

What Is A Concept Paper?

(a 1-page outline)

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All research projects need a concept paper: a short summary that tells the reader what the project is, why it is important, and how it will be carried out. Even if no one else ever reads it, the concept paper helps a researcher spot holes in her or his project that might later prove fatal. It is far better to be clear at the beginning than to put in a lot of effort for naught!

Typically, a concept paper contains these elements:

1. A clear description of the research topic, including a summary of what is already known about that topic.
2. A one-sentence statement of the research question that the project will seek to answer. (This is almost always something that is not known.) The concept paper should connect this question to the existing literature -- something that almost always takes more than one sentence to accomplish.
3. A demonstration of why it is important to answer this research question. What good comes of this answer? Why is this project worth anybody's time?
4. A description of how the researcher plans to answer the research question. This includes:
 - a. a description of the data that the researcher plans to gather or use;
 - b. a description of how the researcher will analyze these data;
 - c. a demonstration of how these data and this analytic method will answer the research question; and
 - d. a summary of any ethical issues that may arise in the research process.
5. A statement of the limitations of this research, specifically the things that it cannot discover (and why).
6. Longer projects -- term papers, masters' theses, dissertations, and professional research -- also typically include a selected bibliography.

Concept papers typically range from 2 to 5 double-spaced pages (500 to 1250 words), not counting bibliographies. Longer projects spend more time reviewing what is already known about a topic, typically drawing on several different scholarly literatures to do so. Shorter projects do not need such depth.

Some projects, notably honors theses, dissertations and professional research, later develop the concept paper into a formal research proposal, which covers the above points in greater depth. Different advisors and granting agencies call for different amounts of detail. It is a rare proposal, however, that takes up more than 20 double-spaced pages (5000 words). A concept paper is a good first step in such proposal development.

In any case, the point of a concept paper is to provide a clear summary of the research project. It should enable a casual reader to understand what the researcher is investigating, why it is important, and how the investigation will proceed.