How to Present a Research Proposal?

East Asian Institute, Chinese Studies

Before starting your thesis, you need to present a research proposal. You are required to obtain the approval from your advisor for your proposal before starting to write.

I. Structure

1. Title
✓ A working title, which adequately reflects the research you plan to do,

2. Introduction ("Establish a Territory")
Research problem (elaborate, with arguments)
• Which (theoretical, practical, social) series of questions is the starting point of your work?
• What is the concrete research question to which your work should provide a scientific answer?
• Why did you choose this topic, what motivates you for this research work?
The introduction should be about one page long and state the research problem, your motivation, and basic steps by which you plan to answer your research questions.
✓ A research question. Make sure that your research question is narrow enough to be feasible within the scope of your planned work.
✓ The rationale for the study, which outlines how you came to be interested into this research question. This should be based on your readings and will be elaborated in section 3. You should also make an argument for the importance of your topic.
✓ A working hypothesis, that is, what do you expect to find out.

3. State of the Art ("Claim a Niche", draft)
Here you want to prove that you do not reinvent the wheel. "State of the art" means to summarize previous research on your research question, find gaps in this research, and claim your own niche for new research.
✓ State of the Art, which outlines what previous scholars have argued about the case (needs quotations).
✓ Are there contradicting facts? Research gaps?
✓ This is a draft. At this point, you should have a good overview of available research and have read at least abstracts, introductions and conclusions, summaries, and book reviews.

4. Methodology ("Occupy the Niche")
Here you want to prove why you are in the position to fill the gap in our research.
✓ What is your specific research methodology?
✓ How do you plan to collect evidence? Describe the body of secondary/primary sources you plan to use. It needs to be limited and well defined.
✓ Make sure that your sources pass the C.R.A.P. test, see: Dudek, Brittany. n.d. "LibGuides: Learn about Evaluating Sources: CRAP Test." Accessed December 2, 2018. //ccconline.libguides.com/c.php?g=242130&p=2185475.

5. A Work Schedule

Here you want to show that you will be able to finish within the time available (e.g. six months for a MA thesis).

6. Bibliography

All of the previous has to be well documented. Show that you have learned the proper methods of academic citations.

✓ Before you start, use a reference manager to collect sources and to establish a bibliography. Do not use the reference manager in MS Word to do that. It really does not work well. Zotero (a Firefox add-on, www.zotero.org) or Mendeley (www.mendeley.com) are great free tools available. Our university has a subscription to Citavi.

✓ Distinguish between secondary (books, research articles) and primary sources (for example newspaper articles, archival sources).

✓ The bibliography should show that you have chosen the literature carefully. The arguments of the literature should be summarized in the "State of the Art". List only literature that you have actually used.

✓ Again, the amount of sources depends on the type of work. If you are unsure about whether a certain source is viable or not you are advised to rather include MORE literature in the proposal than you will eventually use. Your advisor help you to sort out better-suited sources.

7. Preliminary Outline (optional)

The basic structure of research papers is fairly standardized and contains the same basic elements that you have already worked out in your research proposal. Only you will now complete, revise, and polish these elements and add the empirical evidence. The Outline is optional for the research proposal, but you should keep this structure in mind for your thesis. Keep it simple, that is, try to maintain only one or two levels.

1. Introduction
   Here you **establish a research territory**. You state the basic interest, research question and hypothesis. This section aims at getting the reader interested and oriented, so he/she knows what to expect.

2. State of the Art
   Claim a niche: This section summarizes the state of research, claims open questions, tells the reader why you are best equipped to fill this gap. This section aims at telling the reader what has been missed out in previous research and claim a niche for yourself to justify why you through an article/book at people who are already overwhelmed by too many articles and books.

3. Methodological and Empirical sections
   Occupy the niche: First you have to make clear how you plan to occupy the niche. Which sources and methods you will use and why you chose these sources and methods as best suited to answer your research question. This can be followed by **one or several** sections which make up the empirical part of your study. Here you tell your story. In these sections you need to prove that you are indeed better than others in filling the research gap.

4. Conclusion:
   Here you summarize everything. Please note that many readers only read the introduction and conclusion. Make sure that all the important arguments and findings of your paper (though not all the details) are included.

II. Format

Proposals use the following format:
1. New Times Roman, 12 pt, 1.5 line spacing, A4, margins 2.5 cm.
2. Citations follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). See online under: The Chicago Manual of Style Online. https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.
3. Chinese terms have to be stated in *pinyin* [set in italics] followed by Chinese characters.
4. Citations of internet sources require full information (author, title, date of creation, date of access, url).

III. Criteria for Accepting Your Proposal

1. Interest of the Topic: Is the topic sufficiently new and interesting?
2. Puzzle: Does your research question solve a puzzle? (To give an account of what happened is not a research question)
3. Focus: Is your research question focused enough? (Do not try to solve all problems of humankind in one paper)
4. Sources: Do you have a body of primary sources? Have you found good secondary sources? What other sources could be used? Do your sources pass the C.R.A.P. test?
5. Methodology: Do you discuss methodological issues?
6. Feasibility: Is the topic feasible within the time frame?
7. Language and Format: Did you write your proposal in good German or English? Are you able to use word-processing software, appropriate formats, and citation styles?

IV. Helpful Information for Academic Writing

There are many books and online guidelines on academic writing. Here are a few.

Gillet, Andy. 2018. "Using English for Academic Purposes For Students of Higher Education." UEFAP. 2018. http://www.uefap.net/.

Marius, Richard. *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. The Short Guide Series. Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989.

Storey, William Kelleher. *Writing History: A Guide for Students*. 3 edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.