

Typical components of a Dissertation or Project Proposal

The choice of elements used in a proposal will depend on the discipline and level of study.

Component	Content and aspects to consider
Proposed title	This should be relatively short; a two-part title style can be useful
Description of the subject area/ Summary/ Background/ Brief review/ Statement of the problem or issue to be addressed	A brief outline that provides context such as; a synopsis of past work; a description of the 'gap' to be filled or new area to be explored; a summary of current ideas and, where relevant, hypotheses
Aim of research	General description of the overall purpose; a statement of intent
Objectives	Listing of specific outcomes you expect to fulfil in order to achieve aim
Literature to be examined	Sources you intend to consult during your researches
Research methods or critical approach	How you propose to carry out your investigation
Preliminary bibliography	Details (in appropriate format) of the key sources you have already consulted
(Special) resources required	Information sources, samples, instruments, people, etc. necessary to carry out your investigation.
Outline plan of dissertation or project report.	For example, the likely section or chapter headings and subheadings.
Timetable/ plan	A realistic breakdown of the stages of your dissertation, ideally with your appropriate milestones
Statement or declaration that you understand and will comply with safety and/or ethical rules	The guarantee that you have considered these; details may be required in certain cases

Try not to prepare your proposal in a rush – if possible, write out a near-final draft and leave it for a few days before coming back to it again with a critical mind, then make suitable modifications before your final submission.

Choosing a title

The point at which you write your proposal may be the first time you have concrete thoughts about your title. Consider adopting a two-part title – an attention-grabbing statement, followed by a colon or a dash and a secondary title that defines the content more closely. It is also worth noting that the title given at the proposal stage should be seen as provisional, for the nature of the study and the outcomes may dictate a change at the end of the process.

Practical tips for producing a successful proposal

Carry out an appropriate amount of background reading beforehand, selecting the sources carefully. You do not need to read all of the papers at the start, as this will take up too much of your study time, but you do need to gain an up-to-date appreciation of key topics and trends in your chosen field. Choose recently published reviews on the topic, especially those likely to prompt ideas about key aspects that need to be looked at in more detail.

Try to formulate a research question to investigate (hypothesis). Your dissertation needs a focus and this will come from trying to answer a specific question; investigate a key issue or highlight a specific topic. Use brainstorming techniques such as mind mapping to help you develop your ideas.

Remember that your proposal is only a proposal. You do not need to write the complete work at this stage. You merely need to establish, for the benefit of your supervisor, that you have chosen a reasonable topic and are likely to succeed in producing a dissertation or project report that meets the learning outcomes of your course.

Discuss your proposal with staff beforehand. At an early stage, try to arrange an appointment with a staff member for a brief discussion about possible directions. If you have been allocated a supervisor, then consult them. (Note your supervisor may not be chosen until after you have chosen your topic).

Get feedback from your peers. Show an early draft to a friend or family member, or swap proposals with a classmate. Ask for comments and respond to them. This kind of feedback is especially valuable to ensure that the logic of your proposal is transparent to readers.

Use appropriate language. Your proposal should be clear to the non-specialist, but include appropriate terminology to show that you understand key concepts and jargon.

Set yourself realistic aims and objectives, bearing in mind the need for originality in your work. The person considering your proposal will be aware that a

major reason for students having problems with dissertations and project choices is that they were over-ambitious at the start.

The difference between aims and objectives (goals)

The distinction between these can be confusing. Widely accepted definitions generally suggest that *aims* are statements of intent or purpose that are broad in nature, and hence defined in general terms perhaps relating to an overall outcome, while *objectives* (goals) are outlined in more specific terms and tend to relate to individual, achievable outcomes that are required to achieve the ultimate aim. For example, the aim of a dissertation might be to 'summarise viewpoints within a particular research field' while an objective might be to 'compare the various research methods in use to measure a particular variable'. Ideally objectives will state 'what', 'how', 'where' and 'when' (as appropriate). Some people favour **SMART** objectives that are: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, and **T**angible: -

- **Smart** (What am I aiming to achieve)
- **Measurable** (What targets can I set myself)
- **Achievable** (What can I do in the time)
- **Realistic** (Are my goals realistic)
- **Tangible** (Will I be able to see the progress I`m making)

Adapted from Mcmillan, K. and Weyers, J. (2007) *How to write Dissertation and Project Reports.* Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.