

GUIDELINES FOR PROPOSALS: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Human Development and Family Studies

Overview:

The following guidelines are not dogma. Using the guidelines, work with your advisor to create a format that works best for your thesis or dissertation proposal. Your advisor may want to vary the sections included in the proposal, the order of the sections, page limits, or the placement of material in sections. In general, however, the logic of the proposal does not vary.

Organize the sections of your research proposal to answer the following questions:

1. Statement of the problem (sections A & B): What do you intend to study, and why is increasing knowledge in this area important? What is the social significance of this topic?
2. Review of the literature (sections C & D): How does your study fit in with previous research and theory in the area? How is your research related to other research areas? Explain how your research expands beyond or critically examines what is already known. What are your initial research questions that emerge from the statement of the social significance of and literature review on this topic?
3. Methods (sections E): Who is the targeted study population? How and when are you going to do the work? Explain why you have chosen the methods that you are going to utilize. Discuss how your views and experience with this topic might influence your perception of the data and the development of your analysis.
4. Work Plan & Emergent Research Process (section F & G): Describe your initial work plan. Anticipate what might lead to changes in your original proposal. Propose how you will keep your committee informed about changes in research directions and the research process.

Overall, ask yourself: Is there enough detail? Does the proposal flow logically from section to section? Include sufficient information in your proposal so that the reader can evaluate your work without reference to any other source. Be specific and informative and avoid redundancies. Reviewers appreciate brevity and clarity of presentation. Use APA format; this includes the use of non-sexist language.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

- A. Locate the area of study. Describe the topic that your study intends to provide a better understanding of and the context for your interest in this topic.
- B. Significance: Explain the significance of your topic by considering it in relationship to all or any of the following perspectives:
 - a) those who live the experience you are studying;
 - b) academic research on related topics, including demographic information, statistics, and trends;
 - c) informing grand theory and conceptual debates;
 - d) policymakers, past and current social policy, political debates, and applied practice;
 - e) conventional wisdom and ideologies;
 - f) your own experience and views on the topic (including any previous research or participatory activities you have done in this area);
 - g) methodology (creating, refining, or extending the instruments and perspectives used to study the topic);

State concisely the importance of the research described in your proposal by relating the specific aims to the longer-term implications of your research problem.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- C. Related Research and Theoretical Rationale. Science is cumulative. In this section, you must place your research questions, concepts, and perspectives in the context of previous academic research and contemporary discussions. Discuss your proposed study in relation to previous research. Indicate how your study will expand and extend knowledge about your content area. Describe how your study fits into the continuing dialogue in your area of research. In the context of previous research and theory, what is the unique question that your study asks? How does previous research and theory compare with your research questions, concepts, and concerns? If this is a previously unexplored topic, identify where this new knowledge would make a contribution in existing social science fields. If this knowledge is corrective of distortions in previous social science knowledge, explain how it transforms how traditional understandings of the topic.

Qualitative research projects are often justified on the basis that they are exploratory. In order to use this reason, it must be demonstrated that this is indeed an unexplored topic or an unusual way to examine it. The best way to do this is to explicitly discuss other examples of research in related areas and show how they differ from what you intend to study.

Organize your review thematically with headings for each theme or subtheme. Headings help organize your thoughts and help the reader follow your reasoning. Also, material does not overwhelm the reader if you use enough headings. If you are not able to break down your review into sections with headings, then you have probably not thought about the material long enough.

What is the theoretical or conceptual base for your study? Have you described your theoretical foundation clearly and indicated its relation to your research problem? Exactly what concepts or propositions have you taken from the theory or conceptual framework? (Even if you are rejecting previous theoretical frameworks, it is important to identify and introduce them in order to show how your research will move the understanding of this topic forward).

Summarize the pertinent research. Have you examined primary as well as secondary sources? If a study is important, you must read the primary source rather than rely on someone else's summary or review of that work. You should not cite a reference unless you have read it. Have you selected and reviewed the literature that most directly bears on your research problem? Do you include the most recent literature in both content and method? Demonstrate a mastery of the relevant literature in the field. Cite works that explain and legitimate your research questions, major concepts, initial expectations, and methods. Acknowledge key works that provide a critique of alternative point of view to that which you adopt.

Your task is to review the literature thoroughly, but report it selectively. Use the research literature to support and explain the choice you made for your study, not to show that you have read every book and article in your research area. If you insist on a comprehensive literature review of a problem area, be clear about where your project fits into this greater scheme. If there is little literature bearing on your research problem, have you indicated the studies closest the problem? Do you demonstrate that you have made a scholarly attempt to find relevant previous research? Can you show how you are bridging between what is known and what it is that you are examining in this study?

Synthesize the previous research. Do not organize your review study-by-study or paper-by-paper. That is, do not have a paragraph that summarizes Washington (1990), followed by a paragraph that summarizes Nakano (1992), and on and on. Integrate material so you can draw conclusions and/or identify themes and/or issues across studies. Some studies are so important that you will need to cover them in greater detail one-at-a-time. You should have no more than five studies that deserve such attention. The other material should be presented by integrating studies together to support your general conclusions.

Critically evaluate the previous research. Is there consistency or inconsistency across studies? Can you explain any inconsistencies? Are there gaps in the knowledge or limitations in previous conceptualizations? Are there problems with measurement, data collection, sampling, or interpretation of results? Discuss the limitations of previous conceptualizations and analyses on this topic.

In their book, Proposals that Work (1987, p. 67), Lawrence Locke and his co-authors offer the following guidelines for evaluating your review of the literature. To assure yourself that your review is complete, mark your manuscript where you have answered the questions below. The first six questions are from Locke, and we added a seventh:

1. Is there a paragraph outlining the organization of the related literature section?
2. Do you have headings and subheadings that represent your most important topics and subtopics?
3. Is the relation of the proposed study to past and current research clearly shown in your summary paragraphs?
4. What new answers (extension of the body of knowledge) will the proposed research provide?
5. What is distinctive or different about the proposed research compared with previous research? Is this clearly stated? Is this introduced in the first few paragraphs?
6. What are the most relevant articles or books that bear on this research? Are these articles or books presented in a way that denotes their importance? Has the evaluation of these key articles been presented succinctly?
7. Is the connection between your discussion of theory and your review of the literature clear?

- D. Research Question(s): Identify what more needs to be studied. Point out what will be distinctive and different about your proposed research compared with previous research and/or conventional understandings of this topic. If previous research has been mostly quantitative, include in your discussion how a qualitative study will provide a new understanding of the topic. If previous research has included qualitative research, explain why more qualitative research is still needed.

METHODS

- E. Methods. The purpose of this section is to tell the reader how you will achieve your specific aims. This is the most important section of the proposal. The methods section constitutes a “contract” between you and your committee. The purpose of this proposal is to demonstrate that you have given your project enough forethought to justify your initial research questions and design. This may include having conducted a pilot study in order to refine your research questions and instruments prior to formally engaging in the thesis or dissertation research.

However, since much of the process of conducting qualitative research is emergent and is shaped by the data as it is collected and preliminary analyses as you develop them, it is not possible to exactly lay out how you will conduct the entire research project. What is traditionally thought of as a pilot study, may be part of the formal research process, because even these preliminary explorations provide data that will shape the final analysis.

Even though the qualitative research process is emergent, it is still necessary to explain where you are starting and anticipate how you will move through the emergent research process. This includes explaining the criteria for your initial sampling and how you anticipate future theoretical sampling will proceed. You will also need to explain how you will capture data and how you will conduct preliminary analyses.

Note: The following components of your proposal should be based on having conducted a pilot study according to the proposed guidelines (e.g. 2 in-depth interviews with representative participants, 5 hours doing participant observation, conducting an initial focus group to develop a participatory research project). Doing a pilot study will not eliminate the emergent character of doing qualitative research, but it will allow you to write your proposal and begin your study around concrete, lived experiences of those whom you are interested in, rather than only your own academic and experiential knowledge.

1. Site, Population and Sample. Define your target population. Describe the site and/or population from which you will draw your sample, the method of sampling, and the rationale for the sampling method.

Explain how the sample you seek out will allow you to draw conclusions about the dimensions that you identify as important in your problem statement. For example, if you plan to analyze how race and ethnicity matter in childcare decision-making, explain why you have chosen to focus on particular racial ethnic groups. Or if you are interviewing only wives about marital issues, explain why learning about the wives' perspectives will allow for an analysis of marital relationships without also considering the husbands' perspectives.

2. Choice of Methodology. Provide a brief explanation of qualitative research methodology: its assumptions and purpose. Reiterate the rationale for doing qualitative research on this particular topic. Describe the research methods (including those that are conventionally thought of as "quantitative" if you are triangulating). For the qualitative methods (e.g. participant observation, indepth interviewing, focus groups, participatory research), include references to methodological texts that will guide your research.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this methodological approach given your specific aims and research problem? Convince the reader that you have chosen the most appropriate methodological approach. For example, discuss the advantages of using focus groups instead of individual interviews, or observing behavior as a full participant observer instead of as observer participant. In this section, it would be particularly useful to discuss previous experience with the different methods in order to demonstrate your prior training in the method.

3. Data Collection. In qualitative research, what constitutes data is very different than what counts as data in a quantitative study. Data can range broadly from responses collected through a survey instrument to a single unplanned observation that you as the researcher made at a single time during a single, chance observation with your research population. Explain how will you record data as you discover it. Even though the researcher as a "human-as-instrument" is a critical data collecting component of qualitative research, the data must exist somewhere other than inside your head. Discuss the different ways to capture the data. This may include (but are not limited to): writing field notes, memo writing, video and audio taping, asking respondents to draw pictures and diagrams for you, questionnaires, etc. Propose how you will capture the data and how often you will reflect on it. Finally, discuss the methodological logic for deciding when to stop collecting more data.
4. Your Relationship to the Topic: Since the researcher is an important data collection instrument in qualitative research, it is important to understand how you stand in relationship to your topic of study. Discuss how your perspective (assumptions and biases, preconceptions, knowledge of formal research, advocacy work, and past experiences with this topic) might influence your understanding, observation, and analysis.
5. Data Analysis. In qualitative research data analysis begins immediately and constantly informs and reshapes the research question, the sample, the methodology and the data collection. Qualitative researchers repeatedly cycle through research questions, data collection, data analysis, and reformulating research questions, data collection and data analyses. Explain how you will move through this cycle. Define the analytic perspective you anticipate using: existential phenomenology, grounded theory method, extended case method, etc. If you are planning to use qualitative software programs for data analysis, explain your choice of software.

Note: The analytic process in qualitative research requires developing preliminary categories and analyses and constantly comparing data against the emerging analysis. As cases contradict the emerging analysis, the analysis is revised until all cases are accounted for. It is strongly recommended that your proposal include a date to submit a carefully conceived preliminary final draft of your analysis in time to still allow for enough time for major revisions and reconceptualizations. (It is highly recommended that you plan to submit this preliminary final draft at least 6 weeks (MA thesis) or 4 months (dissertation) prior to when you plan to complete your thesis or dissertation).

Note: Because the research questions and focus of study are emergent, you may have to conduct a new literature review before finalizing your thesis or dissertation.

6. Limitations of the Study. Cite any weaknesses or limitations in your study and why you will not correct for them prior to engaging in your research.

7. Ethical Considerations. What are the ethical issues involved in your study? What are the potential risks and benefits to your participants. How will you protect your participants from risk? Complete the necessary form to apply for permission to conduct this study through the Institutional Review Board and attach these documents to your proposal.

WORK PLAN AND EMERGENT RESEARCH PROCESS

- F. Work Plan and Emergent Research Process. Indicate in chronological order the length of time required for each major aspect of your study. A diagram or time line may be the best way to display this information. That is, draw a line, mark dates on the line, and indicate what your research activities will be at any given time. Do you have a clear idea of the sequence of your research process? Is your timing realistic?

What sources of funding might support your research? This proposal will be the basis for you to write proposals for grants to support your research. Identify school, university, national (foundation and federal) granting agencies, and dissertation scholarships that you might apply for.

- G. Planning for the emergent research process: Since changes in the research plan will occur, you will need to plan for how you will explain changes to your committee, including keeping them informed and getting their approval for changes in the research process. Think of how often and in what form you will keep your committee informed of these changes. Possible techniques for doing this include (but are not limited to the following):

- (a) Plan how you will regularly inform your committee of the changes you have made. You might schedule several times to meet, or send regular emails or memos to your committee to keep them updated on any changes in the research question or process. It is important to provide explanations that justify why your research has moved in new directions.
- (b) Develop a regular schedule to meet with your committee or individual committee members to discuss the data and your preliminary analyses. The purpose of this kind of meeting is not to explain your changes, but to discuss your preliminary analyses and to consider what kinds of changes you are considering before making them.
- (c) Share and discuss memos with your committee or individual committee members. An important assumption in qualitative research is that understanding comes through writing. Three major types of writing that could be shared with your committee are 1) writing field notes and memos that turn your observations into data, 2) writing preliminary analyses to develop explanations of the data, and 3) writing that develops the final analysis.

The point here is to keep your committee informed about your research process. This will help them and yourself understand why changes are necessary and logical. By keeping your committee informed, you avoid surprising them after you have moved too far along. Since changes in the original research questions and the kind of data needed are inevitable, it is best to have a plan of how to keep the people who read your original proposal informed as to why, in the end, you may have collected data differently or changed the specific research question. Some of these changes are major and require obtaining your committee's approval, whereas other changes are minor shifts and adjustments that do not dramatically change the original research intent. In either case, keeping your committee informed will also keep you aware of your own decision-making throughout the research process.

REFERENCES

- H. Include references used to write the proposal. Use APA style. Avoid using secondary sources, especially textbooks. Include methodological as well substantive topical references.

Unanimously approved by the HDFFS Faculty at the May 4, 1999, faculty meeting.