

Study and research in Germany

Information Center Accra

How to Write a Research Proposal

Please note: The following recommendations are only suggestions. They do not guarantee a successful research application. They may, however, help you prepare a carefully conceptualized and comprehensive proposal. This may not only be important to the members of the selection committee who have to decide on your application, but also for yourself, by giving yourself a clear structure for your own work, a rough idea of where you are going and a timetable in which to accomplish your research successfully.

Keep in mind that your research proposal has to be written by you. Any passage from another source, even a single sentence, has to be appropriately cited. Plagiarism may result in your disqualification.

INTRODUCTION


When applying for a research grant or a study scholarship, the DAAD expects you to hand in a

"detailed and precise description of study or research proposal as well as information on any previous study or research projects of particular relevance to a decision of award" (see application form, p. 5)

What does that mean precisely?

The purpose of the proposal is to ensure that the candidates have done sufficient preliminary reading/research in the area of their interest, that they have thought about the issues involved and are able to provide more than a broad description of the topic which they are planning to research.

The proposal is of course not a fixed blueprint. One cannot predict one's findings beforehand or mechanically stick to an argument since the research will inevitably alter or even unseat one's initial expectations. There is no fixed formula for writing a proposal. Furthermore, academic traditions in Ghana and in Germany may differ slightly.



The overall criterion is:

You have to convince members of the scientific community that you have identified a scientific problem as well as that you have a theory background and a methodical approach to solve the problem within a realistic time frame and at reasonable expenses. With your research you will add a new aspect to the scientific discourse.

Your research proposal should have at 4 to 15, but not more than 30 pages. It should have a proper layout (typeface and line spacing) as well as a table of contents and page numbers. Remember that the members of the selection committee may usually have to read a large number of research proposals. Therefore good legibility of your proposal will be an advantage.

TITLE PAGE

On the title page, state your personal data like: name, academic title (if applicable), your position at your own university, e.g. junior lecturer (if applicable), your date of birth, nationality, your work and private address including telephone and e-mail-address.

Then the title of your planned dissertation (or research report) should follow. Remember that at this stage, the title can only be a working title. Nevertheless, all words in the title should be chosen with great care, and their association with one another must be carefully considered. While the title should be brief, it should be accurate, descriptive and comprehensive, clearly indicating the subject of the investigation. Note that you will only be ready to devise a title when you are clear about the focus of your research.

You should also state the area of your research, e.g. Political Science - Theory of International Relations - or Empirical Social Science etc.

You should give a realistic time frame in which you plan to complete your project, followed by the name(s) of your supervisor(s), the university department where you hope to do your research and, if applicable, information about other academics with whom you plan to collaborate.

SHORT STATEMENT ON THE RESEARCH TOPIC

Give a short summary on the research topic that you have identified - not more than one page. Focus on the new, current and relevant aspects of your topic. Remember, the most important aspect of a research proposal is clarity on the research topic.

You should choose a topic which can be investigated through appropriate and valid methods and for which research material is available. Your greatest challenge might be narrowing the topic down. This challenge often occurs with topics that are still relatively unfamiliar. Do a lot of general reading, and, if possible, discuss your topic with your supervisor.



REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Give a short and precise overview about the current state of research that is immediately connected with your own research project. Name the most important contributions of other scientists.

The proposal should contain a clear and logical discussion of the theoretical scope or of the framework of ideas that will be used to back the research. The proposal needs to show that you are fully conversant with the ideas you are dealing with and that you grasp their methodological implications.

Your research review should indicate an open problem which then will be the motive for your project. State clearly how your own research will contribute to the existing research.

YOUR OWN PREPARATION

Summarize the most important impact of your own work on the topic (if applicable). Attach copies of your own publications that might be seen in relation to your research project.

OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT


Give a concise and clear outline of the academic (possibly also non-academic, e.g. social and political) objectives that you want to achieve through your project. Your proposal needs to show why the intended research is important and to justify the effort of doing the research. Here you outline the significance (theoretical or practical) or relevance of the topic.

Such justification may either be of an empirical nature (you hope to add to, or extend an existing body of knowledge) or of a theoretical nature (you hope to elucidate contentious areas in a body of knowledge or to provide new conceptual insights into such knowledge). All research is part of a larger scholarly enterprise and candidates should be able to argue for the value and positioning of their work.

OUTLINE OF YOUR PROJECT

This is the central part of your research outline. It may well fill half of the space of your proposal. You should give detailed information about your intended research procedure during the given time.

Anyone who reads your proposal will want to know the sources and quality of evidence you will consult, the analytical technique you will employ, and the timetable you will follow. Depending on the topic, suitable research strategies should be defined to ensure that enough and adequate empirical data will be gathered for a successful research project. You will describe the intended methods of data gathering, the controls you will introduce, the statistical methods to be used, the type of literature or documentary analysis to be followed and so on.



Consider your work to be a Work-in-Progress and allow yourself a flexible planning: Stay ready to revise the proposal according to new insights and newly aroused questions and keep on modifying the working hypothesis according to new insights while formulating the proposal and the working hypothesis, but: Once you have a useful working hypothesis, concentrate on pursuing the project within the limits of the topic.

TENTATIVE TIME TABLE

Give information about your estimated time table (if possible in table form), indicating the sequence of research phases and the time that you will probably need for each phase. Take into account that at this stage, it can only be estimated, but make clear that you have an idea about the time span that will be needed for each step.

SELECTIVE RESEARCH BIBLIOGRAPHY

Here you list those academic works which you have mentioned in your research outline as well as a number of other important works to which you will refer during your research.

ATTACHMENTS

Give a list of other documents attached to your proposal.

EDITING

Once you have finished the conceptual work on your proposal, go through a careful editing stage, in which you make sure your proposal does not contain any grammatical/orthographical mistakes or typos.

Check whether the title, the abstract and the content of your proposal correspond with each other.

If possible, ask someone within the academic community to proofread your proposal in order to make sure the proposal conforms to international academic standards.

CHECKLIST FOR A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

With your scholarship application you will have to cover the following issues respectively to hand in the following documents:

- ✓ Table of Contents (Decimal System)
- ✓ Abstract
- ✓ Introduction into the General Topic
- ✓ Problem Statement and Justification of the Research Project
- ✓ Hypothesis and Objectives of the Study

- ✓ Literature and Research Review
- ✓ Research Methodology
- ✓ Data Collection, Analysis and Evaluation of Data
- ✓ Expected Results and Output of the Study
- ✓ Bibliography
- ✓ Appendix, e.g. Tables, Graphs, Questionnaires etc.
- ✓ Financial Budget and Timetable
- ✓ 3 Letters of recommendation by local researchers
- ✓ Statement of the home university on the need for staff development and for support of the applicant
- ✓ Correspondence with Scientific Supervisor and formal agreement on supervision in Germany in detail, including confirmation on the use of laboratory equipment, materials etc.
- ✓ C.V., focusing on educational and scientific background: Publications, Participation in conferences, papers published, co-operations, participation in research projects, research and teaching experiences





PLEASE NOTE:







If proposals fail, it is often not a problem of writing the proposal according to formal standards, but of explaining the intended project itself, i.e. of the delimitation of topic, of the given research questions, of the data collection etc. according to current academic standards, and of embedding the own project into a broader academic view.

CRITICAL REMARKS OF THE SELECTION COMMITTEE

When applying for a DAAD scholarship you will have to convince the selection committee which has to decide over a huge number of international scholarship applications for research projects that *you* have to pursue your project in Germany.

The following list of critical remarks of a selection committee on project proposals might help you writing your project proposal in a better way:

-  The proposal is not focused; the approach is too broad.
-  The proposal is predominantly declarative, but it cannot be operated practically as a basis for research.
-  The abstract is clearer and more interesting than the title allows expecting.
-  There are some aspects in the title that are not dealt with in the abstract and in the proposal.

- 
-  The current state of the art even at the home university seems to be unknown to the applicant. Some of the 'open research questions' are already dealt with at this very university.
 -  It remains unclear why a research stay abroad is necessary for this project.
 -  The statement of the supervisor in Germany is not solid.
 -  The subject related terminology is not precise.
 -  The academic level of research questions has not the level of a PhD-project.

LITERATURE ON SCIENTIFIC WRITING

Clyne, Michael G. (1987a): Cultural Differences in the Organization of Academic Texts. English and German. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11. 211-247.

Clyne, Michael G. (1987b): Discourse Structures and Discourse Expectations. Implications for Anglo-German Academic Communication in English. In: Smith, Larry E. (Ed.): *Discourse across Cultures. Strategies in World Englishes*. New York: Prentice Hall, 73-83.

Duszak, Anna (Ed.) (1997): *Culture and Styles of Academic Discourse*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Halliday, M.A.K. / **Martin**, J.R. (1993): *Writing Science. Literacy and Discursive Power*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Swales, John M. (1990): *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge u.a.: CUP (Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series).

Ventola, E. / **Mauranen**, A. (Eds.) (1997): *Academic Writing. Intercultural and Textual Issues*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.