Writing Effective Research Proposals

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Outline

• Basics of Writing a Research Proposal

• Structure of a Proposal
  – Introduction
  – Research Question
  – Literature Review
  – Methodology
  – Expected Results and Limitations
The Basics

The main goals of a research proposal are:

1) **Show that you have a worthwhile research project**
   a. Situation
   b. Research Question

2) **Show that you have the competence and the work-plan to complete it**
   a. Literature Review
   b. Methodology
Outline of a Research Proposal

- Introduction
- Research Question
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Expected Results and Limitations
Follow the submission guidelines – a general rule is: keep it short!

• Introduction ➜ 1 page
• Research Question ➜ 3 lines
• Literature Review ➜ 1 page
• Methodology ➜ 1 page
• Expected Results ➜ 1 paragraph
• Limitations ➜ 1 paragraph
• References ➜ 1/2 page
• TOTAL ➜ 3-5 pages
Introduction

Situation

• Get straight to the point - avoid generalizations (e.g. “The study of climate change is becoming increasingly important in this day and age.”)

• Include only facts, data and numbers that impact the topic you are studying.
Introduction (cont.)

Problem

• Give evidence to show there is a problem
• Or show there is a lack of research on the topic
All Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) economies are members of regional free trade agreements (FTAs), including, most recently, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area.

To date, little research has been carried out into the environmental implications of FTAs in the GMS.

What are the environmental implications of the ASEAN-China FTA?
The Research Question

• “A question well asked is a question half answered.”

• Ask simple, answerable questions
The Research Question cont.

• Limit the scope of your research:
  – Don’t tackle multiple research projects in one study.
  – Be realistic—what can you accomplish in this study?
  – E.g. “What are the impacts of climate change?”

• Stay on topic
  – A trade research paper should focus on trade (not science or macroeconomics)
  – E.g. “What is the effect of climate change on aquaculture?”
The Research Question (cont.)

• Tips for Limiting the Scope
  – By geography
  – By identifying a gap in the existing literature
  – By policy needs
  – By thinking through time and cost constraint
  – By considering the available info/data
Example (1)

- Examining the impacts of climate change on trade ➔
- Examining the impacts of climate change on trade flows in the Asia-Pacific region ➔
- Assessing the risk of climate-change related disruptions to supply, transport and distribution chains in the Greater Mekong Subregion
Example (2)

• What are the linkages between climate change and the services sector? →
• How will climate change likely impact the tourism sector? →
• How will the projected rising sea levels affect the tourism sector in the Pacific Islands?
Literature Review

• Provides the background and context for the research problem
• Proves that your proposed research is necessary
• Demonstrates that you are already knowledgeable about the area
• Provides the “jumping-off” point for your research topic within the larger, ongoing research area
Literature Review Citations

- Citations are important - they prove that you have done background research and are able to discern between good and bad sources
- Use the same citation format throughout
- See reference slide for links to citation websites
Methodology

• Explain in detail your source of information (data) and the analytical method you will use to answer your research question
Data

• For primary data: explain the data collection instrument (survey, interview, etc.) and method (sample size, etc.)

• For secondary data: detail the source (e.g. COMTRADE) and availability of data (e.g. outline limited data availability for LDCs)
Analytical method

• Outline the methodology you plan to use to analyze the data
• Be as specific as possible; include relevant analytical form (e.g. mathematical model, regression)
• E.g. “I will build a theoretical model involving the environment, human capital, growth, and trade, and will test the model empirically with data.”
Expected Results and Limitations

• What results do you think will come from your research?
• Limitations – explain how your research results are likely to be limited (e.g. by geography, by country, by product)
Other elements to add

• Include other relevant information requested in the submission guidelines:
  – Timeline
  – Budget
  – Team composition

• List of references (include weblinks where possible)
Before Submitting Your Proposal…

• Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses → ask for help to improve your proposal in those areas

• Format your proposal:
  - edit and spell-check
  - check consistency of font, capitalization and use of acronyms
Orally Presenting Research Proposals

• Use the same format for your oral presentation as for your written proposal

• Practice out loud to a colleague or friend and time yourself
References

  http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/proposal.html.

• United Nations Library Network. “Grant Proposal writing Guidelines.”
Links to Citation Styles

• Modern Language Association format

• Chicago Manual of Style format
  http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html