How to Write a Research Proposal (Plan) or Prospectus

An academic research proposal or prospectus is expected to contain these elements:

- A rationale for the choice of topic, showing why it is important or useful within the concerns of the discipline in which you are writing. It is sensible also to indicate the limitations of your aims. In other words, don't promise what you can't possibly deliver.
- A review of existing published work ("the literature") that relates to a topic. Here you need to tell how your proposed work will build on existing studies and yet explore new territory.
- An outline of your intended approach or methodology (with comparisons to existing published work), perhaps including costs, resources needed, and a timeline of when you hope to get things done. A prospectus lists the basic research materials; these may be listed according to title and author, or they may include annotations. If experts in the topic are to be consulted, their names are also included. (NOTE: The list of basic research materials may not be a complete list of all materials that are finally used in the research, but should indicate the research direction and the types of materials the researcher plans to examine and study.)

1. Particular disciplines have different ways of organizing a research proposal or prospectus. As such, it is wise to ask within your department what the standard guidelines are in organizing your research proposal/prospectus. Research proposals/prospectuses are often longer than abstracts that are part of any published research (up to 500 words).
2. Often it is helpful to begin with a research question that you would like to investigate/attempt to answer. The prospectus usually does not include the researcher's thesis, except as the basis for the research questions. If the researcher *believes* a certain thing to be true, but has no substantive evidence to support that belief, then the researcher's belief drives the questions that must be answered in order to demonstrate the correctness of the belief. In certain types of research, especially scientific research, the investigator must state a hypothesis in the prospectus, what the researcher will attempt to prove or disprove. The hypothesis gives the researcher's supposition or unproved theory as the basis for the investigation.

To whom is a prospectus written?

The audience for the prospectus is the reader who will determine whether or not the research project should be undertaken. This reader may be a professor, a research committee, a graduate degree committee, a funding agency, or the management of the company or agency for whom the researcher will conduct the study.

Other general tips for putting together a research proposal / prospectus

- Start with why your idea is worth doing (its contribution to the field), then fill in how you will address your idea (the technicalities about the topic and method).
- Give enough detail to establish the feasibility of your proposal, but not so much as to bore your reader.
- Show your ability to deal with possible problems or changes in focus (which will often happen in a longer research project or thesis/dissertation).
- A formal style generally is preferred. Since the prospectus cannot present the researcher's conclusion, i.e., the research has yet to be done, write the prospectus in the third person. More importantly, use active voice verbs and a writer's voice that demonstrates confidence that the research has merit. A prospectus that "sounds" dubious or not well considered typically indicates that the research project is dubious and not well considered.

More tips to get you started

- Look closely at departmental specifications (about timing, scope, length, readers, etc.). Remember, standards for abstracts, research proposals (plans) or prospectuses vary widely from discipline to discipline, journal to journal, conference to conference, and rhetorical situation to rhetorical situation.
- Ask other students (undergraduate as well as graduate) in your department about their experiences with this type of writing; look at past abstracts, research proposals (plans) and prospectuses for examples.
- Try out your ideas with as wide an audience as possible, especially with your supervisor and/or committee members (informal discussions, drafts, preliminary meetings, presentations at colloquia, etc.).
- Show why your research idea is interesting within your research field by discussion of what other scholars/writers have done and not done with your topic in your field.
- Make sure that you show that you can carry out your project by sketching your methodology.
- Limit your promises/scope: exclude topics and methods that you will not address and outline those that you will use.
- Gain your reader's interest early by using active language and enthusiasm in your topic!
- Don't confuse verb tenses: use present tense to describe results with continuing applicability or conclusions drawn; use the past tense to describe specific variables manipulated or tests applied; and future tense to project research and predict findings. Avoid "boilerplate sentences" which take up room and provide no real information (ex: "Policy implications are discussed" or "It is concluded that," etc.).
- ALWAYS USE FULL SENTENCES and avoid negatives like "cannot," "never," etc. Avoid abbreviations, jargon, symbols and other language shortcuts that might lead to confusion.
- Above all, don't procrastinate!!! Delay just isolates you and drains your energies.