

Steps to Writing a Research Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Submitting a research proposal that is assessed by the concerned committee as being well-written and professional is undoubtedly the objective of any scholar recently admitted to the field of research. This positive acknowledgment would be the keystone to guaranteeing one's admission to higher research programs. As a matter of fact, the current work aims to equip the targeted audience namely; post graduate students who are novice in the field of research, with initial but basic skills that would be indispensable to help them reach the aforementioned goal. It provides them with the different steps required to write a quality research proposal along with simplified explanation of the different concepts used in research which may be newly introduced to them and thus aims to familiarize them with these key concepts that would be translated and reflected through their professional proposal writing at later stages.

Key words: research, qualitative, quantitative, literature review, sampling.

INTRODUCTION

From an Etymological standpoint, research has been used from as early as 15th century and is derived from the French verb "rechercher" which means the seek for knowledge. Conceptualized by Given (2008) as the systematic enquiry, which is reported in a form, which allows the research methods to be accessible to others, research means finding out something; collecting data and constructing interpretations about something.

However, the word *research* is used in everyday speech to cover a broad spectrum of meanings. This makes it a confusing term for those who are new to the concept.

From a conventional standpoint, the act of knowledge acquisition may involve such variables as customs, sociality, power, logic, and so on which may reduce the whole act into mere data collection which, in turn, is just a part of a whole process. In this very respect, Naidoo (2011) emphasized that in order for an enquiry to be systematic, research should be based on scientific methods. To quote him, "in science, research is the diligent systematic enquiry into nature and society to validate and refine existing knowledge and to generate new knowledge" (p.47). The same author enlisted a series of features without which research cannot be complete.

These features are highly important for any novice researcher to know and consider before indulging into any kind of research as they may help him/ her anticipate potential challenges and act accordingly.

- **Relevance:**

Novice researchers should be aware that research is time consuming, it also makes use of extensive resources and above all cognition. In order not to waste the aforementioned variables the research must be both content and context relevant.

- **Conceptions of research:**

Research may be basic or applied. Therefore, the potential outcomes of it should be conceived before proceeding practically.

- **Research orthodoxies**

This refers back to Garcia (2016)'s terminology of "theological insight" through which he called to transcend and challenge the blind adherence to dogmas and the literal interpretations of texts. By contrast, he insisted that researchers are those who are aware that there is always extra knowledge and meaning to reality that they need to find out.

- **Theoretical orientations:**

Any research should be framed in terms of scope. Indeed, the theoretical orientation aims to position the research in the content or discipline on which one is focusing. Theories may be critical, developmental, sociological, or discourse- based. All these kinds and others help provide an understanding of surrounding events be they academic, social, political...etc.

- **Ethical framework:**

Evidently, scientific research whatever the field involves participants. This dictates the "mandatory" adherence to certain ethical principles that would protect the autonomy of these participants. Such principles include the totally free and voluntary contribution of the latter without any kind of pressure or influence.

Once the abovementioned features are considered, scholars may proceed to carry out a scientific research.

On the whole, scientific research, which makes up the focus of the present paper, is a systematic process which produces data to answer a specified question. Several methods may be followed, all of which have distinct characteristics. The kind of methodology selected by the researcher is dependent upon the style of the research question, with appropriateness of choice. In other words, the researcher asks a question and selects an appropriate research methodology to answer it. All of these methods follow a generic framework of sequentially prescribed steps, which have customary language of understanding for researchers.

Before an attempt is made to start a research study, a proposal should be compiled because most of research projects if not all start with a proposal. As a matter of fact, a proposal is probably one of the most important documents that you need to write before actually starting your research program. It simply describes a question and the approach you are going to follow in order to answer that question.

According to Naidoo (2011), constructing the proposal is the most challenging part in the process. It is, nevertheless, the most critical and should be given careful consideration since it provides logic and structure to the envisaged study. Your research proposal is very important

because it is the main basis for deciding whether or not to admit you as a research student. Indeed, it is your portal to convince someone, your supervisor, for instance, that your research project is worthwhile. You should allow yourself plenty of time to write a detailed proposal and check it carefully for any mistakes. A proper well- designed research proposal should satisfy the following features: relevance, context, approach and feasibility.

Your proposal should be a maximum of 2000 words long (excluding the list of references). There is no specific minimum but generally it should be at least 4 pages or 1500 words. Note that although your proposal is an important first step in your research, you can still make changes after you have begun your project – in fact most people do, and this is just part of the research process.

A research proposal follows a set of sequential steps that provide structure to the prospective study. It is a written submission which spells out the design of the intended research project. There is also no formula for writing the proposal, but you are strongly advised to cover all of the points listed below.

1. Research title

The title is the first element to be seen. In fact, it is undoubtedly the part that is read the first. The question that may be posed in this respect is “how to create the perfect title for my research proposal?”. According to Sidik (2005), “the title of a research proposal should be concise and descriptive” (p.30). To achieve this, there are some points to be respected in order to formulate the title of your paper. First, make sure the title you choose captures all the relevant aspects of your research without making it too long or too short (by inserting too many unnecessary or vague words). Second, check that the title answers the question what my research paper is about by foregrounding the key variables (dependent and independent). Third, the title should be accurately formulated in terms of grammar, lexis and punctuation. Fourth, “an effective title not only picks the reader’s interest, but also predisposes him/ her favourably towards the proposal” (Sidik, 2005, p.30). In order to create a working title, it is highly recommended to create it after completing your research to guarantee that it covers what has already been done.

2. The abstract

This part traditionally summarizes your research as whole as it covers your research questions, the method you are going to use, the results you assume to obtain and later your discussion. It is simply a statement that highlights the issue you are interested in and you are going to focus on in your proposal. Make sure that the abstract is short because, at this stage, you still haven’t actually done a research but you are discussing a propose research.

3. Background

Give details of the linguistic and/or social background to the study, the context of research in this area and the need for further research. At this very level, you should convince your readers that your research is original, interesting and important.

Why is this topic interesting? Give a justification for the research you are proposing and your motivation for carrying it out. This rationale provides information to the reader that will promote their understanding of the purpose of undertaking the study. This justification

communicates the link between the research question and its relationship to advancing the literature and improving professional practice.

Try to give a concise and clear indication of what you want to do and why it is interesting in your very first paragraph. Show that you have a knowledge and understanding of the research that has already been done and the publications in the field, and that your proposed research makes sense against the background of current academic debates. Include references to key items of literature, and make sure that you have references to some of the most recent contributions to the field.

4. Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to afford appropriate and topic- related background information on the research you are proposing (Sidik, 2005). In this section, you should provide a documentation that would convince your audience that your research project has a solid foundation in existing knowledge and theory. A well-based literature review also reflects the extent to which you are familiar with the field. Simply put, literature review is a critical recapitulation of what has already been researched on the topic focused on.

Practically, you need to explain how your own project will be situated within and contribute to the existing conversations on the topic. Accordingly, present a literature review that summarizes and critically appraises previous research in the field, draws attention to gaps in current knowledge and cites key references. As claimed by Van Meter (2000), relevant research papers are accessed from appropriate databases and electronic journals. These are analyzed and the findings are summarized and discussed in relation to the aim of the proposed research study. Starting with a bibliographical analysis, the referential framework is established and the antecedents of the study are described. This framework helps you systemize the questions posed and aids you when drawing up a model, as well as it helps you decide on our research focus. In order to achieve these goals, you need to follow these simple steps:

- Search for academic sources relevant to your topic especially books and articles. Make sure to use the “right scholarly database”.
- A good evaluation of the sources to be read would automatically lead to better selection of the sources to be used later on. Given the bulk of research on every single topic because of the information boom witnessed these days, you cannot read everything written about your topic, so resort to scanning the abstract and the references to help you decide on the relevance of the reading to your topic which will reduce the amount of time you may waste and guide you to select the proper resources to be used.
- Once this is done, identify themes, debates and gaps throughout your reading, take notes about the connections between the different sources so that the literature review arguments and structures are organized in an easier way.
- Outline your literature review structure: there are four ways on how you go to structure your literature review and this depends on what you found in the literature and what you want to emphasize. These four approaches are chronological (from older to more recent documents), methodological (compare the different methods used across several studies), thematic (structured around key themes), and theoretical (discuss opposing theories or models)

- Start writing: make sure that just like any other academic writing, your literature review should include an introduction, main body in which you summarize and synthesize the sources and a conclusion.

5. Research questions

The research questions as the name implies are essentially defining what you are seeking out of conducting your research and the central aims behind your study. Seek to find where exactly your research fits into the field of study and whether the questions you are seeking to answer are feasible or not. This confers more originality and add new information to the particular field of study.

Give details of two or three questions (or main questions and sub-questions) which you want to answer. Explain why these particular ones are the ones you want to research. Make sure that these questions are linked to the need for research which you have already argued for. Make it clear what the focus of your research is. Your research questions should be: clear, well formulated, well grounded (based on solid reasoning), backed up with appropriate current references, original, interesting, sensible, focused, and researchable. It is usually best to frame these questions as interrogatives (i.e. they should have the form of questions, so that they can have answers!).

Research forms a circle; that is, it starts with a problem and ends with a solution to the problem. The researcher should think about what stimulated them to research the problem. Are there questions about the stated problem to which answers have not been found? The research aims and questions should be stated in a way that leads to analytical thinking and potential concluding solutions to the stated problem.

Stating the aim, research questions, hypotheses and null hypotheses makes explicit the purpose of the proposed research study. That is, what the researcher hopes to achieve (hypotheses are only relevant in quantitative studies).

A hypothesis is stated in an explanatory form, because it indicates the expected reference of the difference between two variables. The research hypothesis may be stated in a directional or non-directional form. A directional hypothesis statement indicates the expected direction of results, while a non-directional one indicates no difference or no relationship. A hypothesis should be:

- (1) Testable.
- (2) A tentative answer to the stated problem.
- (3) Be specific, logical and simplistic (not vague).
- (4) Supported or rejected post statistical analysis.

6. Data collection

At this stage, you should explain what form your data will take and how you will collect them. Will you be using tried and tested methods of data collection or will you have to design new ones? If some aspects of data collection are difficult or complex explain this and explain how you will ensure access to the data you need. Explain if there are any special ethical considerations involved. Give an indication of how much data you will need and over what time

span it will be collected. You need to show that it is feasible to gather the quantity of good-quality data that is needed for you project, in the time available.

7. The research methodology

The research methodology section, also called research design, is probably the most important section in your research proposal as it defines the overall approach and the practical steps you are taking to determine the answers to your research questions i.e., provides practical details of the sequential processes involved in answering the research question. A well-designed research proposal should be written in such a way that an unfamiliar person could pick up the proposal and repeat the study. Each research methodology (recipe) follows a recognisable template. It describes what methods you will use to analyse your data. Go into as much details as possible about how you will deal with your data and obtain the information you want from it. Be as specific as you can about theories or approaches which you intend to use and/or explore, and any new directions you want to investigate. Give an indication of what you think you might discover. Show how your chosen methods relate to the research questions and sub-questions and why these are the best methods for answering them.

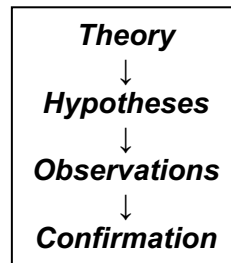
- *Selecting an appropriate research methodology*

Research follows a carefully planned formula. That is, it follows a specific methodology and there are several methodologies to select from. The methodology chosen should be a suitable formula to answer the research question. The researcher outlines the steps of the selected research methodology. It is not enough to follow the research procedures without an intimate understanding that the research methodology directs the whole endeavour. The research methodology controls the study, dictates the acquisition of data and arranges it in logical relationships. The entire process is a unified effort, as well as an appreciation of its component parts (Creswell, 1994).

(a) Quantitative research

In quantitative research, the information collected takes the form of measurements or numbers that can be analyzed statistically to determine whether or not a treatment has made a real difference. This type of research requires standardized procedures, specific methods and statistical analysis and so maximizes objectivity (Alasmari, 2020).

A deductive approach is taken by quantitative researchers. Deductive reasoning works from the more general to the more specific. This is sometimes informally called a "top-down" approach. The researcher begins by thinking up a *theory* about a topic of interest. This is again narrowed down into more specific *hypotheses* that can be tested. This is narrowed down even further with *observations* collected to address these hypotheses. Ultimately, this process equips the researcher to test the hypotheses using specific data that provides *confirmation* (or not) of the original theory.



Quantitative research is:

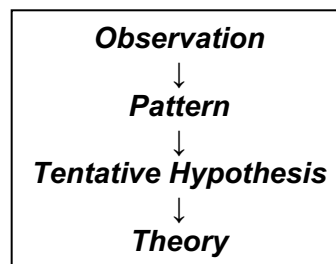
- (1) Experimental
- (2) Manipulative
- (3) Controlled
- (4) Hypotheses are stated
- (5) Empirically based
- (6) Data collection precedes analysis

In stark contrast:

(b) Qualitative research

It aims to explain the processes which lie behind patterns of behavior, people's emotions or their responses to certain situations. It uses different ways of collecting data, e.g., words and phrases people use in interviews are analyzed non-mathematically (Alasmari, 2020).

Quantitative research takes an inductive approach. Inductive reasoning works the other way round from the quantitative approach, moving from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. This is sometimes informally called the "bottom up" approach, with the researcher attempting to detect patterns and regularities in the data that can be explored and end in the development of conclusions and/or theories.



Inductive reasoning, by its very nature, is more open-ended and exploratory. In comparison, deductive reasoning is narrower in nature and is concerned with testing or confirming hypotheses.

Qualitative research is:

- (1) Interpretive
- (2) Reflective
- (3) Inductive
- (4) Data collection and analysis are often concurrent.

8. Defining the "Universe" of the Study and Extracting a Sample

This section is concerned with considering the setting, participants and numbers to be included. Alternatively, details of the data to be collected if no participants are being included. Choice of

population, sampling method and inclusion/exclusion criteria should be considered (e.g., age, gender, cultural background, native English speaker etc). in this very respect, the method of recruitment (i.e., selection of participants) should be declared and justified.

Sampling also has to do with “external validity” which refers to the idea of how the findings of your paper could be generalized to other people or situations (Shavelson, 1988). One more key factor in sampling is that the subjects being selected should be “representative” as this may affect the generalisation of your paper results later on (Pajares, 2007).

9. Data collection instruments

Provide details of the data collection instruments you intend to use in the study, e.g., questionnaire, interviews, or observation. Describe how they will be used and the items of data that will be collected, e.g., demographic data, learning atmosphere etc. Justification for choices should be provided. If existing validated data collection instruments are being used, these should be referenced as such. If new measuring tools are being specifically developed for the intended research study, information should be provided on how validity and reliability will be established. The design and methods should be described in sufficient details (Mohajan, 2017).

10. Data processing and analysis

The next step is to consider the intended data processing and analysis. Specifically, what descriptive and inferential statistics are going to be produced? What comparisons might be made “if any” with the data, e.g., by age, gender, socio-economic status...etc? The projected analyses should relate to the aim and the research questions cited. For qualitative research, describe the processes involved in analysis of the interview transcripts.

Once data has been collected, it will be organised into meaningful patterns that can be interpreted. According to Kothari (2004), the significance of findings depends on the way the human brain extracts meaning. No rules or formula lead the researcher to correct interpretation. The same author added that analysis is subjective and depends entirely on the logical mind, inductive reasoning skills and objectivity of the researcher. For advice on appropriate statistical analysis, it may be helpful to seek the advice of a statistician.

Note, that not all quantitative studies are subjected to significance testing. In descriptive studies, the aim is to summarize the data set quantitatively without employing probabilistic formulation, e.g., to produce measures of central tendency, dispersion or association (Goundar, 2012).

- Triangulation

Triangulation is the application and combination of several research methods in the same study. By combining multiple observers, theories, methods and/or empirical materials, researchers can hope to overcome the weakness or intrinsic biases and problems that arise from using one single research method. Triangulation combines research strategies for the purpose of achieving a multidimensional view of the phenomenon of interest (Honorene, 2016).

Content analysis may be qualitative or quantitative in nature. First, in most basic terms, qualitative content analysis induces elements of text into labelled categories. In addition to this,

during quantitative content analysis, the researcher further proceeds to allocate numeric codes to these labelled bundles of meaning.

11. Implications

While you are heading to finish your proposal, you need to end it on a strong note. Emphasize the probable implications for and contributions of your research project to theory or practice. Your research project may, for example, include suggestions to enhance processes in a given field, further conclusions to inform policy goals, and more results to strengthen a particular theory or challenge existing scientific assumptions. Your research could also be a basis for further researches to be conducted. This highlights the significance of your research and ignites the audience interest in it. This would mainly foreground the originality of your potential research. Therefore, an explanation of why this research is substantial should be provided. Indeed, while proceeding, you need to show how your intended research will build on the present state of knowledge in your field of study and add to the existing literature.

12. Potential problems that may occur

This section concerns the different challenges you assume you may face while conducting your research and the different steps you are going to take to overcome them. Considering challenges, outcomes and alternatives shows how correct your research mindset is. To this end, outline any potential organisational, practical or methodological problems that might occur and how you intend to surmount them. For example, when determining the projected length of the study, it is important to incorporate interview and employment plans and the total time required to train relevant people.

13. Appendices of relevant additional material

The appendices section refers to the additional materials that are not a main part of the proposal text but are helpful to give a more understanding of the research problem. It is to be noted that a separate appendix should be used for each distinct topic or set of data and always include a title that describes its content, appendix questionnaires, interview schedules, diagrams of equipment and any relevant information that will aid to understand the intended project. Remember to refer to these in the proposal text. The university/trust recommended a certain referencing format that should be used throughout.

14. References

While writing your research, you definitely used sources, a proper citation of these sources should be included in the references section. This section is also known as “bibliography” or “cited literature”. The goal behind displaying this list is to show the literature that supports your project. It includes the key pieces of literature that your work is based on and in general terms they are ordered alphabetically by the last name of the author. However, this depends on the field of study as some fields have specific format requirements that you need to know about so as your referencing fit in with your particular field. Citing references is not just for stylistic effect, but also for a purpose. In fact, any idea that is not yours and referred to from theoretical or experimental studies you have read must have a citation in order for the readers to know the source, this may help them get more information about it in case of interest.

CONCLUSION

It worth noting that post data analysis, a discussion, conclusions and implications for practice are written in light of the study findings. Suggestions for future research may also be projected. Well-designed research proposals include a method of evaluating the success of the project post implementation.

To propose a good proposal, you should:

- Present the logical need for the proposed piece of research.
- Provide an analysis of the most important past research (literature review) as a context for the proposed study.
- Specify the objectives and/or the hypotheses or research questions.
- Outline the basic procedures to be followed

Remember to be realistic when designing the study. Overly optimistic ideas of what the project can accomplish may detract it from the chances of being approved.

At this very stage, you might come to an understanding that a crucial part of research is knowing how to make a research. This knowledge will be reflected later on through your accurate choice of your research topic and title and the well- organized parts of your research proposal that would be an appeal to your concerned audience in the field of study.

It noteworthy to note that this knowledge and deep understanding of how to conduct a research depends on the extensive conscious reading you do.

This paper, however might be helpful to novice researchers, cannot stand on its own as a unique source that would equip them with knowledge sufficient to prepare and write a research proposal. More topic- related references are needed to reach this objective.

In addition, the taxonomy of the different steps to be followed in the research process may differ from one scholar to another. Some of these steps may be embedded under the same headings or one heading may be divided in two or more subheadings. As a beginner in the field of research such taxonomies and classifications are not the point. What really matters is the full grasp of the conceptual framework of what research is and what research proposal involves in more particular terms. This understanding could be deepened through extensive reading of research related documents that would affect the quality of research you will conduct later on.

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