

3

SELECTING AND PLANNING RESEARCH PROPOSALS AND PROJECTS

Selecting a research topic	47
Topics to avoid.....	56
Planning the project.....	58
Writing academic proposals	58
Writing organizational proposals	71
The final stages for academic and organizational proposals	73

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Generate new ideas for research topics.

- Identify a good research topic using selected criteria.

- Identify which kinds of topics to avoid.

- Write an academic proposal for a research project.

- Write an organizational proposal.

KEYWORDS

- Research topics

- Academic proposals

- Organizational proposals

DIGITAL RESOURCES

Keep an eye out for the Digital Resources Available feature at the end of each chapter – each one means there's a free learning resource online for you. Find the resources at: <https://study.sagepub.com/grayresearchworld6e>.

Having read Chapters 1 and 2, you should now have a clearer idea about the methodologies, approaches and tools essential for designing and implementing a good research topic. The question remains, of course, what is a good research topic? Research projects are often designed as part of an academic programme of study or because of a business or organizational need. While the former will probably require greater theoretical underpinning, both need a sharp, practical focus or application. The outputs from research projects not only have potential benefits for organizations and their management, but also can be a vital element in personal learning and development. The best approach is to select a research topic that interests you and one that is likely to maintain your interest. The research process can be long and arduous, so you must be committed to your topic. Winkler and McCuen (2007) suggest that you also need to select a research topic with sufficient scope to generate interesting research questions. So, for example, investigating how a particular brand of laptops is produced and shipped to a local retail outlet may not prove particularly illuminating. On the other hand, a study of laptop component international supply logistics may offer greater scope for the research process (including products, processes and regions), the range of literature to be consulted and the value of the research outcomes.

If you find you have difficulty finding a research topic, then talk to colleagues to see what sort of issues concern them. Discuss the matter with your academic supervisor or line manager. Think back over your course about which topics really interested you and how the themes here could be developed. Other useful sources are professional journals and magazines that often contain articles on issues that are currently engaging the minds of business, commerce, public sector and voluntary organizations. You might also browse the relevant sections of your local bookshop to see what titles are being published in your areas of interest. This chapter makes practical suggestions for generating research ideas, selecting a research topic and writing a successful research proposal. It also suggests how you can plan a schedule for conducting your research and how you should carry out the project, not only efficiently, but also ethically.

SELECTING A RESEARCH TOPIC

You may already have a research topic in mind and, hence, want to use this section as a means of checking its **validity**. Alternatively, your organisation may have commissioned you to undertake a specific piece of research. In the latter case, do not feel that you should be a passive recipient of such projects. Make use of the criteria in this section to evaluate and renegotiate the focus of your project if you feel that this is necessary.

When to Select a Research Topic

Obviously, this is going to be a matter of individual choice. Some researchers have a very clear idea and focus at an early stage. Indeed, they may have embarked on a programme of study precisely because they want to tackle a specific end project. For others, and probably the majority, a research topic emerges only towards the end of the study programme, or because of an emerging problem in the workplace. For some, the problem may be choosing between several potential topics; for others, there may be only one focus.

Sources of Research Topics

There are, essentially, two ways of identifying a research topic. One is through the literature – books and academic and professional journals – which may raise interesting themes and topics related to your interests. The other route is directly from the workplace or business setting. Line managers, supervisors or project teams may all require assistance, which can often be a fruitful source of research focus ideas. In effect, the researcher then acts as an internal consultant to a project team.

What is a Good Research Topic?

Whatever topic you choose, you will likely begin to develop or enhance a range of personal skills. A good topic, then, gives you free rein to maximize this self-development. Jankowicz (2004) argues that such personal development might include:

- Improving personal time management.
- Gaining access to respondents.
- Interviewing respondents.
- Speaking to an audience.
- Persuading people to cooperate.
- Dealing with uncertainty about data.

But it must also be a topic that interests you. Since research may involve many hours of planning, execution, data analysis and report writing, you will quickly tire of any topic that you thought was only moderately interesting at the outset. Choosing a topic that allows you to demonstrate your skills and abilities is also a good idea. Hence, if, for example, you are undertaking a project at the end of an academic programme, you will need to select a topic that gives you scope for showing the integration of various fields of knowledge and analysis. For example, if you are researching in a health context and want to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme given to newly qualified nurses for counselling the next of kin of patients who have died, this provides you with an opportunity to integrate a knowledge of programme evaluation, counselling techniques and ethics. Conversely, researching the attainment levels between boy and girl Year 5 pupils in one state primary school would be too narrow, partly because the sample size used is so small and unlikely to provide results of any (statistical) significance.

Within the workplace, being able to demonstrate the skills of planning, data analysis and report writing can enhance your prestige and even promotional opportunities.

Meeting Academic Requirements

You must ensure that the research topic is capable of meeting academic requirements if you are undertaking a programme of study – for example, it is capable of generating a dissertation, thesis or report of sufficient length. As Raimond (1993) suggests, also be sure that your topic is capable of being linked to the appropriate academic theory. Management theory, for example, tends to evolve and change quite quickly – for example, there are countless theories of leadership with new ones being coined each year. It is bad practice to rely entirely on textbooks, since they can take years to write and are often out of date by the time they are published. Your

research should also incorporate the use of academic journals (many of which are now online), which tend to be more topical. Academic journals also include reports on empirical studies from which you can glean a greater understanding of research methodologies and tools.

Top Tip 3.1

Before writing an academic dissertation or thesis, check out your university's guidelines. Look in particular at requirements for length. Also pay close attention to marking schemes and how marks are distributed for different elements such as descriptions of the literature, methodology and analysis.

Gaining Access

You will need access to relevant information, material and data. If you select an issue where these are lacking, you have little chance of completing the project.

- Can you gain access? Remember that some issues in organizations are sensitive or confidential, for example, some financial data (such as pay), redundancy plans, legal records (for example, intellectual property rights), etc. Indeed, Flick (2018) warns that a research project is an intrusion into the life of an institution and is inherently unsettling for it.
- Can you minimize disruption? Apart from written or web-based information, one of the essential elements of research is access to people. Who will you need to meet (perhaps to interview) and how busy are they? A classic contradiction is that the more important your project (to the organization), the more likely it is that the people you need to see are senior in the organization, and too busy to spare the time to be interviewed. The challenge is to gain access to these people despite this by being flexible and offering a range of interview dates/times.

Employability Skill 3.1

Using Diplomacy to Negotiate Access

In organizational settings, the researcher may be seen as an intruder or outsider. Gaining access will be facilitated, however, if you can use someone who is respected by the organization who can act as a gatekeeper. But once you have located this person, you will need to use all your tact, diplomacy and negotiating skills to gain access. While being honest, use persuasion to put across what the organization might gain from allowing you in (see Top Tip 3.2).

(Continued)

Thankfully, social media (and particularly LinkedIn) can help here. If you do not have your own direct access into an organization, many businesses have their own LinkedIn website. You can locate people (and their job titles) and contact them using what LinkedIn call 'InMail'. However, you may have to join one of the Premium accounts and pay a fee for this. The protocols for doing this are just as important (indeed, more important) as when you are using your own contacts – see Top Tip 3.2 below.

Top Tip 3.2

Gaining access will be made easier if you:

- Get sponsorship/support as high up the organization setting as possible.
- Are clear and transparent about the aims and focus of the research.
- Keep the aims of the research coherent and bounded. Do not give the impression that you are about to 'hunt around' for any interesting fact that might emerge.
- Are clear about the research methodology (e.g. number of interviews and with whom) so the potential level of disruption is known.
- Make clear what the organization might gain from allowing you access. Typically, this might be a copy of your research or a summary.
- Demonstrate how confidentiality is going to be kept.
- Above all, make sure that any communication you send is accurate and contains no errors of grammar or fact. Even the slightest mistake creates a very bad impression and will almost certainly reduce your chances of gaining sponsorship.

Employability Skill 3.2

Having an Alternative Strategy for Choice of Research Project

Gaining sponsorship for a project within an organization can take time. Furthermore, at the end of a long discussion process, the organization may decide not to allow you access. It is essential, then, to be flexible and always have an alternative plan (even if it's not as appealing as the first).

Getting Sponsorship and Using Networks

It helps if you have a sponsor or client who can give you either financial backing, or at least moral or practical support. The latter might involve 'opening doors' in the organization and facilitating your access to people with information. Figure 3.1 shows the kind of networks that may exist, or which you may request are established, to provide you with assistance. Note that not all elements of this network are necessarily connected. They all perform different roles, so you need to understand or negotiate what each can offer you.

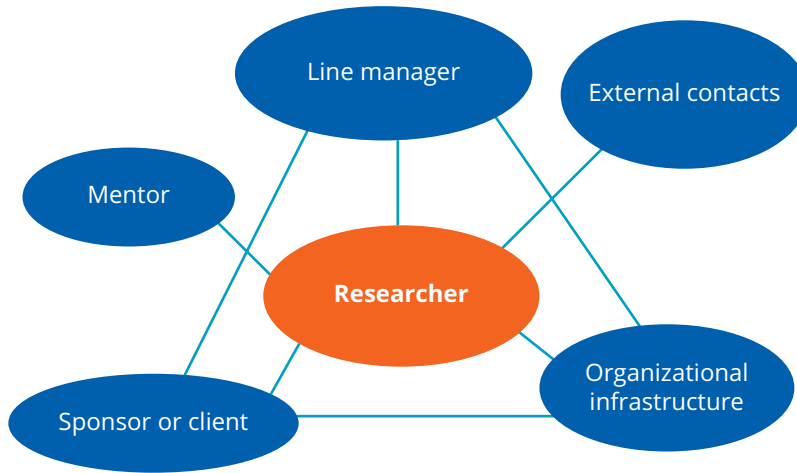


Figure 3.1 Organizational sponsorship and support networks

Go Online 3.1

Make a list of the support networks available to you. These might include online social networks such as LinkedIn. See the following for a list of social networks available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites.

Are they readily accessible? Are they sufficient?

Using the Time Available

Be sure that the research can be completed within the time available. There is always a tendency to underestimate the time needed for a project. However, note that there are texts on time management and project planning that can help you here. Further difficulties may arise if the topic chosen is dependent upon the implementation of another project within the organization. If this project becomes delayed (which is often the case), or abandoned, then your research project may quickly reach an impasse. For example, IT projects (particularly large ones) are notorious for going ‘over time’ as well as over budget. The best approach is to draw up a research plan before starting the project, with clear indications of dependencies and potential bottlenecks.

Considering Your Capabilities and Experience

This may seem obvious, but selecting an issue that is within your capabilities is essential. Your skills will, hopefully, develop during the course of the research process, but, say, choosing a topic that requires robust statistical skills when you are comfortable with only basic mathematics may be a recipe for disaster. Experience may be a different matter. As the Johari window in Figure 3.2 shows, you can choose projects that are congruent with both your work area and experience (the safe approach), or, moving towards the top-right side of the diagram, beyond

both your work and current knowledge set. This poses greater risks, but also enhances opportunities for personal development. Moving the project into an unfamiliar work area may also provide opportunities for networking amongst new groups of people which can be advantageous for both the project and your own professional future (including your future as a researcher).

Activity 3.1

Take the project that you intend to do, or one or more projects that you are considering. Locate the position of the project(s) within the Johari window. How risky is the project, and are the risks worth taking? How 'stretching' is the project and is such development a personal objective?

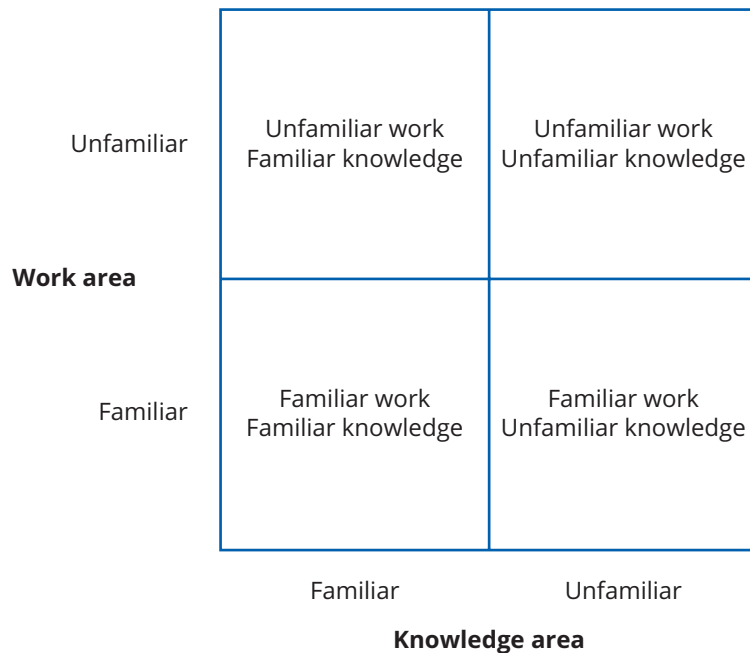


Figure 3.2 Johari window showing choices between familiar and unfamiliar work experience and personal knowledge

Reflecting on the Value of the Project

Projects that have value to the organization (say, in terms of identifying cost savings, new marketing opportunities, IT strategies, etc.) will have a much greater chance of success than those that merely re-plough old ground. Innovative, provoking and original projects have a better chance of sponsorship and support from within the organization (at the appropriate level), of opening new networks for meeting and interviewing people, and of eventual implementation.

Of course, innovative projects also bring with them the potential added bonus of higher academic grades. A high value project is also more likely to motivate both you and your line manager or sponsor. But ambitious projects may be more difficult to manage and complete. Sometimes, a more modest project may be both more feasible and achievable.

Achieving a Symmetry of Potential Outcomes

Gill and Johnson (2002) suggest that one way of reducing the risks involved in a project is to achieve symmetry of potential outcomes. This means that, no matter what the results are, they will be useful. For example, a project to examine whether a company's e-commerce website produced any increase in overall sales would be significant whatever the outcome. Conversely, a project that examined the relationship between levels of stress and output levels amongst line workers would be interesting if strong correlations were found, but would be of little value if they were not.

Thinking of Career Goals

In selecting a topic, researchers may have only short-term objectives in terms of achieving an academic qualification. However, as Employability Skill 3.3 shows, it can be beneficial to also have some longer-term objectives in mind, particularly in terms of linking research topics to career goals.

Employability Skill 3.3

Linking Research Topics to Career Goals

You may consider whether the research topic may be of value to you in the future in terms of your personal career development. The research may make you an 'expert' in a particular topic or area, and enhance your value as an internal consultant or help you in applying for a particular post. For example, completing a research project in performance-related pay can make you attractive to a human resource department. Research can also be cumulative. A good undergraduate dissertation can lead on to a Master's degree; in turn, a Master's dissertation can form the basis for a future PhD. Academic qualifications can enhance employability, particularly if the research is seen as having some practical application to employers.

Generating Research Ideas

If you are devoid of ideas for a topic, how can you create some imaginative ones? New ideas can be generated either through rational or creative processes.

Examining Your Own Strengths and Weaknesses

You will benefit from choosing a topic that you enjoy and for which you have probably received good marks for previous assignments and other course assessments, or positive feedback from a work-based project. Why not make a list of your strengths and weaknesses. Get a friend or colleague to critique the list (prepare yourself for a shock!), then amend it as necessary.

Looking at Past Projects

This is often a useful way of generating new ideas. A glance towards the end of some projects may reveal a section entitled ‘Suggestions for future research’ that may be helpful. There may also be a bibliography which could prove a useful starting point for your own research – although take care that the references are not too dated. Also note that some universities and colleges place *all* theses and dissertations in the library. Their presence there, then, is not a necessary guide to their quality.

Searching the Literature

The literature includes articles in the academic journals, reports, books and websites (although be wary of the authenticity and quality of the latter). Becoming aware through the literature of the significance of some issues, or new angles on old ones, can be a stimulus to undertake research in how these ideas can affect your own organization. More detail on reviewing the literature is provided later in this chapter.

Gaining Ideas through Discussion

Ideas might be generated by talking to fellow students, work colleagues, line managers, university tutors, practitioners and professional networks (the latter, possibly, through online discussion groups).

Brainstorming

This is a well-known problem-solving technique for generating and refining ideas. Jarvis (1995) suggests that the quantity of ideas produced by the brainstorming group is more important than the quality. All points made by participants are recorded (for example, on a flipchart) over a mutually agreed period of time. No member of the group may criticize the ideas of another, irrespective of how ridiculous some ideas may sound, since this would inhibit discussion.



Image 3.1 A group brainstorming using Post-it notes

At the end of the agreed time period, the group discusses and selects from the points raised. Luse, Mennecke and Townsend (2012) also suggest discussing ideas with a partner who is completely outside your research topic area. If you can explain an idea to a 'layperson' outside of your field and have it make sense, it is more likely that the idea is logically sound.

Exploring Personal Preferences using Past Projects

Here, you simply take a look at the topics you have chosen for previous modules, programmes or work projects, and identify the kinds of topic areas you have selected. This may be a guide to what you are generally interested in.

Relevance Trees

This is similar to mind mapping, where you start with a broad concept from which you generate more specific topics. From each of these branches, new sub-branches can be generated. Do this quickly (say, in no more than ten minutes) with an emphasis on generating ideas rather than evaluating them for quality. Once the process is finished, look over your material and evaluate the results.

Keeping a Notebook of Ideas

This simply involves noting down any new ideas as and when they occur. It is best to keep the notebook with you at all times. This could be a section in a research log book (see Managing Information, Chapter 5, p. xxx).

SWOT Analysis

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. As Smyth et al. (2016) point out, the persistence of SWOT as a tool lies more in its pragmatism than its theoretical underpinnings which are slight. Hence, using this method, you could make a list of ideas under each of the SWOT categories. For example, if you work in a retail store, a strength of this position might be that you have access to the shop as a case study. A weakness might be that the store is small, representing only a single case (when you might need more). The opportunity might be the potential for using the results of the study to implement practical improvements in the store. The threat might be bias, because you are researching a site about which you are committed and passionate. Can you stand back and act objectively as a researcher? Undertaking this kind of SWOT analysis usually works best, however, when undertaken by a group since good ideas tend to generate others.

Activity 3.2

Go to Google Scholar at <http://scholar.google.co.uk/>

Type in a theme that might be of interest to you, for example, 'franchising'. If you also add the letters 'pdf' the hits will include documents such as research articles and reports, some of which can be downloaded immediately. Even if you can't always download the documents directly, the hits will indicate what articles are available and in which academic journals. Providing you have access to the appropriate electronic database, you can then access the article. If you also click on 'Any time' in Google Scholar and the current date (year), you will see what kinds of topics are 'current' in terms of what is being researched. This can generate new ideas for your own research.

TOPICS TO AVOID

It is often only possible in retrospect to recognize the topic you should not even have attempted! However, here are a few hints that may help you to avoid the research disaster. The topics to avoid are those that are:

- *Too big.* For example, 'Human resource management – innovative international perspectives'. Some very large projects can be worthy and valuable to an organization, but you need to ask yourself whether you have the time, experience and resources to complete them. The human resource management theme, for example, would be more feasible if, instead of 'international perspectives' which imply a global focus, you contrasted, say, two countries. Even this would be an enormous task involving national surveys and large samples. More feasible would be to contrast human resource management perspectives between two groups of companies, each group being representative of a different approach. Winkler and McCuen (2007) also warn that the big topic is also the most difficult to write about: it is difficult knowing where to begin, and omissions and oversights are more crudely exposed.
- *Too trivial.* This may seem rather subjective, but you should use your common sense to evaluate the kinds of projects that are worth doing and those that are not. As a general rule of thumb try using the 'So what?' test. Ask yourself, after completing the research, whether the results have any meaning or significance (to others not just to yourself). For example, a research project that surveyed how to reduce the use of paper in a marketing department of ten people would yield very little of value. On the other hand, a project that took the issue of recycling (paper, printer cartridges, furniture, computers, etc.) across an organization could have considerable scope and link into the broader environmental debate.
- *Lacking in resource materials and people.* Look out for warning signs – very few references to the topic in the main textbooks, practitioner journals or other refereed journals or websites. If the project is going to rely on access to in-house knowledge experts, make sure that they are both available and willing to cooperate with you. This, of course, needs to be planned well in advance. If undertaking an academic thesis or dissertation it may be particularly important that human as well as text-based resources are accessible. Often it is necessary to gain access to an organization as part of a case study or to gain access to respondents. Here it is vital to get the commitment or sponsorship of key people such as directors, senior managers or the leaders of networks or groups at an early stage.
- *Too technical.* Some projects are more concerned with solving highly technical problems rather than organizational or social research. Leave these to the technical gurus. Often these kinds of highly technical projects also turn out to be intractable. You may be offered a problem that nobody else has been able to solve. Be highly suspicious of this kind of gift! Ask yourself: 'Why me?' It may be an offer you need to refuse.
- *Dependent on the completion of another project.* Even if you are 'guaranteed' that projects you hope to use as data sources will be completed in time for your use, you

are strongly advised not to make your own project dependent on them. If slippage occurs, your own research will be held up or even scrapped. This is particularly the case when negotiating access to an external organization. If you get the slightest hint that your research will be dependent on the completion of, say, an ongoing study, pull out. As an outsider you have no influence or control over the organization's timescales, in circumstances when your own timescales (for completing your dissertation) may be tight.

- *Unethical.* Avoid taking on projects that can damage other people physically, emotionally or intellectually. Refuse to take on a project that forces you to breach confidentiality or trust. When using interviews, observation or surveys, you will need to pay particular attention to politically sensitive issues such as power relationships, race, gender and the disclosure of personal information. Ethics are discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, in Chapter 4 and elsewhere in this book.

Top Tip 3.3

When focusing an academic dissertation on one or a limited number of organizations, conduct the negotiations for access in parallel with your literature search; don't leave it until the literature search is finished. If access becomes problematic, this still gives you time to find another organization, which may want you to focus on a different topic area.

Case Study 3.1

Identifying a Theme for Research

Marion has reached the final stage of her part-time MSc programme and has decided that she wants to do her dissertation on 'leadership'. She meets with her academic supervisor and tells her that this is going to be her topic, but is surprised by her supervisor's reaction – laughter. Her supervisor advises her that the topic of 'leadership' is somewhat large and unwieldy. She should try to identify more of a focus. Marion goes away and talks to her line manager at work – she is a project manager in the police force – and to some of her fellow students. She has always been concerned by what she perceives to be a lack of promotion of women into leadership positions in the police. She therefore conceives of her research project as: 'Women and leadership: are there glass ceilings in the modern police force?' This topic has the double bonus of being relevant not only to her academic institution but also to her organization and the development of its equal opportunities policy. (For how this theme is converted into a proposal, see Case Study 3.2.)

Activity 3.3

Consider each of the following 'big' topics and formulate a more focused, narrower research project from each of them:

- Communication in the workplace.
- Mergers and acquisitions.
- Health and safety.
- Teenage pregnancies.
- Equal employment legislation.

PLANNING THE PROJECT

It may seem obvious that all research projects should be carefully planned, but it is surprising how many researchers rush forward into data collection without a plan of campaign. Disaster is the inevitable result. Planning also helps with time management, one of the greatest problems when work and research commitments compete. There are many ways of planning a project and presenting the plan. One technique is to make use of a table, which sets out the tasks and the planned dates for their completion. A better approach is through the use of a Gantt chart (see Figure 3.3) through which you not only specify tasks but whether they are going to be completed in sequence or in parallel. Project management software not only generates various graphics such as Gantt charts, but also allows you to specify timescales for the completion of each task. However, it is probably only worth the investment in time learning the program if your project is a large and complex one.

WRITING ACADEMIC PROPOSALS

A research proposal is described by Punch (2016) as a document that deals with issues such as:

- The proposed topic of the research.
- What the research intends to achieve.
- The methods by which the research will be conducted.
- What will be learned from the research and why it is worth doing.

Since a research proposal can only be constructed through a detailed process of planning and design, it almost goes without saying that a proposal has to be developed through a process of research. Indeed, Punch (2016) contends that the research proposal is just as important as the research project that comes after it. Even if the boundaries of the intended research are blurred and the research inductive and emergent, the proposal should still be distinct and concise in terms of what is intended and how the research is to be carried out.

	WEEK									
Research Project Plan	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Literature review										
Methodology										
Finding and analysis										
Conclusions and recommendations										
Review and editing										
Final draft										

Figure 3.3 Example of project planning using a Gantt chart

Before you even think about writing a proposal, you need to identify an appropriate academic institution in which to study and a supervisor from that institution. Locating a suitable institution may be simply a matter of applying to one that is most convenient to where you live or work. But it pays to be more discriminating than this, because you will be needing somewhere with good resources (particularly in your topic area) and a supervisor who is an expert in your field of study (if you know what that topic area is at this stage) and who is actively publishing in this field. Also find out whether the institution has an active research community of both academics and postgraduate students. Possession of such a community means that the institution sees research as one of its priorities. It is also more likely to recruit some of the better research academics. Being a member of an active research community will help you to discuss academic and research issues with your fellow researchers. As Locke et al. (2013) put it, working knowledge is not in college libraries; it takes the form of unpublished academic papers, conference speeches, seminars and email communications.

The structure of proposals is normally set out by the academic institution in which you will be studying, so it is important that you follow the specifications you are given. However, the following sections provide you with a typical structure and guidance on what to write. In writing a proposal it is important not to use unnecessarily technical or obscure language and to write in a style that is fluent, clear and accessible. The use of extensive quotes should be avoided and, as a general rule, the first paragraph should be completely free of citations. An example of a typical structure for an academic proposal is given in Table 3.1. The themes presented in the table are discussed below.

Table 3.1 Typical structure for an academic proposal

Section	Contents
Working title	Describes the breadth and depth of the topic and gives an indication of the methodology to be used (e.g. case study, evaluation, etc.).
Introduction (abstract)	A summary of the research topic, describing the core problems or issues, the gaps in the current research and how this research will address them.
Aims	General statements on intent and direction of the research.
Objectives	Clear and measurable statements of intended outcomes.
Justification	Rationale for the research with reference to gaps in current knowledge, and potential application of results.
Review of the literature	Describes the history of the topic and key literature sources; illustrates major issues and refines focus to indicate research questions (qualitative research) or hypotheses (quantitative research).
Research questions and hypotheses	Describes the key research questions, expressed in measurable terms, plus hypotheses (if needed).
Methodology	1 Research design: inductive or deductive; quantitative or qualitative (or mixed methods). Choice of research strategy (e.g. experiment, survey, case study, interviews, observations, etc.). Justification for how this strategy addresses the research questions. 2 Approaches to sampling (random or non-random) and justification for sampling design selected. Description of <i>how</i> the sample will be selected. 3 Approaches to data gathering: survey, case study, interviews, focus groups, etc. Benefits and potential drawbacks of using the approach(es) selected. Details of how the approach will be used in the current study including how instruments will be designed and administered/distributed. 4 Approaches to data analysis (for quantitative designs, which statistical tests; for qualitative which analysis methods, e.g. content analysis, thematic analysis, etc.). 5 Quality in data analysis: approaches to ensuring validity and reliability of findings, or for qualitative studies, credibility, authenticity and transferability.
Work schedule	A timetable for completing the research indicating tasks and timescales.
References	Bibliography of works cited in the proposal.
Limitations	An acknowledgement of the potential limitations of the research, including the quality and representativeness of samples.
Appendices	Appendix 1. Survey questionnaire, interview schedule, etc. Appendix 2. Ethical waiver form and information on project supplied to respondents/interviewees including participant consent form. Appendix 3. Costs involved (travel, voice recorder, mailing, telephone calls).

Working Title

This is a ‘working’ title because you may decide to change it once you come to write your final thesis or dissertation. The title describes the breadth and depth of the topic and can often give an indication of the methodology to be used. For example: ‘Employee commitment during

organizational change – a case study in the public sector’, or ‘Crowd funding: should the banks be worried?’. Ensure that the working title is phrased grammatically and would provide a non-expert with a clear notion of what your research is about. If you are unsure, get your title reviewed by your supervisor or by a friend or colleague.

Introduction

The introduction provides a summary of the research topic, describing the core problems or **constructs**, and how the research will address them. One of the most common weaknesses in introducing research is to make a series of sweeping generalizations without coming to the central point. It is usually simpler to write the introduction once you have finished composing the remainder of the proposal, and you know the direction the research is taking. Avoid making the introduction too long and detailed. It should not, for example, contain a comprehensive description or analysis of models or theories, as these should be discussed in the review of the literature.

Aims

The aims are general statements on the intent and direction of the research. So, for example, the aim of a project might be to: ‘Identify the factors that influence the decisions of shoppers to buy online’. Aims describe the purpose of the research. They do not describe research outputs (such as reports, documents or policy statements) or research questions, which are more focused.

Objectives

While the aims are general statements, the objectives are clear statements of intended outcomes, all of which can be measured in some way.

Justification

This is a rationale for the research with reference to the current gaps in knowledge, and potential application of the results. The justification attempts to persuade the reader that not only does the investigation merit attention, but that the nature of the problem has been correctly identified. This is not the place to launch into a lengthy and detailed analysis of the problem, a description of core theories or models, or to discuss the methodology of how the issue will be researched as this comes later in the proposal. At this stage, the justification needs to be direct and succinct.

Review of the Literature

According to Boote and Beile (2005) a substantive and thorough **literature review** is a precondition for doing substantive and thorough, sophisticated research. In order to advance our collective knowledge, a researcher has to understand what has gone before. The literature

review, therefore, describes the history of the topic and key literature sources, illustrating major issues and refining the focus of the research in a way that can ultimately lead to one or more research questions. We will explore the purpose and outputs from a literature review in more detail in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say here, the literature review must cover the main sources in the field, or closely related fields of study. Peterson et al. (2017) distinguish between a systematic review of the literature which begins with a primary question on which the inquiry is focused (see Chapter 5) and a scoping review which allows for a more general question and exploration of the related literature. The latter, which is probably more appropriate for a research proposal, is derived from an array of sources such as research studies, the grey literature and expert opinion.

One of the simplest ways of ensuring that your coverage is comprehensive is to make use of your supervisor who should be able to point you to what sources and theories are essential. However, this is only a research proposal. You would not be expected to have completed an entire literature review at this stage, as this is what you will do when you are actually working on your thesis or dissertation. The purpose of the proposal literature review is to explain the choices of literature made for the study, and this can be successfully done in a succinct manner. The purpose of the literature review, then, is to:

- Demonstrate the key theories, arguments and controversies in the field.
- Highlight the ways in which the research area has been investigated to date.
- Identify inconsistencies and gaps in knowledge that are worthy of further investigation.

Punch (2016) suggests three guiding questions for identifying the appropriate literature for a research study.

What Literature is Relevant to the Project?

In answering this it is important to remember:

- For some topic areas, the volume of literature will be extensive, but for others, relatively limited.
- One topic area may have more than one body of literature associated with it (including both theoretical literature and empirical studies).
- Some literature will be central to a study and other literature quite peripheral (but the latter might still be worth discussing).

What is the Relationship of the Proposed Study to its Research Literature?

In particular, this means showing how the proposed study moves beyond what is already known. This might mean taking some main trends in the literature but extending them; confirming or challenging current findings; or researching an accepted theory but in a new field. Figure 3.4 illustrates a common (and erroneous) way of approaching this, represented by (a). Here the researcher presents a chunk of literature and then a methodology chapter but with little, if any, relationship between the two. A far better approach is adopted in (b). Here the literature review leads logically to a set of research questions that are set out clearly (see Research Questions and Hypotheses, below). However, these questions should not appear 'out of the blue'. Far better is to signpost the themes and issues from the literature that are

relevant to the proposed research study, as the literature is described. By the time the reader comes to the actual research questions, they should be able to say to themselves: 'Yes, this is what I expected the focus of the research to be'. The methodology chapter then sets out the research design for tackling the research questions. Of course, this approach should not just be contained in the proposal, but also in writing up the research study itself.

Let us take an example. Suppose you were researching the subjective experiences of newly recruited senior managers, including their levels of confidence, motivation and intention to continue in the business. In describing the literature and various research studies already completed in this field, at the end of, say, a section on the 'onboarding' of new managers, you might explicitly state: 'So, as we have seen, levels of initial confidence are subject to varying levels of doubt and uncertainty, often linked to critical incidents in the boardroom. Measuring the linkages between senior management confidence and such critical incidents will be a focus of the current study. In doing this, use will be made of a survey of FTSE-100 companies, followed by ten in-depth case studies'.

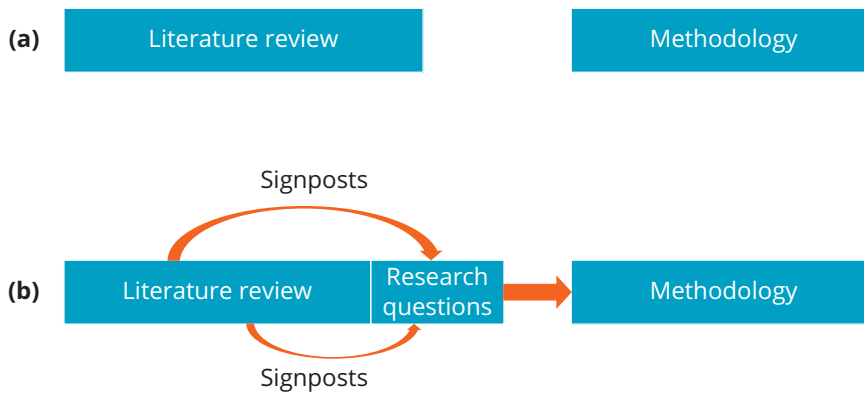


Figure 3.4 Linking the literature and methodology via research questions

How will the Proposed Study use the Literature?

As far as the proposal is concerned, there is a range of approaches that might be adopted, including:

- A review of the entire relevant literature (probably the least likely option given the scale of work involved).
- A clear statement and justification for not reviewing the literature at this stage, since the study is inductive. The relevant literature will be reviewed as and when the data are collected and analysed.
- A review that includes a sample of the literature or the main themes in the review, supported by the relevant literature.

The literature search needs to be much more than merely a series of descriptions of what the major 'authorities' in the field have said. Above all, it must avoid what Boote and Beile claim is often merely 'disjointed summaries of a haphazard collection of literature' (2005: 9). There

must, at the very heart of the review, be the development of a research problem or series of problems worthy and capable of being researched. It is the statement of the research problem that can then be converted into a specific research question (see following section).

Top Tip 3.4

Students often say, 'I know what my research topic is, but I don't think that there is a body of literature associated with it!' This is never true. There is always a body of literature associated either directly or indirectly with a topic; the challenge is identifying it. If your topic is quite specialized, or one where there have been few, if any, studies, you may need to locate a body of literature that relates to it at a more abstract or theoretical level.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

As we have just seen, the literature review should lead the reader to one or more **research questions**. Hence, there needs to be a tight connection between the literature reviewed and the research study that follows. The connection between the two is the formulation of research questions and/or hypotheses.

Research Questions

All proposals must contain a formal statement of questions which must be researchable and explicit. As O'Leary (2021) points out, research questions help to:

- Define an investigation, i.e. whether its purpose is to discover, explore, explain or compare, and the kinds of relationship foreseen between concepts (such as correlations or one concept causing another).
- Establish boundaries for the research. In studying peripheral topics, it then becomes possible to ask: 'Does this answer my research question?' If the answer is: 'No, but I now see it as being important,' then it will become necessary to modify or completely rewrite the research question. Thus, we see that research questions are not 'set in stone' but are often modified during the research process.
- Provide direction, pointing to the theories that are pertinent, the literature that is relevant to the study and the kinds of research methodologies required. At least for deductive approaches it is impossible to select a research methodology without first having a clearly articulated research question.

One of the challenges researchers face is that topics are broad but research questions definitive and narrow. How do we move from the general to the specific? O'Leary (2021) suggests finding an 'angle' on the topic. For example, taking a topic but looking at what contemporary commentators are saying about it, or what 'hot issues' are generating argument and debate. Another obvious angle is if you identify a gap in the literature where a theme has been ignored or where a researcher has recommended further themes worthy of research at the end of an article.

The next stage is to write a research question that is concise and unambiguous. This, however, is easier said than done. It is astonishing how difficult most students find the formulation of research questions. Even when they have identified a focus for their research, locating one or more researchable questions seems to pose a Herculean task. Just as problematic are those novice researchers who write a set of vague aims or intentions then claim they have written their research questions!

Top Tip 3.5

Consider the question: 'Is alcohol abuse at work a problem?' This question needs a considerable amount of reworking and clarification. What is meant by 'abuse'? A problem for whom – the individual or the company or both? It is also prudent to avoid questions that you have an emotional connection with. In the case of the alcohol abuse question, a researcher who grew up in a family where the parents had a serious alcohol dependency, may have difficulty in formulating a neutral, unbiased question. Questions also need to be achievable in terms of the time you have available, and your potential access to respondents. They also need to be ethical (see Chapter 4).

As we saw in Chapter 2, approaches to research include exploratory, descriptive, explanatory and interpretive studies. Given their distinctive approaches to research, it follows that the kinds of research questions asked will be quite different. Table 3.2 provides some examples of specific questions using the topic of alcohol consumption as a focus.

It is worth noting that not all researchers would accept that the formulation of research questions is actually necessary. Some qualitative researchers argue that their approach is so inductive and emergent that the application of research questions is not only superfluous but inappropriate. Most qualitative researchers, however, are prepared to formulate research questions, even if they regard these as tentative and subject to change during the research process.

Table 3.2 Examples of descriptive, explanatory, exploratory and interpretive questions

Question	Type of question	Comments
What changes in workplace alcohol consumption have taken place over the last ten years?	Descriptive	The research could explore changes in aggregate alcohol consumption levels and/or changing levels across different business sectors or professional groups.
Do high levels of alcohol consumption lead to absenteeism at work?	Explanatory	Seeks to explore a relationship between two variables (alcohol consumption and absenteeism). It also suggests a direction for the relationship – that high levels of alcohol consumption lead to higher levels of absenteeism. It is relatively easy to convert this question into a hypothesis.

(Continued)

Table 3.2 (Continued)

Question	Type of question	Comments
Why is alcohol consumption at work on the increase?	Explanatory	A question that seeks to identify the factors behind a phenomenon.
What is the scale and cause of alcohol abuse amongst older employees?	Exploratory	A question which seeks to identify themes when little is currently known about the topic.
What is the impact of rising alcohol consumption on workplace performance/accidents?	Interpretive	Seeks to uncover people's views and perspectives. A valid question for exploratory, largely qualitative studies.

Hypotheses

Locke et al. (2013) point out that when the research is largely exploratory or for qualitative studies, it may be sufficient to formulate a question rather than a hypothesis. Indeed, for purely qualitative research a hypothesis would not be appropriate. In all other cases, however, and particularly in quantitative studies, hypotheses are necessary. Hypotheses are used when existing knowledge and theory allow for predictions to be made about a relationship between variables.

A hypothesis describes a research question in a testable format which predicts the nature of the answer. A hypothesis can also be written as a null statement such as 'There is no difference between x and y', or as a directional statement such as, 'When this happens, then that happens' (positive), or 'When this, then not that' (negative). As Locke et al. (2013) suggest, the use of directionality in hypotheses allows for the use of more powerful statistical tests. Punch (2016) suggests that, in determining whether a hypothesis is appropriate, a researcher needs to reflect on the following questions:

- For each research question, is it possible to predict, in advance of the research, what findings will emerge?
- Is the basis for this prediction a rationale, a set of propositions, or a 'theory' which explains the hypothesis?

If the answer to both these questions is 'Yes' then Punch (2016) argues that a hypothesis should be formulated. Otherwise, he advises that it is perfectly acceptable to work from a set of research questions. Researchers should not adopt a hypothesis just for the sake of it. For a more detailed description of hypotheses, see Chapter 6.

Top Tip 3.6

Avoid the common mistake of making the hypothesis statement too long and complex. Several short, testable hypotheses are infinitely preferable to a long, rambling one.

Methodology

The methodology section of the proposal sets out and justifies the methodological approach and must be tightly related to the research question identified above. It is likely that it is this section that will receive the most attention from academics who will be scrutinizing and evaluating your proposal, hence it is this section that requires the greatest attention to detail and accuracy. You will need to follow the guidelines of your own academic institution, but it is likely that in most cases the methodology section will require a description of:

- The research methodology.
- The target population and sampling methods chosen.
- The data gathering instruments and techniques and the procedures for the collection and recording of data (for example, paper-based questionnaires, tape recorders, video recorders or digital cameras, etc.).
- The data analysis procedures to be used.
- How ethical issues are to be catered for.

One important issue the methodology section will need to address, is whether the study is to be primarily quantitative, qualitative or both. If, for example, some kind of intervention or experimental design is planned, then it is likely that **quantitative methods** will be adopted. On the other hand, if the project seeks to conduct an ethnographic study that focuses on the meanings and interpretations participants give within a particular cultural setting, then the data are likely to be qualitative. In each of these examples, once the decision is made to adopt a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approach, then this will have a significant influence on the choice of data gathering methods and approaches to data analysis. Punch (2016) insists that it is therefore very important to revisit the research questions and the way in which they are phrased, and to ask oneself about what implications this has for research design.

Research Methodology

Once a decision is made on whether to use quantitative, qualitative or a mixed approach, then this influences the research methodology to be adopted. Table 3.3 suggests some common methodologies that are associated with each of these approaches. It needs to be stressed, however, that these are influences and not rules. Note, for example, that action research and evaluation appear in both columns, implying that these kinds of projects can adopt a largely quantitative or qualitative approach – or, indeed, a combination of the two. Recall some of the descriptions of these methodologies in Chapter 2.

Sampling Strategies

Once an appropriate strategy has been adopted, it is necessary to convert it into a research design. This means stating in clear terms exactly how and with whom the research is to be conducted. This, then, brings us onto sampling. Since it is rarely practical to involve data collection from everyone, it is necessary to select a **sample**. Sampling strategies for quantitative designs are discussed in detail in Chapter 6 and for qualitative designs in Chapter 7 and a complete chapter devoted to the principles and approaches to sampling in Chapter 9. The

Table 3.3 Typical research methodologies associated with quantitative and qualitative approaches

Quantitative approaches	Qualitative approaches
Experiment	Case study
Quasi-experiment	Ethnographic study
Correlational survey	Phenomenological study
Longitudinal study	Grounded theory
Action research	Action research
Evaluation	Evaluation
	Heuristic inquiry

point to be made here, is that sampling should not be considered merely as an afterthought, but should be planned as an integral part of the overall research design. The sampling strategy should include details on:

- The size of the sample.
- The composition of the sample.
- How the sample will actually be chosen (e.g. randomly, through volunteers, etc.).

In some qualitative projects there will be no initial, pre-determined sample size – successive samples are accessed depending on what trends are emerging from the data analysis. But if this is the case, the choice of this strategy should be made explicit at the outset.

Top Tip 3.7

In quantitative studies, it is common for students to falsely claim (largely without thinking) that they have adopted a random, probability sampling approach. In other words, they hope that their chosen sample is representative of the entire population under study. **Random probability sampling** means adopting a selection approach whereby each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample. Yet, in the case of many student projects, an organization is chosen because it is convenient (for example, local) or the student knows someone who works there. Or an online survey is launched, so there is no control over who responds. So, look at the research methods literature (including this book!) on the various kinds of sampling techniques to identify the one you are using. Using **non-probability sampling** is not a sin – as long as you acknowledge the limitations that this sampling imposes on the claims you can make for your results.

Data Collection Instruments

For quantitative approaches, data collection instruments include questionnaires, standardized measuring instruments (such as psychometric tests) and the kinds of observation schedules that involve counting the number of times an event or activity occurs. As Punch (2016) points out, an important decision here (which requires discussion and rationalization in the proposal), is whether to use existing standardized collection instruments or to design them specifically for the research. For pre-existing instruments, details need to be provided of how and when they were developed, their use in other research projects (especially ones that are similar to your own, if possible) and how they have been validated. When developing new data collection instruments, detailed descriptions of how they have been piloted and validated may be needed.

Qualitative data gathering instruments could include questionnaires for a qualitative survey where the questions are open-ended and qualitative interview or observation schedules. While it may be possible to make use of instruments that have already been developed, it is more likely that qualitative researchers will construct their own data collection instruments. Just like quantitative data collection instruments, it is essential to describe how the instrument was constructed and validated. Apart from questionnaires, qualitative data-gathering approaches also include using interview and observational schedules, documents, journals and diaries and non-written materials such as photographs and video recordings.

Whatever the data collection instrument (quantitative or qualitative), it is essential to describe in detail how it will be used. For example, if using a questionnaire, describe whether it is to be used face-to-face, distributed by post, or delivered online via the Internet. If using an interview schedule, describe where the interviews will take place and whether the interview is to be audio-recorded. In all cases where people are being asked to volunteer their views, a participant consent form (see Chapter 4, p. xxx) should be signed and a copy of the form provided as an appendix to the proposal. In other words, imagine that a reader knows nothing about your study, and take them through what you plan to do, step by step. Apart from collecting data, you also need to provide details on how they will be securely stored.

Data Analysis

If dealing with quantitative data, the analysis will involve the use of appropriate statistical techniques. The proposal should indicate which statistical tests will be applied. In the case of qualitative research, many more analytical approaches are available, including grounded theory, template analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis. Again, even at this early stage, the research proposal should be able to state the choice of analytical approach.

Having chosen an analytical approach, it is not necessarily the case that the researcher would be expected to demonstrate in-depth knowledge and mastery of applying one of these approaches to data analysis. This will come later at the actual data analysis stage. What is important here is that you show how the analytical approach chosen is consistent with the general logic of the study and the kinds of research questions chosen.

Ethical Considerations

The important issue of ethics will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, so it will only be covered briefly here. The proposal should always seek to demonstrate how the study will abide by ethical principles. For example, it should show that respondents are giving their views voluntarily, that their privacy will be safeguarded and that the information they provide will be

treated confidentially. The proposal should also make clear how the data are going to be stored securely so that the anonymity of respondents can be protected.

Work Schedule

This is a timetable for completing the research, indicating the tasks to be undertaken and their dates for completion. People new to research frequently underestimate the time it takes to complete these tasks, so be realistic when calculating how long each task will take.

References

It is best to get into good habits in using references at this early stage. You may want to learn to use one of the bibliographic software packages such as Endnote or Reference Manager to store and organize your references. Find out which reference system your academic institution uses (for example, the Harvard system) and keep to it. Note the distinction between references and bibliography. The reference section lists all the sources that you have cited in your study. A bibliography lists all the main sources in the topic area under study, some of which you may not have read. In most cases, it is a reference section that is needed in a proposal.

Limitations

No research is perfect, and it is important that researchers themselves identify and are honest about the weaknesses and limitations of their own research (otherwise readers such as supervisors and examiners will be critical for them!). Typical limitations, at least for quantitative studies, include an inability to control factors in the study design such as the assignment of members to experimental and control groups. All studies may suffer from low sample sizes or problems in gaining access to key respondents. What is important is that the implications of these weaknesses are acknowledged (and not avoided or 'skated over'), particularly on the validity and generalizability of the results. If, for example, statistical analysis does not reach significance, this itself is a finding. Of course, if the sample size was only 30 then this might be the prime cause. So here again, it would be prudent to acknowledge the limited size of the sample contributing to the result. However, if, say, the study design also included a qualitative element such as interviews, the results from these might add some weight to answering the project's research questions. In the final analysis, producing results that put you in line for a Nobel Prize is not always necessary! Modest studies that nudge forward the boundaries of knowledge are acceptable.

Case Study 3.2

Developing a Research Theme into a Proposal

As we saw in Case Study 3.1, Marion's dissertation title is: 'Women and leadership: are there glass ceilings in the modern police force?' In her proposal, she readily identifies a number of literatures she wishes to access and discuss. One, of course, is the general

literature on leadership itself. Within this, she identifies three important models: transactional, transformational and situational leadership. A sub-set of leadership theory is the literature that deals with women and leadership, which contains not only conceptual but also empirical articles based on field research. There is also a much smaller, but, for Marion's purposes, wonderfully focused literature on women and leadership in the public services (including a few articles on women, leadership and the police).

Marion reflects on her attitude towards epistemology. She believes that knowledge is not absolute but contextual and relative. She does not, therefore, see her role as producing 'the truth' about women leaders in the police. Instead, she wants to highlight the experiences of women who have 'made it to the top'. Her main research question is: What are the essential skills, competencies and behaviours that contribute to the promotion of women into leadership positions in the police? She sees her epistemological stance as interpretivist, and a series of case studies (of successful women) as central to her research design. The use of qualitative interviews fits comfortably with the case study design. In terms of sampling, she decides to begin with ten face-to-face interviews with purposively selected women leaders, and to analyse the data before deciding on whether additional interviews are necessary to validate existing themes or to pursue new ones.

Activity 3.4

If Marion had adopted a more objectivist epistemological stance, what difference would this have made to her proposal in terms of the kinds of research questions she asked, and the research design adopted?

WRITING ORGANIZATIONAL PROPOSALS

There are two main types of organizational proposal, comprising those that are written:

- In response to a request for proposals or 'invitations to bid' from, say, government agencies or companies.
- For submission to an internal organization or department, often in response to a request for help with a problem or a need to improve a product or service.

Whichever kind is written, White suggests that a proposal is a 'sophisticated advertisement of approaches and abilities' (1997: 218) and not just a description of how a project could be tackled.

To Bid or not to Bid?

Many proposals are written within tight timescales and with the knowledge that other individuals, teams, or organizations are competing for the project. In deciding whether to respond to any request for proposals (RFPs), you will need to take a view of:

- Whether you and/or your team possess the necessary expertise to respond.
- The number of bids you are competing against and the likely strength of opposing bids.
- The number of bids that will be funded.
- Whether all bids are to be fairly evaluated, or whether the process is possibly biased.

These criteria will help you to undertake a risk assessment, weighing up the probability of success and the potential size of the funding if successful, against the time it will take to write the bid.

Preparing to Write the Proposal

There are a series of steps that should be observed in writing any organizational proposal. We will look in detail at each stage.

Review the Request for Proposal Specifications

Take another, careful, look at the RFPs and make sure that they are complete, consistent and clear. The RFP document should contain a description of the background of the proposed project, why it is needed, the intended outcomes and budget. Some RFPs may contain information on how responses to each of the specifications will be scored – for example, some requirements may be more important to the project than others and receive a higher weighting. If anything in the RFP is unclear, then it is legitimate to contact the creators of the RFP (preferably in writing) and ask for clarification.

Develop a Plan of Action

This should include a rationale for the project, the key research objectives and a plan of how these are to be met, that is to say, the research methodology. Take care to show that the project has value. To do this apply the invaluable ‘so what?’ test. This means looking at your proposed project outcomes and asking yourself to evaluate honestly whether they have any real worth in terms of practical application or contribution to knowledge.

Determine the Human Resourcing of the Project

Those who commissioned the proposal will be keen to evaluate not only the number of people committed to the project but also their experience and qualifications. If any element of the project is going to be outsourced to a third party, then again, evidence should be provided of their ‘fitness for purpose’.

Develop the Project Graphics

This will be particularly important for more technical projects but should always be considered for research projects of any kind. Graphics, particularly flow diagrams showing how different elements of a project relate to one another, can be easy to read and understand. Ensure that if graphics are used, there is a clear description provided in the text.

Develop a Project Schedule

A project schedule, such as a Gantt chart (see pp. xxx), provides a list of the main project tasks and the dates for their completion. These tasks could include arranging permissions from an

ethics committee, preliminary arrangements for obtaining research topics, a timetable for constructing research tools, analysing data and writing the research report.

Develop Project Costs

White (1997) warns that this is more an art than a science because there are so many variables to take into account. Particular care needs to be taken when estimating labour costs since these often eat up the bulk of a research project's budget. Since the research process is rarely linear and smooth, it is prudent to add in some contingency costs in case unexpected results emerge that require further research. The less experienced the research team, or riskier the project, the higher the contingency costs should be. Given that commissioning organizations are highly unlikely to pay for contingency costs, these will have to be built into (i.e. hidden!) in general costs. Of course, the higher your overall costs, the less competitive your bid.

THE FINAL STAGES FOR ACADEMIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL PROPOSALS

Preparing the Final Document

In writing the final project or academic proposal, try to ensure that the document is internally consistent and that there are no gaps or contradictions between objectives and research processes. Remember that once the proposal is submitted, you are committed to it, so you need to ensure that all errors have been eliminated. It helps, then, to elicit the assistance of some experienced reviewers who should be asked to answer the following questions:

- Is the proposal clear and understandable?
- Is the proposal realistic – are the aims attainable?
- Is the proposal consistent with the specifications against which it was written?

Also, in the case of organizational proposals, get an appropriate person to review the budget. White (1997) makes the useful suggestion that you should do a hand calculation of all columns and rows of financial data, even if they were calculated by computer (in case a decimal point has slipped!). When you have finished the proposal, print it off and read it one more time.

Success or Failure?

It is worth having a strategy in place for whether the proposal is approved or rejected. If the latter, Williams (2002) offers the advice that you should try to get feedback on the proposal from those who have evaluated it. This may allow you to improve the proposal if there are later opportunities to resubmit it. In the case of organizational proposals, if the bid is successful, you may be offered less funding than you asked for. At this point, you need to decide whether to accept this funding or, if possible, renegotiate the outputs of the project at a lower level.

SUMMARY

- A good research topic must have the potential to demonstrate theoretical credibility, allow for access to the relevant data, provide a symmetry of potential outcomes, and be congruent with your own interests, capabilities and career aspirations.
- To generate ideas for a research topic, you could look at examples of projects completed by others, or ideas could emerge from your reading of the literature or a brainstorming process.
- Before starting the project, produce a plan to show when and how you intend to conduct your research, including data collection, analysis and the writing-up process.
- For any academic research proposal, pay particular attention to the methodology section, including sampling procedures and the choices made for research strategy and data collection tools.
- In writing any proposal, make sure that your bid matches the specifications accurately. Get your proposal evaluated by others before submission.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 Make a list of all the potential sources available to get ideas on the subject matter or focus for your research. Which of these is most readily available to you? Which is less available but essential?
- 2 Consider your familiarity with the knowledge area for your research and allocate a number for your familiarity with this area, with 1 being totally unfamiliar and 10 very familiar. What number have you chosen? How comfortable are you with this number? Does it suggest that you should aim for a higher or lower level of familiarity?
- 3 Imagine that you are working in an organization and are contacted by a student as a potential sponsor of a research project. What kind of reassurances would you want to receive before agreeing to sponsorship? What kind of payback would you want for your organization?

YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT CHECKLIST

Check your understanding of what has been discussed in this chapter by completing the activities in this checklist:

- ☐ Consider the scope of your intended research
- ☐ Think about topics and themes from other courses you've studied and consider how they can be developed
- ☐ Look at books, professional and academic journals to identify key issues
- ☐ Consider whether your proposed project is interesting, stimulating and demonstrates skills and abilities
- ☐ Reflect on your research capabilities and previous experiences
- ☐ Think what makes your proposed research innovative
- ☐ Consider whether your research topic relates to your career goals
- ☐ Discuss and brainstorm potential research ideas with others

- ☐ Record different research ideas in a notebook
- ☐ Evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of different research ideas
- ☐ Develop clear, coherent research aims
- ☐ Use networks to gain financial, moral and/or practical support
- ☐ Investigate whether access is possible
- ☐ Draw up a research plan
- ☐ Create a Gantt chart
- ☐ Write a research proposal
- ☐ Formulate your research questions
- ☐ Develop your hypotheses
- ☐ Identify how and with whom the research is to be conducted
- ☐ Select a sampling strategy
- ☐ Decide whether to use pre-existing data collection instruments or to develop new instruments
- ☐ Choose an analytical approach
- ☐ Consider the ethical implications of your research
- ☐ Learn how to use a bibliographic software package

FURTHER READING

- Locke, L.F., Spirduso, W.W. and Silverman, S.J. (2013) *Proposals that Work: A Guide to Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals*, 6th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The fact that this is now in its 6th edition speaks for itself. A detailed book that provides valuable guidance on the structure and content of proposals and the often-forgotten issue of ethics in proposal writing.
- Punch, K.F. (2016) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, 3rd edn. London: Sage. A helpful book that deals with both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. It includes examples of successful research proposals and a checklist of 32 questions to guide proposal development.

JOURNAL RESOURCES

- Heath, M.T.P. and Tynan, C. (2010) 'Crafting a research proposal', *Marketing Review*, 10(2): 147–168. As well as guidelines, this paper discusses the criteria against which research proposals are assessed.
- Kim, Y., Hahn, D. and Coursey, D. (2012) 'Decisions in research review boards', *Public Integrity*, 14(2): 173–192. The kinds of criteria that make for a successful bid are revealed by researching the decision-making processes of institutional review boards.
- Klopper, H. (2008) 'The qualitative research proposal', *Curationis*, 31(4): 62–72. Deals with the process of writing a qualitative research proposal about the most critical questions that need to be answered.
- Reave, L. (2002) 'Promoting innovation in the workplace: The internal proposal', *Business Communication Quarterly*, 65(4): 8–18. This paper includes guidelines for producing a work-based proposal, including a suggested structure.
- Sandelowski, M. and Barroso, J. (2003) 'Writing the proposal for a qualitative research methodology project', *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(6): 781–820. This article argues that writing a proposal for research using qualitative approaches is a distinctive challenge due to the emergent nature of qualitative designs. Shows, through an annotated commentary, how the authors constructed such a qualitative proposal.

Vivar, C.G., McQueen, A., Whyte, D.A. and Armayor, N.C. (2007) 'Getting started with qualitative research: Developing a research proposal', *Nurse Researcher*, 14(3): 60–73. The paper includes some basic but very practical guidelines.

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

Online you will find a wealth of handpicked tools and resources to help you avoid common pitfalls and learn key skills.

Find them at: <https://study.sagepub.com/grayresearchworld6e>.

DIGITAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE 3.1

- 1 Case studies – see real research as it happens, including the successes and the challenges!
 - How We Solved the Puzzle of Why Some Countries Thrive Despite Corruption: Steps That Help Choose Important and Interesting Research Topics by Shaomin Li.
- 2 Further reading – free journal articles, book chapters and reference titles chosen to build your knowledge and showcase research in the real world.
 - Chapter: 'Gaining access for the insider-researcher from doing work based research' by Carol Costley, Geoffrey Elliott and Paul Gibbs
 - Chapter: 'Writing a literature review' from *Social Research Methods* by Nicholas Walliman.
 - Chapter: 'Developing questions from research problems' from *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research* by Derek Layder.
- 3 Employability skills – a host of weblinks that help you improve key skills in the workplace and build your employability.
 - My 21 favourite good SWOT questions from Dan Steer.
- 4 Videos – expert advice to provide real world examples and information to get you through the tough stuff.
 - An introduction to the chapter from David.
 - Top Tip videos from David on planning a project and writing a proposal to help you shine.
- 5 Weblinks – quality resources and helpful websites from across the social sciences and the world.
 - Johari Window Model and Free Diagrams from BusinessBalls.
 - Undergraduate Research: Helping Define Career Goals from The University of Texas at Austin.
 - How to Make a Bad Research Question from Hun Myoung Park.
 - Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper from University of Southern California.