How to write a research proposal

Function: For what purpose do I write a research proposal?

You write a research proposal in order to
- get a clear idea about what you want to do
- convince the reader that your project is worthwhile and manageable
- give yourself and your reader the opportunity to decide if your project is doable
- avoid dead ends and false investments in your project
- have a basis for a first meeting with the person who is going to supervise your paper

Elements: What should be included in a research proposal?

These elements have to be included:
- the topic of your research: What is your topic? What are the limitations of your topic? Why is your topic relevant?
- A statement of the problem and goal of your research: What question is your research going to answer? Is there a hypothesis that you are going to test? In what way will the results of your work be significant?
- theoretical framework: Is there more than one discipline involved? What are the most important theories, models, controversies, methodologies and/or studies with regard to your topic? Are you working within a particular line of inquiry? How is your work embedded in the current theoretical framework?
- methodology: What is your approach to answering the question? What steps do you have to take to find your answer? If you carry out an empirical study, what methods are you going to use? What data are going to collect? How will the data be analyzed and evaluated?

These elements sometimes have to be included in a research proposal, depending on your reader/your (supervising) tutor:
- a preliminary outline of your paper
- a schedule showing which steps are to be taken in which period of time
- a cost schedule (in case there are costs within your project that you want the reader of your proposal to accept)
- a preliminary bibliography
- any drafts that you already have

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Length: How long should the proposal be?

There is no standard length for a proposal. Research proposal often have a length of about three pages, but this depends on the total length of the paper and on the addressee's expectations.

Language: What kind of language do I use in a research proposal?

– The research proposal is written in present tense or in future tense.
– Your statements should be intelligible to a reader who is relatively uninformed in the area of your investigation, but you may and should use discipline-specific language as you can assume that the reader is familiar with your discipline.
– As the main function of the research proposal is to inform, to convince and to justify, you use a language that is to the point and that contains causal links as *because, since, for, as, due to, because of...*

Layout: What should the research proposal look like?

There are no standards for the layout of research proposals unless they are provided by the proposal's addressee. But you could use the layout that you are going to use in your paper in order to find out if your supervisor agrees with it.

Approach: How and when do I write my research proposal?

– You write the research proposal after you have taken the first steps within your writing and research process. This means: You should be able to answer the questions named above with regard to the elements of the proposal. But at the same time, you shouldn't yet have gone to far into your research work.
– You can write the proposal in two steps: When writing the first draft, write this text just for yourself as a reader, that is, without paying too much attention to style and language. By writing your thoughts down, you will get a clearer idea about what you want to do. Pay attention to the elements that should be included in the proposal. In your second draft, you write for the text for your reader. You have to keep in mind the person who is going to read it and what effect you want it to have on the reader. Also think of all the necessary information that the reader will need and of the language that he or she will expect.
– Don't look at the research proposal as additional work: You can use parts of it for the introduction in your paper. The proposal can also help you to evaluate your progress while you are researching.

Sources:
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