Typically, all proposals follow a similar organizational template. While this template does not suit every research proposal exactly, it is useful to consider how your own paper fits into such a template or requires its modification.

The template usually requires double, or one and a half line, spacing, one inch margins all the way round, and a running head that excerpt the title. Then, the template consists of some, or all, of the following sections, usually in the listed order:

1. **Cover Sheet.** The first page can be a cover sheet on which you print the title of your proposal (with its colon!), your name and affiliation, and the date. You can also include an author’s footnote in which you recognize the support and help of important others. These will not be included in word count.

2. **Abstract.** Often an abstract is need, usually about a page or two, again with a full title at the top, and your name, affiliation and the date.

3. **Introduction.** The third page begins your proposal proper with a brief one-page introduction. It again has a full title at the top, but usually omits your name and affiliation. On this page, which introduces the big idea behind the proposed study, there are usually three paragraphs:
   a. **Para #1:** Opening interest grabber that uses some interesting factoid – anecdote, statistic, personal experience, etc – to introduce the broad topic.
   b. **Para #2:** Clearly states the broad research theme that drives your work, establishes its educational, practical and/or scholarly significance.
   c. **Para #3:** Provides “stage directions” for the proposal itself, to pre-organize the reader to comprehend the coming organization of the proposal itself.

4. **Background and Context of the Proposed Research.** This section is longer, usually about 8 to 10 pages. Remember that it is not a literature review, and should not be referred to, as such. Instead, it is an extended logical and coherent argument that converts your previously-stated broad theme into a set of specific research questions:
   a. In creating this argument, remember that here, more than anywhere else in the proposal, that you must abide by the “one paragraph, one idea” rule. This means that each paragraph in the argument must contain only a single idea or component of the main argument. This single idea or component must be stated clearly in the opening sentence of the paragraph, and then the rest of the paragraph should be used to describe, explain and support it.
   b. A second key purpose of the Background and Context is to connect your proposed research to a defined scholarly corpus. You should make sure that you forge this connection explicitly to a substantial body of theory or
empirical research, preferably both. Leave no claims uncited – the hidden agenda is to show that you are capable of documented scholarship.

c. A third key purpose of the Background and Context is to provide “hooks” on which you can hang your subsequent research design. Every design decision – about the population of interest, the sample and sampling procedure, the kinds of measurement, the choice of control predictors, the types of data-analysis, etc. – requires an explicit rationale, and often the required rationales can be presaged explicitly and implicitly in the Background and Context section. In fact, it is often useful, throughout this section, to begin the occasional terminal sentence in a key paragraph with the phrase “And so, in my proposed study, I will …,” thereby setting the stage for some subsequent design decision.

d. The specific research questions that are derived from the extended argument in this section should be listed at the end of the section, in an explicit Conclusion that reviews the main threads of your argument and states the specific research questions clearly. This way, the specific research questions stand between your logical argument for the research and your proposed research design which follows. Make sure that your specific research questions are framed so that the anticipated direction of the hypothesized effects is clear.

5. Research Design. You must then describe the critical logistical details of your research design, in a collection of important subsections, covering about another ten pages in total. The subsections should include as many of the following as are relevant to your proposed study, although not necessarily in the following order:

   a. Site. Identify and describe your site, if that does not breach confidentiality, and justify your choice of this site for your research

   b. Dataset. Identify your dataset and describe its broad features, if that does not breach confidentiality, and justify your choice of this dataset for your research.

   c. Sample. Describe your sample, giving its size and some details of its constitution – perhaps in the first exhibit of your paper. Offer concrete justifications for the choice of this particular sample, arguing strongly that it is suitable for addressing your research questions. Offer a power analysis to support your proposed sample size, or a reference to a source that makes the case for you. Don’t forget that, if the sample is longitudinal or multilevel, you will have to stipulate and justify the size of the sample of participants, of waves, of classrooms and schools, and so on.

   d. Procedures. Document the physical procedures that you used to collect your data, in an explicit chronological order, so that readers understand what you did to obtain the data.
e. **Instruments.** List, and briefly describe, the instruments that you propose to administer to participants, linking to appendices that contain the measures themselves, if possible.

f. **Measures** (listed explicitly as outcome, question predictors and control predictors). You should establish a common format for variable description throughout the Measures sub-section to make the reader’s job easier. For each variable, you should name the variable, provide a one sentence definition, and describe the variable’s metric or how it is coded, along with any information you possess about reliability and validity in this population. Make sure that the reader understands the origin of each variable, in terms of its source back in the instruments you presented in the previous section or in associated appendices. If you have created composites to stand as analytic variables, reference and describe the compositing process here, briefly.

g. **Data-Analytic Plan.** Here, you overview all the data-analyses that you propose to perform, organized by research question. Typically, the analyses for each question are described by specifying an appropriate statistical model, defining its parameters (you don’t need to define the variables as you defined them in your Measures section, above), and then commenting that you will fit the model using a specified technique. Then, you must explicitly identify the model parameter, or parameters, that address the research question, and indicate how you will know from its estimate and associated tests that the question has been answered. You should indicate the anticipated direction of detected effect. It can all be brief, but should be repeated explicitly for each research question.

6. **Threats to Validity.** Here, you can discuss the limitations of your proposed work, and offer concrete suggestions for how these threats can be either mollified, evaluated or discounted in interpretation. This section should not contain vacuous and uninteresting banalities – it is not good enough to say, for instance, “I promise to be careful in my interpretation” – instead, you must explain explicitly how you will deal with, assess, or account for each threat to validity.

7. **Bibliography.** This should be entirely complete, with every work cited in the text being included, and with the author’s names spelled correctly. You would be surprised to learn how many proposals have omissions and spelling mistakes in the bibliography. The message that this sends to the reader is that you are not a careful scholar!

8. **Appendices.** These are critical, and there can be any number of them. They provide a relatively uncontrolled part of the proposal where you can really make it clear that you are skilled and competent. You can include copies of instruments, a lengthier overview and description of your dataset and variables, examples of data-coding and compositing, results of preliminary analyses, sensitivity analyses, commentary on specific and unusual facets of the design, and the like. The hidden agenda here is to communicate to the reader that the research can be done and that you the person to do it!