

RP: How to?

# Test Yourself

- **How long should a research proposal be?**
  - 1. 1 – 3 pages
  - 2. 3 – 7 pages
  - 3. 7 – 15 pages
  - 4. 15 – 20 pages
- **Which of the following is NOT needed in a research proposal?**
  - 1. a research question
  - 2. a list of references
  - 3. a detailed literature review
  - 4. a research timetable
- **How can proposed research be justified?**
  - 1. a gap in the literature needs to be addressed
  - 2. an unusual or improved methodology is to be used
  - 3. the research may benefit policy and practice
  - 4. all of the above

# The importance of the research proposal

- A research proposal is a document that informs others of a proposed piece of research. This proposed research is usually a Masters or Doctorate by thesis, but it can also be work for a corporate purpose. University students usually write research proposals for academics who may eventually supervise the work based on the proposal.

## The Following Elements Must Be Included In Any Proposal:

1. **Introduction or background to the research** problem or issue, including an identification of the gap in the current research
2. **Research question** and, if possible, a **thesis statement** answering the question
3. Justification for the proposal research, i.e., why the research is needed
4. **Preliminary literature review** covering what others have already done in the area
5. **Theoretical framework** to be used in the proposed research
6. **Proposed research methodology**
7. **Preliminary findings**
8. **Conclusion & (Discussion)**
9. **List of references** used in preparing the proposal

# The Elements Of The Research Proposal: Detail

## 1. Introduction

The introduction should be as brief as possible (a paragraph or two). Whatever you do, don't ramble on for pages; you need to make this part of the proposal clear and crisp.

In the introduction, you need to give a sense of the general field of research of which your area is a part. You then need to narrow to the specific area of your concern. This should lead logically to the gap in the research that you intend to fill. When the gap is identified, a research question can then be raised. The answer to this question is called the *thesis statement*.

It may be helpful to think of these parts in the following way:

- . The general area is a particular conversation among academics in the field of study
- . The specific area is your focus on a particular part of the bigger conversation
- . The gap is what you notice needs to be said in the conversation that has not been said before or that needs addressing in more detail
- . The research question asks something to address the gap
- . The thesis statement is your tentative or proposed answer to this question

Note that the thesis statement may only be tentative at this stage as the research has not been carried out. It is not expected in a proposal that you have an answer to your research question. This is what the thesis provides. However, it helps if you have a tentative answer. A hypothesis is useful for this purpose, though this might only be necessary for more empirical subjects (Economics, for example).

## Research Question

- Note that the research question may not be a question as such, but rather a statement of a problem to be investigated.
- Below is an example. Note the move from a **general area**, to a **specific area**, to the **gap in the research (the first italicised passage)** and then to the **proposed thesis statement (the second italicised passage)**:

According to business marketing theory, businesses are more likely to succeed if they utilise marketing management approaches or techniques. For example, the marketing concept, a cornerstone of business marketing thought, stresses the importance of determining the needs and wants of consumers and delivering the desired satisfaction more effectively and efficiently than competitors (Kotler, 1986). *Philosophies from marketing management have recently been applied to almost every industry from insurance to travel and hospital services, but not often to farming.* Concerns have been raised about the distinction which appears to exist between agricultural and business marketing theory (Bartels, 1983; Bateman, 1976; Muelenberg, 1986).

*In this research proposal, the role of marketing management in agricultural marketing theory and practice is described.* It is argued that the marketing strategies of farmers are not adequately described by either the business or agricultural marketing disciplines, and a methodology for analysing the farm business marketing strategy process is outlined (*Adapted from McLeay* <sup>(1)</sup>)

## Let's look at this more closely:

- The **general area** is business marketing theory
- The **specific research area** is marketing management concepts (especially the difference between agricultural and business marketing theory)
- **The gap is** the application of these concepts to the farming sector
- The research question is whether the distinction between agricultural and business marketing theory is justified in the farming sector
- The thesis statement is that neither agricultural marketing nor business marketing concepts are appropriate in the farming sector and that a new methodology is needed. This is what the research will provide.
- The research question in this case is really a statement of what needs to be investigated. This is a perfectly acceptable way of putting this part of the introduction.
- However, it could also be phrased in the form of a question or formal **hypothesis**.

# Literature Review

This is where you provide more detail about what others have done in the area, and what you propose to do. You need to write around two pages in which you cover the following:

- The major issues or schools of thought
- Gaps in the literature (in more detail than is provided in the introduction)
- Research questions and/or hypotheses which are connected carefully to the literature being reviewed
- Definitions of key terms, provided either when you introduce each idea, or in a definition sub-section
- Questions arising from the gaps that can be the focus of data collection or analysis
- The preliminary literature review eventually becomes Chapter 2 of the thesis.
- Perry suggests that potential candidates read a thesis in a similar area to get a feel for what is required in this section

## An excerpt from a preliminary literature review:

*An examination of textbook definitions of business and agricultural marketing provides the most general guide to theoretical content. Although there is no generally accepted definition of agricultural marketing, it is frequently viewed as part of the economic system (Ritson, 1986; Bateman, 1976) and is widely recognised as involving the exchange process. A typical definition is given by Shepard and Futrell (1982) who state: ‘ ...’. By this definition, agricultural marketing theory focuses on the workings of the distribution system, and is typically viewed as a process that begins after produce leaves the farm gate. ... Thus production planning is frequently excluded from the marketing process. ...*

*Although, there is no universally accepted definition of business marketing, it is generally accepted that business marketing, like agricultural marketing, involves the exchange process. For example, Kotler (1972, p. 12) defines marketing as: “ ...” ...*

# Proposed Research Methodology

This section should be about 1-2 pages

You do not have to describe the methodology to be used in great detail, but you should justify its use over other methodologies. For example, you could explain the reasons for using:

- a certain paradigm or theory
- qualitative or quantitative research
- a case study of a specific kind
- surveys, correlational experiments, field studies, specific statistical measurements, etc.
- certain dependent or independent or moderating variables (see *Study and Research Helpsheets: The Research Process and Research Essentials*)
- a particular sampling frame and the size of a sample

You could also explain how you are proposing to:

- have access to the data
- analyse the data (this is usually Chapter 4 of the thesis).
- You also need to provide *operational* (ie. testable, or at least well-supported in the literature) definitions of key terms (see Sekaran <sup>(6)</sup> ; Perry <sup>(7)</sup> ).

## List of References

- This must be provided in the usual scholarly fashion. It helps to convince your reader that your proposal is worth pursuing if you can identify literature in the field and demonstrate that you understand it. It makes a very strong impact if you can identify where there is a research gap in the literature that your proposal hopes to fill. This is your contribution to the scholarly conversation.
- In-text references should be provided for all sections of the proposal with the exception of the research plan and timetable.

Remember to follow APA citation style

# RP outline

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 General area

1.2 Specific topic

1.3 Gap

1.4 Research Question

1.5 Thesis Statement

## **2. Literature Review**

## **3. Proposed Methodology**

## **4 . Preliminary Findings**

## **5. Conclusion & Discussion**

## **6. References**

Adapted from: Martin Davies (2011), Study Skills for International Postgraduate Students. Basingstoke, UK.: Palgrave, MacMillan.