Writing research proposals: five rules

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Writing a research proposal is quite a challenge; especially writing a good research proposal. What is a 'good' proposal? Punch proposes the following three 'overarching' questions in relation to the proposal writing process [1] and says that a 'good proposal would succinctly and clearly answer the following questions.

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?

The process of describing the what, the how, and the why in a proposal frequently involves the process of summary and it is not unusual to have to write within a word limit, regardless of the specific nature or purpose of the proposal. Any form of writing that involves summarising always raises the tricky issue of what to include and what to leave out. You may have spent a great deal of time planning your research project in considerable detail. You can be so close to your project that it is frequently difficult to objectively and concisely describe what you intend to do. As a result the proposal writing process can be quite emotional, especially for novice researchers working alone, and it is easy to take critical questions about the proposed research too personally. Many proposal writers are frustrated by the questions raised by the readers of their proposals who, as far as they are concerned, have either failed to read it properly or are too stupid to understand it! Unfortunately, in some instances, this judgement may be correct but more often than not the readers are not stupid but rather are genuinely seeking to understand your intentions.

Proposals are written for a variety of reasons but two are particularly significant. The first is the proposal written for educational purposes [1]; in this case the proposed research may never actually take place and the proposal becomes an end in itself, that is, an assessment tool. For research students the proposal is a required prelude to their research written to show what is intended and to convince others of its academic potential. The second type of proposal is that written to secure research funding [2]. A fundamental difference here is the origin of the focus of the research. Whereas the student frequently has a fair amount of choice with regard to the focus, the focus of commissioned research is largely predetermined by others. Another significant difference is that the student generally works alone under academic support but commissioned research is often undertaken by teams of researchers working collaboratively.

Regardless of the purpose of the research there are some common principles in developing a proposal. This article will not attempt to describe a step by step approach to developing a research proposal; there are plenty of good publications that do this in far more detail than is possible here [1,3]. What follows are five rules to guide you in creating your proposal. These five rules focus on the essence of a good proposal and are drawn from the experiences of a variety of people ranging from professional researchers working in teams to practitioners and students working largely by themselves with minimal support.

Rule one: read and understand the guidance

Rule one is absolutely critical. It doesn't matter whether you are a lone research student or a member of a large research team; ignore the guidance you have been given at your peril. If there is something in the guidance you don't understand, ask for clarification before you proceed. There is almost invariably some kind of guidance available to the proposal writer; in addition to word limits the guidance may include specific areas to be covered, the format of the proposal, and to whom, when and how it should be submitted. In the case of proposals that have been written in response to commissioned, funded, research it is vital that any guidance on the background context is studied carefully and it may even be necessary to undertake a little additional research into the nature and preferences of the organisation and/or individuals commissioning the research. Do they have any preferences with regard to specific topics/issues or research methodology; have they ever commissioned any qualitative research for instance? Guidance can be brief or extensive but you must make sure you follow it. Do not, for example, apply to an organisation for funding for a project in Africa if their guidelines clearly state that they only fund projects in the UK. This might sound ridiculous but proposal writers sometimes make this sort of mistake.

If you are a student and you are writing your proposal as an assessment task there will be assignment guidelines, usually written but sometimes verbal. If you haven't been given any

guidance you should ask for it and if it's still not forthcoming then you almost certainly have grounds for a formal complaint. If the guidance is only given verbally ask for it in writing. As a student undertaking research you may be asked to submit your proposal to a formal ethics committee. This process often involves completing a form as well and good practice would be to provide guidance notes for completing it. In this sort of situation be careful about simply copying sections from your proposal into sections of the form; what is perfectly clear in the context of the proposal can become ambiguous when viewed as an isolated paragraph in a form.

Rule two: seek advice and support

Even if you are very sure of your own abilities there is nothing like letting at least one independent reader look at your proposal before you submit it for review. Apart from anything else they will often spot simple things like typographical errors. Sometimes academic organisations will require you to submit your proposal for peer review prior to formal submission but not always. Choose who you ask for advice and support carefully. Just as it would be pointless to ask someone who is notoriously poor at spelling themselves to check your work for errors it is no good asking for comment on complex controversial methodologies from people who know less about the method than you do. You obviously need to leave time for this process; it is unrealistic to expect someone to drop other commitments in order to read your proposal. For a document of 2000–3000 words you should allow at least a week for quality feedback. You can choose different people for different purposes. If you know someone who is a good proofreader ask them to do just that. To save time all round you can direct someone toward a specific section or issue. If you are a novice researcher get some advice on methodology early on with regard to what is appropriate, realistic, and achievable in the time available.

Rule three: don't forget about presentation

You don't have to use professional printing techniques when writing your proposal but it is in your interests to pay attention to presentation in terms of logical sequencing, accuracy and consistency. Use headings to give structure to your proposal; exactly what headings to use will depend on the context of the research but again, we can draw on Punch [1] for a basic structure that can be adapted as required (see Table 1).

A quick internet search would give you many variations on proposal structure but the important thing is to take the reader through the proposed research logically from the context of the research (the why) through the purpose of the research (the what) to what will actually happen (the how). When you write your proposal imagine if you lost it in the street or left it on a bus; would someone who picks it up be able to clearly understand what it is proposing and why.

Figure 1. Checklist of headings for research proposals. From [1] with permission **{AQ - if this is a direct copy, it will need permission from the publishers to be reproduced}**

Title and title page
Abstract
Introduction: area, topic and statement of purpose
Research questions
General
Specific
Conceptual framework, theory, hypotheses
The literature
Methods
Design: strategy and framework
Sample
Data collection: instruments and procedures
Data analysis
Significance
Limitations and delimitations
Ethical issues: consent, access and participants' protection
References
Appendices
In some types of research, the research questions would come after the literature section.
In some situations, sections on costs (budget), risk management and timetable are required.
A table of contents coming immediately after the title page is helpful to readers.

Simple things can greatly improve the integrity of your proposal; choose three or, at the most, four heading level styles and use them consistently throughout the document. The same goes for spacing between paragraphs and sections. Don't forget page numbering and give your proposal a version number in the footer as this is often required in accompanying forms. If you can't be bothered to check your spelling and grammar then get someone else to do it for you but don't expect readers of your proposal to take you seriously if you give them a document with many typographical errors.

Use visual aids in the form of figures and tables to clarify your proposal. A good diagrammatic

overview of your study is worth its weight in gold and visual timelines make the progression of the research much clearer for the reader. At the same time, having to put something complex into diagrammatic form can clarify your own understanding about what you are proposing.

Rule four: recognise any ethical dimensions to your research

For healthcare practitioners, probably the most common reason for writing a research proposal is to get ethical approval. This applies both to academic and commissioned research. This undertaking has become increasingly complex over recent years as health providers have become increasingly sensitive to potential ethical issues and now also involves the parallel process of research governance approval. It is important for health professionals to realise that, even though there may not be any obvious ethical issue associated with the proposed research, some form of ethical approval will be required for the majority of research projects that involves the participation of patients and/or staff in NHS environments or uses NHS resources. It is equally important to realise that the concept of ethics now extends beyond issues such as voluntary participation, informed consent and the right to withdraw etc. to include the quality of the proposed research methods. In other words a poorly designed study, or even a poorly described study, would be considered unethical. This can be quite a problem when writing a proposal if you are proposing to use unusual or innovative research methods as the systems and people involved in healthcare ethics are orientated, in general, to linear, pre-defined quantitative approaches and experimental research in particular. Iterative research (research that evolves in stages based on the outcomes of previous stages) may be perfectly acceptable and unproblematic to university ethics committees but be particularly difficult to 'sell' to NHS research committees. Much qualitative research is iterative and there are specific issues related the writing of proposals for this type of research but they are beyond the scope of this article [4, 5]. The time required for ethical approval can be surprisingly long so any time spent identifying any potential problems and pre-empting questions about your proposal is time well spent. You can, for instance, use published examples showing how the type of research you are proposing has been used elsewhere.

Rule five: expect questions

Expect your proposal to be challenged. If it's not then all is well and good but usually it will be and if you have prepared yourself you will be better able to deal with any criticism that comes your way. Often the process of being challenged leads to a better research project and as such it can be a very positive experience. Unfortunately not every reader is positive and you may find yourself on the receiving end of some negative and potentially hurtful comments if you take them personally. Some people take the opportunity to exercise their own particular hobby-horses in this situation and there is little you can do other than to respond professionally to criticism using an evidence-based approach. You won't be able to anticipate every eventuality so expect to be surprised. If, as suggested in Rule Two you have sought the advice of others then, (a) collectively you will have anticipated most potential problems and (b) you can at least share the burden of the criticism.

Conclusion

Proposal writing is demanding not so much from a descriptive perspective but in terms of adjusting the proposal to fit its specific purpose. It's relatively easy to find a framework of headings to guide you through the writing process but not so easy to choose the right words and phrases that will trigger a positive response from individual readers with their own personal, sometimes complex, agendas. In this respect probably the most important of the rules is the first; reading and understanding the guidance. The rules presented here are intended to highlight some of the issues in proposal writing but they are only broad guidelines. Your research proposal is unique; you need to find out who will read it and try to anticipate and pre-empt their response as best you can. Good luck.

References

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