BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM SECTION
WHAT DO YOU NEED TO CONSIDER?

This section is like the free style competition in gymnastics. While there are certain things that you must do, the manner in which you prepare this section will be uniquely yours. However, it must be persuasive and engaging to the reader. You need to pay particular attention to the ALM Guide specifications for this thesis section. This paper will provide you with some additional information you may wish to consider as you prepare this section. However it does not prescribe a way to write this section.

The background section serves several purposes, which are often misunderstood. It is not just a literature review, as is commonly believed. By definition, a literature review is exhaustive, whereas the recommended length of this part of the application is three to five pages. The first purpose of this section is to demonstrate your understanding of your field by critically analyzing the pertinent work of other investigators leading up to your proposed work. "Critical" does not mean negative, however; critical means that you are able to appreciate the salient contributions of other scientists upon whose work your work builds. Do not disparage the work of others in this section (or anywhere in your application). You never know who may end up reviewing you.

Once you have identified the pivotal work leading up to yours, state explicitly what scientific questions other scientists have not yet answered about your field. This will identify the "gaps in our understanding". You could suggest how your work will be structured to address these important questions.

Finally, make certain that the significance of your proposed work is clearly shown. What the readers are looking for is the impact of your research on the field in question. Similarly, you do not need to justify your research by quoting statistics or providing long lists of facts. Rather, use this space to convince your readers that your proposed research addresses an important clearly defined question pertaining to topic at hand. Stick to the research issue and do not digress.

The background section highlights the empirical foundation of the proposed thesis. In many ways, this section of your thesis proposal is deceptively straightforward. On one level, the purpose of a background section is to give the reader the relevant facts about your topic so that they understand the material that you are writing about and how it links to your research question. This section must not, however, simply provide the general context, but must direct the readers' attention to the empirical details through which your research topic and question are lived and made relevant. As such, this writing must not just fill in details of the topic you are researching, but implicitly illustrate the need for and importance of your research.
The background should engage your readers with broad themes and topics. This involves connecting details to concepts. The “history” of your topic should be easy to read and compelling both for its relevance and for its fresh approach.

The background should illustrate your concepts, questions, and theory. To do this, try to ensure a tight fit between this and the proposal's other sections. Your history should be the empirical embodiment of your research problem section. This requires you to make explicit links between the story you tell and the research question, hypothesis, and theoretical approach you are using.

The background should demonstrate your experience, knowledge, and passion. What you write about and how you write can reveal a great deal about your knowledge and interest in your subject. This is true in all parts of your thesis proposal, but perhaps most so in this section. Use the background section as an occasion to show the depths of your knowledge of the topic by demonstrating your fluency in accepted understandings and literature as well as your fresh insights and approaches. You may also use this review to implicitly reveal what has drawn you to the topic in the first place. Doing this well will help convince the reader that your interest in the topic is justified and that you are likely to sustain that interest over the time required to complete the project.

The background section must be precise and measured. Too passionate, too political, or too lengthy, a background section may cause some readers to loose focus or question your capacity to be detached and analytical. You must also be careful in choosing your citations as proposal readers from your field or region are likely to look carefully at your bibliography. Similarly, you must show that you have read authors from across the theoretical or ideological spectrum. While simply putting the "right" people in your bibliography should not be the focus of your work, it is important to demonstrate that you have done your research and that you know your field including the related research being conducted here at Harvard University.

**Scholarly Writing**

It is helpful to keep in mind that you are telling a story to an audience in this section of the thesis proposal. Try to tell it in a stimulating and engaging manner. Do not bore them, because it may lead to rejection of your worthy proposal. (Remember: Professors and scientists are human beings too.)

The ALM Guide states that others’ research should be considered in a systematic fashion, according to topic, date, perspective, or some other logical means. It must have obvious flow, a sense of continuity, and an overall theme or point(s). You will have to condense large amounts of information into a short section. Here is your chance to show your proseminar Instructor, the research advisor and ultimately your thesis director that you have mastered the organizational skills required for the effort.
There are three simple, overlapping concepts to keep in mind when writing your background section that will help you do to this. *Engage* your readers with broader themes and topics that *illustrate* your concepts, questions, and theory and *demonstrate* your knowledge and passion.

Writing is for readers. So you need to help your readers get into your document by helping them understand what you are writing about and why. Since your proposal is a persuasive document, you need to be sure your readers understand what you are writing about. To do this try considering these ideas:

1. **Level of technicality** - start at a place your reader understands
2. **Level of specificity** - move from general to specific
3. **Focus**
   - Consider the general goal / general problem
   - Explain the situation
   - Explain the general problem
   - Show what created the problem
   - Show why the problem/issue/situation is important
   - To do all this you need to
     - explain the theory behind the problem/situation
     - define terms in the definition of terms section
4. **Propose some ideas for openers:**
   - unusual fact / interesting fact
   - review the controversy
   - ask a question—then answer it
   - define an important term

In a background section you want to start with a general principle, and move to specific problems you will deal with.

Present the findings as tables, figures, diagrams. Such diversity in presentation adds appeal to the section. Each finding should be close to the tables, diagrams and figures so that there is no need to flip back and forth between pages to understand the presented information. Provide a table title and a legend that describes how the data were generated. For each figure, provide a legend that describes the finding and then, include sufficient methodology and detail as how the data were generated. The figure or table legend may be presented by a smaller font as long as they are easily legible. For example, you can use an arial font that is 9 or 10 point. Using a smaller font gives further interest to the look of the page. At the end of each section, present the conclusions that you have drawn from these experiments. Italicize these statements.


**Literature Review**

The literature review serves several important functions:

- Ensures that you are not "reinventing the wheel".
- Gives credits to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
- Demonstrates your knowledge of the research problem.
- Demonstrates your understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question.
- Shows your ability to critically evaluate relevant literature information.
- Indicates your ability to integrate and synthesize the existing literature.
- Provides new theoretical insights or develops a new model as the conceptual framework for your research.
- Convinces your reader that your proposed research will make a significant and substantial contribution to the literature (i.e., resolving an important theoretical issue or filling a major gap in the literature).

Most students' literature reviews suffer from the following problems:

- Lacking organization and structure
- Lacking focus, unity and coherence
- Being repetitive and verbose
- Failing to cite influential papers
- Failing to keep up with recent developments
- Failing to critically evaluate cited papers
- Citing irrelevant or trivial references
- Depending too much on secondary sources

In presenting the literature, you should explain the origins of the research question and problem, drawing on your preliminary reading. All cited materials should be presented with specific references using the APA Style Guide. The literature should help you demonstrate that testing your hypothesis is the most obvious next step in the preparation of your thesis. The literature review should be an informed argument that leads the reader to a deeper understanding of the problem. This is the guiding organizational rule for doing a literature review.

You should seek to provide a detailed and critical review of the literature directly bearing on the proposed research. For example, you should evaluate various theories in the light of available research findings. You should also examine the relevant literature related to the key variables. Be very careful to fully align the review of literature with the research questions. Cover the major related theories, positions, and studies that ground, inform, and lead up to your way of constructing the problem. Leave everything else out! The review reflects your judgment of what it is important rather than everything you have read.

Literature reviews should be selective and critical. Reviewers do not want to read through a voluminous working bibliography; they want to know the especially pertinent works
and your evaluation of them. A list of works with no clear evidence that you have studied them and have opinions about them contributes almost nothing to the proposal.

A literature review is not a simple citation or serial listing of studies, findings and conclusions. Be analytical and try to identify themes, conclusions and implications. Follow your review of each material in the literature with a synthesis -- a pulling together in fresh words of the material presented. Weigh and evaluate the material without going into excessive detail.

Keep quotes at minimum, if at all. Views and findings should be re-stated, paraphrased and summarized rather than quoted. Quote material only if it is so novel, apt or unexpected that they deserve to be reported verbatim. Even then they should be very short.

The literature review should be a well integrated document in which the material is organized under headings and subheadings which follow one another in a logical order. Provide a summary at the end of the review in which you attempt a scholarly synthesis and tell briefly how the literature review informs your study.

Each subsection should represent a major aspect of your proposed research. For each segment, you need to critically examine relevant literature. The purpose of the literature review is to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the problem area, as well as justify your study. You need to convince your reader that your proposed research will make a significant and substantial contribution to the field (i.e., resolve an important theoretical issue or fill a gap in the literature). The literature review should conclude with a brief synopsis of the literature and its implications for the problem under investigation.

**Relation to Research Currently Being Conducted**

Discussions of work done by others should therefore lead the reader to a clear impression of how you will be building upon what has already been done and how your work differs from theirs. It is important to establish what is original in your approach, what circumstances have changed since related work was done, or what is unique about the time and place of the proposed research.

This information should be related to the literature review. Used together these sections are used to persuade the reader that you have an expert's knowledge of the area under investigation or at least that you are familiar with the major trends in previous research and opinions on the topic, and understand their relevance to your study. The review is a partial summary of previous work related to the focus of the study (compared to the full literature review in the final thesis).

Acquaint the reader with existing studies relative to what has been found, who has done work, when and where latest research studies were completed, and what approaches involving research methodology, instrumentation, and statistical analyses were followed (literature review of methodology sometimes saved for chapter on methodology)
You should establish possible need for study and likelihood for obtaining meaningful, relevant, and significant results. This is the place to establish the ability you have to carry out the proposed studies. In science, the time honored way to demonstrate competence, of course, is by publications. How worthy will your work be to merit publication next to the articles that you have already reviewed?

**Relation to Research at Harvard University**

You will need to know how your research complements or contrasts with the research of your potential thesis director. References to their work should appear in the literature review section. They may not be a major center of research in this area. If this is true, you need to show how your work will help them move into a new area that would complement the work that they are currently doing. If you do this, you will need to provide some compelling reason why you think they should consider this.

In some cases, you might be filling in some of the gaps that they missed or providing an application that they did not exploit to date. You need to be clear about how your proposed work relates specifically to their work. There has to be some kind of connection that would provide them with intrigue and interest. Your research of potential thesis directors should provide you with the background to do this. Interviews with colleagues in Harvard centers or discussions with their current graduate students or post-doctoral fellows may also provide additional information to help you meet this requirement for your background section.