

Writing an Under-graduate Research Proposal: Social Science

This workshop will...

- Consider the ways proposals differ from other types of academic writing
- Explore common components of many research proposals at this level
- Offer tips and strategies for writing up an effective proposal

Teaching Points:

1. How proposals are different to other assignments
2. Sections in a research proposal
3. Tips for writing an effective proposal

Adapted extensively from Burnett (2009: 78-92)

1. How proposals are different to other assignments

A proposal is similar to some types of writing you will do at University – reports, dissertations, and possibly reflective assignments – but it is also markedly different. This is due to its function: to provide your tutor, and you, with an **outline** of your intended research activity. You need to include...

- what your research question/s are
- why you have chosen this research activity and field
- the subject of your research activity
- how you intend to undertake the research activity
- why you have chosen these methods

You will notice that the list above contains words in the **future tense** whereas other pieces of written work use the past tense: what you 'did', what 'was' said, etc. This makes the proposal an unusual assignment to write and many students find it difficult to make the switch to discussing what they *will* do in one section of the assignment and what they *have* done in another. You are likely to use words such as 'will', 'shall', 'may'.

Another aspect of proposals that is a departure from the 'norm' of academic writing is the (possible) use of the **first person**. Please check with your tutor, but they may wish you to put yourself into the proposal; after all, it is you who is doing the research. Check first, but you may need to write from the 'I' and 'me' perspective.

Proposals also include specific **sections** with **headings** (these components are discussed below). Proposals' sections mirror those found in a dissertation but are shorter. In fact, proposals are often the **shortest assignments** students produce – they are typically approximately 1,500 words long.

It is possible you may have to re-submit your proposal following discussion and feedback with your tutor: *this is normal*. Try not to be upset or down-hearted as this is probably the first time you have written a research proposal before. It is important the proposal is right and that **you and your tutor agree** with the structure and content of your research. The proposal is your map or plan for your research activity, so it needs to be clear and logical.

Many courses provide **specific** format and content information regarding proposals; please check your handbooks and with your tutor whether this is the case. You may lose marks if you do not follow the parameters required.

2. Sections in a research proposal

Most of your other assignments will not require a **title** but a proposal does. It should clearly reflect your aim/s of your research activity. Titles are everywhere in the media – television programmes, films, and books – but do not be tempted to try to give your proposal a catchy, short and attractive title as this is not required in academia. Your title needs to say enough about your project to a reader to make them want to read the rest of the written piece. This means they are often long and, to be honest, a bit boring. Some tips for focusing your titles include:

- ✓ Identifying the setting, e.g. the organisation you are investigating or the location
- ✓ Using your research question, possibly with a subheading
- ✓ Being 'concrete' about what you are researching, e.g. '*A study of white girl gangs aged 14-15 in Swansea.*'

The following title has a number of issues:

Why are the managers white at Moon Bank Inc?

It is too vague and general, as there are so many aspects of race, history, politics, society and many other subjects that could be included. This makes it difficult for the reader to know what the research is about. Also, are all managers at all grades included? Are all managers white? What if 75% were?

TALKING POINT

Let's look at the next title together to see if it has any problems.

All change: the need for radical intervention at Moon Bank Inc. to enable BME managers to take their place in the boardroom.

Activity 1: Titles

Read the following title, and in pairs or small groups, decide whether this is a strong title or not, and if there are any issues with it. Does the title need any amendments or additions? If so, write out a new one.

All change: an evaluation of the frameworks in operation at Moon Bank Inc. which aim to facilitate BME managers to take their place in the boardroom: a case study of two branches in Liverpool and Cardiff.

Many students are unsure of the difference between **an aim and objectives**. This is one way to remember what they both are:

An *aim* is what you want to end up with, the end result. Use the analogy of a fruit cake: this is what you want as your end result.



Your *objectives* are more specific and include the key research questions.

In the case of the cake, these are the key steps of baking: getting your ingredients together and following a recipe.

An aim would be:

To evaluate the formal and informal processes of promotion within Moon Bank Inc.

Objectives could be:

- A. How much is the degree of support given to possible candidates influenced by informal networks?*
- B. Do all candidates have an equal chance of finding out about forthcoming promotion opportunities?*

You may be able to present your aims and objectives as bullet points rather than as full sentences, but check with your tutor before you write your final draft.

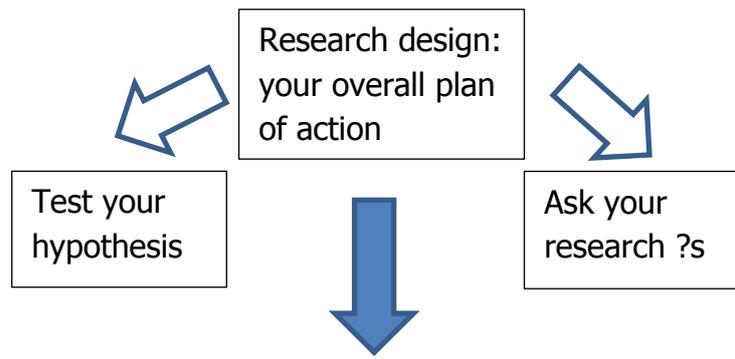
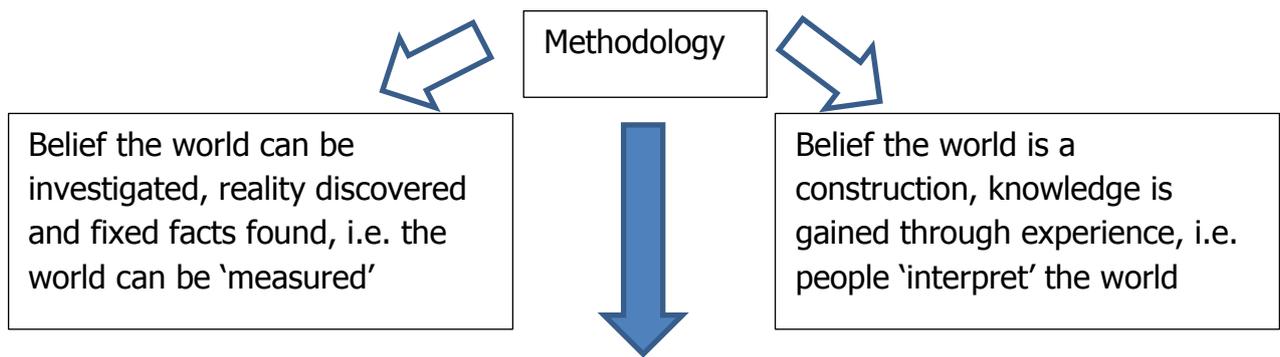
An **introduction** provides both a summary and background of your intended research. You should explain what the topic is and why you have chosen it, i.e. its significance in the field and/or to you. Also, discuss why it is a good time to be doing the research now – you could look in the news, or read an organisation's documentation, or find recent or current debates in academia or the media on your topic.

You may be set a specific literature review assignment and asked to produce a large review in your final report or dissertation, but a shorter **literature review** section is required in a proposal to show how previous research has influenced your research. This may relate to your choice of research following the identification of a gap in previous work, or a method you chose to employ. The point is to clearly connect the literature to your own enquiry. If you require additional support or information on literature reviews, we run workshops on undertaking and writing literature reviews. Please visit our website for more information.

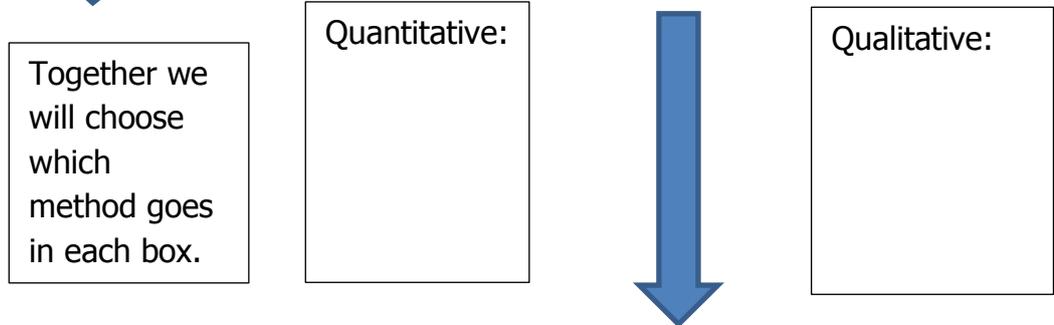
The next section may be called '**Research design**' or '**Methodology**' or another name, but it is a discussion of the reasons behind your choice of approach and tools/methods. Specifically, it includes:

- The research methods and tools chosen to collect and analyse the data, and why you have chosen them. Are there any particular advantages and limitations you have discovered if they were used in previous research, and how you intend to address them.
- Which methods you rejected and why, and what you may have gained/lost by not using them.
- What is your 'stance' as a researcher (more discussion below). Express how this has affected the kinds of questions posed and the methods you have selected.

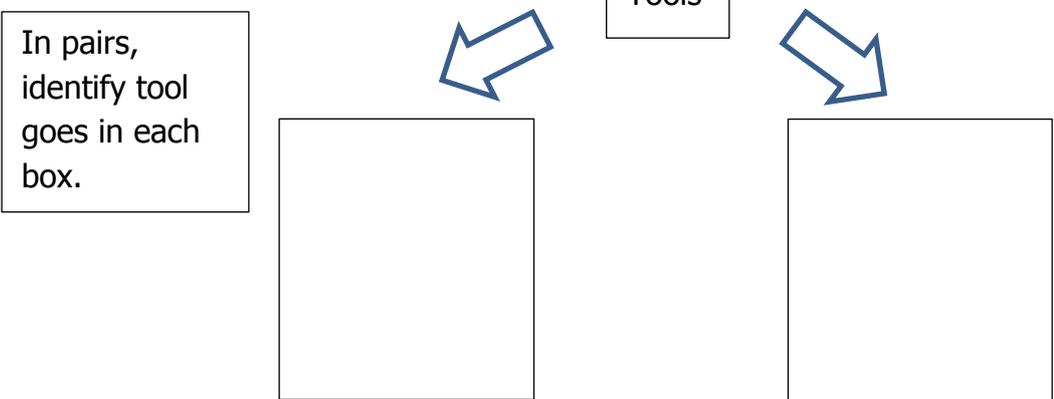
As a rule of thumb



TALKING POINT



Activity 2: Choosing the tools



Where would you put a case study?

Ethical considerations: University of Bradford has a checklist and application procedure or any research undertaken by students or staff with human participants or tissues. Often, at undergraduate level, these procedures are modified by your course or School to suit the kind of research you might propose. This means your tutor will normally advise you on where relevant documents can be found and the process you need to follow. In addition to completing and submitting these papers, ensure your proposal addresses the following:

- How you will gain any participants' consent?
- How you will demonstrate that your participants have given informed consent (this means that they will understand the implications of what they are consenting to, not just simply agreeing to be involved)?
- How will you protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity?
- How will you store the data you collect and for how long?
- How will your participants have access to the results of the research?

All research proposals must show you aim to draw a **conclusion** and show how they relate to the aim/s and objectives. If appropriate, indicate you expect to make **recommendations**.

Proposals often include a **time frame** which breaks down the research process. Allocate a fixed time period for each stage (weeks, days, hours) and the major landmarks attached to each stage. This section is of practical use to you to monitor your progress, and make sure you are on target and deadline.

A **reference list** is a list of all the texts you have cited in your proposal and a **bibliography** is a list of texts that you have read but not cited. Your tutor may want one or both as separate lists or combined.

3. Tips for writing an effective proposal

- ✓ Be clear and concise by using as few words as possible and not using multi-syllabic words where simple ones will do. Tutors and markers have thousands of words to read so make it easy for them to find the key messages in the designated sections.
- ✓ When writing about you, be relevant. For example, I have years of sales experience so I am comfortable with people and have good communication skills. Therefore I am most likely to use interview and focus group methods to collect my data. This is relevant-my cycling proficiency test is not!
- ✓ Learn to give and receive feedback from co-students as this could provide valuable information on how to improve your proposal, and you will be better prepared for feedback from your tutor.
- ✓ Use the following **WHITTLE** checklist:

What: is the research question – is it targeted and refined or too broad?

How: will you carry out your research – what is the methodology, methods and tools you have chosen and why? Why have you rejected others? What is your stance as a researcher?

Importance: why is your research important? Who are most likely to find your research important?

Timely: why should your research be carried out now?

Title: does your proposed title tell a reader what the research is about?

Literature: have you identified the key research carried out in your field? Do you show a clear link between the existing literature and your research?

End result: are the aims clearly defined and when you have finished your research, what will the end result be?

References

Burnett, J. (2009) *Doing Your Social Science Dissertation*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Wisker, G. (2009) *The Undergraduate Research Handbook*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

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Student Recruitment and Admissions. (2010) *How to Write a Good Postgraduate Research Proposal*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh [online] Available at:
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Answers

TALKING POINT

Titles

Better title as it...

- States who or what the research is about (BME presence in the boardroom of the company)
- Is clearer about what the research will investigate (interventions to enable BME managers to achieve director/partner status), and the scope of the research (about BME managers breaking the 'white' ceiling to get into the boardroom)
- Locates the research at Moon Bank Inc (although it could still be a global business requiring lots of work)
- Provides a 'flavour' of the project by using 'All change' suggesting a policy or intervention change

Still not quite right, e.g. the researcher has already identified a course of action in response, i.e. the 'need for radical intervention' before they have done the research.

Activity 1: Titles

Better again as it...

- States the enquiry will be an 'evaluation', revealing the researcher will be looking at the 'frameworks' from a number of angles to make a final judgement about their efficacy.
- States the research methodology to be employed: 'case study'. This means the reader will be prepared to see different methods of data collection, both quantitative and qualitative.
- Restricts the research further to 'Liverpool and Cardiff' so a less-wieldy research project.
- Are two assumptions:
 - That there are 'BME managers' at Moon Bank Inc.
 - That 'frameworks...to facilitate BME managers to (ascend to) the boardroom' are in existence.

The researchers will have undertaken preliminary research to discover if the company has such managers and such a structure.

Could the writers have included information regarding the timeframe they were researching within – maybe the frameworks have been a recent addition or they may have been in existence for some time? How about...

All change: an evaluation of the frameworks in operation at Moon Bank Inc. which aim to facilitate BME managers to take their place in the boardroom 2004-2014: a case study of two branches in Liverpool and Cardiff.

TALKING POINT

Methods

Quantitative: survey; experiment; observation

Qualitative: interview; ethnography; focus group

Activity 2: Tools

Quantitative: questionnaire; apparatus; recording equipment

Qualitative: question schedule; questionnaire; recording equipment