How to prepare a research proposal

Every theological research project should begin with a research proposal. Before writing a thesis or a dissertation, your proposal needs to be approved by a panel of experts. A professor may require you to submit a brief proposal for a term paper. Even if a project does not require a formal proposal, you will benefit from preparing one for yourself; it will focus your thoughts and give your research direction. The ability to conceptualise and write a quality proposal is the mark of a man ready to do independent research.

In this chapter, we are going to look at the research proposal as a whole—its value, components and preparation. The two chapters that follow will each tackle one of the two main parts of the proposal, the research problem and the research plan, in greater detail.

The value of a research proposal

A research proposal "is a document that outlines how you *propose* to undertake your research studies" (Mouton 2001:44). Essentially, it outlines *what* you will research and *how* you will research it. The "what" part is called the *problem*; the "how" part we call the *plan*. A proposal describes a problem and sets out a logical, systematic plan to solve it.

Whether it is a 1-page outline for your own use or a detailed doctoral proposal, writing the research proposal is the most difficult and the most important part of the entire research project! If you rush through this step, you will have a poorly conceived research problem and plan. This makes the rest of the study difficult. On the other hand, if you invest time and effort to produce a first-class proposal, the rest of the study should fall into place.

The greatest value of a proposal is that it keeps the research project on course. It gives direction and focus to the project. It prevents you taking rabbit trails—time consuming, energy sapping digressions. If you invest the time and energy at the start of your project to think through *what* you will research and *how* you will go about it, formulating a clear picture in your mind of your

destination and the route you will take to get there, your journey should go without delay or detour.

For example, if you carefully and precisely formulate your research problem, keeping it narrow and focused and identifying which aspects to include and exclude, you dramatically reduce the amount of reading you need to do. This saves time. If your problem is vague and fuzzy, you will read five times as much because you have no clear yardstick to distinguish what you must read from what you need not read. Similarly, if you think through the essential steps you must take to solve the problem, you reduce the chance of wasting time gathering data not necessary to solve the problem.

In short, prepare a good proposal and your research will flow; prepare a poor one and it will flop. An old adage—"failing to prepare is preparing to fail"— certainly applies to research. Yet students often do a poor job of preparing their proposals. Why? Partly due to ignorance, that is, not understanding the nature of research well enough to plan the project. I suspect over-eagerness is an even bigger cause. In their haste to get on with "the real work", they slap together a poorly conceived proposal. Preparing a quality proposal is hard work. It requires much reading and reflection. It is time-consuming. However, in the long run, it saves time. So, I urge you, invest quality time in the proposal. Prepare it well. What you sow into the proposal, you will reap in the thesis.

If you are convinced of the value of preparing the proposal properly, you will be wondering what elements should go into a research proposal. Views differ from one researcher to another. In the next section, I shall present my preferred breakdown of the elements that belong in a proposal.

The elements of a research proposal

A research proposal consists of two main parts: the research *problem* and the research *plan*. The first part, the research problem, addresses "the what" of the study; it describes the problem the researcher will attempt to solve. Part two, the research *plan*, focuses on "the how" of the study; it explains how the researcher will go about solving the research problem. Let us examine each part.

Part 1: The research problem

The first part of the proposal should state the research problem with the utmost focus and clarity. The problem the researcher will attempt to solve needs to be defined and delimited with such precision as to leave no confusion or ambiguity as to what the research is about and what it aims to accomplish. The more clearly and precisely the research problem is laid out, the more focus the research will have.

> Your problem should be so clearly stated that anyone anywhere in the world (who reads English) may read it, understand it, and react to it without help. If the problem is *not* stated with such clarity and precision, then you are merely deceiving yourself that you know what the problem is. Such self-deception will merely cause you trouble later on (Leedy 1993:63).

What components should you include in your description of the research problem? I suggest you include these elements in this order:

1 The statement of the problem
   1.1 The main problem
   1.2 The key questions
   1.3 The hypotheses
2 The elucidation of the problem
   2.1 Delimitations of the study
   2.2 Definitions of key terms
   2.3 Presuppositions of the researcher
   2.4 Preliminary literature review
3 The value of the study
   3.1 Theological value
   3.2 Practical value

The notable omission from the list is a section on the background to the problem. The first time I wrote about research methodology was a course for Master of Theology candidates at the South African Theological Seminary. I followed Mouton (2001:48), who suggests that the statement of the problem be preceded by a section on the background to the problem. Since writing that

course, I have evaluated almost one hundred research proposals by students working from the model I presented. I am convinced that including a background section tends to hinder students more than it helps them. The heading "background" lures all except the most gifted students into writing a long-winded social narrative that seldom sheds much light on the research problem. For many students, it serves as a decoy. After writing several pages about social ills in their communities, they are unable to shift focus from the practical to the academic, from real-life problems to a research problem. Under the heading "the problem", they describe a broad, undefined social problem that is unsuitable for theological research. For this reason, I consider it best to exclude a background section from the research proposal. Essential background information can be presented in the section about the value of the study.[1]

The statement of the problem. Begin your research proposal with a direct statement of the research problem. State the problem as a single sentence (at most a short paragraph). You may formulate it as a statement, a question or an objective. In large research projects, the main problem is usually too large to solve without dividing into smaller units. In such cases, break the main problem down into 2-6 subproblems; we are calling these "key questions", but many call them "objectives". An hypothesis is a calculated guess as what the answer to a research question will be. An hypothesis must be directly related to a research problem or question. Thus you may have an hypothesis for the main problem and, if you wish, one per subproblem.

The elucidation of the problem. If you begin with a direct statement of the research problem, there will be loose ends that need to be tied up. This section clarifies the nature of the research by explaining the delimitations, definitions and presuppositions of the study and by presenting a preliminary literature review. Under delimitations, you narrow the focus of your study by indicating what you will *not* research, that is, what you will exclude. The sections on definitions and presuppositions help your readers to understand the things you treat as "givens" (what you assume to be true) and how you use important terms. The literature review places your planned research in the context of

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[1] I advise you to check with your professor whether he wants you to include a section on the background to the study.

related scholarship, helping readers to appreciate how your study relates to what others have done.

The value of the study. The first part of the proposal ends with a motivation for doing the study. You may motivate the study at a practical and/or theoretical level. This section provides an opportunity to introduce some essential background information by indicating how the proposed research will help to address social needs in a community. You may explain who should benefit from the research and how they might benefit.

We shall discuss each of these elements in more detail in the chapter on the research problem. Now let us examine the elements that constitute the second part of the proposal, the research plan.

Part 2: The research plan

Research follows a problem-solution format; so does the research proposal. The first part sets out the research problem; the second part presents a plan to solve it. The research plan contains three sections: design, methodology and bibliography.

4　The research design
　　4.1　The model
　　4.2　The structure
　　4.3　The timeframe
5　The research methodology
　　5.1　The data
　　5.2　The tools
　　5.3　The steps
6　The annotated bibliography

In certain cases, it may be necessary to add a section indicating the qualifications of the researcher to do the research. For example, if the proposed study requires advanced analysis of the Greek text of the New Testament, the researcher needs to be competent to perform such analysis. If an empirical study depends on specialised psychometric testing, the researcher needs the skills and licence to perform the testing.

The research design. Your first decision is what kind of study is best suited to solve the research problem. For example, can you use a purely literary approach or do you need an empirical component? Later in the book I shall present a variety of standard designs for theological research—exegetical studies, systematic theology, empirical research, case studies, etc. The chosen design largely dictates the logic and structure of the study. In large projects, such as theses or dissertations, the proposal needs to include proposed timeframes; these serve as a progress agreement between student and supervisor.

Research methodology. To assess the validity of a research project, one must know *exactly* how the study will be conducted. You should explain step-by-step how you intend to do the research. The best way of doing this is to work through your proposed study one section (or one subproblem) at a time, describing the research tools (methods) you will deploy and indicating what data you will collect, how you will collect it and how it will be analysed.

Annotated bibliography. End your proposal with an annotated bibliography of at least 20 good entries. The majority of the entries should be recent scholarly works. Avoid sources that are out-of-date and those classified as "popular" instead of "academic"; do not clutter your bibliography with irrelevant books (those not directly related to your topic) or with online articles. You must show that you know what the major works on the topic are. The annotations show that you are familiar with a source's content and understand its relevance to your study.

We shall discuss each of these elements in more detail in the chapter on the research plan. The final matter we need to address in this chapter is the preparation of the research proposal.

The preparation of a research proposal

Students are notorious for being careless in the way they prepare research proposals. As a member of a committee which evaluates proposals for MTh theses and DTh dissertations, I am appalled by the sloppiness with which many proposals are prepared. Students write the name of the degree programme incorrectly; their work is littered with spelling and grammar

errors; it abounds with imprecise language, fuzzy logic, unsubstantiated claims and unjustified generalisations or assumptions.

Take care with the preparation of your research proposal. Based on the proposal, your professor(s) will make a decision as to whether you are capable of conducting serious research. Your proposal needs to make a positive impression. Sloppiness in the presentation of your proposal sends the wrong message. No professor looks forward to working with a lazy, careless student.

What are the important errors to avoid when preparing a research proposal? Here is a checklist of questions to consider:

- *Did you carefully check the spelling and grammar?* Even if you have to write the proposal in a second or third language, there is no excuse for the kinds of spelling, typing and grammar errors that can be corrected by using the spelling and grammar checking functions on your word processor. Proof read your proposal several times before you submit it.
- *Does your proposal conform to the requirements of the institution?* Find out if the institution has set requirements for the following: (a) line spacing, font type and size, margins, etc. (b) the components of the proposal; and (c) referenci and bibliography. Make sure your proposal conforms to all the institution's requirements.
- *Did you write the name of the qualification correctly?* The South African Theological Seminary offers a Master of Theology (MTh) and a Doctor of Theology (DTh). We regularly evaluate proposals on which students specify the qualification as an MA or a PhD—very careless.
- *Is your language precise and modest?* Be modest in your claims. Do not promise more than you can deliver. Support all claims with evidence. Say exactly what you mean. It is your responsibility to be so precise that you leave no room for readers to misunderstand your proposal.

Pay attention to detail when you prepare a research proposal. Do not be careless or sloppy. The research proposal is the most important part of writing

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a thesis. It needs to convince a panel of professors that you are capable of doing independent research.

Summary

A research proposal governs and directs a research project. This is the most difficult and most important part of many research endeavours. In the long run, the time and energy invested in conceptualising the project pays dividends.

Research proposals have two main parts—the research *problem* and the research *plan*, the *what* and the *how*. First it describes a problem; then it presents a plan to solve it. See Table 1 for a list of the components included in each section of a proposal. These two parts are so crucial that we shall devote the next two chapters to exploring them in detail. In the following chapter, we shall explore how to construct each element of the research problem.

Table 1: The components of a research proposal

The Components of a Research Proposal
Part 1: The research problem
1 The statement of the problem
1.1 The main problem
1.2 The key questions
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2.4 Preliminary literature review
3 The value of the study
3.1 Theological value
3.2 Practical value
Part 2: The research plan
4 The research design
4.1 The model
4.2 The structure
4.3 The timeframe
5 The research methodology
5.1 The data
5.2 The tools
5.3 The steps
6 The annotated bibliography

Works Cited

Leedy PD 1993. *Practical research: planning and design* (5th ed.). New York: MacMillan.

Mouton J 2001. *How to succeed in your master's and doctoral studies.* Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik.