

## MAA PROPOSAL GUIDELINES<sup>i</sup>

### SUMMARY

- **Introduction:** General background, importance of the subject area.
- **Objective:** A concise statement of the purpose or objective of the project; this should flow logically from the introduction and be short and specific.
- **Methods:** General plan, specific methods, sampling or experimental design, duration, and projected procedure for data analysis; these methods should be appropriate for directly addressing the purpose or objective.
- **Results:** Results of theoretical investigations, experiments, field sampling, computer simulations, data analyses, etc. should be clearly stated.
- **Interpretation:** How will the results be interpreted? There should be explicitly stated inferences that would be drawn from all outcomes; outcomes that cannot be interpreted imply imprecise objectives or inappropriate methods.
- **Significance:** Why is this investigation justified? What is the scientific or practical contribution?
- **Timeline/Workplan:** The timeline helps to assess whether the proposed research is feasible as planned and establishes milestones. Periods when there are activities that slow progress should be highlighted when accounted for when selecting milestones. The timeline should also indicate when likely outputs (e.g., scientific paper and reports) will be produced.

The length of the written project proposal should be the minimum needed to do adequately address these topics; 8-10 pages including references would be appropriate. The intent is to write the proposal early in the degree program. If written too late, it will begin to resemble the project proposal in size and scope, and its primary purpose will be lost.

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### Writing the Proposal

The objective of a master's project proposal is to ensure a definite plan for the work to be done. Once approved by the supervisory committee, it becomes an informal contract between the student and the committee. In addition, a project proposal serves as:

- A basis for discussions between student and committee regarding experimental design, data analysis, and focus of the coursework
- A clear statement of the amount of effort anticipated for an acceptable project proposal.

The proposal is essentially an outline of the research, similar to a set of architectural drawings for building a house: the clearer the plan, the more timely and successful the completion of the project. A well done, acceptable proposal, therefore, is a kind of personal contract between you the candidate, and your committee.

The challenge lies in deciding exactly what topic you want to propose! It is true that some fortunate students may be offered a specific topic or problem to pursue by a mentor whose preferences agree with the student's own. But more often, your job is to come up with a specific topic or research question that shows promise for extended study. Do not worry if a topic does not suggest itself to you immediately. Be ready and willing to try out a number of possibilities to see how they develop. How do you "try out" a topic? By doing a topic analysis!

This is really a simplified proposal form that includes the following parts:

1. Problem, proposal, or question

2. Importance of research
3. Significant prior research
4. Possible research approach or methodology
5. Potential outcomes of research and importance of each

Analyzing a potentially useful topic in this step-by-step way forces you to look at it objectively and precisely within two to four pages. Here are some points to watch for:

1. If you are unable to write your topic in either the form of a proposal or a clear statement, you need to refine and clarify the topic. It must be stated specifically, not in vague, imprecise terms.
2. You'll need to be able to justify what you're doing and prove that it's worthy of your time and energy. It's always handy if you can quote a major authority stating a need for the research. But if you don't have an authority on hand, try to demonstrate that your research is in some way significant to a major activity.
3. Be sure you have a reasonable (if not exhaustive) grasp of what's been done before. This will help support #2.
4. Extremely important part! Exactly how do you plan to approach the research? Try to explain as precisely as possible, and include an alternative methodology. This part may still be in rough form, but it should indicate the likely nature of your approach.
5. This will be important in assessing the worth of your topic. For example, let's say you might propose the use of a questionnaire to collect evidence. You would then need to analyze the results of the questionnaire. Your potential outcomes (speaking generally) might be a positive correlation between two factors, a negative one, none at all, or unsatisfactory responses. Perhaps only one of these outcomes could lead to a dissertation. That result could suggest the need for a different approach to the issue, which in turn could lead you down a more productive path.

Let's say all of the above is complete and you're now in the happy position of writing the first draft of your formal proposal. This is an expansion of the topic analysis and will be your final work plan, so it will probably end up being anywhere from ten to twenty pages.

Again, here's a generally accepted proposal with an idea of expected page length:

Section of Proposal	Page Length
1. Summary	1-2
2. Proposal, problem or question	1-3
3. Importance of topic	1-2
4. Prior research on topic	1-7
5. Research approach or methodology	2-8
6. Limitations and key assumptions	1-2
7. Contributions to knowledge	1-3 (for each potential outcome, if there are more than one)
8. Descriptions of proposed chapters in dissertation	2-3

Note: Length of the proposal will vary considerably over the areas of the program. You

need to work with your Primary Advisor to determine what is best for your project.

(1-4) The first four sections are about the same as those in your topic analysis, only amplified and refined. The prior research section in particular must be more comprehensive, although you may certainly summarize your report of prior research if there is a great deal of it. Your actual submission will be the obvious place to go into more detail.

The research approach or methodology section (5) should be explained explicitly. For example, what questions will you include on your questionnaire? If your work includes an experiment, what apparatus will you use, what procedures will you follow, what data do you intend to collect, and what instruments will you use in data collection? List any major questions yet to be decided.

In the limitations section (6) make clear what your study will not attempt to do.

**Remember** that it's often necessary to refine the first proposal, most likely by narrowing the scope of your study. But this is all part of the essential process of formulating a working plan for a dissertation that will yield a successful result. If you think of your proposal in this light, you're more apt to remain patient as you, work your way to the final draft.

### A Checklist for Self-Appraisal

1. Does the proposal have imagination?
2. Is the problem stated clearly?
  - (a) proposal clear? testable?
  - (b) are objectives clearly stated? can they be accomplished?
  - (c) problem perhaps too large?
3. Is the methodology feasible?
  - (a) can data be collected?
  - (b) how will data be analyzed?
  - (c) will the analysis allow the acceptance or rejection of the proposal?
  - (d) is the sample population overused?
4. What might the results of the analysis look like? (tables, graphs, maps, drawings, etc.)
5. What are the consequences if
  - (a) the experiment fails;
  - (b) data cannot be obtained;
  - (c) analysis is inconclusive;
  - (d) proposal is rejected or accepted?
6. Can major research activities be listed?
7. Can a time estimate be made for each activity?
8. Again, are the dimensions of the project manageable?

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<sup>i</sup> Compiled from several sources including the following: 2002 Dr. Kendra Gaines <http://www.gwr.arizona.edu/writingproposal3.htm> with additions by Davis and Parker; QUERM, [http://depts.washington.edu/qerm/degrees/degrees\\_masters\\_thesis.html](http://depts.washington.edu/qerm/degrees/degrees_masters_thesis.html);