

## Research Proposals for Application to American Universities

Albert Einstein famously said, “If we knew what we were doing, it wouldn’t be called research.” Research, a form of learning, is one of the main missions of university work in the United States. Writing a strong proposal for entrance into a masters or Ph.D. program is the critical component for acceptance.

When reading these proposals, professors do not believe that the student will come to the United States and do exactly the research proposed. Rather, professors are looking for two primary aspects:

1. Are there professors at the university with the expertise to guide the student in the topic area and the methodological area proposed;
2. And, does the student have a basic grasp of research design.

When you propose a study, it’s a proposal. There will be revisions made as you work through your program.

### Basic Outline

- A. **Name the Problem:** This should not be a general statement, and it should not be written using sentimental language (no journalism). Rather, use statistics, specifics, and detail to describe the problem you’re addressing. Typically, this section should be about 1/5<sup>th</sup> to 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the proposal. Remember, that the most common indicator that the student is not ready to conduct research is a problem statement written using a journalistic or sentimental approach (e.g., “When I was 12, my mother was diagnosed with AIDS.... The single exception to this might be a proposal in the humanities.).
- B. **Review the Literature:** In a proposal, you do not have the space to cover all the literature on a particular topic. Pick 8 to 12 of the most relevant pieces of literature; pieces that encapsulate the program and the research; and, pieces that demonstrate you know what scholarly research is and when it’s done well. As you review, always include the sample/participants (i.e., sample for quantitative research and participants for qualitative research), analytical methods, and findings.

To determine that a journal source is scholarly, check the journal website. It must have a practice of peer review to be considered a scholarly source. Also, be sure to Google “Top Journals in \_\_\_\_\_(name your discipline, e.g., sociology, education...), and include some work from those journals.

Remember, that the most common indicator that the student is not ready to conduct research is a literature review that includes media sources and white papers. Literature reviews summarize the scholarly work on a topic only.

This section should be about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the proposal.

- C. **Research Questions:** Question format is different for qualitative and quantitative work. Qualitative questions tend to ask questions like, “How do female students navigate campus relationships after a campus attack?” or “How do college-aged men envision their future relationship with their spouse?” or “Does the government student funding

scheme encourage college attendance and persistence?” These questions ask about the quality of life or the range of thinking. Quantitative questions ask about the size of problems or the size relationship between variable. For example, “Is there a correlation between educational level and domestic violence?” or “Do students receiving government funding persist at higher rates than students not receiving funding?”

This section should be 1/8<sup>th</sup> or less of the proposal – just the questions.

- D. **Methodology:** For beginning researchers, this is the most difficult section. In this section, you’ll (1) discuss your paradigm choice (qualitative or quantitative) and how that choice answers your questions; (2) name your sample process or participant selection; and (3) outline your analytical methods.

There are a number of critical mistakes in this section. **First**, the central question is whether the methodology you are naming can answer the question you have proposed. Students might be surprised to know how often questions and methods simply do not match.

**Second**, do not try to fake it. If you do not know regression modelling generally, do not assert that structural equation modelling is perfect for your problem. Simply discuss the match between your question and quantitative modelling in general.

**Third**, do not use popular words just because they are popular. Because mixed methods is now a popular design, students will assert that they are going to do a mixed methods study, but they have not developed a problem or questions that require a mixed methods design. Professors do research and read research. Please do not try to fake it. Discuss what you know.

**Fourth**, I have noticed that international students often call qualitative research what Americans would call a literature review. Doing a review of existent research on a topic is not a qualitative design. Qualitative design requires that you collect data (e.g., documents, interviews, observations) and conduct qualitative analysis of that data. Be careful not to call a literature review a content analysis.

This section should be 1/3<sup>rd</sup> or a bit more of the proposal.

- E. **Contribution to the Field:** Finally, you should anticipate how your research will contribute to the field by connecting it to the literature you reviewed in the literature review section.

This section should be 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the proposal.

The University of Southern California offers a helpful website on research proposals:  
<http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/researchproposal>