The Research Proposal

Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2007). Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for supervisors. New York: Routledge.

Research proposals are an example of what Swales (1996) calls 'occluded' genres; that is, genres which are difficult for students to have to access to, but play an important part in the students' lives. In his book *Successful Dissertations and Theses*, Madsen (1992: 51) writes that 'the research proposal is often the key element to the successful thesis and, as such, the most important step in the whole process'. Meloy (1994: 31) presents a similar view, saying that 'proposal writing does not appear to be something that comes naturally' and that we learn not only by example but also by the reactions and suggestions of our supervisors and our thesis committee members. The process of writing a research proposal will, therefore, be examined in some detail in this chapter. Topics covered will include choosing and focusing a research topic, developing a research proposal, the structure and purpose of research proposals, details to include in a research proposal, differences between a master's and a doctoral thesis, and different expectations across different areas of study.

Differences between master's and doctoral theses

An important point for students to consider before they write their research proposal is the degree they are writing it for, and what that degree requires of them

A master's dissertation demonstrates:

- an original investigation or the testing of ideas;
- competence in independent work or experimentation;
- an understanding of appropriate techniques as well as their limitations;
- an expert knowledge of the published literature on the topic under investigation;
- evidence of the ability to make critical use of published work and source materials;
- an appreciation of the relationship between the research topic and the wider field of knowledge;
- the ability to present the work at an appropriate level of literary quality.

A doctoral thesis demonstrates all of the above, plus:

- a distinct contribution to knowledge, as shown by the topic under investigation

- the methodology employed
- the discovery of new facts, or interpretation of the findings.

In scope, the doctoral thesis differs from a master's research degree by its deeper, more comprehensive treatment of the subject under investigation (Elphinstone and Schweitzer 1998). A doctoral thesis is also required to demonstrate authority in the area of research. That is, the student is expected to have an expert and up-to-date knowledge of the area of study and research that is relevant to their particular topic. The thesis also needs to be written in succinct, clear, error-free English.

At the doctoral level, examiners are often asked whether the thesis contains material that is in some way worthy of publication. The issue of a 'distinct contribution to knowledge' is an important consideration at the doctoral level. In short, has the writer carried out a piece of work that demonstrates that a research apprenticeship is complete and that the student 'should be admitted to the community of scholars in the discipline?'

A study carried out by Tinkler and Jackson (2000) in Great Britain found that while there was a large amount of agreement among the criteria used by universities for defining doctoral theses, the actual examination of the thesis was often conceptualized, and carried out, in rather different ways. It is therefore important for students to be aware of the criteria their university will use for assessing their thesis.

A checklist for developing a research proposal

Nunan (1992) and Bell (1999) provide good advice for students writing a research proposal. The following checklist summarizes their work. This is a helpful list to work through with students as they are deciding on, and refining, their research topic.

(i) Draw up a shortlist of topics. Students can do this, for example, by speaking to other students, asking colleagues, asking potential supervisors, or looking up related research in the library:

(ii)(ii) Select a topic for investigation.

(iii) Then, formulate a general question. That is, turn the topic into a research question.

(iv) Next, focus the question. That is, be as specific as possible about what the study will investigate. This is often difficult to do, so students should spend as much time as necessary to get their question right.

The question needs to be:

- worth asking; that is, it needs to be *significant*;
- capable of being answered; that is, it needs to be *feasible.*

There are many questions that are worth asking but which cannot, in any practical sense, be answered. It is important to strike a balance between the value of the question and the student's ability to develop a research proposal they are capable of carrying out; that is, a project that the student has the background and training required to carry out.

(v) Decide on the aims and objectives of the study or formulate a hypothesis.
(vi) Think about the data that need to be collected to answer the question.

(vii) Draw up an initial research plan.

(viii) Now, read enough to be able to decide whether the project is on the right lines. Look especially at previous research in the area. Good places to look are journal articles, research reports and other theses and dissertations written in the area.

(ix) Next write up a detailed proposal, including definitions of key terms that are used in your proposal. That is, define the characteristics of the terms you used in the proposal in a way that would enable an outsider to identify them if they came across them.

Often a student starts off with a fairly brief proposal that is further refined over a period of time (Elphinstone and Schweitzer 1998). This depends on the requirements of the particular university and academic department and the particular requirements they set for students applying for admission to a degree and the writing of a research proposal within that degree. It is important for students to check these requirements and write a proposal that meets the requirements of the particular setting in which they are writing their proposal.

Refining a Research Question

Stevens and Asmar (1999) point out that often new researchers start off with a project that is overly large and ambitious. They suggest that 'wiser heads' know that a good thesis project is 'narrow and deep'. In their words, 'even the simplest idea can mushroom into an uncontrollably large project' (Stevens and Asmar 1999: 15). They highlight how important it is for students to listen to their supervisor and be guided by their advice in the early stages of their research.

Ways to refine a research question

● Read broadly and widely to find a subject about which you are passionate. Immerse yourself in the literature, use your library, read abstracts of other recent theses and dissertations, check theses on the web. For example:

http://www.ndltd.org/
– http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/

- Narrow your focus to a single question: be disciplined and not overambitious.
- Be prepared to change or modify your question if necessary.
- Be able to answer the question 'Why am I doing this project?' (and not a different one).
- Read up-to-date materials – ensure that your idea is achievable and no one else has done or is doing it.
- Consult other students who are further down the track, especially those who have the same supervisor as you.
- Discuss your ideas with your supervisor and lots of other people.
- Attend specialized conferences in your area – take note of the focus of research and learn from the experts in your field.
- Work through the implications of your research question: consider existing materials and ideas on which it is based, check the logic, spell out methods to be used.
- Condense your research question into two sentences, write them down, above your work area. Change the question if needed.
- Ask yourself: What will we know at the end that we did not already know?

Lecture Two

Details to Include in a Research Proposal

Below is a list of points that are often included in research proposals.

1- A clearly focused statement of the overall purpose of the proposed research.
2- A clearly focused research question/hypothesis that is: worth asking; capable of being answered.
3- Precise definitions of the key terms in the research question/s or hypothesis that will allow them to be clearly observed, measured and identified throughout the study.
4- An awareness of key research that has already been carried out in the particular area including:
- what conclusions were reached in this previous research, by whom and when;
- whether these conclusions are in agreement or conflict with each other;
- the main issues or controversies that surround the problem;
- significant gaps in previous research in this particular area;
- an indication of how this previous research is relevant to the proposed study.

5 An appropriate choice of research approach for the particular question or problem including a well-defined list of procedures to be followed in carrying out the research. This should include the method of data collection and analysis. The proposal should also include, if appropriate:

- a broad description of any particular theoretical framework to be used in the analysis and the reason/s for its use in the study;
- a brief statement describing how the sample population will be selected for the study and the reason for the approach to selection;
- a pilot study in which the research instruments will be trialled and evaluated and an analysis carried out of the trial data.

6- A section which highlights any anticipated problems and limitations in the proposed study including threats to reliability and validity and how these will be countered.

7- A statement which illustrates why the study is significant; that is, why the research question or hypothesis is worth asking.
8- Consideration of ethical issues involved in carrying out the research such as whether informed consent needs to be obtained, and if so, how this will be done.
9- A proposed timetable for the research. This is extremely important as it gives an indication as to how realistic the proposal actually is.
10- A proposed budget for the research (if appropriate). This is also important as it gives an indication of how realistic the proposal may be in terms of financial requirements and whether the research might need to be adapted in the light of these.
11- A list of references which relate to the proposal.
12- Appendices (if appropriate) which contain any material that will be used or adapted for the study, including any permission that might need to be obtained to use it.

Table 4.1 Purpose of each section of a research proposal

Section	*Purpose*
Title	To summarize, in a few words, what the research will be about
Summary	To provide an overview of the study which you will expand on in more detail in the text that follows.
Overall purpose	To present a clear and concise statement of the overall purpose of the research.
Relevant background literature	To demonstrate the relationship between the proposed study and what has already been done in the particular area; that is, to indicate the 'gap' that the study will fill.
Research question/s	To provide an explicit statement of what the study will investigate.
Definitions of terms	To provide the meaning of the key terms that have been used in the research question/s.
Research methodology	To give an illustration of the steps the project will go through in order to carry out the research.
Anticipated problems and limitations	To show awareness of the limitations of the study, what problems may be met in carrying it out, and how they will be dealt with.
Significance of the research	To say why the study is worth carrying out.
Resources required/budget	To say what resources the research will require – and what other costs may be anticipated in carrying out the study.
Ethics	To provide a statement as to how participants will be advised of the overall nature of the study, and how informed consent will be obtained from them.
Proposed table of contents	To give an overview of the scale and anticipated organization of the thesis or dissertation.
Timetable	To give a working plan for carrying out, and completing, the study.
References	To provide detailed references and bibliographic support for the proposal.
Appendix	To provide examples of materials that might be used, or adapted, in the study.

Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, p. 61

Criteria for Assessing Research Proposals

In an article titled 'English for academic possibilities: the research proposal as a contested site', Cadman (2002) surveyed and interviewed supervisors to ask them to prioritize the particular features they expected to see in a research proposal. She found supervisors gave most value to:

- the logic of the student's argument;
- a well-focused research question, set of research objectives, or hypothesis;
- the width and depth of the student's reading;
- the feasibility of the student's project;

- a critical approach to the literature; justification of the project through the literature;
- understanding of current issues on the student's topic;
- matching of methodology and methods to the research questions

Lecture Three

Writing the Acknowledgments Section

Hyland points out that there are typically three stages in Acknowledgements sections: a *reflecting move* which makes some introspective comment on the writer's research experience, a *thanking move* which gives credit to individuals and institutions, and an *announcing move* which accepts responsibility for any flaws or errors and dedicates the thesis to an individual or individual/s. Examples of each of these moves are shown in Table 11.2. Only the thanking move is obligatory in these texts, however, even though there are often more moves than this.

Table 11.2 Moves in Acknowledgements sections

Move	*Examples*
Reflecting move	The most rewarding achievement in my life, as I approach middle age, is the completion of my doctoral dissertation.
Thanking move	
Presenting participants	I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all those persons who have given their invaluable support and assistance.
Thanking for academic assistance, intellectual support, ideas, analyses, feedback, etc.	In particular, I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr James Fung, who was very generous with his time and knowledge and assisted me in each step to complete the thesis.
Thanking for resources, data access and clerical, technical and financial support, etc.	The research for this thesis was financially supported by a postgraduate studentship from the University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong and China Gas Company Postgraduate Scholarship, Epson Foundation Scholarship, two University of Hong Kong CRCG grants and an RCG grant.
Thanking for moral support, friendship, encouragement, sympathy, patience, etc.	I'd include those who helped including my supervisor, friends, and colleagues. It is also appropriate to thank for spiritual support, so I'd also include my friends in church and family members.
Announcing move	
Accepting responsibility for flaws or errors	Notwithstanding all of the above support for this project, any errors and/or omissions are solely my own.
Dedicating the thesis to an individual/s	I love my family. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Source: based on Hyland 2004b

Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, p. 161

Application: Analysing a sample Acknowledgements Section

Analyze the structure of the following Acknowledgements section and identify the ways in which the writer has expressed gratitude to the people that helped her with her thesis.

I am deeply indebted to my thesis advisor Elizabeth Wood, who approved my topic, edited my thesis and gave me invaluable advice both in person and on the phone. I would also like to thank her for her wit, humanity and constant encouragement of my endeavours. She is truly an inspired soul.

I would also like to extend thanks to the faculty members of the Department of Cultures and Values for their generosity, especially Dr David Smith, Grace Wong McAllister, Dr Ratna Ghosh and Dr Bill Lawlor, whose magical presence I miss tremendously.

Special thanks is reserved for my father, who helped me gather several of my references when I sat on many library floors on the verge of frustration and for just being there. In addition, I am indebted to my younger brother, Atiba Lewis, whose extensive computer skills saved me on several occasions.

Lecture Four: The Abstract

Introduction

One of the final things a student needs to do is write their Abstract and Acknowledgements. The Abstract is an important piece of work as it is one of the first things an examiner will look at. The Acknowledgements are also an important part of the student's text as they can reveal a lot about disciplinary membership and networks at the same time as showing gratitude to the people that have helped the student in the pursuit of their studies. This chapter provides suggestions for how to structure thesis and dissertation Abstracts and Acknowledgements. Examples of Abstracts and Acknowledgements are included for students to analyse.

The importance of the Abstract

Cooley and Lewkowicz (2003:112) give this advice on the Abstract: [The Abstract] is written after the research has been completed and the writer knows exactly what is contained in the body of the text. It is a summary of the text and it informs readers of what can be found in the dissertation and in what order, functioning as an overall signpost for the reader. Although it is the last part of a dissertation to be written, it is generally one of the first a reader will look at. Indeed, if the Abstract is not well written, it may be the only part of the dissertation a reader will look at!

Typical Structure of the Abstract

The Abstract typically aims to provide an overview of the study which answers the following questions:

What was the general purpose of the study?

What was the particular aim of the study?

Why was the study carried out?

How was the study carried out?

What did the study reveal?

The typical structure of an Abstract, then, is:

- overview of the study;

- aim of the study;
- reason for the study
- methodology used in the study;
- findings of the study.

The language of Abstracts

Cooley and Lewkowicz (2003) discuss the use of verb tense in Abstracts. As they point out, there are two ways the student may view their Abstract: as a summary of their thesis or dissertation, or as a summary of the research that was carried out. The first of these will typically use the *present simple* tense (This thesis *examines* ...). The second will typically use the *past simple* tense (The study *revealed* that ...) and the *present perfect* tense (Previous research *has shown* that ...). Table 11.1 is a summary of these different tense uses, with examples taken from the previous Abstracts.

Lecture Five (5)

The Structure of Theses and Dissertations

Source: pp. 66, 7, 8, 9& 70

Paltridge, B., &Starfield, S. (2007).Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for supervisors. New York, NY: Routledge

pp. 66, 7, 8, 9& 70

Then would you have a look at boxes: (5.1, p.68), (5.2, pp. 69-70), (5.3, p.71), (5.4, 72), (5.5, pp. 73-74), (5.6, p.76).

Dudley-Evans (1999) terms the typical 'IMRAD' type thesis a 'traditional' thesis.

- introduction
- methods
- results
- discussion)

Thompson (1999) further refines this category by dividing traditional theses into those, which have 'simple' and those, which have 'complex' patterns of organization.

Simple Traditional

- introduction'
- review of the literature
- materials and methods
- results
- discussion' and conclusion

A thesis with a 'complex' internal structure: reports on more than one study

It typically commences with 'introduction' and 'review of the

literature' sections, as with the simple traditional thesis. It might then have a

general methods' section which is followed by a series of sections that report'

on each of the individual studies. The thesis ends with a general overall conclusions

section (Thompson 1999).

Topic-based' Thesis

This kind of thesis typically commences with an introductory chapter which is then followed by a series of chapters that have titles based on sub-topics of the topic under investigation. The thesis then ends with a 'conclusions' chapter.

A compilation of research articles presented as a PhD thesis

Compilation of publishable research articles. These are quite different from other sorts of theses. he research article chapters are more concise than typical thesis chapters, with less of the 'display of knowledge' that is often found in a thesis or dissertation. Further, in terms of audience, they are written more as 'experts writing for experts', than novices 'writing for admission to the academy'.

Writing the Introduction

The introductory chapter

Bunton (2002) and Paltridge (2002) found that despite variation in the overall structuring of the thesis with the emergence of new 'hybrid' types (see Chapter 5), all the theses they examined had an introductory chapter. Our understandings of the structure and organization of the Introductions to theses draw on the research into journal article Introductions, primarily carried out by Swales (1990). Readers may be familiar with his Create a Research Space (CARS) framework. Introductory chapters have in fact probably been subjected to greater examination than other typical sections of the thesis genre (Bunton 2002; Dudley-Evans 1986). This may be because they are themselves shorter and therefore more amenable to analysis than the other typically much longer sections, but whatever the cause, there is more research upon which to draw when we look at thesis Introductions. This allows us to propose a framework for the typical structure of thesis Introductions (see Table 6.1). As Swales and Feak (1994) have argued in terms of the research article, the thesis Introduction is of strategic importance: its key role is to create a research space for the writer. It is in the Introduction that the writer makes claims for the centrality or significance of the research in question and begins to outline the overall argument of the thesis. In the fierce academic competition to get papers published in reputable academic journals, the Introduction is extremely important in positioning the writer as having something to say that is worth publishing. This is not as true for the thesis writer who is seeking to enter a community of scholars but as Bunton (2002: 58) notes, 'since one of the criteria for the award of a doctorate in many universities is that the thesis makes an original contribution of knowledge', the doctoral student needs to establish in the Introduction how the thesis relates to and builds upon previous research in the field. In a study carried out in Hong Kong, Allison *et al*. (1998: 212) found that 'failure to create a

"research space"' was a key shortcoming in the thesis writing of the non-native speakers of English at their university.

Table

The role of the introductory chapter in the thesis: creating a research space

We have found that despite the growing variation in thesis structure and organization at the macro-level, it is useful to begin by considering the role of the Introduction in relation to the thesis in its entirety. The thesis is said to be shaped like an hourglass that is open at the top and bottom (see Figure 6.1 on p.84). The Introduction sits in the upper open end of the hourglass bowl to indicate that it is in the Introduction that the researcher clearly signals the relationship between the specific topic of the thesis and the field of work into which the thesis is being inserted.

The typical structure of the Introduction

As we said earlier, recent research has provided a more detailed understanding of the generic structure of thesis Introductions (Bunton 2002; Dudley-Evans 1986). The organizational structure of the Introduction can be said to move from a fairly general overview of the research terrain to the particular issues under investigation through three key moves which capture the communicative purposes of the Introduction (Swales and Feak 1994):

- to establish a research territory;
- to identify a niche or gap in the territory;
- to then signal how the topic in question occupies that niche

Table 6.1 is a modified version of Swales and Feak's move structure (drawing on Bunton 2002) which can usefully be applied to introductory chapters. In Table 6.1, the sub-moves (indicated by lower case a, b, etc.) have been elaborated on. It is important to note that not all sub-moves will necessarily be found: these are labelled optional.

In Move 1 – *establishing a research territory* – the writer typically begins to carve out his/her own research space by indicating that the general area is in some way significant. This is often done through reviewing previous research in the field. In addition, the writer may choose to provide background information on the particular topic being investigated and may define key

terms which are essential for the study. The different moves in the Introduction tend to employ different tenses (Atkinson and Curtis 1998). Move 1a, which signals the importance of the general area of research, often uses verbs in either the present tense or the present perfect tense in the sentence which makes these claims to *centrality* (Swales and Feak 1994). In the extracts below, the verbs in the present or present perfect tenses of sentences taken from Move 1a of a selection of PhD theses are underlined. The writer's use of the present tense suggests that the statement is a generally accepted truth. The use of the present perfect tense (i.e. has been) in the third sentence functions similarly to describe a state that continues up to the present moment. This sub-move also often contains an adjective, shown below in italics, which emphasizes the importance or interest of the topic.

In these areas, reducing groundwater recharge is an *important* step in reducing land degradation caused by salinity (Lewis 2000: 1). ● The Magellanic Clouds provide a *unique* environment in which to study *many interesting* and astrophysically *challenging* problems (Amy 2000: 1). ● Speech has arguably been the *most important* form of human communication since languages were first conceived (Epps 2000: 1). ● The modeling of fluid flows is of *great interest* to Engineers and Scientists alike, with many engineering problems and issues of scientific interest depending upon complex flow phenomena (Norris 2000: 1).

Move 2 – *establishing a niche* – points to a 'gap' or niche in the previous research which the research will 'fill'. For Swales and Feak (1994), the metaphor of the niche or research space is based on the idea of competition in ecology – academic writers seeking to publish must compete for 'light and space' as do plants and animals. Elsewhere, when describing writing a conference abstract, Swales and Feak (2000) use a marketing metaphor to talk about 'selling' one's research, and the niche metaphor can be extended to the notion of niche marketing – identifying a specific gap in the market which the new product can fill. While comparing one's thesis to a marketable product may initially appear distasteful, we have found it useful to talk in these terms to our students; the dissertation must after all make an original contribution to the field. The market niche metaphor is also helpful in understanding the idea of the Introduction as enabling the writer to position themselves in the marketplace of ideas relative to what has been written by others in the field. In the thesis, the gap is also sometimes presented as a problem or need that has been identified as requiring further research

In Move 2 of the framework, the writer typically establishes a niche by indicating a gap in the previous research or possibly extending a current research approach into a new area. It is through the review of prior research that the gap is established. The language of 'gap statements', according to Atkinson and Curtis (1998: 63), is typically evaluative in a negative way. In the examples listed below, gap statements from the Introductions of master's and doctoral theses have the gap words and phrases in italics.

● One class of quality improvement which has *not received much attention* is enhancement by broadening the bandwidth of coded speech without an increase in the bit rate. This is surprising since the notion of quality as a function of speech bandwidth is anticipated to become more pervasive (Epps 2000: 4).

● Due to the complexity of the flow problems *there are few* analytic models of fluid flows, but the advent of digital computers has stimulated the development of numerical method for the modeling of flow (Norris 2000: 1).

● Indeed, there appeared to be a story of female agitation for Aboriginal rights in twentieth century Australia that *had largely gone unnoticed up to that point*, and in the context of contemporary feminist politics *was positively denied* (Holland 1998: 1).

● Although it became accepted that episodic recharge might be a factor in the agricultural areas of Western Australia (e.g. Nulsen 1993), *no systematic analyses of* where and when it occurred, and how important it was in the overall picture of groundwater recharge and salinity were carried out (Lewis 2000: 6).

● These observations point to the proposition that in order to recognize the mismatches and to begin to understand the consequences of discontinuities, *there is a need to increase* research knowledge of community social practices and interactions with community literacies (White-Davison 1999: 2).

● *It is important to take issue with* his criticism of the role of structuralism and post-structuralism (Wakeling 1998: 5). The lists below, from Swales and Feak (1994: 187–189), contain examples of typical 'gap statement' words and phrases which may be useful for the nonnative English speaker.