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1.07 How to write a research proposal

There is no single format for research proposals. This is because every research project is different. Different disciplines, donor organisations and academic institutions all have different formats and requirements. There are, however, several key components which must be included in every research proposal. The specific research problem will dictate what other sections are required.

Key components are:

- A description of the research problem.
- An argument as to why that problem is important.
- A review of literature relevant to the research problem.
- A description of the proposed research methodology.
- A description of how the research findings will be used and/or disseminated.

DESCRIBING A RESEARCH PROBLEM

Before your proposal can make sense to a reader, he or she must understand clearly what the proposed research will be about. Therefore, you would do well to begin this section with a clear and simple formulation of your research question. Read the following examples:

- This research project explores the extent to which vigilantism is growing within different sectors of the South African population. In particular the research focuses on the factors which promote and maintain vigilantism in our society.
- Many community projects in rural Mpumalanga rely on micro-enterprises (such as community gardens and spaza shops), to extend the income generating potential of communities. The following is an investigation of the extent to which these micro-enterprises do actually influence the broader economic position of these communities.

Flesh out this section with some or all of the following:

- Where does this research question come from?
If it arises out of a debate in the literature, introduce that debate.
- Clarify or quantify any concepts which may not be clear.

Have a look at a very simple example:

This research project explores the extent to which vigilantism is growing within different sectors of the South African population. In particular the research focuses on the factors which promote and maintain vigilantism in our society. Recent reports in the media detailing the operation of extensive and organized vigilante groups have created public interest and concern, and there are important implications for policing policy. A "vigilante" is defined as being "a volunteer committee of citizens for the oversight and protection of any interest, especially one organized to suppress and punish crime summarily, as when the process of law appears inadequate" (Smith, 2001).



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WHY THE RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT

This section, often referred to as the "rationale" is crucial, because it is one place in which the researcher tries to convince her/his supervisor/external examiner that the research is worth doing. You can do this by describing how the results may be used.

Think about how your research:

- * may resolve theoretical questions in your area
- * may develop better theoretical models in your area
- * may influence public policy
- * may change the way people do their jobs in a particular field, or may change the way people live.

Are there other contributions your research will make? If so, describe them in detail. Look at the following example:

In the economic example of micro-enterprises in rural communities, the researcher might argue that the research will:

- * provide an understanding of the economic impact of micro-enterprises
- * support the government's plans for start-up loans to micro-enterprises
- * demonstrate the usefulness of micro-enterprises as part of rural development, thereby contributing to the work of government and non-government rural development organisations.

Detail regarding each of these three points should be added to produce a convincing argument as to the usefulness of the research.

Literature review

The literature review presents one of the greatest challenges of the research proposal to experienced and inexperienced researchers alike.

The literature review:

- * Provides a conceptual framework for the reader so that the research question and methodology can be better understood.
- * Demonstrates to the expert reader that the researcher is aware of the breadth and diversity of literature that relates to the research question.

It is important that you are able to provide an integrated overview of your field of study. This means that you show awareness of the most important and relevant theories, models, studies and methodologies.

Examples: (The research topic is "the History of Mental Illness in Natal in the period up to 1945")

Unsuccessful Literature Review

Foucault's works looked at mental illness, asylums, and the archaeology of knowledge. Roy Porter's and Edward Shorter's histories of psychiatry and psychology show that definitions of mental illness have differed across time and place. Ernst and Swartz record that under colonialism, science and medicine contributed to racial, class, and sexual discrimination. Feminist writers Chesler and Showalter who have written on psychiatry will be important for this study. Post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches to the construction and representation of identities will be used. Post-colonialism's concern with the 'subaltern' and the suppression of 'subaltern voices' will be significant.

Successful Literature Review

This study will draw on diverse approaches to the history of psychiatry, and to the origins of segregation in southern Africa. Histories of psychiatry and psychology have shown that, although having a probable partial biochemical basis, the criteria for the definition of mental illness have differed across time and place. The history of science and medicine in both Europe and in the colonial order provide a means for exploring the role of biomedicine (including psychiatry) in contributing to racial, class, and sexual discrimination. Feminist analyses of the centrality of gender, and critiques of psychiatry and psychology, will be a key axis around which this study is formed. For example, while men of all races formed the majority of inmates at the Natal Government Asylum in nineteenth century Natal, women were deemed to be particularly prone to particular forms of mental illness.

Post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches to the construction and representation of identities, and to the articulation of power, will provide a means of deconstructing the 'texts' and discourses which are an important part of this study. In particular, the works of Michel Foucault

on mental illness, asylums, and the archaeology of knowledge will be considered. I recognise, however, that the application of Foucault's ideas in the African context is problematic. Post-colonialism's concern with the 'subaltern' and the suppression of 'subaltern voices' will be reflected in attempts to 'hear the voices' of the institutionalised.



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Empirical Research Methodology

Hypotheses

Specific research hypotheses to be tested during data analysis.

Research Design

Should the researcher plan to use several groups, or repeated testing to test particular hypotheses, this should be explained in this section. Most research methodology textbooks discuss the more commonly used research designs.

Sampling

Empirical research almost always depends upon a sample which is assumed to accurately represent a population. Therefore, the techniques by which the sample was chosen are vital to a discussion the validity of the research findings.

Empirical research methodology measurement instruments

When particular measurement instruments are used, it is often important to explain how those instruments were developed, where they have previously been used (if at all), and to what effect.

Data collection procedures

Detailed data collection procedures should also be included so that other researchers can replicate your method exactly if required.

Data analysis

Various techniques of quantitative and qualitative data analysis exist and should be described in detail in this section.

Structure

Use " Spider Diagrams" to structure your proposal. A spider diagram is a tool for planning your writing. Try the following:

1. Draw a box in the centre of a large sheet of blank paper. Write the

title of your research proposal in that box.

2. Draw a "leg" from the central "body" towards the top right hand corner of the page. Label this "leg" with the first topic that you wish to deal with in your proposal.
3. Add more legs moving clockwise around the page until all the sections have been included, with the final one being somewhere near the top left of the page.
4. Now divide each "leg" up into smaller "legs" with all the points that you wish to make in each section. (Again work clockwise from the top left so that the sequence of ideas is maintained),
5. You may have to redraw your spider diagram several times until you find a structure that works for your proposal.

Make sure that you find a proposal structure that suits the needs of your research. If you are submitting to different organisations, make sure that you find out what those organisations' requirements are. Some institutions have very rigid formats and often proposals are disadvantaged because they do not conform to the requirements laid down.

Apart from the sections outlined above, many organizations demand other sections as well. These sections could include:

Time frames

Inexperienced researchers tend to underestimate the amount of time that the various stages of research will take. Be generous when working out time frames and check them with a more experienced researcher.



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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT WRITING

Many people assume that any literate person can write a research proposal. This is not automatically true. Writing is a difficult skill to master and one that requires practice and some dedication. Some tips to help you in your writing include:

- Always structure your work in advance.
- Know what you want to say before trying to write it.
- Every sentence must contain one idea only.
- Each sentence must follow logically from the one before. A well written text is a "chain of ideas".
- While writing, keep your reader's needs in mind. This means providing a "verbal map" of your document so that your reader knows what to expect, and placing "verbal signposts" in your text to explain what is coming next.

FINAL COMMENTS ON STRUCTURE AND STYLE

DO:

- produce a professional looking proposal

- be interesting
- be informative
- write in a way that is easy to read
- include a contents page
- use clear headings and sub-headings
- be concise and precise
- use simple language wherever possible
- construct clear arguments
- check your spelling and grammar
- reference your work fully using an acceptable format

DON'T:

- use words when you are not absolutely certain of their meaning
- use difficult words to impress your reader
- use overly simplistic language
- repeat yourself
- digress

Submission

Before submitting, make sure you have completed each of the following steps:

1. Proof-read your work carefully.
2. Ask a friend or relative to read your proposal.
3. Ask an experienced researcher or your supervisor to read your proposal.

(Adapted from www.nrf.ac.za/yenza/research/proposal.htm)

Links to further resources on writing research proposals

[Nottingham University](#)
[University of Leicester](#)
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[Vicky Schofield](#) 2004

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