

Leaflet on Dissertation Proposals

What is a dissertation proposal?

A dissertation proposal (German: Exposé) is a short text that provides an introduction to the topic of your dissertation for a general audience. It serves as an outline, plan, and schedule for your project. Your proposal describes what you want to deal with in your dissertation and how. A well-written proposal also demonstrates that you have acquainted yourself with the topic and are capable of writing an academic text.

What do I need a dissertation proposal for?

You need a dissertation proposal to apply for doctoral scholarships, you often need one to apply for research positions, and you also need one for your own use. A proposal provides a “roadmap” for your research in the coming years. Dissertation supervisors also often require a dissertation proposal before agreeing to supervise a doctoral candidate.

How long should a dissertation proposal be?

A dissertation proposal should be around ten pages long. However, some scholarship organizations request shorter proposals (e.g., five pages). Use a 12 point font, preferably Times New Roman, with 1.5 spacing and 2.5 cm borders.

How is a dissertation proposal structured?

There is no predefined structure for a dissertation proposal, but there are certain parts that it should include. However, please note that not all of the parts are equally important for every dissertation. The best strategy is to adhere to the specifications in the call for applications of the scholarship you wish to apply for and the suggestions of your dissertation supervisor.

1. **Abstract:** This is a short and concise description of what your dissertation will be about, how you want to achieve your objectives, and what contribution your dissertation will make to the advancement of knowledge in your field of study. The abstract is generally at the beginning of the proposal.
2. **Research questions and hypotheses:** What research questions do you wish to address in your dissertation? Do you already have hypotheses you wish to test?
3. **Objectives:** What objectives would you like to pursue with your dissertation? Are there fields of research your dissertation will make a significant contribution to? Do you want to expand on certain theories or methods? For the natural sciences: Does your dissertation have the goal of developing a certain product/medicine?
4. **Literature review:** What has already been written on your topic and what do previous studies focus on? Identify areas in which more research needs to be done!
5. **Selection of primary sources:** What primary sources do you wish to analyze and why are these sources suitable for addressing your research question? For the natural sciences: What criteria will you use to select experimental conditions and text subjects and why?
6. **Methodology:** What methods will you use to address your research question? Will you develop your own methods?
7. **Theories and concepts:** What theories and concepts are significant for your dissertation and why? Do you intend to expand on particular theories or formulate your own theories?

8. For dissertation proposals for research training groups: Why is your dissertation important for the topic of the group? How does your dissertation complement the research interests already being pursued in the group? (Some research training groups require you to provide this information in a separate motivational letter.)
9. Work and time schedule (see leaflet on work and time schedules)

Leaflet on Work and Time Schedules

What do I need a work and time schedule for?

A concrete work and time schedule is an important part of a scholarship application, even though it may seem like a matter of pure conjecture for someone just beginning a dissertation. The main purpose of including a time schedule with applications is to demonstrate that it will be possible for you to complete your dissertation within a set period of time (three years, as a rule). However, a realistic time plan is also essential for your own goal-setting and self-management. You can use it to review steps of your work, set individual deadlines, and break your project down into smaller work packages without losing sight of the big picture. It is thus also advisable to create and continuously update a work schedule even if you do not need to apply for a scholarship.

How is a time schedule structured?

There are several possibilities. The following recommendations have been adapted from the guide *Handbuch Promotion* (ed. Ansgar Nünning & Roy Sommer (2007), pp. 249).

Your time schedule should be separated roughly into three phases:

The first phase should include the structuring and organization of your project as well as the review and analysis of relevant literature, the second phase should consist in the actual writing of your dissertation, and the third phase should involve editing and revisions to the text.

Now break these phases down into even smaller, more manageable steps.

Here are a few more tips:

- Make sure to plan in enough leeway to allow yourself time to deal with unexpected problems, as well as to prepare for conferences, write articles, and visit archives and libraries.
- You can also mark important “milestones” in your time schedule (e.g., I will turn in a draft of the first chapter for my supervisor to read).
- Don’t wait until close to the end to begin writing (unless you are writing an experiment-based dissertation in the natural sciences) and plan in at least half a year for editing and revisions. Keep in mind that most well-written academic texts are the product of multiple revisions.
- The steps you plan initially should take no less than a month and no more than three months to complete.
- It might also help to plan your schedule in the opposite direction, starting with the submission of your dissertation or your defense.

Helpful Literature

Nussbaum, Maury: How to Write a (Thesis/Dissertation) Proposal. Virginia Tech, 2010.

Download at:

<http://www.filebox.vt.edu/users/nussbaum/subpages/ProposalHowTo.pdf>

Phillips, Estelle/ Pugh, Derek: How to Get a PhD. A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 4th edition, 2006.

Przeworski, Adam/ Salomon, Frank: On the Art of Writing Proposals. Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions. Social Science Research Council, New York, 1995.

Download at:

http://www.ssrc.org/workspace/images/crm/new_publication_3/%7B7a9cb4f4-815f-de11-bd80-001cc477ec70%7D.pdf

Yeh, Anthony (Ed.): How to Prepare Thesis Proposal. Graduate School of the University of Hong Kong, 2006.

Download at:

<http://www.hku.hk/gradsch/web/resources/thesis-proposal.pdf>

Hilfreiche Literatur

Adamczak, Wolfgang: Wie stelle ich einen Forschungsantrag? Uni Kassel: 2008.

Download at:

http://www.uni-kassel.de/uni/fileadmin/groups/w_170000/Downloads/Informationsbroschueren/Forschungsantrag.pdf

Alemann, Ulrich von: Das Exposé. Ja, mach nur einen Plan... In: Promotionsratgeber für die Doktorandinnen und Doktoranden der Philosophischen Fakultät. Hrsg. von Sabine Brenner. Grupello-Verlag, Düsseldorf: 2001, S. 24–40.

Download at:

http://www.phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de/politik/Mitarbeiter/Alemann/aufsatz/01_expose2001

Knigge-Illner, Helga: Der Weg zum Dokortitel. Strategien für die erfolgreiche Promotion. Campus concret, Frankfurt: 2009.

Liebscher, Daniela: Der Stipendienantrag – der „Businessplan“ für die Promotion. In: Kompetent zum Dokortitel. Konzepte zur Förderung Promovierender. Hrsg. von Katrin Girgensohn. VS Research, Wiesbaden: 2010, S. 133–153.

Nünning, Ansgar/Sommer, Roy (Hrsg.): Handbuch Promotion: Forschung – Förderung – Finanzierung. Metzler, Stuttgart: 2007.