

WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

The ultimate aim of research is to contribute in some way to the existing knowledge we have in a particular field. A research project or thesis is a documented record of what that contribution is and how it was achieved. You need to thoroughly research what is already known in your field, identify an area that needs further research, then make claims based on your findings. The claim should be the most reasonable based on the available evidence.

WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

A research proposal is just that – it is what you **propose** to do. First, you need to think what it is you propose or intend to research. The next step is to explain why you would do it. What is the point? What do you hope to achieve? This is not always obvious and needs to be explicitly stated. You must justify your proposal in light of the literature and what this indicates about the state of knowledge in your field. This is commonly known as the 'gap' in our knowledge. Once you have done this, the next step is to describe how you will conduct the research. Simply, your research proposal should reflect:

- what you are going to research,
- why you are going to research this particular area
- what is the significance of researching this area and
- how you are going to conduct the research

Your **supervisor** will be an invaluable source of advice and support throughout your candidature. They are the ones who will offer guidance on your proposal.

THE STRUCTURE OF A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

While each discipline has some slightly different requirements for setting out a research proposal, the major differences will be dictated by the kind of research you are undertaking – ie whether you are doing what is called **primary research** or **secondary research**.

Secondary research means that you are not gathering or creating your own empirical data but are using existing data that someone else has collected, recorded and analysed. Generally this applies within the Humanities and some social science topics (Sociology, History, Politics) Consequently, you will not need to include a detailed methodology or research methods section in the proposal. Nevertheless, you should provide an outline of how you intend to approach your research problem, the theoretical framework you intend to use and the areas, issues or authors you intend to focus on.

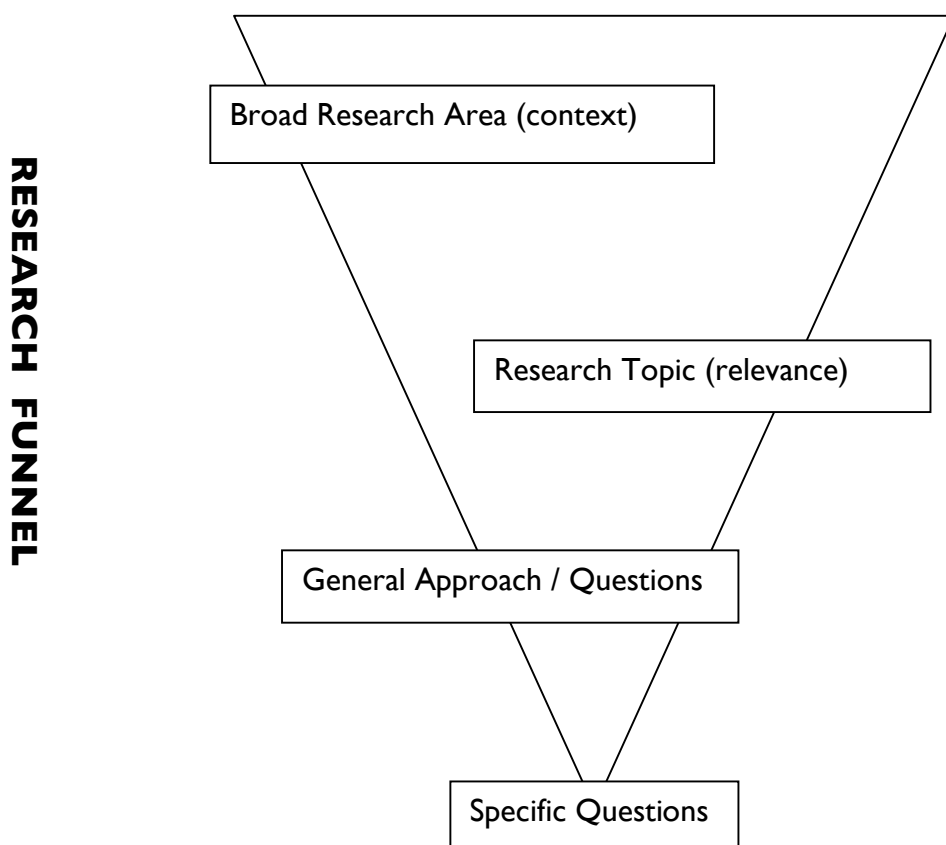
Although you are not conducting primary research, you should still use what are called the **primary sources**. These will be the original texts, films, magazines, novels or poems produced by the authors themselves. In the case of history, for example, you may need to access original records, letters, journals, diaries, shipping logs or museums. Your proposal must illustrate who and what you intend to access for data and why/how it is relevant to answering your question or problem.

Primary research means you are going to collect or create your own data through applying different methods of data collection (ie. experiments, interviews or questionnaires, surveys or by compiling statistical charts). In what is called **empirical** research, the research proposal plays a crucial role. First,

you need to work out who (or what) you are going to access for information and how you are going to collect or obtain it. This has to be carefully recorded as part of your proposal. You then need to say what you are going to do with the data, and how it will be processed and analysed. This means your proposal will need to include a methodology and research design section. These must be accurate and detailed. You may need to apply for **ethics approval**.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL STRUCTURE

The content of the proposal usually goes from the general to the specific and is often represented as a funnel. (Adapted from Jane Haggis, *Development Studies DV ST 9020, Flinders University*)



RESEARCH PROPOSAL OUTLINE

The proposal needs to show clearly that you understand your field, you have identified an area that warrants research and you know how to conduct that research. It should contain some or all of the following elements:

- Working title
- Statement of the problem or gap in the current research in your field of study.
- Context in which the problem arises; historical and current research in the field
- Reasons why the problem exists and justification for addressing it
- Methodology you will use to address the problem
- Key research questions
- Expected contribution to knowledge
- Time-frame and (special) resources
- References or bibliography

HOW TO STRUCTURE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The following sections provide more detail on what should be included under each section. What is included will depend on the kind of research you are doing.

(The following is a guide only; adapted from fIRST website, www.first.edu.au)

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH PROGRAM?

WORKING TITLE

It is important to have a title for your research proposal that is clear, concise and which reflects the content of your research program. The title should not just be descriptive but should indicate your likely position.

THESIS STATEMENT / DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

This is a summary of your research aims and objectives giving an introduction to, and accurate outline of, the central problem you will address, the broad research questions to be answered and the expected outcomes. This section may also briefly indicate the originality of the research or the gap which your research will fill.

LIMITATIONS/DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY (SCOPE)

Generally this part would set out the parameters of the research project. It is important to specify what is within and outside the scope of your research. You also need to explain why.

WHY ARE YOU UNDERTAKING IT?

BACKGROUND CONTEXT/ LITERATURE REVIEW

This section deals with the historic and current state of research in your field. By addressing the literature, you will place your research into its context and reveal what problem it is attempting to address.

JUSTIFICATION

It is important to state clearly why there is a problem that needs to be addressed. You will need to show that the research fills a gap in the current research by referring to the literature in the field. It should then be evident where your research project fits in the overall context.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

State clearly why this research is important, what the benefits will be and how your work will contribute to knowledge in your field. This may include commercial benefits, changes in current practice, a new perspective on an old issue or other benefits to the community. You need to indicate why it is significant and how it advances understanding of the issues under discussion.

HOW THE RESEARCH IS UNDERTAKEN

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It should be clear what paradigm you are working within, what theoretical assumptions you are making or questioning. You need to offer a justification for the adoption of the particular methodology you will use to conduct your research. This needs to be supported by the literature.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES / METHODOLOGY / DESIGN

This section sets out the mechanisms of conducting your research, the sort of data needed to answer your research questions and the details of how this is to be achieved in practice. State clearly how you plan to conduct your research. What methodology are you using? Why? What information needs to be gathered? Will this data be applicable to the research questions? Who or what will you use as the data source? How will you collect data or construct experiments? What controls are in place? How will the data be analysed? Do you need ethics approval?

RESOURCES AND TIMEFRAME

It is important to know what sort of resources you will need, how available they are and the costs involved. You may need to attach a proposed budget. You will also need to indicate how long each stage of the project will take.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

REFERENCES

The proposal should cite research material which supports your research. Any text referred to or quoted from in the proposal needs to be listed and attached. Formatting should follow the standard method advised by your discipline, ie Harvard system (sometimes called author, date system) or footnoting system (author, note system).

RESEARCH FOCUS

Remember that your research proposal is a useful guide. A good research proposal can become the first chapter of your thesis. As you learn more about your topic, your ideas will change. This may mean that the focus of your proposal will also change. It may take you several months to finalise the proposal you will use for your thesis. This is quite normal. **BUT BE CAREFUL.** Don't keep changing directions. The sooner you have a good working proposal, the sooner you can start work on the main body of your thesis.

** Useful reference:

Patton, Michael Quinn 1990, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd Ed), Sage Publications, USA.

STUDENT LEARNING CENTRE
STUDENT CENTRE, LEVEL ONE

TELEPHONE: 61-8-8201 2518
FAX: 61-8-8201 3839

E-MAIL
study.skills@flinders.edu.au

INTERNET
<http://www.flinders.edu.au/SLC>

POSTAL
PO BOX 2100, ADELAIDE, SA 5001