

Writing the Proposal

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

What should the research proposal as a finished product look like? What content should it include? What structure and sections might it have? This chapter deals first with these questions, bringing together what has been said in previous chapters, especially Chapter 5. It then comments on qualitative proposals.

In the literature, there are numerous descriptions of proposals, with suggestions and recommendations for proposal sections and headings. Sometimes these are written for social science research in general – examples are Madsen (1983), Behling (1984), Mauch and Birch (1989) and Peters (1997). Sometimes they are written for specific areas – examples here are Tornquist (1993) and Brink and Wood (1994) for nursing research, Borg and Gall (1989) and Krathwohl (1998) for educational research, Coley and Scheinberg (1990) for research in human services and the helping professions, Gitlin and Lyons (1996) for health research and human service professionals, Parsigian (1996) for media projects, and Hamper and Baugh (1996) for business research.

In addition, there is literature on ‘grantsmanship’ (research proposals for grant applications – see, for example, Lauffer, 1983, 1984; Gilpatrick, 1989), and literature on proposal preparation and development from within particular research approaches. Thus Marshall and Rossman (1989) and Maxwell (1996) write on proposals for qualitative research, while Locke et al. (1993) write mainly about proposals for quantitative research.

By contrast, the description of the research proposal given in this chapter

aims to be general enough to suit different social science areas, and to cover quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method approaches to research. As noted earlier, it is written primarily with the dissertation student in mind, but I believe it has application also to the non-university context.

Before the proposal's sections and structure are discussed, it is worth noting again four points from previous chapters:

(a) Keep the framework of three overarching questions discussed in Chapter 3 in mind, since this will be what most of your readers are expecting your proposal to deal with. These are:

- What is this research trying to find out, what questions is it trying to answer?
- How will the proposed research answer these questions?
- Why is this research worth doing?

(b) Review again the five issues raised in Chapter 4. As noted there, they are not necessarily all applicable in any one project, but they are useful things to think about in planning the research and preparing the proposal. They are:

- the perspective behind the research;
- the role of theory;
- pre-structured vs unfolding research;
- the relevant literature;
- whether the study is to be quantitative, qualitative, or both.

When they do apply, how they are dealt with in the proposal is a matter of judgement for the writer – for example, whether, as points, they need a separate section, or are interwoven throughout other sections.

(c) Quoting Maxwell, remember that the form and structure of the proposal are tied to its purpose – ‘... to explain and justify your proposed study to an audience of nonexperts on your topic’ (Maxwell, 1996: 100–1).

(d) The proposal itself needs to be presented as an argument. Seeing it as an argument means showing its line of reasoning, its internal consistency and the interrelatedness of its different parts. It means making sure that the different parts fit together, and showing how the research will be a piece of disciplined inquiry. As an argument, the proposal should show the logic behind the proposed study, rather than simply describing the study. In so doing, it should answer the question of why this approach, method and design have been chosen for this study.¹

6.2 PROPOSAL HEADINGS²

In the interests of making the proposal clear and easy for the reader to follow, it will need an organizing framework, or structure. This section

gives a suggested set of headings for writing and presenting the research proposal, shown in Box 6.1.

A problem in suggesting a general set of headings for proposals is the variation in headings, format and length of required documents across different areas of university research. There appear to be two extremes in university practice. Some universities (and some degrees) have institution-wide requirements, where the proposal covers the same headings in all disciplines. Other universities (and degrees) have department or area-specific requirements and headings.

Institution-wide formats are usually, and necessarily, more general. For example, they often use the broad heading 'aims' (or 'objectives'), rather than the more specific 'research questions' focus emphasized here. Again, the broad heading 'research plan' might be used, rather than the more specific term 'research methods'. Where these broader terms apply, the headings shown here in Box 6.1 can easily be clustered accordingly.

The focus in this book on empirical research in social science means that a common set of proposal headings should be broadly useful across areas. At the same time, there needs to be room for variability in proposal format, to reflect the variability in research approaches, while accommodating the general expectations a reader will have when reading the proposal. These headings address those expectations, but it follows that they are not necessarily the only sections or headings, nor is their suggested order the only one that could be used. Therefore, this description

BOX 6.1 *Checklist of headings for research proposals*

- i. Title and title page
- ii. Abstract
- iii. Introduction – Area and topic
 - Background and context
 - Statement of purpose (or aims)
- iv. Research questions – General
 - Specific
- v. Conceptual framework, theory, hypotheses (if appropriate)
- vi. The literature
- vii. Methods
 - Design – strategy and framework
 - Sample
 - Data collection – instruments and procedures
 - Data analysis
- viii. Significance
- ix. Limitations and delimitations (if appropriate)
- x. Consent, access and participants' protection
- xi. References
- xii. Appendices

is not meant to be prescriptive, and the researcher should feel at liberty to vary this material as appropriate. But that should be done against the background of readers' expectations (see Chapter 2), and any guidelines from the relevant department and/or university. Even if these particular headings are not used, the content they point to should be contained in the proposal, in some clear, easy-to-follow format.³

Some of these sections apply to both quantitative and qualitative research, whereas some are more directly applicable to one approach than the other. The writer's judgement is needed to decide which sections are appropriate, in which order, and which might be omitted or combined. But, as with the issues discussed in Chapter 4, the full list is useful to think about in proposal preparation, and is also useful for developing full versions of the proposal – where shorter versions are required, a good strategy is to prepare the full version, then summarize it. Also, the full version of the proposal, outlined here, will be useful when it comes to writing the dissertation itself.

It is easier in many respects to suggest proposal guidelines for a quantitative study, since there is greater variety in qualitative studies, and many qualitative studies will be unfolding rather than pre-structured. An unfolding study cannot be as specific in the proposal about its research questions, nor about details of the design. When this is the case, the point needs to be made in the proposal. Unfolding qualitative proposals are discussed again in Section 6.3.

Some proposals require the definition of terms. This occurs when terms are used which may not be understood by people outside the field of study, or when specialized technical terms are used, or when there is a need to define one or more terms clearly so that misunderstanding does not occur (Creswell, 1994: 106). Quantitative research in particular has a clear tradition of defining its variables, first conceptually and then operationally. Whether or not a separate section is required for any definition of terms is a matter of judgement – it can often easily be incorporated into other sections. But the conceptual and operational definition of variables in quantitative research is often best done in a separate section, perhaps under methods.

In what follows, I make some comments about abstracts and introductions. In the other main sections (research questions, conceptual framework, literature, methods), I bring together the points made in earlier chapters.

Abstract and title

An abstract is a brief summary, whether of a proposal or a finished study. It is *not* the introduction to a proposal or study, but rather a summary of it. It functions like the executive summary in the business context, giving readers a brief overview of all essential elements of the proposal.

Abstracts play an important role in the research literature, and they are required in proposals (usually), dissertations and in research articles in most refereed journals. Abstract writing is the skill of saying as much as possible in as few words as possible. For a proposal, the abstract needs to deal with two main issues – what the study is about and aims to achieve (usually stated in terms of its research questions), and how it intends to do that.⁴ The abstract should give an overview not just of the study itself, but also of the argument behind the study.

For most of us, abstract writing is a skill which needs to be developed, since we typically use many superfluous words when we speak and write. Together with the title, the abstract is written last, since it is difficult to summarize what has not yet been written.

Examples of abstracts of proposals are difficult to find, since they are not collected and published. On the other hand, examples of abstracts of completed studies can be found in several places – completed dissertations, at the start of articles in many top class research journals, and in compilations of research such as Dissertation Abstracts International, and the various collections of abstracts in different social science areas.

Titles also have importance in the research literature indexing process. Therefore a title should not just be an afterthought, nor should it use words or phrases which obscure rather than reveal meaning. Extending the point about abstract writing, the title should convey as much information as possible in as few words as possible.

Introduction – area and topic, background and context and statement of purpose (or aims)

There are many ways a topic can be introduced, and all topics have a background and a context. These should be noted in the introduction, which sets the stage for the research. A strong introduction is important to a convincing proposal. It is the lead-in, to help the reader follow the logic of the proposal. Its purpose is not to review the literature, but rather to show generally how the proposed study fits into what is already known, and to locate it in relation to present knowledge and practice. Creswell (1994: 41) suggests four key components for introductions: (a) establishing the problem leading to the study, (b) casting the problem within the larger scholarly literature, (c) discussing deficiencies in the literature about the problem, and (d) targeting an audience and noting the significance of this problem for the audience.

In addition, I think the introduction should also contain a clear identification of the research area and topic, and a general statement of the purpose of the research.⁵ These can lead later into general and specific research questions. Particular features of the proposed study, and important aspects of its context, can also be identified here, as appropriate – for example, if personal knowledge or experience form an important part of

the context, or if preliminary or pilot studies have been done, or if the study will involve secondary analysis of existing data (Maxwell, 1996).

Especially for qualitative proposals, two other points might apply here. One is the first general issue raised in Chapter 4 – is there a particular perspective behind this research? This can be noted here, to inform the reader early in the proposal. The other is the third issue raised in Chapter 4 – where on the structure continuum is the proposed study? This strongly influences later sections of the proposal. If a pre-structured qualitative study is planned, the proposal can proceed along similar lines to the quantitative proposal. If an unfolding study is planned, where focus and structure will develop as the study proceeds, this point should be made clearly, again to inform the reader. In the former case, there will be general and specific research questions. In the latter case, there will be more general orienting research questions.

The introduction should be strong and engaging. Various logical structures are possible, but a progression from more general to more specific issues, culminating in stating the topic and research questions for this study, often works well. Whatever structure you choose, make sure your introduction actually does introduce your topic, and sets the stage for what follows. In my experience, it is a mistake for the introduction to go on too long, especially about the background to the research, and it is a good idea to get to the point of your research, stated as purpose in the introduction and leading on to research questions, as soon as is possible.

An excellent illustration of an introduction, with edited comments, is given by Creswell (1994: 45–8). Four others, also edited, are given in Locke et al. (1993: 185–296), and others in Gilpatrick (1989: 57–60).

Research questions – general and specific

The nature and central role of research questions were discussed in Chapter 3. In the proposal outline suggested here, they can follow from the statement of purpose given in the introduction. If your research questions fit into the general-to-specific framework described in Chapter 3, presenting them in the proposal in this section should be a quite straightforward matter. Remembering the empirical criterion for research questions in Chapter 3 (Section 3.6), it should be clear what data are required to answer each specific research question.

The point about this section is to tell the reader what questions the research is trying to answer, or what questions will initiate the inquiry in an unfolding study. This section is often what proposal readers turn to and concentrate on first, in order to get as clear a picture as possible of the purpose of the research. This reinforces the comments in Chapter 3 about the central role of research questions. It also implies that an emerging-unfolding type of study needs to indicate here what general questions will initiate the research, and how they might be refocused and refined as the study progresses.

Conceptual framework, theory and hypotheses (if appropriate)

There is wide variation in the applicability of this section, given the range of studies possible across the quantitative and qualitative approaches. If a conceptual framework is involved, it is a matter of judgement whether it goes here, or in the methods section later in the proposal. Theory and hypotheses are included if appropriate, as explained in Chapter 3. If theory is involved, it may be included in the literature review section, rather than here.

Thus, as noted in Chapter 4:

- if your study has a pre-determined conceptual framework, the proposal should show it; this can often be done effectively using a diagram;
- if this conceptual framework is seen as only an initial version or approximation, for modification as the study progresses, this should be noted when the framework is presented;
- if you have an unfolding study, where a conceptual framework will be developed during the research, this too should be noted and explained;
- the role of theory in the proposed study should be made clear. In particular, is it theory verification or theory generation? If a theory verification study is proposed, hypotheses, and the theory behind them should be shown.

The literature

The proposal needs to identify the body of literature which is relevant to the research, to indicate the relationship of the proposed study to the relevant literature, and to indicate how the literature will be dealt with in the proposed study. The following three possibilities were noted in Chapter 4.

- The literature is reviewed comprehensively in advance of the study, and that review is included as part of the proposal, or is attached.
- The literature will be reviewed comprehensively ahead of the empirical stage of the research, but that review will not be done until the proposal is approved. In this case, the nature and scope of the literature to be reviewed should be indicated.
- The literature will deliberately not be reviewed prior to the empirical work, but will be integrated into the research during the study, as in a grounded theory study. In this case too, the nature and scope of the literature should be indicated.

For some qualitative proposals, the literature may be used in sharpening the focus of the study, and to give structure to its questions and design.

If so, this should be indicated, along with how it is to be done. In all cases, the researcher needs to identify the relevant literature, and to connect the proposed study to the literature. In general, I agree with the advice of Locke et al. (1993) and Maxwell (1996) that the function of the literature in the proposal is to locate the present study, and to explain and justify the directions it proposes to take.

Methods

DESIGN – STRATEGY AND FRAMEWORK At this point, the overall approach to be taken in the research – quantitative, qualitative, or both – becomes decisive. While this might well have been indicated earlier in the proposal, it is nonetheless useful to make it clear here (again, if necessary). Whichever approach applies, the proposal should identify the basic strategy behind the research. Thus:

- If the study is quantitative, what strategy is proposed?
- If qualitative, what strategy is proposed?
- If there is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, what is the proposed mixture of strategies?

A clear statement of the strategy helps to orient the reader, and leads naturally to a description of the design.

The design connects the research questions to the data, and can now detail the implementation of the strategy. For example, if an experiment is planned, this section gives details of the proposed experimental design. If a case study is planned, this section gives details of the case study design – for example, single or multiple, cross sectional or longitudinal.

For conventional quantitative designs, the conceptual framework may be shown here, instead of earlier. In qualitative studies, the location of the study along the structure continuum is particularly important for its design. Qualitative strategies such as case studies, ethnography and grounded theory may overlap, or elements of these may be used separately or together. This means it will be difficult to neatly compartmentalize such a study. That is not a problem, but it should be made clear that the proposed study uses elements of different strategies. Qualitative studies vary greatly on the issue of pre-developed conceptual frameworks, and the position of the study on this matter should be indicated. A fully or partly pre-developed framework should be shown. Where one will be developed, it needs to be indicated how that will be done. This will interact with data collection and analysis, and may be better dealt with there.

Sample

Chapter 5 stressed the need to think about sampling in the study as part of the planning process for the research, to select among sampling possibilities in line with the logic of the study, and to indicate the sampling

plan in the proposal. The rationale behind the sampling plan needs to fit in with the logic of the study, and to be briefly described. Whatever the approach, the basic idea in this section is to indicate who or what will be studied, and why.

If the study is quantitative, the proposal should indicate:

- the sampling strategy, especially whether it is purposive, representative or both, and what claims will be made for the generalizability of findings;
- how big the sample will be, and why;
- how it will be selected.

If the study is qualitative, the proposal should similarly indicate:

- the sampling strategy, including what intention (if any) there is for the generalizability of findings;
- the extent of the proposed sample;
- how sample units will be chosen.

If a case study is involved, the basis of case selection should be made clear, as should the basis of within-case sampling. If sampling of documentary or other qualitative material is proposed, its basis needs to be shown.

DATA COLLECTION As indicated in Chapter 5, the two matters here are the instruments (if any) which will be used for data collection, and the procedures for administering the instruments or, more generally, for collecting the data.

(a) Instruments for quantitative data collection:

- If the decision is to use already-existing data collection instruments, a brief description of their history, use in research and their basic psychometric characteristics (especially reliability and validity information, if available) should be included.
- If the decision is to construct an instrument(s) specifically for this study, an outline of the steps involved in doing that should be given, showing what pre-testing is involved.

(b) Instruments for qualitative data collection:

- A general plan for any qualitative fieldwork should be shown; if the researcher is the 'instrument' for data collection, the proposal should indicate this.
- If interviews are involved what type of interviews, and especially, what degree of structure and standardization is proposed? If standardized interview schedules are to be used, how will they be developed and pre-tested?

- If qualitative questionnaires are proposed, what degree of structure and standardization is involved? How would they be developed and (if appropriate) pre-tested?
- Similar considerations apply for observational data – what degree of structure and standardization is proposed, and how would proposed schedules be developed and pre-tested?
- If documents are to be used, which ones and why? Are there sampling or access considerations?
- If diaries, journals, critical incident reports, or other qualitative materials are involved, how would the collection of these, including any sampling aspects, be organized?

(c) Procedures – for both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the proposal needs to indicate:

- how the data will be collected;
- how the proposed procedures are arranged to maximize the quality of the data.

Issues of access and ethics may be dealt with here, if they apply especially to data collection procedures, or in the section on consent, access and participants' protection, if they apply more generally.

DATA ANALYSIS The objective in this section is to indicate how the data will be analysed. Quantitative proposals should indicate the statistical procedures proposed. Similarly, the qualitative proposal needs to show how its data will be analysed, and how the proposed analysis fits with the other components of the study. If applicable, both types of proposal should indicate what computer use is planned in the analysis of the data. As noted in Chapter 5, this is an area where you may well need the help of an expert.

Significance

Here, the proposal should indicate the significance of the proposed study. Synonyms for 'significance' here might be justification, importance, or contribution of the study. They all address the third general question of Chapter 3: why is this study worth doing? While the particular topic and its context will determine a study's significance, there are three general areas for the significance and contribution of a study: to knowledge in the area, to policy considerations and to practitioners (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). The first of these, contribution to knowledge, is closely tied to the literature in the area, and is often interpreted as theoretical contribution. If the study has the clear objective of theory generation or verification, indicating this contribution is straightforward.

Limitations and delimitations (if appropriate)

'Limitations' refer to limiting conditions or 'restrictive weaknesses' (Locke et al., 1993: 18) which are unavoidably present in the study's design. Any study has limitations, and they should be noted in the proposal, which should argue nonetheless for the importance of this work. 'Delimitations' means defining the limits, or drawing the boundaries around a study, and showing clearly what is and is not included. This is sometimes useful in avoiding misunderstanding by the reader.

Consent, access and participants' protection

All social research involves consent, access and associated ethical issues, since it is based on data from people and about people. Section 5.3.4, on data collection procedures, shows a range of different ethical issues which might arise in research. Some ethical issues are present in almost all projects (for example, anonymity and confidentiality of data, the use of results), while others are much more project-specific (for example, intervention and advocacy). The researcher needs to anticipate the particular ethical issues involved in the proposed project, and to indicate in the proposal how they will be dealt with.

References

This is a list of the references cited in the proposal.

Appendices

These may include any of the following: a timetable for the research, a budget for the research, letters of introduction or permission, consent forms, measuring instruments, questionnaires, interview guides, observation schedules, and examples of pilot study or other relevant work already completed (Maxwell, 1996).

6.3 QUALITATIVE PROPOSALS

Qualitative studies vary greatly, and in many, the design and procedures will evolve. As noted earlier, this obviously means that the proposal writer cannot specify exactly what will be done, in contrast to many quantitative proposals. When this is the case, the proposal can explain the flexibility the study requires, and show how decisions will be made as the study unfolds. Together with this, as much detail as possible should be provided. Review committees have to judge both the quality, feasibility and viability of the proposed project, and the ability of the researcher to carry it out. The proposal itself, through its organization, coherence and integration, attention to detail and conceptual clarity can inspire confidence in the researcher's ability to execute the research.

On the one hand then, for some types of qualitative research especially,

we do not want to constrain too much the structure of the proposal, and we need to preserve flexibility. On the other hand, as pointed out in Section 4.3, this does not mean that 'anything goes'. Eisner (1991: 241–2) writes as follows, about qualitative research in education:

Qualitative research proposals should have a full description of the topic to be investigated, a presentation and analysis of the research relevant to that topic, and a discussion of the issues within the topic or the shortfalls within the research literature that make the researcher's topic a significant one. They should describe the kinds of information that are able to be secured and the variety of methods or techniques that will be employed to secure such information. The proposals should identify the kinds of theoretical or explanatory resources that might be used in interpreting what has been described, and describe the kind of places, people, and materials that are likely to be addressed.

The function of proposals is not to provide a watertight blueprint or formula the researcher is to follow, but to develop a cogent case that makes it plain to a knowledgeable reader that the writer has the necessary background to do the study and has thought clearly about the resources that are likely to be used in doing the study, and that the topic, problem, or issue being addressed is educationally significant.

This elaborates Eisner's earlier comments (see Section 4.3) that 'evidence matters' and 'planning is necessary'. I want now to extend these points, focusing both on proposals for qualitative research in general, and in particular on those with unfolding rather than pre-structured elements. This sort of proposal is probably the most difficult to write, but the following points can guide the writing. They fit in with the headings shown in Box 6.1, though some modifications are required.

First, there should still be an identification of the research area and topic, and an introduction to those which places them in context and describes any necessary aspects of the background to the study. Second, there still needs to be an identification of the relevant literature, a connection of the proposed study to that literature, and an indication of how the research itself will deal with the literature. Third, there needs to be an assessment of the proposed study's significance and contribution, including its contribution in relation to the literature.

Fourth, when it comes to research questions, it is likely that only general guiding and starting research questions will be identified in such a proposal, supported by statements as to why this is appropriate and as to how more-specific questions to direct the investigation will be identified as the research proceeds. As a matter of proposal presentation strategy, it is a good idea to indicate possible (or likely) research questions as the study unfolds, while pointing out that they are first approximations, to be revised and changed as the study proceeds. It is usually not difficult to make an intelligent first approximation to the sorts of research

questions that might arise, through anticipating, and trying to imagine or simulate the research situation. For some research also, some small-scale empirical exploration (or pilot study) may be possible in developing the proposal. Where possible, this is very helpful in keeping things grounded.

Fifth, when it comes to design and methods, there should be clear statements in the proposal about the general research strategy envisaged, about the sorts of empirical materials to be targeted (at least initially), and about the general plan for collecting and analysing them. As before, the description of methods should not stop at a general identification of the research strategy. The proposal needs also to indicate awareness of the procedural and methodological choices ahead of the researcher in implementing the general strategy, and the basis on which those choices will be made. This was the distinction made in Section 5.3.1 between general and procedural descriptions of methods. Terms describing qualitative research strategies such as the case study, or participant observation, or grounded theory, or an interview-based study, are necessary but generic descriptions, identifying an approach and a strategy in general terms. The execution of any of these in research involves numerous procedural and methodological choices. Thus the 'interview-based study', for example, involves choices about such matters as the selection of interview respondents, approaches to them, the establishment of trust and rapport, physical arrangements for the interview (time, place, etc.), recording procedures, the type of interview, the nature of the questions and the role (if any) of an interview schedule and pre-testing. The qualitative proposal does not need to be able to answer all such questions. Indeed, many of them may well be unanswerable, at proposal stage. But the proposal should indicate awareness of such upcoming methodological choices, and the basis on which they will be made.

Sixth, the other proposal headings listed (abstract and title, limitations and delimitations, consent, access and participants' protection, references and appendices) apply, as appropriate, as before.

Writing the proposal for a qualitative study can be more complicated, given the less pre-structured nature of most such research. The writer should indicate early in the document the unfolding nature of the proposed research and why such an approach is appropriate for this study on this topic in this context at this time. The need to preserve flexibility, the unfolding nature of the study, and the ways in which this research will follow a path of discovery can be strongly stated. Against that background, it is good advice to develop likely research questions and issues of design and methods as far as possible in the proposal, indicating what methodological choices will be involved and the basis on which they will be made.

NOTES

- 1 Maxwell (1996: 112–13) has an excellent example showing the structure of a dissertation proposal, as an argument with its own logic. Locke et al. (1993: 18) suggest three useful questions which address the logic of the proposed research, its topic and research question: what do we already know or do? (The purpose here, in one or two sentences, is to support the legitimacy and importance of the question.) How does this particular question relate to what we already know or do? (The purpose here is to explain and support the exact form of questions or hypotheses that serve as the focus for the study.) Why select this particular method of investigation? (The purpose here is to explain and support the selections made from among alternative methods of investigation.)
- 2 See *Introduction to Social Research* (Punch, 1998), pp. 268–79.
- 3 Other lists of possible proposal headings are shown in the literature noted in the introduction to this chapter, and other proposal outlines are described by Morse (1994) and by Kelly (1998).
- 4 For a finished report (or dissertation), the abstract would need to deal with three issues – these two, and a third which summarizes what was found.
- 5 Creswell (1994: 56–67) gives examples of purpose statements for five different types of studies – a phenomenological study, a case study, an ethnographic study, a grounded theory study and a quantitative survey.