*. Take on only what's reasonable.

Remember what the proposal is really all about -- to let your readers *help* you define and bound what you're going to look at. Your two readers, and particularly your research advisor, are in fact there to help you, and you should feel free to bug them as much as you need to get the task done. As we said, talking with your friends is often an excellent way of sharpening what you're trying to say. They'll be honest with you if you are honest with them.

Good luck! You *will* get it done...and you will learn a lot!