

A Systematic Guide to Write a Scholarly Research Proposal in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

This traditional narrative review provides a systematic guideline for developing scholarly research proposals and transitioning them into final research reports, with its specific focus on the challenges and opportunities presented by generative AI era. The intent of this review is that proposal writing remains a fundamentally creative, non-generative process despite technological advances. The study addresses three primary objectives is to examine the core constituents, functions, and challenges of research proposal writing—particularly topic novelty, structural integrity, and the proposal-to-publication transition, to identify the most frequent methodological and ethical requirements in research propositions, and to delineate the structural and functional distinctions between research proposals and research reports to inform best practices in scholarly writing. Synthesizing recent literature (2024–2026) with established frameworks, the review proposes that successful proposal development integrates systematic gap identification, stakeholder-driven prioritization, narrative-based discovery, and computational novelty assessment. Key findings indicate that research proposals serve not merely as bureaucratic mandates but as persuasive, planning, and ethical accountability documents that shape research trajectories. The paper concludes that mastery of proposal writing constitutes a critical scholarly competency in an increasingly competitive, impact-driven academic landscape, and offers a practical guide for early-career researchers navigating this complex terrain.

Keywords: research proposal, research report, scholarly writing, topic novelty, methodology, ethical considerations, proposal-to-publication transition¹

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INTRODUCTION

The research proposal is among the simplest documents in the academic projects as it is a blue print and a roadmap to the investigation, a persuasive document in defense of the value of a proposed research. According to Whitty, it does not help to conduct research unless it reaches the people who have to use it (cited in Symbaluk and Hoeber, 2024, p. 1). This is a declaration that denotes the mere purpose of the research proposal to declare potential contributions of a research study before the investment of resources and initiation of studies. The ability to develop a sound methodologically feasible research proposal has recently become a significant requirement to scholars in any course, or academic environment because of growing tendencies in learning and academic environments with regard to the importance and need to generate productive research studies. It is therefore a written submission to spell out in a logic format the nature of the design and the means and strategies that are going to be used. (Sudheesh, K et al.2016)

Research Objectives:

1. To thoroughly examine the main constituents, roles, and issues of writing research proposals with particular attention to the choice of the topic novelty, structural integrity, and publication transition.
2. To identify the most frequent methodological research designs with reference to their philosophical assumptions.
3. To delimit the structural and functional distinction between the research proposals and research reports to perceive the finest practices in scholarly writing.

Research Questions:

1. What are the fundamental elements, procedures, and issues of research proposal writing, specifically in the sense of novelty of topic, structural integrity, and publication transition, how are they created by?
2. Which are the most frequent methodological and ethical stipulations in research proposals and research ethics?

3. Which are the major structural and functional differences between research proposals and research reports, and can the differences inform the best practices of scholarly writing?

Significance of study:

This review is noteworthy as it deals with a basic but frequently neglected research training requirement: how a research proposal can be converted into a completed research report, especially in a time when generative AI is becoming more and more indistinct between creative academic activity and automatic text production. Synthesizing recent literature (2024-2026) with the existing methodological frameworks, the review will give early-career researchers a practical and evidence-based set of guidelines on choosing new topics, structuring persuasive proposals, adhering ethical and methodological standards, and transforming proposals into publishable reports. More important, it operationalizes the notion of novelty, i.e., it considers the gap-identification of qualitative and explicitly draws the line between the rhetorical and structural roles of proposal and report. In this way, the study provides scholars, supervisors and research committees with a logical toolkit to increase the chances of obtaining funding successfully, simplify ethical approvals, and eventually produce better research work and its impact.

Importance of Research Proposals

The purpose of this paper is to bring into focus the basic definition of the Research Proposal.

A research proposal is a specific plan that is used prior to commencement of a research process and shows what a research project will and will not accomplish its objectives (Symbaluk & Hoerber, 2024). It is a visionary proposal, which is meant to convince the parties, funders, and ethics committees, academic supervisors, or institutional review committees, that the proposed study is worth making an investment and carrying out the experiment. (Caulified, 2024).

Purposes and Functions

The research proposal does have a number of important functions in the research ecosystem. To begin with, it is an attractive instrument that proves the significance and feasibility of the suggested research. (Chung et al., 2025).

Secondly, it is a proposal consisting of planning document which forces the researchers to be systematic in the consideration of every phase of the investigation. The proposal assists in

detecting the possible risks prior to beginning the research process by making the research questions, methodological strategies, and analytical strategies be clearly explained. The proposal is evaluated by four types of stakeholders with different expectation, the academic colleagues, policy makers, practitioners and lay audiences. Each stakeholder group may manifest unique priorities and conducting a comparative analysis allows researchers to gain valuable insights into the varied perspectives and priorities associated with the prioritized review topics. Hoekstra & Lhachimi (2025). Proposals provide answers to two fundamental questions as highlighted by Symbaluk and Hoeber (2024), the reason behind the research. How should the research be conducted to bring out the desired objective? (p. 3).

Thirdly, ethics of accountability measures are considered research proposals. Prior to implementation of research involving human subjects, animals or sensitive data, ethics review boards expect elaboration of any proposal, that outlines the method mitigation of risks attainment of informed consent and ensuring the safe guard the welfare of the subjects during the research process (Symbaluk & Hoeber, 2024).

Choosing a New Research Study

Choosing a research topic that is new and doable is one of the most difficult phases of the research process, especially among young researchers. As noted by Ben-David (2024), a very little proportion of initial promising ideas ever evolved to publishable content in high-impact journals, and the conversion rate is estimated to be about one out of ten ideas. Such a poor success rate highlights the importance of a methodical, critical, and strategic approach to the topic selection and idea evaluation. The same issues are reflected in the general literature, which focuses on the idea that the choice of a topic is often poor, resulting in poor outcomes of the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Booth et al., 2016).

Conceptualizing Novelty

The conceptual framework needed to understand novelty is a clear understanding of the concept that places new research in the context of the known knowledge. Ben-David (2024) presents a model of a vector space, so that the current academic opinion and the actual (but not fully observable) state of affairs can be viewed as different points. This gap is then served by the best research idea, which acts as a vector.

In this context, a research idea is more effective when the academic consensus and reality are significantly different (Ben-David, 2024, p. 4). This view is consistent with the argument that an effective research must go beyond an incremental contribution but instead of seeking to fill major gaps in theory or empirical evidence (Swales, 1990). New is therefore not just about being different but meaningfully different in those ways that promote knowledge

Topic Generation Strategies

The generation of research topics is not a spontaneous ability that is given to the selected scholars, but a skill that can be trained with the help of systematic practice, protocols, and critical interaction with both traditional and new tools (Bowen et al., 2025; Illingworth, 2025; Stampfl and Geyer, 2026). The strategies like gap identification, practice-based inquiry, and computational detection represent complementary avenues, and each has its own affordances and constraints (Li et al., 2025; University of Victoria Libraries, 2025; Xu et al., 2022).

Narrative-Based Discovery

Although systematic frameworks are necessary, Ben-David (2024) suggests a complementary model that is based on curiosity-driven observation. It is an approach that invites researchers to work intensively on the ground, gather anecdotal evidence and ask themselves whether the phenomena that they observe are consistent with their hypotheses.

This is a methodology that is close to inductive research traditions where theory is developed through observation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through the real-world experiences, the researchers will be able to reveal some latent patterns and unexplored phenomena that would otherwise have been ignored in purely literature-based investigations.

Gap Identification using a Literature Synthesis

According to Snyder, 2019 a systematic literature review is still one of the pillars of research gap identification. According to Hoekstra and Lhachimi (2025), an advanced solution is horizon scanning that implies checking high-quality databases and systematic reviews to identify unexplored areas.

This makes the literature review more of an active analytical process rather than a passive summary and allows the researchers to determine discrepancies in results, identify poorly researched populations or situations, identify methodological shortcomings of previous research.

These practices are in line with evidence based research synthesis (Grant and Booth, 2009).

Evaluating Topic Potential

The ideas not to be pursued are not all new. One possible solution is the fast-fail evaluation strategy suggested by Ben-David (2024), in which the idea is evaluated against feasibility criteria, including data availability, methodological rigor, and practical constraints, in a short period of time. This will make time and resources allocation efficient.

Moreover, Chung et al. (2025) propose that novelty can be quantified objectively and supplements subjective-based methods of evaluation.

Elements of Research Proposal

A properly formatted research proposal has a standard format, but has a flexibility to adapt to different disciplines. This is why, synthesizing the recommendations of various sources (Hoekstra and Lhachimi, 2025; Oklahoma Department of Transportation, 2025; Stanford Medicine, 2025; Symbaluk and Hoerber, 2024).the proposal not only describe that it is based on an intelligent understanding of the existing literature but also show the scholar thought about the time needed to conduct each stage of the research (Sudheesh, K et al.,2016) The key elements can be structured in the following way.

Title and Abstract

The title must be clear but brief, representing the focus of the research and at the same time be interesting to the reader. Symbaluk and Hoerber (2024) suggest titles that indicate the variables under investigation, and they are independent and dependent, which is an openness of what the study is all about. In social sciences it is recommended that title should not include more than 12 words (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association [APA], 2010, p. 23). Where possible, use complete rather than abbreviated terms. The use of colons in the title allows for conciseness as well as explanations Efron and Ravid (2019, p. 98)

The abstract, that is usually no more than 300 words, will include a summary of the research question, hypothesis, methods, and significance and will be an independent summary that will enable the reader to understand the nature of the proposal in a sort of a snapshot (Symbaluk and Hoeber, 2024).

Introduction

The introduction sets the purpose and setting of the research. Symbaluk and Hoeber (2024) suggest that it must start with a general introduction of the area of interest and then move to earlier studies, theoretical framework, and the importance of the proposed study. This section will have to state the research problem in a clear manner as to why it is required to be investigated and what gaps will be filled by the research.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The literature review illustrates that the researcher has commanded the available literature as well as laying the ground work to contribute. According to Oklahoma Department of Transportation (2025), literature review should prove that either there has been no other studies on the problem using the same approach or that the proposed research project will build upon, alter or refine the previous researches. This part is also expected to explain the theoretical framework that the investigation will be conducted under, that the particular research questions are related to general theoretical issues.

Research Questions and Objectives

The investigation is guided by clear and specific research questions or hypotheses. Stanford Medicine (2025) advises to have a restricted amount of aims, and states that in applications with one specific aim it is fine and that applications with two or three aims tend to be successful (p. 1). The objectives must be designed in positive terms and with action verbs like to determine, to analyze, to measure as opposed to trying to formulate general statements like to study or to investigate (Oklahoma Department of Transportation, 2025).

Methodology

The technical heart of the proposal is the methodology section that shows the viability and quality of the proposed methodology. It has to touch on a number of factors:

Research Design

The general design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) should be described along with their philosophical paradigms and explained. The quantitative research follows the positivism, while qualitative research follows the constructivism and mixed methods research comes under the umbrella of pragmatism.

Participants or Units of Analysis

When human participants are used, the population, sampling strategy, recruitment procedures and sample size should be described. In case of unobtrusive research, the selection criteria and units of analysis should be defined (Symbaluk and Hoeber, 2024).

Instrumentation

The description of the research setting and the materials needed should include the equipment, instruments, or software needed to collect data (Symbaluk & Hoeber, 2024).

Variables and Measures

Quantitative research needs to state the independent and dependent variables as well as operationalization as well as a measurement plan. The evidence of reliability and validity should be used to describe the established measures (Symbaluk and Hoeber, 2024).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection will be described step by step so that the reader can determine its feasibility and possible difficulties. In case of qualitative research either ethnography approach will followed or conducted interviews or follow the focus group discussion. In case of quantitative research surveys or questionnaire will used.

Data Analysis

They need to be defined in terms of analytical tactics, whether the quantitative research is to be conducted using statistical methods both descriptive or inferential statistics and the qualitative research using thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations have to be mentioned clearly, showing the knowledge of possible risks and mitigation strategies. This involves the discussion of the informed consent procedures, protection of confidentiality, risk-benefit analysis, and data security plans (Symbaluk and Hoerber, 2024).

References

The references should be written in the necessary citation style, and APA 7th edition is typical of social sciences. Any given works should be reflective in the reference list and all the listed references should be referenced in the proposal.

Report Writing: Proposal to Publication

Differentiating between Proposals and Reports

It is important to know the difference between research proposals and research reports. According to Symbaluk and Hoerber (2024) proposals are statements that outline intended research, reports are statements that summaries research that has been done. Reports contain parallel sections, similar to proposals, such as introduction, methods, results, discussion, but the sections differ in that the methods section will say that something actually was done, the results section will report what has been found, and the discussion section will explain the extracted results in terms of existing literature.

Table 1

Comparison between Research Proposal and Research Report

| Aspect | Research Proposal | Research Report |
|----------------|---|---|
| Purpose | To present a planned research study for approval or funding | To present the completed research findings and outcomes |
| Timing | Prepared before conducting the research | Prepared after completing the research |
| Focus | Emphasis on research design, objectives, and proposed methodology | Emphasis on results, analysis, and interpretation |

| Aspect | Research Proposal | Research Report |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Nature | Predictive and tentative | Descriptive and conclusive |
| Content | Introduction, problem statement, objectives, research questions, literature review, methodology, timeline, and budget | Introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations |
| Research Questions/Hypotheses | Proposed and may be revised during study | Addressed and answered based on findings |
| Methodology | Proposed plan of action | Actual methods used and any modifications made |
| Data Collection | Not yet conducted | Already completed |
| Data Analysis | Planned techniques described | Actual analysis performed and presented |
| Results | Not included | Fully presented with tables, figures, and statistical analysis |
| Discussion | Not included | Interprets findings in relation to research questions and literature |
| Conclusion | Not applicable | Provides final conclusions and implications |
| References | Includes key sources supporting the proposal | Includes all sources cited throughout the study |
| Appendices | May include instruments or tentative tools | Includes actual instruments, raw data, or supplementary materials |
| Audience | Supervisors, funding agencies, ethics committees | Academics, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners |

The APA Style Role

Since its publication in 1984, the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association has offered detailed advice on academic writing in a great number of fields. The guidelines proposed by American Psychological Association (2020) do not cover only the citation formats but also the structure of the manuscript, the use of language, and ethical publishing. Using the examples provided in the ERIC document (2025), with the reference to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 7th edition, the article explains the main elements

of a research proposal such as the title, abstract, introduction, methodology, and ethical considerations.

Research Report Structure

Normal research papers are written using Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion format (IMRAD), but differences occur in different fields. The introduction provides the research context and problem. The methods section makes the procedures reproducible by giving all the procedural specifications. Results segment is objective and does not contain interpretations. The discussion section applies interpretation of the findings, the limitations, and implications and future directions.

Writing for Impact

Writing research well involves focusing on the audience, being clear and arguing. Ben-David (2024) stresses that studies must make readers update their priors, i.e. revise their knowledge on the basis of fresh facts. To create such an impact, the message should be well conveyed to allow the reader to understand contributions easily. According to Symbaluk and Hoerber (2024), a writer must make writing available to an individual with technical skills, which might not necessarily be in the field under research.

Conclusion

The research proposal is much more than a bureaucratic mandate but it is a document that forms the direction of the academic investigation. As this assignment has shown, proposals fulfill several imperative roles: they convince funders and institutions to commit resources to research, they compel systematic planning, which envisages impediments, and they create moral responsibility prior to initiating research. The significance of proposal quality is supported by the recent empirical research by Chung et al. (2025) who confirm that the characteristics of the proposal are associated with the outcome of the research.

The choice of new research issues needs a methodological method involving stakeholder consultation, gap detection, and critical analysis. The systematic toolkit by Hoekstra and Lhachimi (2025) helps researchers to consider a variety of perspectives but remain rigorous, whereas the

approach presented by Ben-David (2024) allows scholars to understand the power of observational sensitivity. Collectively, these strategies imply that innovation is the result of the interaction between methodical priority-setting and active involvement in real-world phenomena.

Research proposal elements are taken in the traditional patterns that have developed to meet the requirements of both the evaluators and the researchers. Since the title and abstract to methodology and ethical considerations, every section plays its part in the persuasion and planning functions of the proposal. The knowledge of these elements, as well as conventions of writing a report shown in the example of the APA style, allow a researcher to convey his/her work in an effective way and make a significant contribution to the scientific community.

Nowadays in the presence of growing research competition and heightened expectations of impact, the skill of writing persuasive, methodologically sound research proposals has become a crucial scholarly skill. This ability will place the researchers in a position to add to knowledge, gain required resources and promote knowledge in their areas of study.

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