

Learning Commons

Academic Writing Center - Graduate Students



“The purpose of a dissertation proposal is for it to be approved. Only then can you start writing. A lot of misunderstanding swirls around dissertation proposals. One foundational fact cuts through it: A dissertation proposal has no independent existence. It’s a provisional document, a way station to an eventual goal.”

**-Leonard Cassuto in “Demystifying the Dissertation Proposal”
(Chronicle of Higher Education)**

Composing a Dissertation Proposal

Writing a proposal can be challenging, but it can also be a very useful guide when it comes to working on your actual dissertation. The content and length of proposals varies widely between disciplines, so it can be helpful to begin the process by finding examples of proposals in your field and/or discussing expectations with your advisor. It may also be beneficial to see how other people with your same advisor and/or your department have structured their dissertations — you can set up search parameters in ProQuest (go to UC library’s homepage and use the “Dissertations and Theses” link under the “Resources” tab). Regardless of the differences between proposals, the goal remains the same: to get your committee to say “yes”!

So, how do you get them to say “yes”? An irresistible proposal shows your committee how your work is an important part of an ongoing academic conversation. It explains the implications your work will have on your field and the world at large. It illuminates the gaps in previous scholarship and shows how your work will fill those gaps. In short, your proposal answers the age-old question: so what?

Common proposal sections

Title	Gives your reader an idea of the topic and approach
Abstract	Outlines your project in (generally) 100 – 350 words
Introduction/Background	Provides an overview, context, and scope of your project
Statement of the Problem	States what is missing in your field and what problem you will work toward solving
Purpose/Rationale/Research Question	Declares why your work is necessary, important, and does something no one else has ever done
Methodology	Explains how you will collect your data and which theoretical approaches you will bring to your work
Literature Review	Explains what other people have said about your topic/issues surrounding your topic
Significance/Implications	States the theoretical/practical/methodological contributions of your work
Chapter Overview	Provides a short overview of each chapter and what it will accomplish
Timeline/Work Plan	Serves as a general guide that demonstrates your consideration of deadlines
Bibliography/Appendices	Provides a complete bibliography/appendix in the citation style of your field

Further Resources: The Graduate Writing Center at Penn State University, Intellectual Entrepreneurship at University of Texas, and Writing Tutorial Services at Indiana University Bloomington

Content has been adapted from Penn State University’s “Writing Thesis and Dissertation Proposals”

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