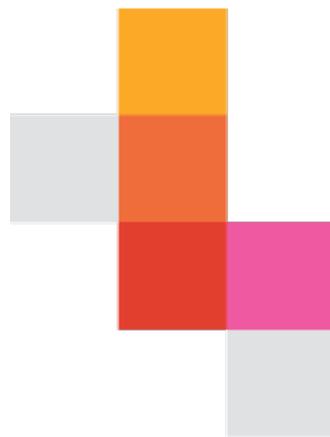# Research Writing

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Academic Writing Guide Part 4 – Research Writing: This section outlines the process of writing a research proposal.

Research writing

1. Research proposal

What is the purpose of your research proposal?

When you start an extended piece of research the subject can seem very large and it can be tricky to decide what area to concentrate your study on. Writing a research proposal is a great way to focus your ideas and clearly define what you are – and are not – going to do. Your finished research proposal is your research plan; with it you are ready to begin.

- Your university faculty asks you to do a research proposal so they know what direction your research will take. Writing the proposal shows them you have the level of discipline needed to undertake the research task. It is proof you have the required basic skills to start an extended piece of research.

- Your research proposal should show faculty assessors:
    o Your research inquiry is genuine and worthwhile, that there is a need for it, that it is significant and important, and it contributes something original to the field you are working in.
    o You are aware of the breadth and depth of the major schools of thought relevant to your proposed area of research.
    o You are able to justify and establish a particular theoretical position, and develop a methodological approach to it.
    o There is enough funding or available equipment to be able to collect the data.
    o The topic aligns with your interests and capabilities, and there are supervisors available who will work with you.
    o You can complete the research in the expected time period.
    o The UTS Ethics Committee has considered the relevant issues and approval has been given.

- Your research plan may change once you commence the project. The focus and perhaps substance of the project might take a different focus in response to the results of your research. As you discover more, your ideas will develop, however changes to the direction of your research must be in consultation with your supervisor(s).

1. 1 Typical structure of a research proposal

Your research proposal should contain most, or all, of the sections listed below. The structure of proposals varies from faculty to faculty, and your supervisor(s) may require you to include or omit some sections. Use this as a guide and confirm with your faculty.

- A cover page

This is essential – it identifies:
- o Your research area presented in your proposed title. (it may change.)
- o Your name, contact details, and qualifications.
- o The institutional or university name, as well as the specific department.
- o Supervisor's and co-supervisor's names.
- o The degree level being attempted.

1. 1. 1 Table of contents (TOC)

A TOC should:
- List the research proposal sections in a hierarchical way, using titles and subtitles.
- Give accurate page references for each section.

1. 1. 2 Introduction

An introduction should:
- Follow the general-to-specific outline for writing introductions (**See Academic Writing 1 - 3. 3. 1 Introduction**)
- Start by providing background information. Give the reader the general socio-political, historical, scientific and educational contexts of the research. You may not need all of these contexts, just the most relevant to your research.
- A good starting point is telling your reader the theoretical, personal, or policy-based motivation for the research.
- Your introduction is your chance to persuade, inform or indicate to the reader why your research is necessary. You try to convince the reader that the research will be useful, interesting, or significant for the academic community. Your proposal will include a literature review. Your introduction should indicate that you have identified a 'gap' in the literature and that your work will fill it.

1. 1. 3 Purpose and aims

This section should:
- Clearly and concisely state the purpose of the research. It should also place your research in the broader context of the field of study.
- Outline your aims and key research questions. The aims must relate to the purpose of your research and to your research questions.

1. 1. 4 Literature review

The purpose of this is to:
- Establish your credibility. It shows you have read widely and are aware of the work of the most significant writers or researchers are in your area of research.
- Be specific about the particular issues or concepts you will concentrate on in your review. As you read more widely and deeply this may change.

- Show your critical judgement by selecting the issues you intend to focus on and the ones you will ignore.
- Show that you can take a critical approach to your area of research. (**See Academic Writing 1 – 2.2 Reading for research**)
- A good argument for the validity of your area of research is to indentify a 'gap' in the literature that your research will fill.
- Establish the theoretical orientation you are planning to take.
- **See 1.3 Tips for writing literature reviews; Academic Writing 3 Assignment Types – 4 Reviews, 5 Annotated Bibliographies** for more detail on writing your literature review.

1. 1. 5 Research design (or methodological approach)

The purpose of this is to describe your research plans and approach:
- Explain the rationale and theoretical source for your research approach.
- Describe the basis for your selection of participants, methods of data collection and analysis, and the steps you will take to ensure that ethical practices are followed.
- Suggest the limits, restrictions or boundaries of your research.
- Provide a timetable, or research action plan, that explains each of the tasks to be carried out and the anticipated times for completion. Make sure the format for this is clear and concise.

1. 1. 6 Thesis structure

This section should provide:
- An outline of the structure of your thesis. You can do this with a small paragraph description of each proposed chapter. Try to show how each chapter links to previous chapters, or following chapters.
- A proposed table of contents. Make sure it follows the guidelines in 1.1.1 Table of Contents.

1. 1. 7 Significance/expected outcomes

This section should include:
- The anticipated outcomes of the research.
- A series of paragraphs predicting of the significance of the research.

1. 1. 8 Glossary of terms

This section should include:
- A list of specialised terms, words, or concepts, and their meanings (e.g. foreign borrowings, acronyms, specialised concepts etc.)

1. 1. 9 Appendices

This section should provide:
- Relevant documents; these may be source documents, pilot study data, interview questions, surveys questionnaires instruments, etc. Including them in the main proposal text may affect readability, so put them in an appendix.

1. 1. 10 References

This section should provide:
- A list of the sources or academic works that you have found and consulted up to the present.
- Most faculties in UTS use the Harvard UTS referencing style, but check with your supervisor(s) and use the one they recommend.

> Adapted from the following source:
> Royce, T 2009, *Writing a research proposal*, ELSSA Centre, UTS.

1. 2 Research proposals for specific faculties

The information here is a brief guide for writing a research proposal. There is no set format or length. Some faculties will require a longer proposals and some faculties such as those listed below have specific information. You should contact your faculty for details and it is vital to discuss the requirements of your research proposal with your faculty and potential supervisor before you submit your proposal.

If you are applying for a research degree in Science, Education or Engineering, please go to the links below for faculty specific information:

- **Education** - **How to write an Outline of Intended Research**
- **Science** - **How to complete a Project Plan**
- **Engineering** - **How to prepare your research proposal**

1. 3 Tips for writing literature reviews

Your literature review will go through various stages as your research continues.

- The "first phase" literature review that you do at the beginning of the project demonstrates your familiarity with the field.
- As your research progresses your literature review should grow and change. You will need to revise it at different stages in the course of your studies.
- Remember it is a REVIEW of the literature, so it is a very important part of your research argument.

Your job as a research student is to create new knowledge in your field of study. Your work rests on and builds on the work that has gone before you. Your final literature review must

persuade the reader that this new knowledge is relevant, significant and a logical development from current work in the field.

Your review of the literature is more than just a summary of what has gone before. There will be an argument implied in the way you review the work of others in the field. This argument relates to the value of your research, the methods you use to carry it out and your theoretical framework. To successfully argue this, your literature review must engage in critical analysis and evaluation of existing work.

1. 3. 1 The purpose of the literature review

The literature review is your chance to demonstrate your analytical research skills as you examine the work of others. Your work should display:

- Understanding of the key concepts, terminologies, ideas, theories and practices in the field.
- Familiarity with the main issues/problems/theories.
- Familiarity with the key researchers in the field.
- Establishing the state of knowledge in the field.
- Establishing the current state of technology development.
- Identifying and evaluating relevant research methods.
- Avoiding duplication.
- Finding 'gaps' in the field, or creating a research space.
- Establishing the significance of your research.
- Showing how your work builds on previous work.
- Showing how your work can be differentiated from previous work.
- Refining your research question/s.
- Keeping up with current developments in the field.

As you write your literature review it is important to keep the reader focused on the underlying principle and significance of your work, and on the key issues involved. Keep the focus and emphasis on your research and how it relates to the works you are reviewing.

1. 3. 2 Structure of Literature Review

- **Introduction**
  Start with an introduction or series of introductory paragraphs to let the reader know the content being covered, the structure of the review, and the boundaries of the subject matter to be covered. You can mention what is outside the scope of the study to demonstrate you are aware of it but that it is not relevant to your study.

- **Body**
  In a series of sections and sub-sections discuss the literature logically and coherently.

- o Discuss and evaluate the literature in terms of the most important topics or key concepts relevant to your area of study.
- o End each section with a summary that relates to the focus of your research area.

- **Conclusion**
Use the most important points from each of the final section summaries to build the case for the need for your research. Conclude with a paragraph that relates the literature to the research project design (methodology).

The structure of a literature review can be **summarised** as follows:

- An introduction to the topic followed by a logical progression of ideas, structured so that there are links between the sections and the conclusions reached. Your conclusion should show how your research would address the issues raised in your review of the existing research.

1. 3. 3 Why your literature review is important

- Your literature review should focus very clearly on existing research that has been done on the research area.
- This process, of collecting the literature and presenting it in a way that builds your argument, clearly demonstrates you have the research skills to undertake this degree. By completing a literature review you show your faculty and supervisor(s) that you have the ability to summarise, paraphrase, synthesise, critically analyse, cite and reference, produce a reference list, structure your writing, proofread and edit your work.

Adapted from the following sources:
Dovey, T 2009, *The literature review*, ELSSA Centre, UTS.
Royce, T 2009, *The structure of the literature review*, ELSSA Centre, UTS.

2. Academic Conferences

2. 1 Why conferences are important

- They keep you up to date with the latest ideas and research in your subject area.
- It is a vital for your career development to meet and establish networks with other researchers.
- Presenting a paper at a conference forces you to refine your ideas and test them on an audience of your peers. E.g.; your conference paper might become a chapter in your thesis, and/or a potential journal article submission.

2. 2 Before the conference

2. 2. 1 Choosing the right conference

To find when and where conference s are being held use the **Conferences** page on the UTS Library Website. There are links to databases with worldwide conferences listings. Your supervisor(s) can also advise you on upcoming conferences.

Not all conferences are the same. Just as you critically assess your research materials you should critically assess the conference before you decide to attend or submit a paper.

A conference checklist:

- Who is sponsoring the conference? Is it a commercial event where the aim is to sell products, or a gathering sponsored by a university, professional body, or group of academics with the aim of furthering research?
- What is the status of the papers? Are they peer-reviewed? This guarantees a higher standard of academic worth in the papers you will hear. Is there an opportunity to publish the paper in conference proceedings?
- Is the conference theme broad or narrow? A broader theme may attract a wider audience and increase your exposure. A smaller more focused programme means the numbers may be less, but you are more likely to meet specialists in your particular field.
- Location and cost. It can be expensive to travel to conferences. You need to weigh up the advantages to your professional development. The university has funding for research students to attend conferences. Ask your supervisor(s) for advice about applying.

2. 2. 2 Call for Papers and abstracts

When a conference is announced the organisers will put out a 'Call for papers.' If you want to submit a paper to present at the conference then you must respond to this call by the nominated date with an abstract of your proposed paper. (**see Academic Writing 2 Assignment Types – 6.2 Abstracts**)

Read the all the information about the 'call for papers' and follow the guidelines. Use this checklist to write your abstract.

- Make sure your abstract addresses the theme of the conference and shows how your paper would fit into that theme.
- If possible use keywords from the conference description in your abstract.
- If the conference is being held in another country find out which languages will be used at the conference.
- What does your audience (those reading your abstract and at the conference) already know about your topic? This is especially important for an interdisciplinary conference
  o Do they need any background information to understand your thesis?

- o Do you need to define special terms?

- Research the profile (publications etc.) of other speakers, particularly the keynote speakers.
- Present your ideas coherently.
    - o Outline/Introduce your topic.
    - o Give a brief background of the issue, e.g. the textual material you are going to analyse.
    - o State the implications/outcomes/the thesis or argument you want to put forward.
- Do not go beyond the specified word length (usually 150-300 words).
- Submit on or before the due date. Last minute or late submissions look like poor planning and preparation.
- Electronic submissions are usually preferred in Word format or 'Rich text format'.
- Avoid bibliographic references (if you need them use in-text references)
- Usually you will be asked to supply a short biographical note (approx. 5 lines).
- Include your name, title, organisation and contact details.
- Let the organisers know the technical support you'll need; overhead projector, video, power point etc.

Examples of abstracts:

Erocide is painless. Insensation in Les Murray's "Fredy Neptune"

Towards the beginning of the First World War, Friedrich Boettcher, the German-Australian narrator of Les Murray's 1998 verse novel, Fredy Neptune, witnesses an atrocity so terrible that he responds to it by losing his sense of touch. For the next 34 years, Fredy's body disappears into its instrumental function, allowing him to carry out extraordinary feats of physical prowess and endurance while at the same time afflicting him with a pervasive numbness that eats away at his sense of self. In this paper, I argue that the crisis of memory written into Fredy's skin stamps him as a victim of what Murray elsewhere terms "erocide", the concerted destruction of a person's sexual morale. Drawing on recent work of Gernot Boehme, I show how erocide represents a form of "affected self-givenness" (betroffene Selbstgegebenheit) which confronts the sufferer with the own most limits and possibilities of his own lived body.

The following is an example of a structured abstract for an Occupational Therapy conference. The call for papers specified a guided structure: introduction, aim, methods, conclusions.

Bringing evidence-based practice to the coalface

Introduction: Evidence-based practice is a process which involves searching for, appraising, and then using research findings to guide clinical practice. It is about using, rather than doing research. Being 'evidence-based' implies that individual clinicians have the skills and knowledge to search for, appraise and use research evidence when making clinical decisions. Aim: This paper describes a number of strategies used by staff from one hospital to implement evidence-based practice.

Methods: Strategies used included the introduction of a 'new' type of journal club, regular searching of electronic databases followed by sharing of the findings, and a review of important clinical topics. In addition, a number of randomised controlled trial have been, or are being conducted within the hospital department to add to the profession's body of evidence. Several staff have been employed part-time as research assistants on these projects. Conclusions: These strategies have helped staff to develop a better understanding of the value of randomised controlled trials.

Occupational Therapy Australia, 2013, *Preparing a Conference Abstract,* Occupational Therapy Australia*,* viewed 15 January 2013 <http://otaconference.com.au/uploads/Practice-Notes-Sample-Abstracts.pdf>

2. 2. 3 Proposing your own panel

You can propose a panel to conference organisers. Put together a panel by approaching other researchers in your field. Your panel should have a clear theme connecting all of the participants' papers. The panel must also be closely related to the conference theme. In your panel proposal/abstract, state the theme and then describe how the various papers address the conference theme. The conference organisers may be grateful to receive a suggestion for a pre-formed panel.

2. 2. 4 Writing your paper

Be clear what kind of paper are you presenting

- **Paper with Respondent**
  - A speaker gives a 30 minute paper. A respondent then gives a 15 minute response to the paper. The speaker then gives a 15 minute reply to the response.

- **Panel Presentation**
  - Panel sessions include 3-4 speakers, each of whom talks for 15-20 minutes. Panels may also have a chair to introduce the speakers and comment on the papers/presentations individually and as a group.

- **Roundtable**
  - A roundtable features 5 or more speakers, each of whom talks for 5-10 minutes.

- **Workshop**
  - These sessions can vary in length from 90 minutes to one full day. Workshop presenters give short statements before involving the audience in some type of activity.

- **Poster/Poster Talk/Poster Presentation/Poster Discussion**

- o All of these involve a visual presentation of ideas. Some presenters choose to display a 3- to 8-page paper that explains their project; others may post their hypothesis and an outline of their findings. The most eye-catching posters exhibit charts, graphs, photographs, or artwork.
- o Posters can be displayed for the length of the conference or for a single day.
- o Poster talks give the audience a chance to question the poster creator at a specified time.
- o Poster presentations feature 4-6 posters on a single theme displayed at a specific time. Each poster creator gives a short talk on his or her project.
- o Poster discussions also include 4-6 posters on a single theme displayed at a specific time. Conference-goers circulate around the room, questioning and collecting handouts from presenters. This type of presentation can also be called an interactive exhibit.

Basic structure of your conference presentation

- Thesis – make it clear what your paper is about and the way it is structured.
- Evidence –
    - o Present a piece of evidence; then discuss it.
    - o Explain clearly and explicitly why it is important.
    - o End each piece of evidence with a clear statement to the audience, like a signpost, saying "here is the thing that is important."
- Conclusion – Tell your audience why this paper/research/idea is important.

The difference between a written essay and a spoken essay

- You are writing a paper to read aloud. Your audience will listen to it.
- Write your essay with oral cues to assist the audience. The transitions between ideas must be clear. Make it obvious with oral cues like, "I have three points. Number one will cover . . .,"
- Use punctuation to help you read clearly to the audience. They can't see dashes, semi-colons, and parentheses but they will remind you to make clear transitions.
- The audience cannot see quotations marks, so when you quote text, pause and indicate the quote by saying "quote . . . . . end quote."
- Too many quotes and lengthy quotes are confusing to listen to. The audience wants to hear your ideas. If you must use lengthy quotes, provide the audience with a handout including the quote and the reference.
- Be aware of how the paper sounds. Read it aloud to revise it and remove wordy sentences and awkward phrases.
- Be respectful and objective if you criticise the work of other scholars. They may be in the audience!

Focus
- Stay focused! Your presentation is usually 15-20 minutes.
- Present one idea. You can't tell them everything you know about your subject. Choose one idea, interpretation, or reading.
- Background is not as important in this situation. Present your point and back it up.

- You are not defending your thesis you are presenting it.
- You don't need a literature review.
- Develop a clear, focused, and interesting argument back it up with a few interesting points of evidence.
- Many conferences encourage "works in progress" and expect presenters to bring up engaging questions and offer suggestions for future research, not give the final definitive word on a subject.
- Who is your audience? Don't present simple ideas to a specialist audience but also don't assume that everyone will know the details of your work.
- Clarity is vital. Your audience has to follow your argument. Make it clear. Structure it.
- Avoid jargon. If you must use field-specific terms, make sure that you can explain them. Give a brief definition.
- Look for simple ways to discuss complex ideas. Metaphors and analogies help your audience.

2. 3 At the conference

2. 3. 1 Presentation

- Arrive early or check the room the day before.
- Make sure all your equipment works.
- Stay to your time limit.
- If you have 20 minutes, your printed paper should be around 10-11 pages of double spaced; 12 point font. Most people will take two minutes to read one double spaced, 12 point font page (without citations). Time yourself.
- It is rude and selfish to speak for longer than your allotted time. The other speakers on your panel and your audience will not appreciate it.
- If you have a lot of references, put them on a handout and give them to the audience.
- Follow the conference conventions:
    - Stick to the text you have sent the organisers/chair. If you make changes send them the revised version.
    - Make sure everyone on your panel has a copy.
    - Read from the text not notes or an outline otherwise you may leave out important information (your thesis, for example), loose track and go over your time limit.
- Sound interested. Use vocal inflection, look up, look at your audience, engage with them, try to relax!!
- Speak slowly and clearly. Don't try to cram more in the paper and then speak really, really fast to stay within the time limit. It doesn't work.
- Make a note in your paper where you are going to use visual aids. Practice with your visual aids before you give your presentation.

2. 3. 2 Questions

- Prepare for questions. Think what might be asked and have a few phrases ready. This will give you time to gather your thoughts.
- Go to other panels and see what type of questions people ask.
- Take notes of important questions and suggestions. The point of the conference is to test your research.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer to a particular question. Don't be defensive, be confident and say that it's something you intend to research, etc.

2. 3. 3 Networking

- A major reason to go to conferences is to make connections with other researchers and academics in your field of study.
- Attend panels.
- Ask questions.
- Have a business card to give to other conference participants.
- Go to the conference dinner and any other functions. The best conversations happen over dinner.

2. 3. 4 Publication

- If you want your paper published in the conference proceedings you might be asked to submit a publishable document soon after the conference. It helps if the paper you present at the conference is almost ready to be a published.
- You may prefer to adapt the paper and submit it for publication in a journal.

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this guide has been adapted from the following sources:

University of New England, 2012, *Conferences*, UNE eSKILLS Plus, viewed 15 January 2013, <http://www.une.edu.au/library/find/eskillsplus/career/conferences.php>.

Monash University, 2008, *Meeting Conference Expectations*: *Tricks of the Trade*, Seminar, viewed 15 January 2013, <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/research/graduate-research/current-students/seminars/conference-expectations.pdf>.

Writing Center, Claremont Graduate University 2004, *Conferences and Conference Papers,* viewed 15 January 2013, <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/861.asp>.

Rodgers, Scott, *Writing a Good Conference paper,* Weber State University, viewed 15 January 2013, <http://faculty.weber.edu/srogers/handouts/conference_paper.pdf>.