

How To Write A Research Proposal For A Dissertation Or Thesis (With Examples)

welcome to another episode of Grad Coach TV, where we demystify the ivory tower world of academia and show you how to work smart and earn the big marks! In this video we're going to be looking at how to write up a research proposal, whether that's for a thesis or a dissertation at undergraduate, masters PhD level. Whatever level, we're going to be looking at how to write up a solid research proposal. Now this video is based on a chapter from our free dissertation ebook, which you can download at the Grad Coach website. I'll share the link to that below this video. So without any delay let's get right into it. Now, before we jump into how to [writing a research paper](#), it's important for us to take a step back and ask the bigger question of why. In other words, what is the purpose, what is the function of a research proposal? If you understand the why, then the how and the what everything becomes a lot clearer, a lot simpler to execute on. So what is the function of the research proposal? Quite simply, it's to communicate, in a very clear and concise way, to communicate what your research is all about and convince the reader, whoever they might be, convince them that they should approve the research. Now convincing is the key word here. If you don't have a convincing proposal, you don't really have any chance of getting approved. So what do you need to convince the reader of? Obviously I can't speak for every university, but I can't say there are a few common things that they're looking for. So there are at least three things that you need to convince the reader of.

Number one - you need to convince them that your research focus is clearly articulated. In other words, is it crystal crystal clear what exactly you're going to be researching?

- What are your research questions?
- Where will you be focusing?
- What will you be covering?
- What will you not be covering?

So you need to communicate that you know exactly what it is that you're going to be focusing on. The second thing that you need to convince them of is that your research is well justified. In other words, are you filling a gap in the research, or are you just doing the same thing that everyone else has done? Does your research have clear justification in terms of originality? Is it something new or at least is it something within a new context and importantly, is it something that is worth figuring out? If your research questions are answered, are they going to add some value to the body of knowledge to to whatever industry that you're working in? So that's another important requirement. The third thing that you need to convince them of is that your research is doable. Now what I mean by doable is that you can execute on this research within the constraints that you have.

Constraints such as time, constraints such as money, constraints such as your own research skills. So you need to show them that not only is this research worth doing, but you are the right man or woman for the job and that this is very doable within the time frame. Even the best research ideas won't be approved if they're not achievable, if they're not plausible within your context. So make sure that you're convincing on that front as well. If you're not convincing the reader on at least these three criteria, your chances of getting approved are really really slim. So give some thought to these three things. If you can't answer these these questions, if you can't hit back with responses on these three points at this at this stage, you might want to just go back and think a little bit more about what exactly you're going to be doing and whether that's doable and whether it's worth doing before you start writing a research proposal. Otherwise you're just going to be wasting time. So make sure you cover those three bases. Right, now that we've covered the why, let's move on to how to write a solid research proposal for your dissertation or thesis. So I'm going to explain how to write a dissertation or thesis proposal by looking at the essential components -

the the essential ingredients if we can - of a solid research proposal. Now it's important to note that there are variances between schools and some schools might want a little extra, so make sure that while you take in whatever is covered in this video, make sure that your consulting whatever brief, or whatever workshop notes, or whatever your university has provided, so that you are 100% aware of exactly what they expect in the research proposal. Right, so enough about that. Let's have a look at the essential ingredients of a rock-solid research proposal. Ingredient number one is a provisional title or a working title. Provisional is the key word here, because this is something that might change, probably will change as you work through your dissertation or thesis or research project. So don't get too stuck up in conjuring up the perfect research title at this point in time, but nevertheless give it some thought. So what makes for a good research title? A good research title should convey the essence of what exactly you're going to be focusing on, as concisely as possible. So let's take a look at an example - an example here is: a quantitative study into the drivers of consumer trust in Robo advisors: a British context. Within 15 words here this title clearly communicates a few things. The first thing it communicates is the broad topic of consumer trust. So we already have an idea - this topic or this dissertation or thesis is broadly about consumer trust. It fits within that category. The next thing that it communicates is the focal topic. So it narrows down the focus to the drivers of consumer trust in online Robo advisors. So now we're narrowing that down to a specific industry. It also sets the context. So it's very clear from this title that this is within a British context within the UK and another thing that it sets is that it's online. Robo advisors are online products and so we already know that now we are talking about a British context and an online environment, which is naturally quite different from an offline environment. The last thing that it communicates is the methodology - or at least it gives a hint as to the research design - and that is quantitative. In other words this is going to be a study that hinges on numbers, that hinges on statistics, on some sort of statistical analysis. So that's a good example of a research title that conveys quite a bit in 15 words or so. Now it's important to state here that your university might have some limitations in terms of how long a title should be. They might even have their own convention - so make sure that you check in and that you check your notes, check your your workshop notes, your study guide, etc. Make sure that you're not missing some specific requirements in terms of your university. But as I say don't get too wrapped up in terms of working title, because it is just something to put down in the interim. Of course, whoever is going to approve your your research proposal is not going to just look at the working title and make a decision on that, so don't get too stuck in it. You might want to take this example as a nice way of laying out - as a nice nomenclature for a title. Alright, let's get on to the next ingredient of a solid dissertation or thesis proposal. The second ingredient of a solid research proposal is an introduction and a research problem.

These might take the form of chapters or just sections, depending on whatever format your university prefers - but you definitely need to include both of them. So how do you go about writing up this section? The first thing that you need to do is you need to provide a broad view of the topic and the context that you're looking at. In other words introduce the reader to the broader topic. For example consumer trust, in the in the previous example that I gave you. You're going to provide a broad overview of the topic, introduce key terminology, introduce any jargon, and introduce anything that's required for the reader to wrap their head around the big picture of whatever you're going to be focusing on. Once you've done that, you then need to narrow it down to your specific focus. In other words, what exactly are you going to be researching, what are you going to be sinking your teeth into in your dissertation or thesis? What's really important here is to not just get stuck in the what, but to also focus on the why. In fact, the why is arguably even more important. In other words, how is your dissertation or your your thesis topic justified? What is the gap in the research that you're going to be filling? For example, you might argue that there is a wealth of existing research on topic X, but that that topic has not been covered in your specific country or within your specific industry. And within your specific country, within your specific industry, there's reason that the existing research might not be applicable. It might be down to cultural components, it might be down to regulatory components, but if you're going to make an argument that there is a wealth of existing research but it doesn't necessarily apply in industry X or country X, then make sure that you justify why that is. Another angle that you might take is that there is a wealth of research on topic X already and that that was done quite some time ago and the context has changed quite significantly. So we live in a world where

there is just consistent change, a lot of which is driven by technology - and that might have some impact on whatever topic you're looking at and you might say, well, times have changed and therefore we need to revisit this topic we need to reassess the validity of the state of research there, because there are these new variables that potentially throw things into a new state. Another argument that you might make is that the existing research has methodological limitations. Now this would require that you have a pretty solid understanding of research design, so be careful with this one. You might argue that existing research is lacking in terms of sampling. You might argue that it's lacking in terms of the approach that was taken - qualitative or quantitative.

Lacking in some way. So again, you would justify that your research is warranted, that it's worth doing because of some sort of methodological limitation. Whichever way you go, and I'm just presenting a few, justifications - but whichever way you go, make sure that you really focus on both the what (in other words what are you going to be researching) and the why (why is it important that this gets researched - why is it that this hasn't been done before in other words how are you going to be original). So make sure that you cover both the what and the why in this section of introduction and research problem. Right once you've narrowed down that topic and you got that down into your introduction section the next thing the next logical thing that you need to include there is your research aims and your research questions. So let's take a look at what an example of that might look like. Following from the previous example, we had about consumer trust. Research aims might look something like this. Your research aim might be: to identify the key factors that influence UK consumers trust in Robo advisors and how these factors vary between demographic groups. So it's just a clear line indicating what your research aims are. Your research questions would then echo that, so you might have two research questions. Number one what are the main antecedents or the the main drivers of consumer trust in Robo advisors in the UK and your second question might be how does this vary between demographic groups. What you can see there's is a very tight link between the research aims and the research questions. Essentially they're presenting the same thing in a different format. The last thing you need to cover in this in this introduction section is scope. Scope is essentially just creating a boundary, just creating a ring-fence to say this is what I'm going to cover and this is what I'm not going to cover. Obviously any topic that you look at, it's going to be a rabbit hole - you can go on and on and on and on you can connect a to B to C to D and very quickly your research can become very unfocused, can become very diluted. So the scope section here is just an opportunity for you to say that I am aware that these connections exist, that this links to that links to that, but this research is going to focus on just this piece over here - and this is why it's going to focus on this piece.

Quite simply the justification is that you need to go deep within a dissertation or thesis. You need to narrow your focus and you need to do one thing really well. Don't feel the need to solve the world's problems. Don't feel the need to create a life's work. This is a dissertation or a thesis and going deep, going narrow is what it's all about. So don't be afraid to ring-fence don't be afraid to cut the the non focus out because it's completely acceptable and in fact it's expected. Right let's move on to the next ingredient. The third essential ingredient of a winning dissertation or thesis proposal is the literature review. Now that you've covered in your introduction chapter or in your introduction section, now that you've covered what it is that that you're going to be focusing your research on, the literature review is your opportunity to delve into and to provide a synthesis of all the existing research in relation to your research aims. So, what you're doing here is presenting a clear narrative, a clear discussion of what the existing research says in relation to your research aims and to your research objectives. Now I'm not going to go into depth about how to full of a literature review - we've got a separate video on that and I'll include the link to that below this video, but I will just quickly speak about the why. If you understand the why, then the actual what of pulling off a literature review is much simpler. So what is the why, what are the three important functions of a literature review, or at least my three important functions of a literature review. So, the first thing that you need to demonstrate in your literature review is that you are very familiar and you understand the current state of the research. You can't take on, within an academic world you certainly, can't take on any sort of research without really understanding what's already been done. So the first function of the literature review is for you to show that you've done your reading, that you've done your homework and that you know exactly what's been done, who said what, how it all fits together. That is very important. The second function of

the literature review is to demonstrate the gap. So, just as I mentioned in your your introduction, how you're going to be talking about your gap you're going to build onto that here, or potentially rehash on that a little bit and show how there is a genuine need for the research that you're going to be doing. So, it plays into the justification of your research. You need to show that you've done the reading and you found the gap. That you found the the missing piece, or one of the many many missing pieces, in terms of the existing research. The third function of the literature review is to inform any sort of methodological decision making. When it comes to your research design, whether you're going to do qualitative or quantitative, that should be informed at least in part by the existing research. In other words, what have people done in the past? How are they, how other researchers have, other authors approach this? You might build on that, or you might say, well therein lies the problem. Regardless, you want to be paying attention to the methodological approaches of previous researchers in your space and you want to be showing that you are aware of what they've done. Also you might be able to borrow from the existing research. Very often, at least with quantitative studies, very often they will publish their question sets, they'll publish the the scales, etc. and these have had a lot of work that has already gone into them and you can make use of them without having to go and design your own. Or of course you could build onto them. So it's important to understand those three components, or at least those three objectives of a good literature review, because those will ensure that you write something that is touching on all the essential requirements. One thing to be really careful about when you are writing up this literature review section is that you don't fall into the trap of descriptive writing. In other words, it's it's very easy to go and write up a literature review which is basically just a history of what everyone has said. That is not what a good literature review is about. What a good literal view is about is synthesizing what everyone has said in relation to whatever your research questions are. So if your research questions are, let's just take the previous example, if you're looking into the drivers, the antecedents of consumer trust, what you want to be looking for in a literature review is to flesh out the drivers that people have previously found in the research. Which ones of these are agreed on, which of these are disagreed on? Where is there some contention? How has that developed over time? How is it potentially relevant or irrelevant? How is it creating a gap in the research for for my specific research? so you want to be providing a synthesis of everything that's been said - not just a pure account of it. Your writing needs to be analytical, not just descriptive. We do have a great post on the Grad Coach blog which provides a good breakdown of a comparison between analytical writing and descriptive writing - and that is a great way of sort of assessing where you where you fit in terms your writing. Assessing whether or not you you're playing too much to one side or the other.

Again I'll include a link to that below this video. Regardless of whether you look at that or not, keep in mind the trap of descriptive writing. Do not just provide an account of what everyone said. You need to pull that back to how is it relevant to my literature, or rather to my research question? How is it a potential answer? How is it a potential problem in light of my research questions and my aims? So bring everything back, bring it together, synthesize everything and and tie it back to your specific research. Don't just provide a descriptive account of what everyone said.

Right, so that's the literature review component or ingredient covered. Let's have a look at the next essential ingredient. The fourth essential ingredient of a winning dissertation proposal or thesis proposal is the research design (or sometimes referred to as the methodology). So far in your research proposal you've covered the what and you've covered the why. What exactly are you going to be focusing on and why is that important? Why is that original? And in your literature review you expanded on that to see what else other people had to say about your what what. What you haven't covered so far is the how - in other words how are you going to be approaching this research? How are you going to be executing on it to identify or least try to identify the answers to your research questions? That is what the research design or the methodology chapter is all about. Explaining in detail how you're going to be approaching this and and why you've decided to approach it in the way that you have. Now much like the working title, methodology and your specific approach might change as you sink your teeth into your dissertation. You might find that you end up doing, if you were going a quantitative approach, you might find that you end up doing a slightly different set of analysis depending on the outcomes of the data etc. So don't get too hung up in specifying, or thinking that whatever you put down on paper here, you are committed to. Obviously you wouldn't

want to switch drastically - you wouldn't want to go from say a quant study to a qual study, although I have seen that happen - but you don't need to feel like if you write here that you're going to do analysis X, Y and Z, three different types of statistical analysis you don't need to feel like it's gonna be the end of the world if you if you don't stick 100% to those. Very often the data comes out in a different way from from what we expected. For example, perhaps a little statistical, but you might expect to have a normal distribution of data and you end up with non-normal distribution and therefore you need to apply a different set of analyses. Don't don't stress out if none of this makes since just yet - the important thing to understand is that the methodology is is somewhat tentative. Don't get too wrapped up in fearing that you're ultra committed once you put it down. In terms of discussing the how of your research design, there are a few things that you'll need to look at. So let's take a look at what those are. The first thing you want to look at is your research philosophy. In other words are you taking an interpretivist approach are you in taking an empirical approach etc.

You want to cover that up front. The second thing you want to look at is your methodological approach. In other words is it a qualitative study, is it a quantitative study, or you perhaps going to go a mixed method route, where you incorporate a bit of both. You want to have a look at that. Your sampling is really important. In other words, who will your sample be, who will you be collecting data from, how many people will you be speaking to, what sample do they represent in terms of their generalizability, etc? Another important point is what data you plan to collect.

- Data about what?
- in what form are you going to be collecting that data?
- How do you plan to collect it?

Are you going to be using surveys or are you're going to be using interviews or you're going to be holding focus groups? Then very importantly how do you plan to analyze it? So if you're taking a quantitative approach, are you going to perhaps use regression analysis? Are you going to use structural equation modeling? Are you going to, in a qualitative environment, are you going to be using thematic analysis or QDA? These are all potential design choices that you need to make and most importantly, not just discuss what you will be doing, in other words what you'll be choosing for each of these variables, but why you've chosen. In other words, what your justification? Throughout your proposal you need to justify everything. You need to explain why it is that you've chosen to go this route and not that route. Remember that your dissertation or thesis is assessing research skills. It's assessing whether or not you can undertake rigorous research - so they want to see when you are proposing that you're going to cover X and you're going to do it in this way, they want to see that you understand why - that you understand why those are the appropriate choices. Now to be fair, depending on your level of research, your research design choices your methodological choices might be more constrained by practical issues - in other words who do you have access to? What data do you have access to? - as opposed to methodological research design theory. Regardless, whatever your constraints are, whatever the reasons are for you choosing whichever way you go, make sure that you clarify not just what you're going to do and how you're going to do it, but why you're going to do or why you're planning to do it that way. Include the justification in everything. It's worth saying that if you're not 100% certain about your methodology. If you're not 100% certain about your research design, it makes sense to consult with someone who does know more than you do. Hopefully is an expert in the space. So it might be someone at your university, it might be someone that you know in your private capacity. You could certainly reach out to one of us here Grad Coach, but consult with someone who is certain. Someone who does understand whatever methodological approach you you're going to use. Because if you make any mistakes here, they will get spotted very quickly and and best case they still approve your research and just give you a feedback that you need to change X, Y and Z. But worst case, if you don't really understand what you're doing here, you might be proposing something that isn't really achievable given your skill set. You might be committing to something which is far bigger than then you originally anticipated, that's not doable with the data that you have. You can create some significant problems down the road once you've already been approved that you're not even aware of. So my advice is just make sure that whatever you're putting down in your methodology section, whatever you're putting

down in the research design section, make sure that you fully understand what you're doing. Don't just use what big words and technical words that you don't fully understand. Consult with someone who does know what they're doing. That will save you a lot of pain down the road. Of course you can have a free consultation with any of our research specialists here at Grad Coach. I'll include the link to that below this video. Right let's move on to the next ingredient. ingredient number five of a winning dissertation or thesis research proposal is the reference list. Now this might go without saying, but being an academic document you need to have a 100% on point reference list at the end of your research proposal. You might get away with slightly shoddy referencing in assignments or coursework, but as I said, what they're looking for in a dissertation or in a thesis and specifically in the proposal, is for you to demonstrate research skills - and one of those research skills in an academic environment is technically correct referencing. So make sure that you understand exactly what the referencing requirements are from your school, for example Harvard or APA format whatever specific format they require, and then use some sort of referencing software - whether that's Mendeley or Zotero or EndNote, Refworks - whatever the case might be, use some software to take care of that. Certainly don't try and handle referencing in any manual fashion - it might sound like that's pretty obvious, but you'll be surprised what I've seen in some dissertations and theses. So make sure that you're referencing is 100% on point.