Developing Effective Research Proposals

3rd Edition

Keith F Punch

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UNDERSTANDING READERS, EXPECTATIONS AND FUNCTIONS

2.1   WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

In one sense, the answer to the question 'what is a research proposal?' is obvious. The proposal for a piece of research is a document which deals with:

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

After it is approved, the proposal leads to the project itself.

In another sense, the dividing line between the research proposal and the research project itself is not so obvious. The proposal describes what will be done, and the research itself is carried out after approval of the proposal. But preparing the proposal may also involve considerable research.

This is because the completed proposal is the *product* of a sustained *process* of planning and designing the research. And both the planning of the research and the proposal for the research are just as important as the phases of research which come after the proposal – those of executing and reporting the research. Indeed, in some types of research, especially those which are tightly preplanned (see Section 2.4), the planning of the research can be seen as the most critical phase of the process. In this sort of research, the plan which is developed forms the basis for the rest of the research.

Thus, the research proposal is a document which is the product of a process of planning and designing. As I will stress throughout this book, it is also an argument which needs to have a coherent line of reasoning and internal consistency.

Two other less obvious, but important, characteristics of the proposal are:

- The proposal is often the first time a researcher (especially a dissertation student) presents his/her work to some wider audience.
- As a finished product, it needs to be a 'stand-alone' document. This means that, at certain points in the approval process, it will be read by people who have not discussed the work with the researcher.

I return to these points later. To finish this section, I quote Krathwohl's (1998: 65) comprehensive definition of a research proposal:

What is a proposal? It is an opportunity for you to present your idea and proposed actions for consideration in a shared decision-making situation. You, with all the integrity at your command, are helping those responsible for approving your proposal to see how you view the situation, how the idea fills a need, how it builds on what has been done before, how it will proceed, how you will avoid pitfalls, why pitfalls you have not

avoided are not a serious threat, what the study's consequences are likely to be, and what significance they are likely to have. It is not a sales job but a carefully prepared, enthusiastic, interestingly written, skilled presentation. Your presentation displays your ability to assemble the foregoing materials into an internally consistent chain of reasoning.

2.2 READERS AND EXPECTATIONS

There are two main situations where research proposals are required: the university context, where the issue is approval of the dissertation proposal for the research to proceed to enable the graduate student to complete the honours, master's or doctoral degree; and the research grant or funding context, where the issue is the competitive application for (usually scarce) research funds. Some of this goes on inside universities, but much of it happens outside universities.

As noted in Chapter 1, this book is written mainly with the graduate student in mind, who is preparing a research dissertation. As well as being a convenient way to organize and present the material about proposals, it is perhaps an area of greater need, because several books already exist to guide proposal writers in the research grant context (for example, Lauffer, 1983, 1984; Lefferts, 1982; Meador 1991; Miner and Griffith, 1993; Schumacher, 1992). But, while written mainly with the dissertation student in mind, much of what is said in this book applies to proposals in both contexts. And, as Kelly (2012) points out, the two contexts come together in the sense that social science graduates will have to apply their knowledge and earn their living in an increasingly competitive marketplace, so that practical skills such as proposal writing become important.

In the dissertation context, readers of the proposal (and members of dissertation committees or proposal review committees in particular) are required to make two sorts of judgements. First, there are judgements on a general level, which are concerned with the overall viability of the proposed study as a dissertation. Second, there are judgements on a more detailed and technical level, such as those concerned with the appropriateness of the research design, or quality control issues in data collection, or the proposed methods of data analysis. This section concerns judgements on the more general level.

The more general judgements centre on such questions as:

- Is the proposed research feasible and 'doable'?
- Is the research worth doing?
- Can the candidate do it?
- If done, will it produce a successful dissertation, at whatever level is involved?

In other words, review committees use the proposal to judge both the viability of the proposed research, and the ability of the candidate to carry it out. It is therefore a pivotal document in the dissertation student's journey. As Locke et al. (2011) point out:

In the context of graduate education the research proposal plays a role that reaches beyond its simple significance as a plan of action. In most instances the decision to permit the student to embark on a thesis or dissertation is made solely on the basis of that first formal document. The quality of writing in the proposal is likely to be used by advisors as a basis for judging the clarity of thought that has preceded the document, the degree of facility with which the study will be implemented if approved, and the adequacy of expository skills the student will bring to reporting the results. In sum, the proposal is the instrument through which faculty must judge whether there is a reasonable hope that the student can conduct any research project at all.

The four general questions listed above give a sense of the expectations readers are likely to have when they read the proposal, and of the general criteria they will use for judging it. Some of the implications for the proposal writer that follow immediately from those questions are:

- The reader needs to have sufficient information in the proposal to make the judgements shown above. The proposal needs to be thorough, and to address all necessary headings.

- The proposal needs to be clear, especially on what the research is trying to find out (or achieve), on how it will do that, on why it is worth doing, and on the context for the research.

- The proposal should show evidence of thorough and careful preparation, even when the research is of the less preplanned, more emerging kind. Research itself demands a systematic, thorough and careful approach, with attention to detail. The proposal should demonstrate, in its content and its presentation, that the student is aware of this.

- As noted already, the proposal needs to be a stand-alone document. This means that it needs to make sense to a reader, often non-expert, who has not discussed the work with the student, and who may not even know the student. The proposal should not need the student's presence to interpret or make clear what is being said.[1]

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[1] I single this point out because of the frequency with which I find it occurs in research supervision. I am sure every supervisor is familiar with the following exchange:

Supervisor (reacting, for example, to a proposal draft): 'This is not clear', or 'I cannot understand this'.

Student (in response): 'What I meant was ...' and proceeds to clarify.

The point is, of course, that the student will usually not be there to clarify what is written when the committee member is reading the proposal, or when a wider audience is involved. It is necessary to make the proposal clear in the 'stand-alone' sense.

2.3   FUNCTIONS AND PURPOSE OF THE PROPOSAL

Locke et al. (2011) list three functions of the research proposal – communication, plan and contract. This section notes their comments on the communication and contract aspects of the proposal. Section 2.5 deals with the research proposal as a plan.

Communication The proposal communicates the investigator's intentions and research plans to those who give approval, or allocate funds. The document is the primary resource on which the graduate student's review panel (or dissertation committee) must base the functions of review, consultation and approval of the research project. It also serves a similar function for persons holding the purse strings of foundations or governmental funding agencies. The quality of assistance, the economy of consultation, and the probability of approval (or financial support) will all depend directly on the clarity and thoroughness of the proposal.

Contract In the research funding context, an approved grant proposal results in a contract between the investigator (and often the university) and a funding source. In the higher-degree context, an approved proposal constitutes a bond of agreement between the student and the advisers/supervisors, department or university. The approved proposal describes a study that, if conducted competently and completely, should provide the basis for a dissertation that would meet all standards for acceptability – a dissertation which should itself be approved. Accordingly, once the contract has been made, all but minor changes should occur only when arguments can be made for absolute necessity or compelling desirability (Locke et al., 2011). This idea of the proposal as contract is valuable, but this last statement needs modification for research which is more unfolding than prespecified. The distinction between prespecified and unfolding research is dealt with in Section 2.4 and again in Section 4.3 of this book.

Maxwell (2012) stresses that the form and structure of the proposal are tied to its purpose: 'to explain and justify your proposed study to an audience of non-experts on your topic'. *Explain* means that your readers can clearly understand what you want to do. *Justify* means that they not only understand what you plan to do, but why. *Your proposed study* means that the proposal should be mainly about your study, not mainly about the literature, your research topic in general or research methods in general. *Non-experts* means that researchers will often have readers reviewing their proposals who are not experts in the specific area.

2.4   PRESTRUCTURED VERSUS UNFOLDING RESEARCH

There is a difference between research which is **prestructured** (or preplanned or prefigured or predetermined) and research which is **unfolding** (or emerging or open-ended). The distinction, which has implications for proposal development, is about the amount of structure and specificity which is planned into the research.

More accurately, it is about the timing of such structure. The structure can be introduced in the planning or pre-empirical stage, as the proposal is being developed. Or it can emerge in the execution stage of the research, as the study is being carried out. Across the whole field of empirical social science research, studies may vary from tightly preplanned and prestructured to almost totally unfolding, with many positions in between. This is therefore a central issue to be clear about in planning the research, and in communicating that plan through the proposal. The distinction applies to the research questions, the design and the data, and it may also include the **conceptual framework**.

Research which is highly prestructured typically has clear and specific research questions, a clear conceptual framework, a preplanned design and precoded data. The clearest examples of prestructured studies come from quantitative research – experimental studies, and non-experimental quantitative studies with well-developed conceptual frameworks. On the other hand, research which is not prestructured typically does not have specific research questions which are clear in advance of the empirical work. A general approach is described rather than a tightly prefigured design, and data are not prestructured. These things will emerge or unfold as the study progresses. The clearest examples here are from qualitative research – an unfolding **case study**, an **ethnography**, or a life history.

These two descriptions represent the ends of a continuum. It is not a case of either–or, and varying degrees of prestructuring or unfolding are possible, as shown in Figure 4.1. When it comes to presentation of the proposal, it is likely that projects towards the left-hand end of this continuum will easier to describe – by definition, such research is highly preplanned, and the proposal describes that plan. Towards the right-hand end, the proposal writer has a different (and sometimes more difficult) problem. By definition, the proposal now cannot contain a detailed, highly specific plan. This is noted in the next section, and is discussed again in Sections 4.3 and 7.3.

2.5   THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL AS A PLAN

The proposal also serves as the action plan for carrying out the research. However, as noted above, how tightly preplanned the research is, and therefore how specific the plan in the proposal is, will vary across different research styles.

Much of the literature on proposals is relevant to research at the left-hand end of the structure continuum just described, and shown in Figure 4.1. Thus, Locke et al. (2011) describe tightly preplanned research when they write that empirical research:

consists of careful, systematic, and pre-planned observations of some restricted set of phenomena. The acceptability of results is judged exclusively in terms of the adequacy of the methods employed in making, recording, and interpreting the planned

observations. Accordingly, the plan for observation, with its supporting arguments and explications, is the basis on which the thesis, dissertation or research report will be judged.

The research report can be no better than the plan of investigation. Hence, an adequate proposal sets forth the plan in step-by-step detail. The existence of a detailed plan that incorporates the most careful anticipation of problems to be confronted and contingent courses of action is the most powerful insurance against oversight or ill-considered choices during the execution phase of the investigation. The hallmark of a good proposal is a level of thoroughness and detail sufficient to permit the same planned observations with results not substantially different from those the author might obtain.

Similarly, Brink and Wood (1994: 236–7) are writing about highly prestructured research when they say that the plan is all-important, forming the basis for the remainder of the research process, and that developing the plan may well be the most critical part of the whole process. In this type of research, figuring out what you are going to do and how you are going to do it (that is, figuring out the plan) is the difficult part. Once that is done, all that is left to do is to 'do it' – to execute the preplanned steps.

These comments describe research which falls towards the left-hand end of the continuum shown in Figure 4.1. They need modification for those types of research which fall towards the right-hand end of the continuum. Proposals for unfolding studies are discussed in Sections 4.3 and 7.3.

2.6   RESEARCH QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH PROBLEMS?

Based on my experience in supervising research, I prefer to focus on the concept of research questions, as a generally useful way of helping students to get their research planning and proposal under way. When a student is having trouble getting started or making progress with the proposal, or is confused, overloaded or just stuck in developing it, one of the most helpful questions I can raise is 'What are we trying to find out here?' It is a short step from this to 'What questions is this research trying to answer?' or 'What are the research questions?' This approach makes *research questions* central.

By contrast, some writers tend to focus more on the 'problem behind the research', or on research problems, rather than on research questions. Thus, for Coley and Scheinberg (1990: 13) writing about proposal development in the human services context: 'Proposal writing includes the entire process of assessing the nature of the problem, developing solutions or programs to solve or contribute to solving the problem, and translating those into proposal format'. This approach makes the *research problem* central.

Other writers draw a sharp distinction between question and problem. Thus Locke et al. (2011), for example, arguing for 'semantic and conceptual hygiene', distinguish sharply between problem and question, and recommend a logical sequence of problem, question, purpose and hypothesis as the way forward in research planning and proposal development. Similarly, Brink and Wood (1994: 45) see proposal development as building or constructing the research problem, and see research question(s) as one of the central components of that. I think both of these frameworks are useful for highly preplanned research, and especially for intervention studies, but are less useful for more unfolding studies. In those cases, the distinction between problem and question is not so sharp.

Sometimes social research is concerned with interventions, and assessing their outcomes. Some areas of nursing research are a good example, especially those concerned with nursing in the clinical setting. Behind this focus on interventions lies the idea of a problem which needs a solution, and it is the intervention which is proposed as a solution (or part of a solution). This is the logic of the approach to proposal development described by Brink and Wood (1994) and by Tornquist (1993). Writing also about nursing, Tornquist describes research as intervention and action followed by evaluation and assessment. Similarly, programs and interventions in education or management might be driven by the same logic – a problem requiring a solution, which takes the form of an intervention. The research then becomes an evaluation or assessment of the effects of the intervention.

This line of thinking concentrates on the identification of a problem – something requiring a solution – followed by an intervention or activity designed to solve it, and the research becomes the assessment or evaluation of that intervention. Another, more general, line of thinking concentrates on the identification of question(s) – something requiring an answer – followed by an investigation designed to collect the data to answer the question(s).

In intervention research, the intervention is designed to solve or change some unsatisfactory situation. This unsatisfactory situation is the problem. On the other hand, thinking about research in terms of research questions is a more general approach, which can be used in naturalistic[2] research as well as in intervention research (the effects of an intervention can always be assessed through a series of research questions), and in basic research as well as applied research. I use the focus on research questions as a way both of getting started in research, and of organizing the subsequent project. I think it also has the benefits of reinforcing the 'question first, methods later' advice of Section 4.7.2, and of flexibility, in the sense that students often find it easier to generate research questions

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[2]'Naturalistic' refers here to research which does not contrive or manipulate the situation being studied, and which does not involve any intervention or treatment. It studies the world 'as it is'.

than to focus on a problem. But if it helps to think in terms of identifying a research problem, rather than identifying research questions, there is no reason at all not to do so. Nor is there any reason not to use both concepts – problems and questions – and to switch between them as appropriate, in developing and presenting the proposal. In any case, there is interchangeability between the two concepts. Thus, a problem, as something requiring a solution, can always be phrased as questions. Likewise, a question, as something requiring an answer, can always be phrased as a problem.

It follows from this that an effective way to develop and present a proposal ties together the three concepts of problem, purpose and research questions. The purpose is the overall intention of the research. It proceeds from some problem which needs attention or solution. It is achieved by answering a set of research questions. This set of concepts has a convincing logical structure, and will be described again in Chapter 4.

2.7   A SIMPLIFIED MODEL OF RESEARCH

My focus on research questions, as a useful tool and strategy for developing proposals, leads to a simple but effective model of the research process. When the research is organized around research questions, and when each question conforms to the **empirical criterion** described in Section 4.6, we have the model of research shown in Figure 2.1.
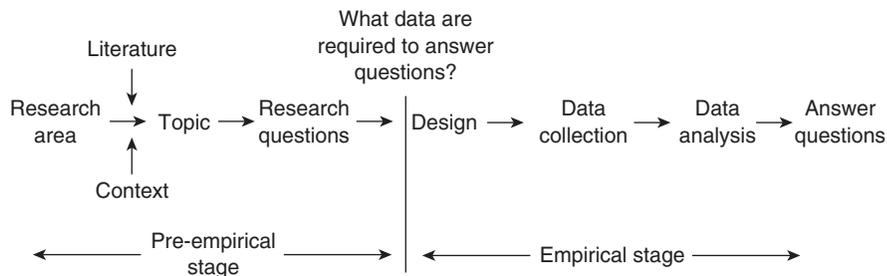

Figure 2.1   Simplified model of research (without hypotheses)

This simplified model of research stresses:

- framing the research in terms of research questions;
- determining what data are necessary to answer those questions;
- designing research to collect and analyse those data;
- using the data (and the results of the data analysis) to answer the questions.

This version of the model shows research questions without hypotheses. In Chapter 4, we consider the issue of hypotheses in the proposal. Where hypotheses are appropriate, this model can easily be modified to include them. The expanded model is shown as Figure 4.1.

Based on this model of research, we can see that two overall questions guide the research planning process. They are also the questions around which the research proposal can be written, and, later and with some additions, the dissertation (or research report). The questions are the straightforward ones of *what* (What questions is the research trying to answer?) and *how* (How will the research answer these questions?). Chapter 4 deals with ways of answering the 'what' question. Chapter 6 concentrates on the 'how' question, the question of methods. There is also a third question, the *why* question (Why are these questions worth answering? Why is this research worth doing?). This concerns the justification for doing the research, and is discussed in Chapter 7.

This model of research helps to organize the research proposal. During planning, it also helps to counter overload and possible confusion. It is effective with quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method research. It needs modification where prespecified research questions are not possible or desirable, and where the plan for the research is that they will be developed as the early empirical work provides focus. In those cases, it is still worth keeping this model in mind, in order to see where and why it is not appropriate. When research questions are developed as the research becomes focused, the analytic process is delayed. It comes during and after some empirical work, not before. When that happens, development of the research questions will be influenced by insights and trends emerging from the initial data. Otherwise, it is much the same process, and just as important for ensuring the fit between the parts of the research. This model is also effective with research conceptualized in terms of problems rather than questions. If the research is the assessment of an intervention designed as a solution to some problem, the assessment or evaluation can easily be structured as a series of research questions.

2.8 REVIEW CONCEPTS

Prestructured research Research which is carefully and thoroughly preplanned; has clear and specific research questions; typically also has a preplanned design, and precoded data; most typical of quantitative studies.

Unfolding research Research which is not so thoroughly preplanned; starting research questions are more general; uses a general approach rather than a tightly prefigured design; specific questions, and aspects of design emerge and are clarified as the study progresses; typical of some qualitative research.

EXERCISES AND STUDY QUESTIONS

Make sure you can answer these questions.

- Who will read my proposal?
- What will their expectations be?
- What is the process for approval of my proposal?
- What departmental and/or university guidelines are there for my proposal and its presentation?