

Developing an effective research proposal

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Topics

- Expectations and functions of a proposal
- Some common pitfalls
- Unpacking the sections of a proposal
- Strategies and tactics to improve a proposal

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Aims of this session

- To provide researchers, and other interested individuals, with some key insights into developing effective research proposals
- To provide strategies and tactics which will improve your chance of success

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Expectations and functions of a proposal

Probability of approval will depend on:

- the clarity and thoroughness of your proposal
- evidence of your understanding of the issues
- your prior experience and knowledge in undertaking similar work

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Expectations and functions

The P's and C's

- phase and communication
- process and context
- product and clarity
- plan and contract

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Expectations and functions

Four main functions:

- what the proposed research is about
- what we will learn from it and why it is important
- what the research is trying to find out or achieve
- how it will go about doing that

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Expectations and functions

- The proposal should not need the researcher's presence to interpret or make sense of what is being said
- It is an argument which needs to have a coherent line of reasoning and internal consistency

(Punch, 2000)

NCVER's evaluation criteria

- Demonstrated knowledge
- Proposed research
- Methodology
- Research experience and expertise

Reader's expectations

- Readers need to have **sufficient information** in the proposal to make an informed judgement
- is the proposed research 'do-able' (realistic)?
- can the proponent do it - and what evidence is given?
- if done - will it produce a successful outcome and what will we learn?

Some common responses

- "Proponent does not have a grasp of the issues"
- "I'm not convinced the research questions will fully address the purpose of the research"
- "Interesting - but what is it going to tell us that we don't already know?"
- "I'm just not convinced this is going to work"

More common responses

- "Not enough detail here - how many people are they interviewing, what industries are covered, and what about the practitioners?"
- "It is not clear that the method proposed will deliver the desired outcome"
- "What evidence is there that they have the right skills and experience to do this?"

Avoid the following pitfalls

- Rationale is weak
- Writing is vague
- Outcomes are uncertain
- Do not have relevant experience
- Project is too large or 'ambitious'
- Project is too limited
- Does not represent value for money

Unpacking the various elements of a proposal

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Conceptual framework

- What the research is trying to find out, do or achieve - research questions
- How the research proposes to answer the question (s) - methods
- Why the research is worth doing - context and outcomes

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Sections of a proposal

- Background and context
- Purpose statement
- Research questions
- Methodology
- Outcomes
- Supporting documentation

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Background and context

- Review of relevant literature
- Context
- Aims
- Significance

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Research purpose statement

- A concise statement of the need or problem
- How you know this is important
- What you intend to do about it

Succinctly answer the questions:

- "why are you doing it...and...so what?"

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Research questions

- Central to the research proposal
- Need to be precise
- Put thought into them and come back to them!
- General and specific questions

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Methodology

- Wide variety of methods possible
- Must specify and justify your research methods and how you will interpret the results
- Not just a list of research tasks
- Make it clear what you intend to do and how

Tips for your methodology section

- Link your methodology back to the needs you identified in your background and purpose statement
- Align your research questions and methods
- Clearly present innovative aspects of your methodology

Outcomes and outputs

- State what you expect the research to yield
- Specify what you will produce

Tips.....

- Make sure your plan stacks up with the declared aim
- Explain how the plan will work - use flowcharts
- Leave the reader with something (positive) to remember!
- Be as succinct as possible

And let's not forget...

- Titles
- Budgets
- Project team and steering committees
- Addressing the guidelines
- Writing style

Title of your research

- Create a lasting first impression
- Clear, concise and unambiguous
- Keep it short
- Title should not be a summary of your research!
- Capture the focus of your research
- Most important words should come first

Remove unnecessary words:

- *The systematic development of a local initiative to create a learning centre for community education*
- *A local learning centre for community education*

Budgets

- Realistic
- Consistent with research activities
- Transparent
- Within any guidelines

Project team and steering committees

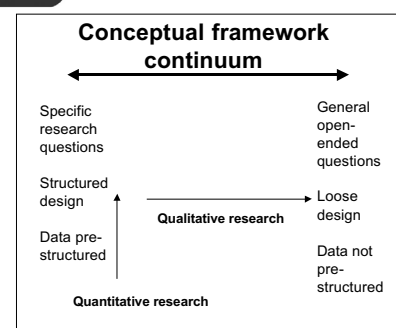
- Specify roles clearly
- Enlist the support of a steering committee

Writing style

- Keep sentences short
- Use short paragraphs
- Use good, plain English
- Structure your points
- Impress the reader with clear thought and reasoning
- Avoid acronyms

Dealing with different types of research methods

- Research studies will vary from tightly planned and structured to unfolding, or action research
- The distinction is important when it comes to research questions and articulating your plan in the proposal



Tips to increase success

- Comply with the guidelines
- Excite!
- Influence
- Establish credibility
- Build confidence
- Differentiate