



How to Write a Research Proposal

**A Guideline for Term Papers
and Theses in English Linguistics**

Technische Universität Braunschweig
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How to Write a Research Proposal

Manual for Linguistics

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1 General Introduction

The starting point for every paper, be it a term paper or a finals' paper, should be a thoroughly worked-out research proposal. Investing sufficient time and thought into writing a research proposal will yield a good return and can save you a lot of time, confusion and disappointment when actually writing your paper.

A research proposal serves several purposes:

- It gives an overview of the relevance and objective of a research project.
- It gives an overview of the content, the procedure and the timing of a research project.
- It shows whether a research project is manageable in scope and timing.

A research proposal has six key components:

- A title page
- An abstract summarizing the project
- A detailed description of the project
- A time schedule for the project
- An overview of the structure of the paper (*Gliederung*)
- References

The following sections give an overview of each component. Although every research proposal should follow this guideline, you will find that not all sections are (equally) applicable for each project, since every research project is different. For instance, a paper that focusses on literature review or a theoretical analysis requires a somewhat different research proposal from a paper that reports an empirical study. Therefore, you will find a section dealing with research proposal for theoretical term papers and one outlining a research proposal for empirical studies.

In the following, we first describe the structure and contents of a research proposal for A2, E2 and M2 term papers which comprise a literature review or a theoretical analysis of existing data. Second, we outline the structure and contents of a research proposal for E2 or BA theses, in which you design and carry out a study and collect data. Follow the guidelines for the appropriate term paper.

Generally, a research proposal for a short term paper (module A2) is less extensive than a research proposal for a long term paper (*komplexe Hausarbeit* in module E2) or a BA thesis / MA thesis. In total, the research proposal should not exceed 3 pages (A2) or 4-5 pages (longer term papers or finals' theses). Useful resources are listed at the end of this guideline.

2 Research Proposals for Literature Reviews and Theoretical Analyses (A2, E2, M2)

2.1 Title Page

Give the title of your research paper, your name, your student ID, your course of study, the semester you are in, your contact details and the course details for which you are submitting the proposal.

2.2 Abstract

The purpose of the abstract is to give the reader a brief introductory summary of the project. The abstract should not be longer than 100-150 words. It should address the following questions:

- What is the topic of research?
- What is the research question?
- Why is this relevant?
- How do I study the topic?
- What kind of findings do I anticipate?
- How will I interpret the findings?
- What are the implications of my research paper?

Even though the abstract comes first in a research proposal, it is advisable to write it last, that means once you have spelt out all information in detail in the later sections. By definition, the abstract duplicates some information that you spell out in more detail in the body of the proposal.

2.3 Project Description

In this section, you give a detailed account of what, why and how you are going to write about. Write this section in a goal-directed manner. Do not attempt to give an exhaustive overview of the literature you have read and do not try to look at every angle of a problem. Rather, everything in this section should relate clearly to your research question. This section will contain the following points in the following order.

2.3.1 What is the Research Question?

In the research question, you succinctly express the objective of your paper. If you feel your project cannot be formulated in a research question, there is something wrong with it. Every suitable project addresses a clear research question! Your research question does need to be novel or unheard of. You can build on previous research.

2.3.2 Why is this Relevant?

In this section, you briefly explain why you consider the research question to be relevant for linguistics. What does the paper you summarize or your analysis of data add to previous research in the field or to topics we covered in class?

2.3.3 What do you Want to Study/Write About?

Here, you zoom in on the particular topic/phenomenon/problem your paper addresses to answer the research question. Make clear why your topic, etc. is suitable for answering the research question.

2.3.4 What did Previous Research Find?

In this section, you provide a brief overview of the relevant literature. For the research proposal, you can use materials and references from the textbook or from the presentations in class. Typically, you outline the different positions/approaches/theories in the field, identify flaws or lacunae in previous research, pinpoint open questions and show how your study follows up on or relates to previous research. It is important to keep this section goal-oriented and brief. Typically, you do not need to cite more than 5-7 sources in this section.

2.3.5 What is Your Hypothesis?

Formulate a clear and testable hypothesis. Unlike the research question, which is open, a hypothesis is a testable statement.

Example of a research question (RQ):

Is there cross-linguistic activation in bilingual language comprehension?

Example of a hypothesis corresponding to the RQ:

(Yes,) there is cross-linguistic activation in bilingual language comprehension.

2.3.6 How Do You Want to Proceed?

In this section, you outline the set-up of your term paper.

Theoretical Term Papers

This section should include information about:

- a) Sources: Which texts/approaches/analyses are you going to use? How did you find the sources or how are you going to find the sources? How are these sources relevant for your research question/hypothesis?
- b) Method and Analysis: How are you going to assess the texts/approaches/analyses? What do you look for? Which criteria for comparison or evaluation do you apply? How are you going to compare several texts/approaches/analyses?
- c) Procedure: In which order (of research subquestions) do you tackle the texts/approaches?

Working With Data

Using data is important in any kind of linguistic term paper, even if you do not carry out an empirical study. For example, you can use data to illustrate a theoretical problem that you have explained in your text. In this case, you can draw on data from previous literature or come up with your own examples. It is also possible to use anecdotal empirical data (e.g., child utterances or speech errors you have heard, but that you did not collect systematically). Make sure that you explain the data sufficiently so that someone who has not read the original paper can understand how the data speak to your research question. Finally, number and reference examples appropriately (see the Manual of Style and the How To for term papers for more information).

2.3.7 What are the Expected Findings?

In this section, you anticipate the findings you think you are going to obtain. Write this section in future tense. Do not make up fake data or conclusions!

2.3.8 How Do the Findings Speak to the Research Question?

In this section, you explain how you interpret the findings in relation to the research question. It is interesting to think about unexpected findings: What if the findings turn out differently? Are there any alternative interpretations?

2.3.9 What is the Expected Contribution of your Paper to the Field/Research Question?

Here, you briefly summarize the impact you think your project will have.

2.4 Structure of Paper

In this section, you provide a preliminary Table of Contents of your paper that illustrates the structure of the paper. For each section, indicate how long it will approximately be and what the main points are in it.

2.5 The Final Steps

Read through your proposal and use this guideline as a checklist. Make sure you have addressed all relevant points. It is important that everything you write is clear and clearly relates to your research question.

2.6 References

You should list all references cited in the proposal. Make sure these references are up-to-date and conform to the department's "Manual of Style".

3 Research Proposals for Empirical Studies (E2 or BA Thesis)

3.1 Title Page

Give the title of your research paper, your name, your student ID, your course of study, the semester you are in, your contact details and the course details for which you are submitting the proposal.

3.2 Abstract

The purpose of the abstract is to give the reader a brief introductory summary of the project. The abstract should not be longer than 100-150 words. It should address the following questions:

- What is the topic of research?
- What is the research question?
- Why is this relevant?
- How do I study the topic?
- What kind of findings do I anticipate?
- How will I interpret the findings?
- What are the implications of my research paper?

Even though the abstract comes first in a research proposal, it is advisable to write it last, that means once you have spelt out all information in detail in the later sections. By definition, the abstract duplicates some information that you spell out in more detail in the body of the proposal.

3.3 Project Description

In this section, you give a detailed account of what, why and how you are going to write about. Write this section in a goal-directed manner. Do not attempt to give an exhaustive overview of the literature you have read and do not try to look at every angle of a problem. Rather, everything in this section should relate clearly to your research question.

3.3.1 What is the Research Question?

In the research question, you succinctly express the objective of your paper. If you feel your project cannot be formulated in a research question, there is something wrong with it. Every suitable project addresses a clear research question! Your research question does need to be novel or unheard of. You can build on previous research.

3.3.2 Why is this Relevant?

In this section, you briefly explain why you consider the research question to be relevant for linguistics. What does your paper add to previous research in the field?

3.3.3 What do you Want to Study/Write About?

Here, you zoom in on the particular topic/phenomenon/problem your paper addresses to answer the research question. Make clear why your topic, etc. is suitable for answering the research question.

3.3.4 What did Previous Research Find?

In this section, you provide a brief overview of the relevant literature. Typically, you outline the different positions/approaches/theories in the field, identify flaws or lacunae in previous

research, pinpoint open questions and show how your study follows up on or relates to previous research. It is important to keep this section goal-oriented and brief. Typically, you do not need to cite more than 5-7 sources in this section. You can use the textbooks, slides and presentations from class as a starting point, but you should go beyond them and conduct an independent literature search.

3.3.5 What is Your Hypothesis?

Formulate a clear and testable hypothesis. Unlike the research question, which is open, a hypothesis is a testable statement.

Example of a research question (RQ):

Is there cross-linguistic activation in bilingual language comprehension?

Example of a hypothesis corresponding to the RQ:

(Yes,) there is cross-linguistic activation in bilingual language comprehension.

3.3.6 How Do You Want to Test the Hypothesis or Do Your Research?

In this section, you outline the set-up of your study.

Working With Corpora

You can draw on electronic corpora (e.g., the International Corpus of English (ICE), the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), the Child Data Exchange System (CHILDES)). Alternatively, you can compile your own data corpus, for instance, on the basis of naturalistic or elicited spoken data that you collected and transcribed or texts (newspaper articles, letters, etc.) you systematically compiled.

If you work with corpus data, this section should include information about:

- a) Sources: What is your corpus? Where do your data come from? What do they look like?
- b) Data treatment: How do you transcribe / annotate / classify your data?
- c) Method: What is the method you apply (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative, longitudinal vs. cross-sectional)?
- d) Procedure: In which order (of research subquestions) are you going to analyse the data?
- e) Analysis: How are you going to categorize, group and analyse the results?

Eliciting Data (Experimental / Task-based Data)

In experimental or task-based studies, you specifically design and carry out a study to collect data to answer your research question. For example, if you focus on finding out how speakers process relative clauses, the experiments/tasks you design (e.g., a psycholinguistic experiment or a survey using a questionnaire) are concerned with relative clauses. This section should include information about:

- a) Participants: How many? What are their characteristics or the selection criteria? Where and how are you going to recruit them?
- b) Materials: What are your experimental items like?

- c) Design of study: How are you going to construct your items? What are the conditions? What is/are the independent variable/s? What is/are the dependent variable/s?
- d) Method: Name the method and explain why you opted for it. What task are you going to use?
- e) Procedure: How does the task work? How do the items get presented? What do the participants do?
- f) Predictions: Break down the hypothesis into experimental predictions according to the design, materials and method of your study.

Example of an experimental prediction corresponding to the RQ above:

Bilingual German-English speakers recognize cognates faster than matched non-cognates in a lexical decision task in English.

- g) Analysis: State how you are going to classify, group and analyse the results. Which comparisons are you going to make? Which statistical analyses, if any, are you going to use (e.g., frequencies, comparison of means, correlations, etc.)?

3.3.7 What are the Expected Findings?

In this section, you anticipate the findings you think you are going to obtain. Typically, these should be consistent with the prediction flowing from your hypothesis. Write this section in future tense. Do not make up fake data or conclusions!

3.3.8 How Do the Findings Speak to the Hypothesis?

In this section, you explain how you interpret the findings in relation to the hypothesis and how they confirm or disprove the hypothesis. It is interesting to think about unexpected findings: What if the findings turn out differently? Are there any alternative interpretations?

3.3.9 What is the Expected Contribution of your Study to the Field/Research Question?

Here, you briefly summarize the impact you think your project will have.

3.4 Time Schedule

A time schedule is particularly important for experimental or data-based projects. Many of these projects fail because they could not be carried out within the set time limit. Hence, working out a time schedule is essential. In most cases, you can use a table for the time schedule as in the example tables (Table 1 and Table 2). Your table may contain more or fewer points. Plan backwards from the date your paper is due and allow for enough time.

Table 1

Time schedule for a corpus-based study

Total time available	<i>9 weeks (until 31 July 2???)</i>	
Activity	Time period	Dates (from X until Y)
1) Finding and reading previous literature	<i>2 weeks</i>	<i>1 May – 14 May</i>
2) Learning about corpus and programmes for analysis	<i>1 week</i>	<i>16 May – 21 May</i>
3) Choosing material from corpus and designing analysis	<i>1 week</i>	<i>22 May – 28 May</i>
4) Doing the analysis		
...		
8) Writing up		
9) Rewriting		
10) Thorough proof-reading (if possible also by someone else)		
11) Submission		

Table 2

Time Schedule for an Experimental Study.

Total time available	<i>4 months (until 31 January 2???)</i>	
Activity	Time period	Dates (from X until Y)
1) Finding and reading previous literature	<i>3 weeks</i>	<i>1 October – 21 October</i>
2) Designing materials	<i>1 week</i>	<i>22 October – 31 October</i>
3) Learning how to use method	<i>2 weeks</i>	<i>22 October – 6 November</i>
4) Designing questionnaire		
5) Finding participants		
6) Running tests		
7) Analysing data		
...		
...		
8) Writing up		
9) Rewriting		
10) Thorough proof-reading (if possible also by someone else)		
11) Submission		

3.5 Structure of Paper

In this section, you provide a preliminary Table of Contents of your paper that illustrates the structure of the paper. For each section, indicate how long it will approximately be and what the main points are in it.

3.6 The Final Steps

Read through your proposal and use this guideline as a checklist. Make sure you have addressed all relevant points. It is important that everything you write is clear and clearly relates to your research question.

3.7 References

You should list all references cited in the proposal. Make sure these references are up-to-date and conform to the department's "Manual of Style".

4 Selected and Annotated References on General and Linguistic Research Methods

- Albert, R., & Koster, C. J. (2002). *Empirie in Linguistik und Sprachlehrforschung: ein methodologisches Arbeitsbuch*. Narr.
- Bell, J. (1999). *Doing your research project*. Open University Press. (methodology is outdated (skip it) but some useful tips on basic statistics and Excel)
- Bortz, J. (2005). *Statistik für Human- und Sozialwissenschaftler*. Springer. (practical advice, first steps)
- Clapham, C., & Corson D. (1997). *Encyclopaedia of language and education* (Vol. 7). Kluwer. (contains many concise articles)
- Field, A., & Hole, G. (2003). *How to design and report experiments*. Sage.
- Hatch, E., & Lazaraton, A. (1991). *The research manual: design and statistics for applied linguistics*. Newbury House. (very comprehensive, but less linguistics than one might expect)
- <http://4teachers.homestead.com/writing.html> (tips on academic writing, avoiding plagiarism)
- <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/> (almost a whole book online; similar to Marczyk et al. (2005) and based on the theory by Shadish et al. (2002))
- Marczyk, G. R., Dematteo, D., & Festinger, D. (2005). *Essentials of research design and methodology*. Wiley. (highly recommended, comprehensive and accessible)
- McDaniel, D., McKee, C., & Cairns, H. S. (Eds.). (1996). *Methods for assessing children's syntax*. MIT Press. (selection of carefully described experiments etc.)
- Rasinger, S. (2013). *Quantitative Research in Linguistics: An Introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rietveld, T., & Van Hout, R. (1993). *Statistical techniques for the study of language and language behaviour*. Mouton de Gruyter. (tough statistics, but sometimes you need it)
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized casual inference*. Houghton Mifflin. (standard work on validity, but not easy)
- Wray, A., Trott, K., & Bloomer, A. (1998). *Projects in linguistics: a practical guide to researching language*. Arnold. (very accessible, but a bit shallow)