



How to Prepare Thesis Proposal

A guide for MPhil and PhD students



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To many students, it may be the first time that they write a research proposal. This booklet serves as a reference guide to highlight the process in preparing a research proposal and basic elements that should be included. Students should bear in mind that this booklet is in no way an exhaustive list of topics that need to be considered in preparing a thesis proposal. Different disciplines may have different expectations and requirements on the substance, format and length of a proposal. In this regard, students are strongly advised to consult their supervisor(s) and the department beforehand.

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All MPhil and PhD students in HKU are required to have their candidature confirmed by the end of the probationary period. By the end of the probationary period, every student is required to submit a thesis proposal for consideration by the Departmental Research Postgraduate Committee (DRPC) and the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee (FHDC). The thesis proposal is one of the most important documents that the University will consider in determining whether the candidature of a student should be confirmed or be terminated. It is also important to students as a plan for how the research should be implemented and to set a time schedule so that the thesis could be completed within the specified time frame.

Degree	Full-time		Part-time	
	Probationary period	Study period	Probationary period	Study period
MPhil	12 months	24 months	18 months	36 months
3-year PhD	12 months	36 months	18 months	54 months
4-year PhD	18 months	48 months	24 months	72 months

II. Preparation for a Thesis Proposal

Before writing the thesis proposal, a student should have already taken most of coursework and done an extensive literature review. He/she should have a solid understanding on the background materials and previous research done by other researchers in the same field. Most importantly, he/she should have identified a research topic with his/her supervisor. In developing a research topic, it is advisable to develop two to three topics first and then finally focus on a topic to develop further. You may like to ask the following questions in deciding on a research topic:

- What is the contribution to knowledge in your field of study?
- Has it been done by others before?
- What is the theoretical framework for the study?
- What are the research hypotheses or questions?
- Are data, if needed, available?
- How to collect data?
- What are the appropriate methods in analyzing the data?
- What are the expected end results?
- Can the thesis be done within the time period of study?

Writing a thesis is the beginning of a scholarly work. You should write a thesis that you can manage within your present resource and time frame.

Developing a research topic and writing a proposal cannot be done within a week. You must allow yourself enough time to develop your research topic and proposal well before the deadline. You need time for your library research and to make sure that you understand all the issues involved in your proposed research. You may also need time to learn about the particular research methodologies that you propose to use. You should consult your supervisor in the process and be open to any advice that he/she may be willing to give. It is helpful to look at some sample products, i.e. theses in your field, before writing your proposal because at the end of the day, the final product of your thesis proposal is the thesis. You need to know what it roughly looks like before you can propose what to do in order to produce it. If possible, ask for copies of past theses that your supervisor has approved. Having a sample of a successful thesis can make the preparation of your own much easier.

As your proposal will probably go through several drafts before you are ready to submit it, you should set aside each draft for a few days, or even a week, before attempting to revise it. This will give you some distance from the draft, enabling you to spot mistakes or gaps in logic that you simply could not see before. It also allows you time to show it to your supervisor to get his comments and advice. If you start preparing your proposal a few days before the deadline, the proposal will be rushed, and more likely will be flawed.

Do not take the thesis proposal lightly. A good thesis proposal is half-way to a good thesis. It will help you to focus on what you would like to do and plan to do in your research. It is also a reflection of your knowledge of your field of study and research methodology and how serious you are in doing research. A sloppy thesis proposal will not impress people who are examining it that you are ready for your research.

In writing the research proposal, you should:

- State the objectives and significance of your research clearly
- Show the contribution of your research in advancing the knowledge of your field of study
- Be focused on your research questions
- Provide a sound theoretical framework of your study based on comprehensive literature review (after you have finished your thesis, you should be the expert and pioneer in your field)
- Make sure that you have cited the most important seminal work related to your study
- Avoid providing a long reference list which contains a lot of work which is marginal to your research
- Provide a persuasive argument and justification of your research
- Provide a time schedule of your research and completion of the thesis
- Indicate the likely end results of your research
- Write clearly in good English

III. Basic Elements of a Thesis Proposal

The following topics/chapters are the most commonly suggested elements of a thesis proposal. It is highly recommended that students should consult the supervisor(s) and the Department for the specific requirements in their own field of study.

1. Title Page

- (i) Tentative thesis title
- (ii) Your full-name
- (iii) Name of your supervisor
- (iv) Degree sought
- (v) Department of study
- (vi) Date of submission

The thesis title should be concise, descriptive and fairly self-explanatory. Choose a title that is easy to understand and represent the main theme of your thesis. For example, the phrase “An investigation of ...” should be omitted and students could consider stating the title in terms of a functional relationship so as to clearly indicate the independent and dependent variables.

A sample title page is given at [Appendix I](#).

2. Abstract of Thesis Proposal

The abstract is a summary of your thesis proposal. It is usually not more than 1 or 2 pages containing the problem statement, the rationale of the study, the hypothesis, the methodology that you are proposing to use, the expected result and the significance of your study. This section gives the reader an overview of your thesis proposal. Don't try to explain the technical details or methodology of your study here, as these should be included in the latter sections. Try to present your idea in layman language so that even readers who are not in your field could understand. This section should not contain references.

3. Table of Contents

You should list all headings and subheadings with page numbers. Subheadings should be indented.

4. Introduction

This section sets the context for your proposed project and must capture the reader's interest. You should explain the background of your study starting from a broad picture narrowing in on your research questions, listing the relevant references, as appropriate. The introduction should be at a level that makes it easy to understand for readers with a general background in your field.

5. Literature Review

The section demonstrates that you are knowledgeable of the primary texts and secondary research studies done by other researchers and ensure that you are not “reinventing the wheel”. It is important to note that this section is not merely a summary of the relevant literature you have read but instead, you have to provide a critical review on it and be able to relate the literature to your proposed research. You should point to areas overlooked or inadequately addressed by previous studies and discuss how your proposed research could contribute to the knowledge advancement in the area. This shows your ability to integrate and synthesize the literature and to develop new ideas and innovations. Proper referencing in this section is very important.

The followings are the most common deficiencies of a literature review and you should try to avoid all of them:

- lack of organization and structure
- lack of focus and coherence
- being repetitive
- failing to cite influential papers or studies
- citing irrelevant and trivial references
- failing to cite the current papers or studies
- failing to critically evaluate cited papers

6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This section tells reader what you would like to find out in your research. State your research questions and hypotheses explicitly in this section. In most cases, the primary research question should be broad enough to cover your whole proposed research and the subsidiary research questions and hypotheses are more specific and each of them should focus on a certain aspect of your research. These hypotheses usually form chapters or sub-sections of your final thesis. You should explain how these research questions and hypotheses are formulated.

7. Methodology

This section explains “how” you are going to conduct your research. You should demonstrate that you are fully aware of the alternative research methods and explain how your proposed methodology is more advantageous than the others in attaining your stated objectives.

For quantitative research, you should include:

- (i) the research design, e.g. a questionnaire study or a laboratory experiment
- (ii) the subjects or data source, e.g. who will participate in the data collection, the sample size and sampling methodology
- (iii) the instruments, e.g. the kind of measuring instruments or questionnaires and the reason for choosing these instruments
- (iv) procedure, e.g. how you are going to carry out your study, what activities are involved and how long does it take
- (v) the methods of analysis, e.g. modeling techniques or statistical methods

You should also discuss the limitations of the proposed methodology, the assumption and the range of validity in data collection.

Where the thesis research involves human subjects, you must also obtain the approval from the appropriate ethics committee. A copy of the approval, if available, should be attached to the proposal.

If you have conducted a pilot study, please also provide the details here and discuss how the methodology will be improved in view of the previous experience.

For qualitative research, as there are no well-established and widely accepted general rules or principles, you need to elaborate more on the data collection process and how you will analyze the results.

The methodology carries great weight to affect the success of a piece of research. You can have a very good research topic but a poor research methodology could easily ruin the outcome! In order to prepare yourself for your research and to enable the reviewer to understand your proposed study better, you should be more detail in your research methodology. For example, how to collect your data, how many samples to take, what specific methods will you used in analyzing your data.

8. Work Schedule

Every student is supposed to submit the thesis for examination by the end of the study period, i.e. 2 years (full-time)/3 years (part-time) for MPhil; 3 years (full-time)/4.5 years (part-time) for 3-year PhD and 4 years (full-time)/6 years (part-time) for 4-year PhD. Hence, you should not start a research that could not be possibly completed within your study period.

In this section, you need to identify the tasks and make realistic estimates of the time required for each task. This could be easily done in a table or chart format. Setting important milestones could definitely help to monitor the research progress.

9. Expected Results and Implication of Results

Obviously you do not have results at the proposal stage. However, you need to have some idea about what kind of data you will be collecting, and what methods will be used in order to answer your research question or test your hypothesis. You should also state the contribution expected from your research efforts.

10. Tentative Thesis Chapter Outline

You should check with your supervisor if this is a required section of the thesis proposal. Present the chapter outline as a draft contents page with brief annotations of expected content or stages will help you in thinking through the process and outcome of your research. Follow the standard sections relevant to your type of research. Look at past theses in your area and discuss your ideas with your supervisor.

11. List of References

This list is desirable only if the proposal contains six or more references. Otherwise, the references can be inserted in the text within parentheses, i.e.

(Morita, Y [1996], Spring torrents: The catastrophic effects of corn snow meltdown. *European Ski Journal*, 5, 141-162). (Note that brackets, not parentheses, are used within parentheses.)

The style and format of the references depend on the disciplinary field. The main consideration is consistency; whatever style is chosen should be followed scrupulously throughout. (Please see IV(1)(v) below.)

1. Presentation

(i) **Fonts**

Even with access to all the power and variety that the combination of modern software and hardware offers, resist the temptation to use fancy or decorative fonts in the main part of the proposal. Look at any textbook, or a newspaper, and note that their body text is almost invariably printed in a serif font (a serif is a small cross stroke at the tops and bottoms of the main strokes of the letters, such as Roman, Times, Times Roman or Palatino). Sans serif (sans = without) fonts lack embellishments and are usually used only in titles, headings or other blocks of text, such as quotations, which need to be set apart from the main text.

Use a standard font size (12 cpi). Small fonts are uncomfortable to read, while large ones are extremely distracting. Don't try to use a small font in order to cram everything that you want to say into specified page limits.

(ii) **Sections and Headings**

To improve the layout of your proposal and make it easier to read, you can divide it into sections and sub-sections, each with a relevant heading. Use line spaces to separate the sections from one another, and bold, capitals or italics to highlight the headings.

(iii) **Point Form**

If you have to write a list of points/items, it may be a good idea to use point form. If your list consists of three items or fewer, you may as well write it sequentially, but for more than three, or if each point is quite long, point form is neater and easier to read. You can use bullets, asterisks, dashes, numbers or letters to introduce the points.

(iv) In-text Citations

In a document as short as a research proposal, it is advisable to use a name-year (**Smith, 1994**)* system and to structure the corresponding reference list alphabetically. This has at least two advantages. First, the reader may actually be familiar with the text(s) that you cite and will instantly know what you are referring to rather than having to take the time to flick back and forward to the reference list. Secondly, it will save you having to re-order numbers, and the numbers in the corresponding reference list, if you add further citations later. You may, however, prefer to use a number system, if that is what you are familiar with. There are various different styles within both systems, and there is probably a preferred one in your field. In the long run, it is immaterial which you use, as long as you are consistent.

* Where there is more than one author, the citation should read (**Smith & Jones, 1994**), or (**Smith et al., 1994**), in the case of multiple authors.

(v) Reference Lists

Again, you will probably adopt the layout style that your department, faculty or discipline recommends, and, as before, consistency is important. For easier reading, it is helpful if you can leave a one-line space between each entry, highlight book/journal titles in some way, and bold your own name and those of your co-investigators wherever they appear. For both references and citations, make sure that you read the relevant style manual thoroughly, double-checking all of your entries against it so that inconsistencies do not arise. Using reference list software (such as Reference Manager) is also useful.

Appendix II contains some examples of the issues that we have just covered on presentation.

2. Language

(i) Sentences

In general, try to keep your sentences simple and short. It is not necessary for a piece of writing to be “difficult” in order to be properly “academic”. To help keep your reader’s interest, it is certainly a good idea to vary sentence lengths throughout any piece of writing, but overlong sentences invariably confuse the reader; they have to be read more than once, sometimes over and over, until they no longer make any sense. It never hurts to make your meaning quite clear: not everyone has the time to unravel long, unwieldy, jargon-filled sentences.

(ii) Linking Devices

Some conjunctions used to link ideas within and between sentences have become rather overused, particularly in an academic context. The most obvious are moreover, furthermore, hence and thus. It should almost always be possible to link sentences using a logical flow of ideas rather than conjunctions, but on the rare occasions that internal logic is not enough, the words ‘and’, ‘also’, ‘but’, ‘so’ and the occasional ‘therefore’, ‘however’ or ‘although’ should be enough. Use others sparingly, if at all.

(iii) Other Overused Words

aforementioned	paradigm	notwithstanding
above-mentioned	parameter	interpersonal
(the) above ____	etc	impact (used as a verb)
(the) said ____	significantly	very
viz	prior to	besides
correlate	indeed	utilise
respectively	interrelated	inherent

Spend some time thinking of alternatives to these so that your writing does not become clichéd - and don’t use a thesaurus. Thesauri usually list equally exotic alternatives, which will in their turn become overused. Stick to simple language.

(iv) Jargon

Jargon is generally best kept to a minimum. If it becomes necessary to use a word that you think the reader might not understand, then you should give a brief explanation, either by supplying clues about the meaning of a word throughout the sentence, or by placing the definition in brackets or between commas or dashes after the word. It is easier to cut out unnecessary jargon if you avoid importing work from elsewhere - for example, from a lecture or journal article that you have written. Not only will it be obvious that you have done so (the style will differ from other parts of your proposal), but it will usually require substantial rewriting before it is suitable for your new audience - much more bother than writing it fresh in the first place.

(v) Variation and the Use of Pronouns

A common problem in academic writing is a lack of variation, with writers using the same nouns over and over throughout a paragraph. This quickly becomes very monotonous. Make good use of variants and pronouns to ensure that your writing is more interesting.

Along the same lines, you may find that there is some overlap in your answers to various questions. If this happens, refer the reader back/forwards to the relevant section rather than repeating the same sentences or paragraphs all over again. Even if you do have to repeat information - in the abstract, for example - don't use exactly the same words as before. It bores the reader and gives the impression that the writer is unimaginative. Paraphrase them instead.

(vi) Spoken vs. Written Language

Spoken, informal language is often inappropriately used in proposals, which should contain more formal writing. The most common examples of this are the words 'get', 'like' (for making comparisons), and 'all' (as in "all (of) the books"). Some synonyms for 'get', depending on the context, are: 'obtain', 'gain', 'acquire', 'find'. 'For example' can often be used in place of 'like'.

(vii) Grammar

Almost all of us, whether native English speakers or not, have problems with grammar at some time or another. In our haste to get our ideas down on paper, we are more concerned with content than form, and so we often make mistakes. Some mistakes are easily discovered during proofreading, while others, particularly if you are not literary-minded, are not so easy either to spot or to remedy. If grammar is a problem for you - and you will usually know if this is the case - then you should be honest and try to do something about it rather than submitting a sub-standard piece of work. There are some simple things you can do to help yourself:

- **Write short sentences**, as recommended in **Sentences**, above. The longer a sentence is, the more complicated the grammar becomes, and the more likely it is that you will make mistakes.
- **Ask colleagues or friends to proofread your work**. This will help with grammar problems as well as any gaps in logic or unclearly-explained points. You know what you meant when you wrote something down, but part of the explanation may still be in your head and not on the paper! A good proofreader will help sort this out. Alternatively, **consult a professional editor or proofreader** if you feel that you need more help than your colleagues can provide.

(viii) Spelling

Probably more than anything else, bad spelling irritates a literate reader. Often it is your typing rather than your spelling that is at fault, but whichever it is, if you do not correct mistakes, it looks as though you rushed your proposal, can't be bothered to use a spell-checker or dictionary, and are therefore a sloppy worker - not a very good impression to make on someone who is going to decide whether or not to confirm your candidature.

A word on American vs. British spelling: BE CONSISTENT in your use of the one that you choose. As it is likely, if you are not a native speaker of the one that you choose, that you will not be aware of the many differences between the two, it is crucial that you use the relevant spellchecker to help iron out any inconsistencies in your proposal.

Please see [Appendix III](#) for more detailed examples and further discussion of language matters.

V. Further Readings

Cooley, Linda and Lewkowicz, Jo (2003), *Dissertation Writing in Practice: Turning Ideas into Text*, Hong Kong : Hong Kong University Press.

Cryer, Pat (2000), *The Research Student's Guide to Success*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Day, Robert A. (1995), *Scientific English*, Westport: Oryx Press.

Strunk, William, Jr. (2000), *The Elements of Style*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

APPENDIX I - TITLE PAGE (SAMPLE)

Your Tentative Thesis Title Here

by

Your Full-name

Degree Sought

Department of Study

Name of your Supervisor

Date of Submission

Use of Point Form

The following sentence:

Our objectives are to find 1) a suitable format, 2) sufficient transmission speed, and 3) minimum corruption of data.

might have been more effectively presented as either:

Our objectives are to find:
 - a suitable format;
 - sufficient transmission speed; and
 - minimum corruption of data.

or:

Our objectives are to find a suitable format, sufficient transmission speed, and minimum corruption of data.

Reference List Layout

Compare the following two extracts from reference lists, both roughly following the APA style:

Bloggs, J and Hartley, J R (1995, December). How to write a better résumé. *Job Hunting Quarterly*, 5 - 24.

Geront, K R and Wong, Y L (1995). *Résumé Basics* (3rd ed). London: Little, Brown.

Lemain, F (1992). Basic résumé construction. *Eastern European Résumé Journal*, 64, 157 - 206.

This is much easier to read than:

Bloggs, J and Hartley, J R (1995, December). How to write a better résumé. *Job Hunting Quarterly*, 5 - 24.

Geront, K R and Wong, Y L (1995). *Résumé Basics* (3rd ed). London: Little, Brown.

Lemain, F (1992). Basic résumé construction. *Eastern European Résumé Journal*, 64, 157 - 206.

Sentences

Overlong sentences cause confusion. They usually become too long for one of two reasons:

- (i) using ten words where one will do, or
- (ii) trying to include too many ideas.

1. Here is an example of a sentence that uses too many words:

Since there is **such a large variety** of potential applications with industrial contributions **that can be made**, we need to identify a particular application that is **both** original, **cost-effective** and **has a high potential for achievability within the time frame of this proposed project**.

(45 words)

Looking at the highlighted phrases in order:

- (i) such a large variety : the word 'large' is essentially redundant;
- (ii) that can be made : too many words;
- (iii) both : 3 things follow, so 'both' is incorrect. It is usually redundant anyway;
- (iv) cost-effective : a trendy buzz-word that usually simply means 'cheap';
- (v) has a high potential... : 'achievability' has been invented by the author, and the whole phrase simply contains too many words.

It can be significantly cut down, as follows:

Given the range of potential industrial applications, we must identify one in particular that is original, cheap, and can be achieved by the end of the project.

(27 words)

2. Now here is a sentence with too many ideas in it:

A selected group of girders is subjected to a simple correction process to expand the number of rust-eating agents assigned to individual girders to improve the suppression rate of the rust that forms on the structure as a whole.

You probably can't understand this straight away. The number of *ofs* and *tos* confuses us, until we are not sure what process is being carried out with what kind of effect on which thing. The sentence would be much better slightly rewritten and divided into two, like this:

A selected group of girders is subjected to a simple correction process which expands the number of rust-eating agents assigned to individual girders. This improves the suppression rate of the rust that forms on the structure as a whole.

It could even have been left as one sentence, if it had been slightly better organized:

A selected group of girders is subjected to a simple correction process which expands the number of rust-eating agents assigned to individual girders, **which in turn** improves the suppression rate of the rust that forms on the structure as a whole.

3. An example of an overly complicated sentence:

The proposed method does not require the user to manipulate a keyboard when responding to screen prompts, but instead employs an interactive touch-screen device.

(25 words)

With simpler vocabulary, it could be much clearer:

With this method, the user does not need to type his/her answers to the computer's questions, but can simply touch reply-boxes on the screen instead.

(27 words)

There is very little difference in length, but the second sentence is much easier to understand, as it does not use unnecessarily difficult words.

Linking Devices

The following paragraph uses a lot of linking words (marked in bold), most of them unnecessary. They are very intrusive, tending to draw the reader's attention away from what is actually being said:

Problems often occur at the time of transmission, and the resultant crystal loss is usually due to congestion in the tubes. **However**, the FRG6 routine, which has a built-in error detection scheme, will abort transmission if an error is found. **Nevertheless**, if FRG6 aborted every time errors were detected, many more crystals would ultimately be lost. **Furthermore**, this would pre-empt the machine's ability to carry out error management and loss recovery. **Therefore**, passing damaged crystals to the decoder for correct treatment without aborting the entire transmission process is definitely something that we must concentrate on in the future. **Hence**, developing an efficient error management and loss recovery system must take priority over all other issues involved in the various methods of transmission.

The passage can be easily rewritten, using internal logic to join the various ideas together instead:

Problems often occur at the time of transmission, and the resultant crystal loss is usually due to congestion in the tubes. The FRG6 routine, with its built-in error-detection scheme, will abort the transmission if an error is found; although if it aborted every time, many more crystals would ultimately be lost, and the machine's ability to carry out error management and loss recovery would be pre-empted. Passing damaged crystals to the decoder for treatment without aborting the entire transmission process is definitely something that we must concentrate on in the future. The development of an efficient error management and loss recovery mechanism should take priority over all other issues involved in the various methods of transmission.

The ideas in the passage now flow much more easily, leading us effortlessly from one sentence to the next.

Jargon

The following examples show some ways of explaining technical terms, whenever their use is unavoidable:

In some plants, the honey guides (petal markings indicating the position of the nectaries) appear to the insect as orange dots.

The people native to this area used to play a little-known musical instrument called an ocarina - an elongated egg-shaped wind instrument - until the early years of this century.

Formerly, the standard treatment for hypoglycaemia, or low blood sugar, was a low-carbohydrate, high-fat diet.

Variation and the Use of Pronouns

The following paragraph shows the kind of deadly, dull repetitiousness of certain words that occurs all too often in research proposals:

Hong Kong doesn't get very much snow. In fact, most people who live in Hong Kong have never seen snow. The proposed snow machine can create snow whenever we want snow, and will make sure that everybody in Hong Kong has a truly White Christmas every year.

Fortunately, the remedy is simple. First, let's deal with the word *snow*:

Hong Kong doesn't get very much snow. In fact, most people who live in Hong Kong have never seen **any**. The proposed machine can create snow whenever we want **it**, and will make sure that everybody in Hong Kong has a truly White Christmas every year.

The redundant *snow* which preceded *machine* has been deleted, and two other occurrences have been replaced with pronouns. Now let's look at *Hong Kong*:

Hong Kong doesn't get very much snow. In fact, most people who live **here** have never seen any. The proposed machine can create snow whenever we want it, and will make sure that everybody **in the territory** has a White Christmas every year.

Spoken vs. Written Language

The following sentences show the inappropriate use of spoken, colloquial English:

We hope we can *get* the final results within a year.

This process will be useful in many situations, *like* playing football, watching TV or eating in a restaurant.

We need to talk to *all* the subjects within six months.

They should have been written as:

We hope to *have* the final results within a year.

It will be useful in many situations, *such as* playing football, watching TV or eating in a restaurant.

We need to talk to *all of* the subjects within six months.

Compound Words

Following is an example of a possible ambiguity resulting from a missing hyphen:

We will have to ensure decisions are made and *follow up* actions taken.

Does the writer mean that he and his co-researchers will make sure that *decisions are made* and *follow-up actions taken*, or are they going to first make sure that *decisions are made*, and then *follow up the actions* taken? This ambiguity will never become clear without actually consulting the writer. Always check your compound words to ensure that there is no possibility of misunderstandings arising.



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