

Guidelines for Your Paper

It's time to write the first draft of your final paper. Remember, paper is a document that is written to explain what you studied and how you approached the problem. In total, it should be about 15 to 20 pages including your graphs and charts.

The first draft is about pulling the pieces together and has 4 parts:

So, the parts of a thesis are as follows:

1. Introduction (what is the problem and why should I read your paper?)
2. Background (What history do you have on this topic?)
3. Methodology (What are you doing and why it makes sense to do it this way – why do observations make sense?)
4. Findings (Okay, what did you discover?)
5. Conclusions – (Can you pull all of the threads together? Can you synthesize your findings?)

First, you need to introduce your subject to your reader and this piece of your paper should be about 2 pages long and have the following pieces. In this section you tell your reader what the problem is and why we should care about the problem. It is not enough to say the problem is interesting. In this section, you want to motivate your reader to read your paper.

Next you need to have a background section for your topic. What do you know about the subject? What have other people said about the subject? For this piece to be complete, you need to review sources of information that you find in the library.

As you know there are many ways to look at a problem and it is your job to figure out which way makes the most sense given your background and understanding of the issues and how to convince your reader of your point of view.

After you write the background section, you need to tell the reader how you will or how you have studied the problem. Some of you made observations, some of you gathered data on your topic and some of you may have unearthed studies or documents related to your topic. All of these pieces and parts will become the method section of your paper.

Below is a detailed write up of what you want to make sure you include in each section. This outline is written with the end in mind – the final proposal. Do your best to pull together a draft of what is expected for the final version.

Introduction:

The introduction is in some ways a mini thesis paper because it summarizes most of the major sections of the thesis (not the conclusion and findings). The intro is your audience's way into your thinking about a particular subject and it is meant to give the reader a taste or overview of the entire thesis.

Background/Circumstances: You start the introduction by presenting the context for the problem you wish to study. Here you introduce your reader to the larger situation. Be careful here not to make it too broad. Instead, ask yourself what does my reader really need to know in order to understand why my question should be answered?

Next, as part of explaining why your question is a good one, you must discuss the background/circumstances that motivate the reader to want to read your work and find answers through your work. Green affordable buildings don't just get built one day they are the result of circumstances and pressures that the environment places on developers, cities and towns. Similarly, public schools don't just fail one day, there are a series of events that lead up to the problem that you have observed.

Problem: Once you have discussed the circumstances you need to focus on the particular problem that you have identified. You must present the problem to the reader so that s/he can get a sense of the focus of the study. Tell the audience what is broken and why it makes sense to try to fix it/study it. This discussion should "hook" the reader – make him/her curious about how the problem might be fixed. When the reader has a clear sense of the problem, s/he will be motivated to read the rest of your thesis.

Purpose of the Thesis: Now that you have described the general circumstances, discussed the problem that you see, it is time to move on to describe the purpose of your thesis. Here you state and explain your thesis question. You might begin this paragraph with a sentence such as "The purpose of this thesis is to study how school vouchers affect the public school system in DC. After you state the purpose, you probably can't stop there. You will need to explain the purpose to the reader in a few short sentences that lead to your research question (more about this below). The several short statements that help the reader understand the research purpose, should be placed in order of importance – most important to least important. Remember to tie your purpose to the problem that you described in the last paragraph. Think hard about how you get from a problem to a purpose.

Research Question: Once you have stated the problem and the purpose, as discussed above, you end with your research question. This research question should be stated as a question because it effectively restates the purpose of the thesis, but in a question form. "Given the failing rates of public schools in the US, this leads to the question: XXXXXX..... Your thesis advisor will focus intently on this section to make sure that your project is both reasonable and robust.

Methodology: Next, you provide a paragraph that briefly discusses the methodology that will be used later in the thesis to study the problem. Say that you will combine survey results and interviews in order to study the problem, if that is how you plan to approach

your subject. The reader needs this information in order to decide whether or not s/he will need to review this section. This paragraph is not as involved as your background section, but will become more detailed when you begin to write the methodology section.

Road Map to the Proposal: Finally, include a paragraph that tells the reader how the thesis proposal is structured. Here you want to say something like. In the next section, an overview of the literature will be discussed paying particular attention to XXXX. In section 3, the methodology will be explained followed by section 4 – a timeline that shows the schedule of work to be completed.

Literature Review:

As you know the literature review looks to experts in the field in order to determine what has already been said and studied or theorized about your topic. There are usually two or three major ideas/authors that you rely on for your information. However, in some instances there will be many more. Your job is to discuss the varying points of view of these authors in light of your specific topic. Reread that sentence – you need to focus on what they say that is related to your topic – not a variety of tangentially related topics. What have these authors said about your topic and/or your thesis question if you can get that specific? That said, sometimes you might characterize an author's view point by saying (While Chen doesn't dismiss school vouchers entirely, she implies in her discussion on Y, that school vouchers are...). The overarching idea here is to understand the theories that are out there floating around about your topic and to put them in the same room together as if the sources were able to talk to each other.

Here you may find a number of theories about your topic and you will need to adopt, modify or create a theory in order to set the stage for the research methodology that follows. As discussed above, different authors will have different theories and it is your job to report these views to the reader who wants to know what scholars think of your topic and the ideas you are studying. In the end, the reader should be able to tell which theory you will be using to focus your research. When you can articulate this point, you will move your reader easily from your literature review section to your methodology section. So, for example, scholars agree in theory, that school vouchers are a plausible solution, next we need to look at a case study that helps us determine whether, in practice, this idea holds true.

What if you don't have a completed literature review? I don't expect you to have completed your literature review, but I do expect that you have three or four articles on your topic so that you can begin to tell your reader who is doing what. Remember to write a short summary on each article as you complete the reading so that you can draw upon this information when you begin to compose the literature review. (A research notebook is key to this task.) Also, ask your thesis advisor for reading suggestions.

Methodology:

The methods section is where you design the strategy you will take in order to be able to test, try out, and study your research question. What does this really mean? It means that given your assumptions about the topic, you will create a plan that helps you study your topic from that particular angle. So, if you believe that school voucher programs make good economic sense, you would study the economics of school vouchers using economic modeling, cost accounting or some other tool. If you believe school voucher programs help low income students succeed in school, you might study low income students on/off school voucher programs and somehow define and track success over a period of time – say 5 years.

The methodology is directly tied to the assumptions you make about your subject matter and the thesis question that you are attempting to answer. I realize this section will not be completed, like many of the others, but do your best to draft a coherent strategy.

Time Line/Gant Chart

A time line is the schedule that you set for yourself. The best way to set this schedule is to work backwards. When are things due? When are drafts due? When are presentations due? When you know the end points, you can begin to carve out the time you will have to complete the various tasks that need to be completed.

What are the tasks? For the most part, the tasks that you will complete are the following:

1. First draft of thesis proposal.
2. Second draft of thesis proposal.
3. Date draft is submitted to thesis advisor (allow time for comments).
4. Final draft of thesis proposal.
5. Research time
6. Writing up the research findings
7. Drafting the whole thesis.

Format

I expect your thesis proposal to be written using a specific format.

1. Title Page: There should be a title page with your thesis title, your name, your advisor's name, and the date. (you will also have an abstract, but not until next semester). Also, above the title should be the words "A Proposal" (without quotes). This lets the reader know that it is not the final thesis.
2. Table of Contents: There should be a table of contents that lists the various sections of your thesis proposal.
3. The Body of the Thesis: The body of the document should be divided into sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion of Findings, Conclusion,
4. Finally, you want to include the End Matter: The Appendix, Bibliography.

A note on footnotes: In social science writing, footnotes can go at the bottom of the page. Footnotes can be a key piece of the writing. It is a place where you can provide details to the reader on a point that you want to make. This detail, which could bog down

the flow of the main text, can be rich in facts and information and some readers will love to explore. Oh, and don't forget to cite any and all information.

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11.027 City to City: Comparing, Researching and Writing about Cities: New Orleans
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