

TOPIC: -

WRITING THE PROPOSAL AND WRITING UP
THE DISSERTATION / RESEARCH.

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WRITING THE PROPOSAL AND WRITING UP THE DISSERTATION / RESEARCH.

One of the skills essential to successful research is that of writing. Good communication is required at every stage of the project, but the main writing tasks are located at the beginning and end of the research project – at the beginning to explain what you will do in the research, and at the end, to explain what you have done and what you have found out. The task is made much easier these days with the help of word processing packages which provide simple ways to record, store, edit, expand and condense text and to present it in an attractive fashion.

FORMULATING A SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH PROPOSAL: -

Before starting a research programme it is necessary to work out exactly what you want to do, why and how. A research proposal is a succinct summary of just that. Obviously it will be very helpful to you, the researcher, to make it clear to yourself what the aims of the research are and what you need to do to achieve the desired outcome. It will also be useful as a way to inform others of your intentions. In fact, the presentation of a research proposal is always required by courses that contain a research exercise, such as writing a dissertation or a thesis. In professional life, for all research projects that need funding you will be required to provide a detailed research proposal as part of the funding application.

Fortunately, research proposals tend to follow a defined pattern. They all need to explain the nature of the research and its context, and why it is needed. This then prepares the way for a statement of the aims and objectives of the research and how it will be carried out and what the outcomes are likely to be. Then there is a description of what resources will be required (time, money, equipment, staffing etc.) in order to carry out the work.

The research proposal, once approved, will act as a contract outlining the basis of agreement between the parties involved, e.g. the researcher, supervisors, institutions (e.g. university or college). In funded research, this will be part of a formal signed contract with the providers of the funds, which cannot be substantially altered without the agreement of all the parties. It is therefore advisable not to 'promise mountains and deliver molehills'!

In the context of research as an educational exercise, research projects should be suitable vehicles for students to learn and practice the theoretical and methodological aspects of the research process as much as being a way to gain new insights into the subject studied.

THE MAIN INGREDIENTS AND SEQUENCE: -

Academic research proposals are usually composed of the following elements:

1. The title;
2. aims of the research;
3. the background to the research – context and previous research;
4. a definition of the research problem;
5. outline of methods of data collection and analysis;
6. possible outcomes;
7. timetable of the project and description of any resources required;
8. list of references.

THE TITLE:-

The function of the title is to encapsulate in a few words the essence of the research. Ideally it should contain all the essential key words that someone might use in an attempt to locate the kind of study you are proposing. These words are likely to include the main concept and variables, and limits to the scope. You can leave out such phrases

as 'an investigation into', 'a study of', 'aspects of', as these are obvious attributes of a research project.

Take for example the title 'The implications of the present Labour and Conservative policies on what is taught in primary schools in England'. The independent variables are 'Labour and Conservative policies', and the dependent variable is 'what is taught'; the type of research task is implied as a comparative study; the theoretical basis is one of prediction of effects of policies; and the purpose of the study is to predict their effects on the curricula of primary schools. Also important are the words which limit the scope of the research, e.g. only 'present policies', only those of 'Labour and Conservatives', only in 'the present', only effects on what is 'taught', only in 'primary schools', and only in 'England'.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH: -

This goes right to the heart of the project. One main aim, and perhaps two or three subsidiary aims resulting from it are sufficient. Precision is essential – too many or vague aims indicate woolly thinking and will be difficult or impossible to achieve within the available resources and time.

THE CONTEXT BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH:-

This explains to the reader the background from which the research problem emerges. It should explain the major factors which surround your problem, and of any significant literature which relates to it. It also has the function of capturing the interest of the reader.

Some of the factors which make up the context might be of a physical nature, such as location, materials, artefacts, organizations, processes etc., while others might be more conceptual, such as the economy, legislation, development policy etc. Even more abstract are theoretical concepts such as power, poverty and Marxism. The research problem should emerge from this context.

Virtually every subject has been researched previously, so a critical account of what has been achieved so far to address the problem is required in order to identify the gaps in knowledge or contentious issues. Accurate referencing is essential here. The research should fill one of these gaps or try to resolve the contention. It is quite difficult to pitch the level of your text so that any intelligent reader understands the factors from which your problem emerges, while at the same time persuading the expert that you are conversant with details of the principal issues. Do not assume that the reader knows anything about your subject.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM: -

The research problem provides the focus of the research project. It is the culmination of the background work and the initiator of the specific research tasks. It must be very clearly defined to explain the nature of the problem and why it is significant. The problem may be expressed in abstract **terms** initially, but through the statement of **sub-problems**, you should indicate how it can be investigated practically.

OUTLINE OF METHODS: -

This part of the proposal explains briefly what you are going to do in order to carry out your research, based on your chosen research approach. In proposals for funded research this may need to be described in great detail.

Every proposal is different in its description of methods, as these have to be specifically tailored to efficiently collect and analyse data relevant to the specific research problem and to produce the outcomes aimed at. One common feature is likely to be a review of the literature relevant to the research topic. It is generally relevant to distinguish between the methods of data collection and data analysis, although in some cases, particularly in qualitative research, these may go hand in hand. The explanation will outline which methods you will use for what, and why. You will probably need to refer to books that describe the methods in detail. There may be only one method used, e.g. experimental, or a combination of several, each suitable for

different aspects of the research. You may have to indicate how you will be able to access certain types of information if these are obscure, in remote locations or only available to certain people. Access to materials or equipment may also be discussed.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH: -

Although you cannot predict exactly what the outcomes will be (if you could, there would be little point in carrying out the research) you should try to be quite precise as to the nature and scope of the outcomes and as to who might benefit from the information. The outcomes should relate directly to the aims of the research. Note that in PhD proposals and most funded research there is a need to indicate what will be the original contribution to knowledge.

TIMETABLE OF THE PROJECT AND DESCRIPTION OF ANY RESOURCES REQUIRED: -

There is always a time limit to research projects, particularly strict if it is a piece of university or college coursework. The formulation of a timetable is therefore essential in order to allocate time limits to the sequence of tasks that you need to accomplish in order to hand the finished report or dissertation in on time. This is not only a test of the practicality of the proposed project, but also an organizational guide when you carry out the work.

Resources that are essential to the project, such as equipment, transport, skills, software etc. should be listed and availability assured in order to convince the reader (and yourself) of the practicality of achieving the aims of the project.

LIST OF REFERENCES: -

The location of the cited work of others must be meticulously recorded in this list. Not only does this ensure that you cannot be accused of plagiarism but also demonstrates that you are aware of the latest thinking in the subject. However, keep the references relevant – it is not a bibliographic list of all the literature surrounding the subject.

WRITING THE PROPOSAL: -

For a major undertaking such as a final year dissertation or research degree, it is important to keep conferring with your tutor or supervisor as you refine the structure of the argument and develop your successive drafts of the proposal. Comments from other members of staff and/or colleagues can be useful too as they might see things from a different perspective. Remember, however, that it is you who must decide what you want to do in the research, so be prepared to discuss it further with your tutor if you do not agree with some of the comments or recommendations made by others.

Why might a proposal be rejected? Here are some reasons:

- x There is no need for the research.
- x The scale of the proposed research is too big so an adequate conclusion cannot be reached.
- x The aims and objectives are vague or impractical or do not match, or are expressed as personal goals.
- x The research problem is not clearly defined so the research work has no adequate focus.
- x The procedures are confused with the objectives.
- x There is a lack of logic in the argument in the proposal, so the link between the research aims and outcomes is broken.
- x The project is formulated on an emotional or a political agenda rather than a factual or a theoretical basis.
- x Not enough information is provided about the details of the project.
- x Access to information, equipment or other resources are uncertain or impossible.

The completed proposal must conform to the requirements of the course or project in which you are taking part. Normally, there is limited space on the forms, and often you must ensure that your proposal is no longer than can be comfortably fitted onto two sides of A4. This is not easy, but is a very good discipline in writing a dense argument. Where possible, use the references as a shorthand to describe theoretical approaches.

Here is an example of a research proposal that has been prepared by a Masters level student for their dissertation that they wrote over the space of three months during the summer. I have annotated it to point out the features described above.