

Chapter

1



The logic and structure of research proposals

What is a research proposal?

Aims of a research proposal

Seven key questions

The structure of research proposals

The logic of research proposals

Evaluation of research proposals



What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a relatively brief document that contains an outline plan for a research project. It is produced at the beginning of the research process in advance of any data collection. It describes what will be done, explains how it will be done, and justifies why the research should be undertaken. It is normally produced to enable the proposed research to be evaluated by someone with the authority to allow, or prevent, the proposed research from being put into practice.

Aims of a research proposal

There are two reasons for producing a research proposal. The first is that a proposal forms an essential part of the preparation and planning process for a research project. A good proposal is based on careful thought about how the project will be conducted and involves the kind of advance planning that is

required if a project is to run smoothly. There is a useful analogy here with house-building. No one would seriously consider starting work on a house without first having drawn up plans for the building. Without such plans, it would be virtually impossible to work out exactly what materials will be required, when they are to be delivered, and how they will fit together. The same applies to a research project. Before embarking on a research project, the researcher needs to prepare the groundwork and give careful thought to the practical issues involved at the implementation stage of the research.

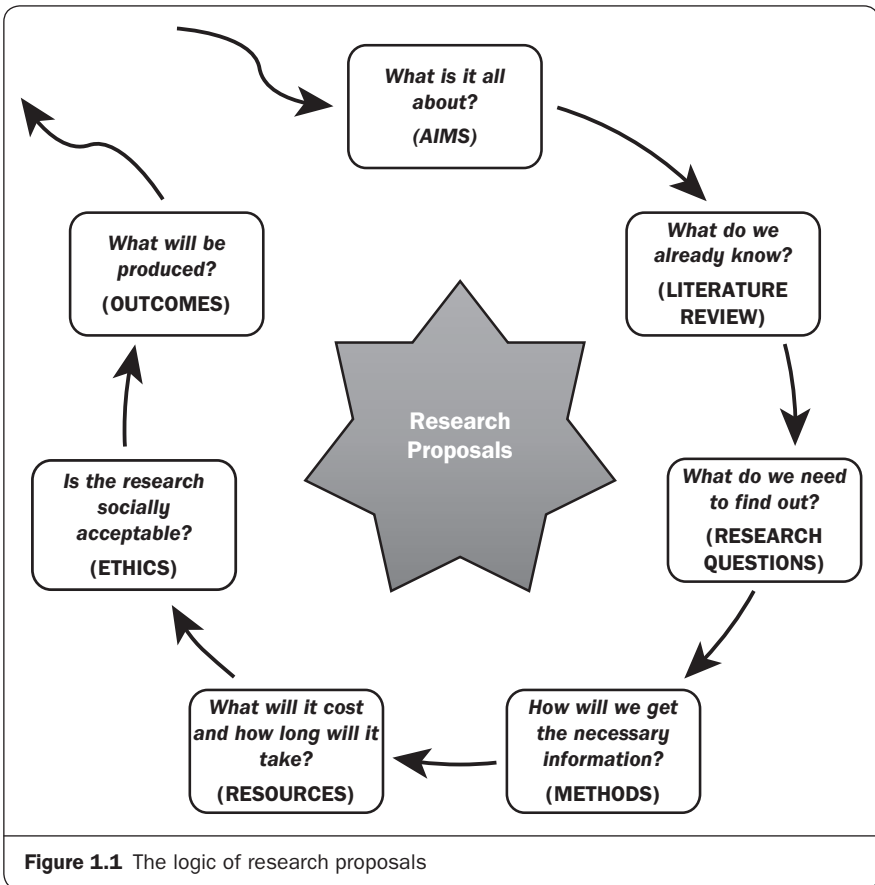
The second is that proposals generally form part of an evaluation process in which the merits, or otherwise, of the proposed research are judged by people who cast an expert eye over the proposal and then decide whether the research should go ahead. The analogy with house-building is once again useful for this point. No reasonable person would start the construction of a house without having sought permission from relevant authorities to embark on the construction. Plans have to be drawn up to show that the house will be structurally sound and that it will meet all the necessary requirements in terms of building regulations. In the same way that there are regulations and procedures that are designed to protect the public from rogue builders constructing houses that are likely to collapse or that fail to meet environmental standards, there are standards and procedures that researchers need to take into account to avoid poor research designs that are likely to fail. The blueprint for research contained in research proposals provides the kind of information that allows people to check whether the proposed research will accord with the necessary procedures and regulations, and it thus allows those who authorise research to make judgements about the quality of the proposed investigation.

Seven key questions

When evaluators make a judgement about a research proposal, there are *seven key questions* they will have in mind, and they will be looking for satisfactory answers to each of these questions within the proposal. As Figure 1.1 indicates, these questions follow a logical sequence with each question building on the previous one in a way that helps to build up a clear picture of what the research entails. Of course, the sophistication of the answers provided to these questions will vary according to the circumstances; much will depend on the purpose of the proposal and the level of expertise expected of the researcher. Good research proposals, however, have this in common: they manage to address the seven key questions in a way that satisfies the requirements of their particular audience.

Question 1: What is it all about?

First of all, readers will be looking for information about the subject matter of the research. They will want to know the answers to the following questions: What is the topic? What is the research trying to achieve? Without such information, readers cannot evaluate the proposal; they cannot judge whether



the methodology is appropriate or whether there will be sufficient time and resources to complete the project; and they will get frustrated and annoyed if they do not get this information supplied clearly, precisely, and succinctly at the beginning of the proposal.

Question 2: What do we already know about the subject?

Having addressed the question of what the research is about, the next logical thing that readers of a proposal will ask is: What do we already know about the subject? What has previous research revealed? These are relevant and important questions to pose because, by looking at the knowledge that has already been accumulated on the proposed subject, it decreases the probability of repeating research that has already been done elsewhere. There is no point in ‘reinventing the wheel’. If the information already exists, it could well be a waste of time and money to duplicate the research (unless, of course, we have the specific aim of checking the validity of the earlier findings).

Question 3: What does the research need to find out?

Once readers are clear about the aims of the research and what is already known about the topic, the next logical step is for them to ask: What *new* information is needed? A review of the existing information not only tells us what we already know, it tells us what we *don't* know and what it would be useful to find out. This allows the proposed research to be targeted where it will be most useful. It helps to pinpoint the kind of things that need to be studied in order to shed new light on the topic.

Question 4: How will we get the necessary information?

Having established precisely what the research needs to find out, the next question is fairly obvious: How will the information be obtained? A description of the research methods is called for in order to answer this question. Proposals always include an account of how the researcher intends to collect the data, how much data will be collected, and what techniques will be used to analyse the data. Armed with such information, readers can draw their own conclusions about whether the methods are suitable for the task at hand and whether the proposed methods are likely to work in practice.

Question 5: What will it cost and how long will it take?

Research takes time and costs money, and this is something that those who evaluate research proposals will have in mind when they assess the feasibility of the proposed project. They will want to know: What resources are necessary for the successful completion of the research? They will be looking for evidence within the proposal that the researcher has planned the research in accordance with the amount of time that is available and the amount of money at his or her disposal for the completion of the project – the proposed research needs to be *doable*.

Question 6: Is the research socially acceptable?

Society places certain restrictions on what can, and what cannot, be done in the name of research. For this reason, readers will want to feel assured that the proposed research will be conducted in a manner that meets socially accepted standards governing research activity. Any doubts on this point and the research project will not be allowed to proceed. The proposal therefore needs to include assurances that the research will be conducted in a manner that abides by relevant principles of research ethics and accords with the law of the land.

Question 7: What will be the end product of the research?

Last but not least, readers will expect a piece of research to be justified on the basis that it will produce some specific, identifiable outcomes. Indeed, it is rarely the case that research can be justified 'for its own sake', especially in the social sciences. For this reason, it is important for research proposals to

address questions about the outcomes of the research and the end products that it is hoped will arise from the research. They need to contain a clear account of the ‘deliverables’ from the project and an explanation of who, or what, might benefit as a direct result of the project.

The structure of research proposals

The seven key questions provide a rationale for the way that research proposals are organised and they can be used as a template for the structure of a proposal. Their sequence and subject matter can be transformed into a series of sections that introduce the vital material in an efficient manner and in a sequence that allows readers to understand things quickly, easily, and with the minimum of effort. To this extent, the headings used in Table 1.1 provide a generic structure for proposals, one that will be applicable across a wide range of circumstances.

Table 1.1 The generic structure of research proposals

Typical headings/sections	Key questions	Location of guidance in this book
Title	What is it all about?	Chapter 4
Keywords		
Aims		
Background		
Literature review	What do we already know?	Chapter 5
Research questions	What do we need to find out?	Chapter 6
Methods	How will we get the necessary information?	Chapter 7
Resources	How long will it take and what will it cost?	Chapter 8
Ethics	Is the research socially acceptable?	Chapter 9
Outcomes	What will be the end products?	Chapter 10

Top tip

Research proposals should always adhere to the structure or guidelines provided by the organisation to which they are submitted. In the absence of any such structure or guidelines, Table 1.1 provides a good template for writing the proposal.

While Table 1.1 provides a good generic template for research proposals, it should not be regarded as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ template, one that can be used at all times under all circumstances. There are two reasons for this. First, proposals can vary in the emphasis they place on particular types of information depending on the nature of the research and the subject discipline involved – Appendix 3 demonstrates this point. Second, the agencies and organisations that receive research proposals often produce bespoke forms to suit their purposes. Although these will largely echo the headings in Table 1.1, they can also include some difference of emphasis, or use slightly different terms or, indeed, ask for additional information that is specific to the area of inquiry and that would not appear on a more generic research proposal. This means that when it comes to writing a research proposal, the first thing that a researcher must do is check whether the proposal needs to be submitted using a particular form or needs to adhere to specific guidelines provided by the body to which the proposal will be submitted. If so, then there is no option but to use the headings and sections as supplied. This is an absolute must. Any attempt to change the stipulated headings and sections is likely to jeopardise the proposal’s prospects of success.

The logic of research proposals

The seven key questions identified in Table 1.1, as we have seen, provide a rationale for the structure of research proposals. They explain why certain sections and headings are typically found in research proposals and why they tend to appear in a particular sequence. But, more than this, the seven questions reflect an underlying logic to research proposals that ties together a number of criteria for judging whether a proposed piece of research warrants support. Figure 1.2 provides an overview of this logic and indicates where the specific criteria are dealt with in Part 2.

Evaluation of research proposals

Research proposals are normally written with a view to being evaluated by individuals or committees who have the authority to allow the research to go ahead, or to prevent it from taking place. This applies whether the proposal is written for an undergraduate research project, a master’s degree dissertation, or an application for entry to a doctoral or PhD research programme. It also applies when proposals are written as part of a bid for funding.

Who approves research proposals?

Proposals are scrutinised by experts who use their experience to make judgments about the quality of what is being proposed and the prospects that it can be delivered. The people who approve or reject proposals, however, do not do

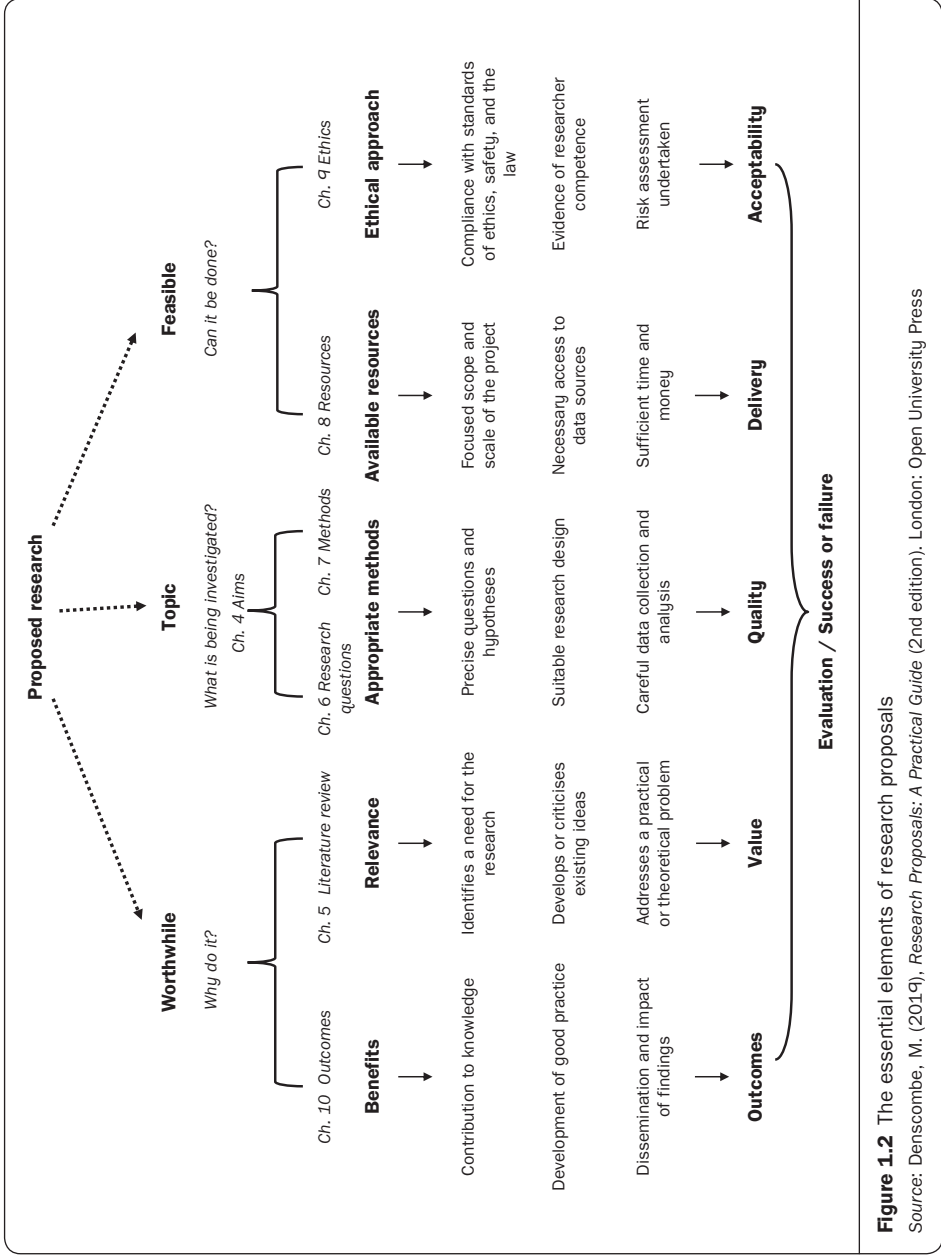


Figure 1.2 The essential elements of research proposals
 Source: Denscombe, M. (2019), *Research Proposals: A Practical Guide* (2nd edition), London: Open University Press

so by virtue of a specific qualification in ‘evaluating research proposals’. They do so as part of their broader professional duties as an academic, researcher, or practitioner in the field of study. Acting in this capacity, they are people who are charged with responsibility for ensuring that the plan of research meets an appropriate standard and, very importantly, that if the research is allowed to proceed, there will be no nasty repercussions for the institution they represent, the participants, or the researcher involved. The evaluators’ role is to safeguard all concerned. Table 1.2 provides a broad overview of who normally has this role in the approval process.

Table 1.2 Who approves research proposals?

Purpose of the proposal	People who evaluate the proposal
Approval for research project on a degree programme • master’s research • undergraduate project	Dissertation supervisors Project tutors
Applications for acceptance onto a research degree programme • PhD application	Research committees PhD supervisors
Funding applications • research grant	Review panels Subject experts

It is worth noting that there is often an overlap between the functions of a research proposal and the process of ethics approval. In either case, approval is needed before the research can begin and that approval depends on an evaluation of the proposed plan of work that takes into consideration details of how the data will be collected, who will be involved, what the benefits of the research are, and what measures are in place to protect the interests of the participants.



Link-up with
Ethics Approval:
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What happens to a research proposal once it is submitted?

When a proposal has been submitted, the amount of scrutiny it receives will vary according to the nature of the research being envisaged and the amount of resources involved. If the research is straightforward and uses well-established methods to investigate uncontroversial topics, then the evaluation might be ‘light touch’ with the proposal being approved or rejected on the basis of evaluation by just one person. This is most likely to happen with small-scale projects like those at undergraduate level where project supervisors will take responsibility for vetting the proposal. For larger projects involving higher-level

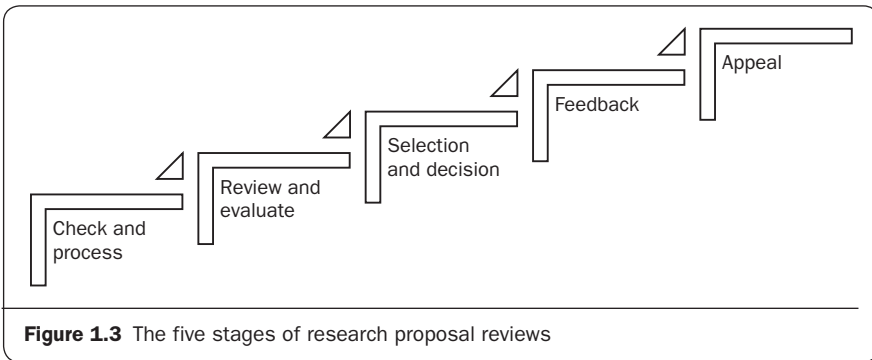
research, the evaluation generally involves more than one person. As a matter of routine, the proposal will be sent to two or more individuals, or possibly a committee with many members, and it will be a collective decision as to whether the proposal should be approved or rejected. This is the kind of approach to be expected in the case of proposals for entry to a PhD degree or with applications for research funding.

Alternatively, the evaluation might involve a multi-stage system with an element of 'triage'. In this case, risky proposals are sifted from safe ones at an initial stage and subjected to further scrutiny at a second stage of evaluation. This is the kind of process that is associated with proposals at any level of research where an initial reading of the proposal indicates that there might be safety or ethical issues that warrant further deliberation. Research into some forms of illegal activities or into sensitive aspects of personal health are typical of the type of proposal that might be seen as posing such a risk and, thereby, worthy of further scrutiny. The triage process is widely used because:

- a) it saves time by avoiding delays to proposals that involve relatively routine research, while also
- b) giving added attention where required through a second level of scrutiny for any proposals that, at first glance, appear to carry the risk of producing poor results or causing harm to anyone involved in the research.

If the proposal is submitted as part of a competitive selection process, there could be a number of stages to the evaluation. This is typically the case for funding applications, where initial stages involve sifting out projects that are seen to have little chance of success and subsequent stages hone down the number of eligible proposals towards a shortlist and ultimately a decision about which proposals are successful.

The amount of *feedback* provided following the evaluation process varies according to the decision that is arrived at and the purpose of the proposal. The evaluation, at its simplest, could result in the decision to 'approve' the project. In this instance, it is not likely that there will be much feedback unless, that is, the proposal forms part of an assessed piece of work for an academic qualification. Where 'conditions' are attached to the approval, then there must be some feedback. It is effectively provided through the comments on items and areas where improvement is required. There will be specific aspects of the proposal that will be identified as in need of change or further work. In cases where the proposal is 'rejected', the amount of feedback varies. If the proposal is part of an assessed piece of academic work, for example at bachelor's or master's degree level, then it is to be expected that there will be a fair amount of feedback. This will point to the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal and, stipulate things that need to be corrected before the proposal can be approved. If, on the other hand, the rejection relates to applications for a place on a PhD programme or applications for research funding, then there might not be much explanation of the reasons. The rejection could offer little more than polite condolences termed in generalities about strong competition and the limited availability of places or funds.



If the research proposal is rejected, then there may be a process of *appeal* against the decision. This will have been made clear in the documentation available in connection with the submission process. In reality, though, even if there is a process of appeal, it is unlikely to lead to a reversal of the original decision. Figure 1.3 illustrates the five general stages for each research proposal review.

Further reading

- Krathwohl, D.R. and Smith, N.L. (2005) *How to Prepare a Dissertation Proposal: Suggestions for Students in Education and the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press (Chapters 1–3).
- Locke, L.F., Spirduso, W.W. and Silverman, S.J. (2014) *Proposals that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals* (6th edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (Chapter 1).
- Punch, K. (2016) *Developing Effective Research Proposals* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (Chapter 2).

Summary of key points

Research proposals contain a brief plan for a research project that describes the purpose of the research and how it will be conducted. This chapter has indicated how, from the perspective of the researcher, this is valuable as a planning exercise that involves the kind of forethought that is necessary to enable the project to run smoothly. However, this chapter has focused on another role of research proposals – one that is equally, if not more, important. Proposals provide a basis for judging the quality of the research, allowing evaluators with responsibility for authorising projects to reach a verdict and either approve the project and allow the research to proceed or reject the proposal and effectively prevent the work from taking place.

These people – the *evaluators* or *readers* – whatever their research tradition or academic discipline, will have certain questions in mind that they would ask about any proposed research. This chapter has therefore identified the *seven key questions* that they will want answers to in a research proposal. These questions are a rational response to the task of evaluating any proposed research, asking for information about the project that is required in order to arrive at a judgement about whether the proposed research is worthwhile and feasible. There is a logical order to these questions, as shown in Figure 1.1, with the answers to one question providing the basis for asking the next. There is also a rationale underlying the questions that translates into the generic structure of research proposals outlined in Table 1.1. The seven key questions provide a framework that, as Figure 1.2 shows, ties together the essential elements of a research proposal.