

---

# 20 Steps to Writing Your Thesis or Dissertation Proposal



**Do you like adventure? Are you excited by exploration? Are you OK with this not being a linear process?** It might instead feel like you're in a continuous loop of discovery, reading, writing...and more discovery, reading, and re-writing? (And will you know when to stop reading, writing, and revising and submit your proposal?)

1. What interests you? (And why?)
2. What can reasonably be answered or addressed in the time you have? With the support (all kinds – financial, mentoring, etc) that you have?
3. Can this topic/project be a book (if you are in the humanities) or a published manuscript (if you are in the social science, life sciences, or engineering)?
4. How interested in and supportive is your advisor of this topic? (Not a deal-breaker, but it suggests another question: How independently can you work on this topic?)
5. Have you talked to your advisor about their expectations for your proposal? What are your graduate program's requirements and expectations for your proposal?
6. Have you completed lots of reading? Now start writing. Even if you don't feel ready to write, start writing. It will help you know what other resources you must read or locate or research. (Write every day. Something. Every day.) .
7. One more before we get to content: Who is your audience? Think of them as you write. Seldom are you writing for yourself, or just your advisor, or only your committee.
8. Does it help to consider a first draft as a series of questions with answers?
  - What is the issue or research question(s)?
  - How is your work situated in the existing literature and context of previous research?
  - What is your methodology? What will you do?
  - What do you expect to find?

- Why is this significant? Original?
- Do you have pilot data from earlier research that is relevant?
- What sites or archives will you visit? What equipment will you need?  
What sources will you consult?
- What references have you consulted?
- What timeline do you expect to follow to completion?

9. Is this beginning to feel like you have an introduction (statement of purpose), a review of literature (or scholarship), methods (research design), and analysis sections.

**Below, write your own questions or guidance from your advisor that will be key to writing your proposal.**

10. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

18. Are you anxious about your research and writing? Anxiety is not a sign of incompetence – just inexperience. None of us will ever do a research project we have done before – we’re all inexperienced to some degree. Anxiety is normal.
19. Make sure you know about and use the many resources available at your institution – resources for writing, for support and community-building, and for physical and mental well-being.
20. Do you know the ethical dimensions and decisions at each step of your research? Failure to know and follow responsible and ethical conduct in research and writing has serious consequences for your academic and scholarly career. It is critical to your success that your research be sound, responsible, and ethical. When you fail at this, all scientists and scholars suffer.

Booth, W., Colomb, G., & Williams, J. (2003). *The craft of research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zinsser, W. (1988). *Writing to learn*. New York: Harper Collins.

Zinsser, W. (2006). *On writing well* (7th ed.) New York: Harper Collins.

Adapted and used with permission from *The Productive Graduate Student Writer*, Jan Allen, Stylus Publishing (2019).