

## CHAPTER 3

# WRITING THE PROPOSAL

## INTRODUCTION

Thesis research starts with a clearly articulated plan of action. The better the plan, the better the thesis and the fewer problems students face as the research process unfolds. A proposal provides a detailed description of the study and assures a thesis committee that students are capable of carrying out high quality research. It demonstrates that they understand and have thought through the research process. Importantly, the proposal is a justification for the topic and methodology, and, once accepted, is a written agreement between students and their thesis committee. This chapter considers the barriers students encounter at the proposal stage and suggests practical solutions to overcome them. It provides tips on selecting a topic of research and concludes by outlining components of thesis proposals.

Practices vary as to when students are expected to write their proposal. Some programs require students to first complete a number of courses and pass a comprehensive exam before writing a proposal. For others, the research question may be established early in the program. When students work in teams to conduct research in a supervisor's lab, the supervisor may assign or suggests areas of related research for each student to carry out independently. Generally, programs in the social sciences, arts, and humanities place more responsibility and freedom on the student. Students in these programs may be expected to initiate their topic, select the theoretical perspective, and determine the appropriate methodology. This work is usually done in consultation with a supervisor.

Proposals are discipline specific and the chosen methodology frequently determines the proposal's content. For example, a proposal to test a hypothesis will differ from one that proposes a field study. However, all proposals demonstrate that the student has identified a topic of research, has read to ascertain what others have found about the topic, formulated a research question, and selected an appropriate methodology to answer that question. There is no consensus on the length or format of a proposal. They can range from two or three page outlines to the first three chapters of the thesis.

For some students, writing a thesis proposal is more difficult than writing a thesis; many who did exceptionally well in their courses flounder at the proposal stage. Students who cannot successfully master a proposal stay in an academic limbo and some drop out of their program. Gardner (2008) interviewed faculty members from departments with low completion rates at one university and found that professors attributed a “lack of focus, motivation and initiative” as the reasons doctoral students drop out of their studies (p. 103). They specifically noted that the unsuccessful student was not able to find a research question.

Personal experience and interviews with other supervisors helped me identify some of the obstacles students face during the proposal stage of research. Students must learn to manage fear and work independently. They must identify a topic that is both of interest to themselves and relevant to their field of study. In addition, they must ask a question that is both big enough to matter to a thesis committee and small enough to answer given the student’s resources. In the following section, I will elaborate on each obstacle and offer strategies to overcome it.

### *Overcoming Fear*

Some who have successfully written numerous course assignments, with little or no difficulty, panic at the thought of writing a thesis. Their fear is the result of an overwhelming, and often unrealistic, conception of what a thesis entails. Lee (2007) holds that all graduate students confront the same problem. “They ask themselves: can they ever reach the impossible standard of scholarly rigor which appears to be demanded” (p. 681).

The “imposter syndrome” is at the heart of most student fear. Described by Clance and Imes (1978), imposter syndrome was first attributed to women, who despite their outstanding academic and professional accomplishments believed they were not smart and had fooled anyone who thought otherwise. The syndrome is now regarded as a major trait among graduate students. Many graduate students fear they do not have what it takes to complete a graduate degree and are afraid others may find out. They silently worry that they are academic frauds. For some, this fear of failure and lack of self-confidence can be debilitating.

Sakulku and Alexander (2011) describe how the imposter cycle begins and is maintained. They posit that the cycle starts when a task is assigned. The task is met with anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of failure. Individuals react to the fear either by procrastinating or going into a frenzy of over preparedness. This is problematic when the amount of energy put toward accomplishing a task is

excessive or interferes with other priorities. Once the task has been completed, there is a feeling of relief and accomplishment. However, this feeling is short-lived. Any positive feedback received is discounted as luck for students who procrastinate, while those who over prepare attribute it to hard work. In either case, success is not internalized or attributed to ability, intelligence, or skill level. For Clance and Imes (1978), the successful completion of a task serves to reinforce the feeling of being fraudulent, rather than diminish the fear.

The imposter syndrome is manifested at the proposal stage when students either procrastinate to write it or work to make it perfect. These students are reluctant to submit the proposal to their supervisor in fear that the supervisor will discover they are not smart enough to carry out research independently. The proposal must be perfect or nothing at all. They have no deadlines to meet, so weeks turn into semesters, and semesters into years.

I suspect that most people in academia feel like frauds, except for the real imposters and egomaniacs. One way to break the imposter cycle is to talk about it or seek counseling. Another way to break the cycle is to acknowledge the role perfectionism plays in preventing students from accomplishing their goals. Sakulku and Alexander (2011) contend that, “Perfectionism is a trait that is believed to have a marked impact on the development and maintenance of imposter fears” (p. 84). These individuals set impossibly high standards for themselves. They believe the work they submit must be flawless. All students want to do well and to be recognized as a top student, but trying to attain perfectionism has its price. It is the enemy of the graduate student. It can rob them of their time, their family and friends, and their health.

Adopting a “good enough” approach to research and academic work can help break the imposter syndrome cycle. Luttrell (2000) borrowed from child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s notion of good enough mothering, since the perfect mother is a fantasy that can damage healthy relations. Luttrell’s notion of being a good enough researcher helps students avoid the fantasy of the perfect student and instead encourages them to accept that mistakes are a healthy and necessary part of learning. Single (2010), author of *Demystifying Dissertation Writing*, aptly advises students to avoid overglorifying the thesis project. She writes, “Your dissertation should be the worst piece of research that you ever write—not that your dissertation should be bad, but all of your subsequent research and scholarship should be better” (p. 21).

### *Working Independently*

Most graduate students were successful undergraduates, and for the first year of graduate studies, their program looks and feels familiar. Professors supply

reading lists and clearly defined assignments to guide learning. Fellow students in the course make up a community of learners. Professors hold regular office hours and provide feedback at midterm and at the end of the course. However, an unfamiliar obstacle may be encountered when students are expected to work on a proposal with little or no guidance. Left on their own, without a peer group and imposed deadlines, students struggle. One seasoned supervisor I interviewed described these students as, “Individuals who show bright talent when led through course work, but when actually deciding a research question, draw a complete blank.” Accustomed to seeing the course instructor every week, the student may now think his or her supervisor is unavailable to them. Students at the proposal stage are expected to be self-motivated but have not been given opportunities to practice self-directed learning. They lack confidence to work alone and find it difficult to set and meet self-imposed deadlines.

#### *Developing or Joining a Community of Practice (CoP)*

Some students enjoy the solitary work of reading and writing but Golde (2005) identified isolation as a key factor in determining attrition. She made particular note of structural isolation, which involves being isolated in small labs or buildings away from the main faculty. For arts and humanities students, structural isolation means working from home or in remote locations. Students in small departments with few graduate students may experience isolation. Students cannot rely on their programs to mitigate this situation, and as soon as possible, should build a strong peer-support system. Working and meeting regularly with peers can help alleviate the social isolation commonly associated with graduate study. Socializing with others may seem counter-intuitive, but participating in academic writing groups can motivate students to be more productive.

Communities of Practice involve more than friends going out for coffee. CoPs are made up of individuals committed to forming collaborative relationships with others to learn from and teach each other. The community is comprised of individuals who engage in activities and share information and resources. Wenger (1999) provides an example of a community as the French Impressionists who met regularly to discuss the theories and practices of painting, but painted alone in their studios. The practice is the shared repertoire of resources that includes experiences and ways of addressing problems.

Furco and Moely (2012) outline the characteristics of effective CoPs. Participation should be voluntary and meetings should be structured. The

members of the group should be goal oriented. Importantly, Furco and Moely point out that the CoP must be a safe place where group members can discuss issues and questions openly and in confidence. Last, the group should be collaborative not competitive.

### *Working with the Supervisor*

Working independently implies that students must write a thesis completely by themselves. Students have supervisors to help guide the research, but it is important to discuss expectations about what guidance they can expect to receive. Moses (1984) identified areas in which students and their supervisors need to set expectations and clarify roles and responsibilities. The proposal stage presents the ideal time for students to initiate a conversation with their supervisors. To begin, students need to determine who is responsible for selecting and approving the research topic. Similarly, they need to determine who will be responsible for other pertinent aspects of the research, such as deciding on a theoretical framework and appropriate methodology. For what aspects of the research project is the supervisor responsible?

What is the supervisors' approach to supervision? Will they read early drafts? Do they want to see the thesis chapter by chapter? Alternatively, is the student expected to work independently to produce several chapters? Some supervisors will only read a complete draft. What level of writing help should the student expect from their supervisor? Will the supervisor read papers the student has written for publication? Is the supervisor responsible for correcting the student's writing? Several supervisors I talked with adamantly refused to act as a copyeditor. One said, "I shouldn't be doing that. My thesis supervisor didn't do that."

Who determines the timeline of research? How often should students and supervisors meet? Who sets appointments and determines the agenda? Who is responsible to keep the students moving toward completion? Not many supervisors clearly articulate these issues so students need to ask and be comfortable with the answers their supervisors provide. If, for example, a supervisor is unwilling to read an early draft and will only read a completed thesis, students need to ask if they can work under these conditions. Some students want and need regular feedback. If the student-supervisor relationship is strained at the proposal stage, it is unlikely to improve with time. It is easier to change supervisors early in the research rather than at later stages.

*Finding a Thesis Topic and Formulating a Research Question*

Many Master's level students come to graduate school with the goal of learning more about their discipline and are surprised to find the focus is on research (Golde, 2005). Students who are unable to find a topic or question that they are passionate about cannot move forward with a plan of research. One professor I interviewed recalled several meetings with a student who was unable to focus on a topic of research. After one particularly unfruitful meeting, the exasperated student implored him to "Just tell me what to do." Supervisors in some disciplines, such as the natural sciences, may assign the topic and methodology. This can save students valuable time in that they do not have to search for and articulate their own area of research. However, they may not be interested in or excited by the direction of research. Without passion for research, students may not have a sense of ownership of the thesis and feel only relief once it is completed.

Some students may have a vague question, but no real passion for the topic. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the student who is too passionate about an idea and wants to fix a perceived problem. They may set out to prove a point. They do not have a clear sense of what a thesis can do. Or should do. These students believe they already know the answer to their question. While idealism is laudable, this is not the purpose of research. At the heart of research is "search" and to search is to look for something unknown. If the answer is known, it is not necessary to look for it and the data may not support their convictions.

Some master's programs permit students to complete courses in lieu of writing a thesis. Students who have difficulty writing a proposal should take only one or two semesters to complete the task. If they continue to struggle, they should take courses and finish the degree. Despite the number of courses required, it is faster to complete a program by taking courses than to write a thesis when there is no clear direction or a compelling question.

*Finding a Research Topic and Methodology*

Single (2010) recommends taking into account three constraints when choosing a topic of research: "resources, time, and knowledge" (p. 24). Resources start with the expertise, support, and availability of a supervisor. It is unwise to insist on a topic or research question with which the supervisor is unfamiliar or warns against. Students should find a knowledgeable and sympathetic supervisor or, if one is not to be found, change the topic.

Similarly, the thesis committee should also be supportive of the topic and method. Collectively they have supervised more theses than one student has written, and their advice is intended to ensure success.

Selecting a topic that will sustain one's interest throughout the process requires self-knowledge. Most programs require a letter of intent for admission and it may be helpful to revisit the questions or concerns that brought students to the graduate program in the first place. Self-knowledge considers future goals because the thesis topic and methodology position graduates to compete in the job market. Knowledge includes an understanding of the theoretical and practical concerns of the discipline. Students should identify areas of recurring concern rather than follow trends. Taking on an area or theoretical position that has gone out of favor or is contentious may lower one's chances for future employment. Trends date research and in some cases, render it obsolete.

Writing research questions takes practice and requires many iterations of the same idea. If the answer to the question can be found in an Internet search, it is not a worthy question. Questions suggest methods and ways of analyzing data. The proposal should address what data are needed to answer the question and consider what knowledge is needed to analyze the data. Will the methodology and analysis require specialized knowledge? Are courses available to provide that knowledge?

Institutional support includes the availability of labs, studios, and technical facilities needed to carry out the research. How long will students have access to labs? If others share the lab, how many can be accommodated? There are financial resources to consider. It is important to determine what costs the research will incur and who is responsible to pay them. What costs are students expected to pay and what will the supervisor cover? Research may require travel. Does the university provide funding for off campus research? Are travel funds available for research activities?

Time and resources are closely linked. How long will it take to collect the data? Is there a time limit for student funding? Some universities fund master's students only for their first year and doctoral students for three or four years of study. Supervisors are expected to recruit new students into their programs, and cannot provide funding for students who go beyond a time limit. A realistic time-line for research takes into account supervisor sabbaticals and leaves, and proposes only that which has a reasonable expectation of being delivered. Timelines should take into account time to obtain ethics approval, if necessary, something we discuss in Chapter 7.

*Components of the Proposal*

A proposal for an action research thesis will differ from one in which a student wishes to test a hypothesis. Most proposals for qualitative research contain an introduction to the proposed inquiry, a review of existing literature to contextualize the inquiry, a methodology section, procedures for research, and a discussion on data analysis. It is important to determine what data will be gathered and how they will be analyzed. Some proposals include a discussion of the study's limitations and the theoretical framework from which the study will be viewed. A quantitative research proposal for testing a hypothesis includes an introduction that defines the research area, the development of a hypothesis, a description of the research design, an explanation of the instruments used for measurement, and a discussion of how the data will be analyzed.

The methodology section should include the methods used to gather data and the study's procedure. Who are the participants? How will they be recruited? What will happen to them as a result of the study? What will they be asked to do? Chapter 7 provides information on core ethical issues. If required, ethics protocol forms should be attached as an appendix. Usually the ethics approval process takes place after the proposal has been accepted, but the form should be consulted while writing the method section.

It is helpful to work out the costs involved in conducting the research. For example, before committing to a study that involves participant interviews, consider the time it will take to transcribe them. If the student plans to pay someone to transcribe, determine the cost of transcribing. Some transcribers charge by the hour and others by the page. In general, an hour interview can generate a 25 page transcript. Focus group interviews usually generate more data and cost more due to their complexity. Admittedly, it is difficult to estimate the length of an interview at the proposal stage. Some focus groups, for example, can be lively while others are terribly quiet.

Generally, students work with their supervisors to develop their proposals. After the supervisor approves a final draft, the proposal may be given to members of the thesis committee. They may meet with the student, or provide feedback to the supervisor. The committee may accept or ask for minor or major revisions. The committee can offer advice that will save time and money, and help the student produce a strong thesis. The student might not agree with the recommendations, but should keep in mind that everyone wants the research to succeed.