

THE ACADEMIC PROPOSAL

An academic proposal is the first step in producing a thesis or major project. Its intent is to convince a supervisor or academic committee that your topic and approach are sound, so that you gain approval to proceed with the actual research. (Sometimes you are outlining hypothetical research, and just want recognition that it *would* be worth doing.) As well as indicating your plan of action, an academic proposal should show your theoretical positioning and your relationship to past work in the area.

An academic proposal is expected to contain these elements:

- a rationale for the choice of topic, showing why it is important or useful within the concerns of the discipline or course. It is sensible also to indicate the limitations of your aims—don't promise what you can't possibly deliver.
- a **review** of existing published work ("the literature") that relates to the topic. Here you need to tell how your proposed work will build on existing studies and yet explore new territory (see the handout on *The Literature Review*).
- an **outline** of your intended approach or methodology (with comparisons to the existing published work), perhaps including costs, resources needed, and a timeline of when you hope to get things done.

Particular disciplines have standard ways of organizing the proposal. Ask within your department about expectations in your field. In any case, in organizing your material, be sure to emphasize the specific focus of your work—your research question. Use headings, lists, and visuals to make reading and cross-reference easy. And employ a concrete and precise style to show that you have chosen a feasible idea and can put it into action. Here are some general tips:

- Start with **why** your idea is worth doing (its contribution to the field), then fill in **how** (technicalities about topic and method).
- Give enough detail to establish feasibility, but not so much as to bore the reader.
- Show your ability to deal with possible problems or changes in focus.
- Show confidence and eagerness (use *I* and active verbs, concise style, positive phrasing).