What is the dissertation proposal?

The first piece of dissertation writing most students are required to do, is often the *proposal.* Sometimes we hear different names used interchangeably to mean the same thing: *dissertation proposal, research proposal, research prospectus,* and others. Obviously, there are different nuances to this terminology because a research proposal implies proposing a study and that may or may not be related to the dissertation, while a dissertation proposal albeit still is a proposal to conduct a study, relates directly to the dissertation. The term research prospectus also means laying out the research plan, but the clarification of methodology may not be as imperative as it is in the case of a proposal. Regardless of the word used, it is clear that a dissertation or any research starts at the beginning, and that beginning is the proposal. *But, what exactly is the dissertation proposal?* It has to be a proposition of the study we are hoping to accomplish. In the traditional academic world, the dissertation proposal is so crucial because its quality can provide or not provide funding to conduct the proposed study. So, traditionally, the research proposal and the details that go in it are crucial for the researcher to fund and conduct the study in the first place. It also implies that the researcher who wrote the proposal is well versed in the material one is attempting to conduct the study. You can imagine how much thought and labor goes into writing the perfect proposal! The perfect proposal includes a number of ingredients showing the level of preparedness before conducting the study. Here are the main key aspects of it:

*a. The Dissertation Proposal includes all the methodological details*

It is a proposal, right? That means that the majority of it surrounds the *how* of the study. What is the methodological approach chosen? Why? If you are conducting a qualitative study, prepare to consider questions about why that is the perfect approach to answer your research question. What type of sampling will you use, and what sample size? Students often throw numbers about the sample size that are not quite well thought out. Why would you interview 10 people or 15 if you are conducting a qualitative study? Why would you interview 20? Is there a magical number? Is there a reason behind the perfect sample size for your study? Where are you going to interview or observe the participants? Are focus groups better fit for you? Why? How long do you think your interviews or observation sessions will be? All of these and more are common methodological questions the researcher attempts to answer through the dissertation proposal. It is the same if not more detailed if you are conducting a quantitative study. How did you find information on the perfect sample size to support the testing you want to use? What are your variables? How are you going to measure them? Why? Regardless of the approach, how are you going to assure reliability, validity, or researchers’ biases? As you can see, the methodological details are extremely important in this piece.

*b. The Dissertation Proposal includes key sources of the literature*

Can you just skim the literature and include some names on the proposal and be done with it until a later time? Absolutely not! The proposal may only include a snippet of your literature review, but it is your job for that literature piece to be comprehensive, recent, up to date on the topic, and highest possible quality. The fact that each portion of the proposal is shorter, it simply implies that the researcher is well familiar with the literature on the topic already to be able to write a shorter version of it. It is always harder to write a shorter version of something than a longer one. The proposal implies that longer versions of it are written multiple times before the perfect short version. The small section on literature review should be sufficiently comprehensive that any expert on the topic could immediately recognize it, and any outsider of the field would understand it. That alone is not a small task.

*c. The Dissertation Proposal is a well thought out plan*

Remember how prospectus was a plan of a future study? Well, the dissertation proposal includes that characteristics as well. It is meant to be a well thought out plan for the researcher that includes methodological details, focus of the study, key literature, and a reasonable timeline. Timeline of a study is a tricky subject because it immediately shows whether a researcher is familiar with conducting research and its time demand. Here is where any practical experiences in the coursework becomes useful. Can you interview 30 participants in 7 days? Well, if you ever conducted a qualitative interview, you know the answer to that question. You realize how schedules work, how draining an interview is on your attention, and how exhausting is to be attentive for an extended amount of time. You also realize the amount of work that goes into transcribing and coding, and being able to identify patterns and themes. Interviewing 30 people in 7 or even 30 days, is quite unrealistic.

These are some of the important aspects of a dissertation proposal. Working with your dissertation chair on the most perfect document that shows your skills, your knowledge, and your level of preparation for the study is no small task.