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The Research Process

If you've started to formulate research questions, you have gone a good way towards beginning a research project. The next stage is to write a plan of your intended work to act as a guide and to make sure that you think through the major issues before you begin. In this chapter we will guide you through the process of writing research plans, or proposals, stage by stage. At each stage, we detail what you need to think about.

What is a research proposal?

Once you know what you want to do your research about and have formulated some research questions, you need to think about how you will actually carry out the research. Doing a research project always involves several different activities and sorts of thinking, some sequential, some running in parallel and some iterative.

Because research is a complex process, it's always a good idea to write yourself a good plan of where you are going and what you are going to do along the way. In this way, you will have a kind of route map to guide you as you travel the research path. However, this path is a little like the roads in *Alice through the Looking Glass*: it sometimes changes direction when you are not looking. So it's important to remember that you can't rely on the map completely. You must keep revisiting it and adjusting it to your changing needs and directions.

These route maps are usually called research proposals. There are some situations in which you may well be required to write a research proposal. For example:

- If you want a place on a research degree programme.
- If you want a bursary to do a research degree.
- In some universities it will form part of a progression exam on a research degree programme.

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- If you are looking for funding for your research, however small, from your own university or some external funding body.
- In some cases, especially when the research is in collaboration with or investigating an external body, that body will need to see the proposal in order to decide whether or not to give you access and assistance to do your research.
- If you want your employer to give you time to do the research; for example, you may want a reduced teaching load or a sabbatical or paid time off from a non-university job to allow you to do the research.
- You may need to get formal approval from your university that your proposed research conforms to certain ethical guidelines. In order to gain this approval, you will need to present a proposal.

In any case, even if you are not required to write a research proposal, it's a really good idea to do one for your own benefit. Writing a research proposal will:

- Help you to be sure that you have a viable research project.
- Provide a clear 'route map' for the research.
- Enable you to identify any possible problems and issues with the proposed project.
- Assist you in choosing an appropriate supervisor or mentor who knows the area in which you are interested. (More on choosing mentors later.)
- Help your mentor or supervisor support you, as they will know what it is you are trying to do.
- Give a project a momentum of its own, almost a material form.
- Give you a reference point to monitor your progress as the project develops. This can give you a lot of confidence and a big boost to your morale.

Writing research proposals

What we will do now is take you through the generic stages and sections of a research proposal. Whatever your discipline or research area, you will need to give consideration to the matters we are about to describe. However, the language you use to address these may differ according to your disciplinary home, as will the relative weightings you give to the various aspects. Also, your proposal will need to be tailored

to the specific expectations of its various audiences, such as research funding bodies, PhD committees and so on. This is discussed further in *Winning and Managing Research Funding*. For your own purposes, your research proposal is likely to include a section on each of the following areas:

- Background and rationale: the ‘so what?’ -ness of the research topic.
- Research questions: what, precisely, are you trying to find out?
- Available literature: the public story so far.
- Theoretical frameworks: the e-word and the o-word.
- Methods: your investigative and analytical techniques.
- Ethical considerations: will your research do harm?
- Time scales: establishing phases and deadlines.
- Dissemination: getting it out and about.

Writing your proposal will be an iterative process, especially in relation to your reading and framing of questions, but remember that, like a lot of academic writing, proposals tend to read best if they are presented in a linear way. The order in which we have outlined the sections is not the only logical order possible and you will have to decide what works for your proposal, always remembering that what you present must be clear, coherent and cogent. Remember, also, that in an actual research process the various stages of research run concurrently, iteratively and sequentially.

Background and rationale: the ‘so what?’ -ness of the research topic

Now is the time to go back to your hardback notebook, as the notes that you made on your research topic and the ‘so what?’ -ness of it are about to come into their own.

This section needs to explain the background, issues and the ‘so what?’ -ness of your proposed research. As we explained before, the best research issues usually start because someone has been curious about the world immediately around them or has had their interest stimulated by something they have seen, heard or read. You might care to start with your own experiences, describing how it is that you came to be interested in the subject – a brief ‘autobiography of the question’.

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The importance or ‘so what?’-ness of the proposed research will lie in the contribution you think it can make to knowledge, to intellectual and theoretical debates, to policy and practice in particular areas – in sum, to our understanding of the world. You need to use this section to convince the readers of the proposal (and yourself) that your project is worth the time and trouble.

Research questions: what, precisely, are you trying to find out?

It is essential to formulate your research questions very clearly and explicitly in your proposal. If you have more than one principal question, you may want to number them. If you have subsidiary questions, they should come immediately after the principal question they relate to. It is necessary to have an answerable question that is clear and sufficiently well defined/focused for you to do the research implied within an appropriate time-frame and the available resources.

If you work in an area in which you are required to put your questions in the form of formal hypotheses, these need to be very clearly stated and numbered. The usual convention is to number them as H_1 , H_2 , H_3 and so on.

Available literature: the public story so far

In developing your research topic and questions you will already have engaged with the literature sufficiently to be able to give a good account of what is known about the answers to your questions and which theories and concepts you expect to find particularly useful. The proposal itself will contain only a relatively short section on the existing literature, but what you write there will need to demonstrate that you know what you are doing and have a good idea of what has been done before.

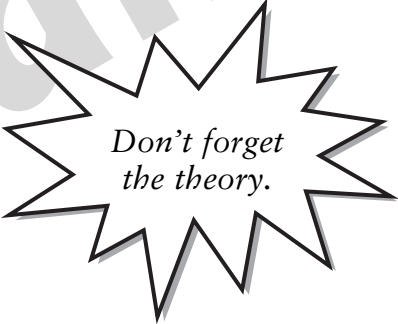
To reiterate, this is *not* the same as reviewing the literature to find a gap, which, as we explained above, is a bit of a trap for unwary researchers. You will already have a fairly clear idea of what sort of thing you want to look at and therefore your visit to the literature isn’t to find a topic. Rather, the proposal needs to make two points clear on the subject of literature.

- First, you need to talk about the work of others that provides empirical data and/or creative insights that contribute to answering your questions. This will demonstrate that you have refined your questions, and that the answers you eventually produce are likely to be a real contribution to knowledge. You will be able to show what further evidence you need to collect to answer your research questions more fully.
- Second, reference to the literature will enable you to pinpoint those theories and concepts useful to you in trying to make sense of your own research.

Most important, you must make a convincing case as to why your research would create valuable and useful knowledge that builds upon or challenges existing work in the field.

Theoretical frameworks: the e-word and the o-word

One of the problems we frequently see in research proposals is the absence of any explicit theoretical framework. Research without a theoretical framework is description and does not qualify as academic research or as a contribution to knowledge. We cannot say it too often or too loudly.



*Don't forget
the theory.*

One of the biggest reasons why people avoid talking or writing about theory is that they feel excluded by the language which people use. In particular, it may take a long time to be confident in the use of commonly used words in academic writing (but not in the rest of the world) such as 'epistemology' and 'ontology'.

Debbie, Rebecca and Jane all admit, to each other and now to you, that when they were novice researchers they had to return to the

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dictionary many times to clarify their understanding of ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’. Here is our best attempt to explain them in readily understandable ways.

Epistemology

Here’s one of the many dictionary definitions that we find useful:

‘The philosophical theory of knowledge, which seeks to define it, distinguish its principal varieties, identify its sources, and establish its limits’

(from *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*)

What this means to us is that epistemology is a theoretical framework for making sense of how the world works or some aspect of how the world works. It’s about what counts as knowledge in your world view. For example, all three of us are feminists and we see feminism as an epistemology. What this means, in practice, is that the lens through which we view the world is shaped by certain understandings about gender, power and the position of women. So an epistemology may be defined as a particular sort of lens that allows you to make sense of some aspect of the world around you in a particular way. Different lenses (different epistemologies) will obviously give different views. No epistemology can give you a total view of the world, because they only allow you to see from particular perspectives. So it’s useful to have a whole range of epistemologies available. Foucault conceptualised this as a theory toolbox.

Everybody, in daily life, no matter what they do, makes sense of the world according to their understandings and theories about it. These may take the form of religious beliefs or common sense or cultural values or social norms and they may not be explicit or apparent even to the person themselves. What distinguishes academic research epistemologies from these everyday epistemologies is that they are expected to be explicit, rigorously defined and robust. That is why we call them theories. You cannot make sense of your data without an epistemology/theory. ▶

► **Ontology**

If 'epistemology' is about what counts as knowledge, 'ontology' is concerned with the nature of the knower. It is about how our place in the world, identity and embodied experiences impact on the way in which we see the world and, consequentially, the epistemologies that we find meaningful and useful. It follows that our ontological perspective will have a significant impact on which epistemologies we are drawn to and how we use them. We've noticed that the early authors in new fields of enquiry such as gender, race, sexuality and disability are often ontologically steeped in the issues they are investigating: they are women, ethnic minority people, lesbian or gay people, or people with mental or physical impairments.

In your 'autobiography of the question' you will have begun, either implicitly or possibly explicitly, to make connections between your own ontology and epistemology.

We do not believe that any knowledge is 'objective' or that researchers can take a god-like stance as knowers. It is therefore important to be clear, up-front and honest about your ontology and epistemology in your research. This will enable your readers to understand where you are coming from and to make a judgement on the quality of your work based on that understanding. Saying who you are and where you are coming from will not stop people who genuinely believe in the possibility of 'objective truth' from criticising you for being partial and subjective. But at least, in contrast to them, you will have been honest about your subjectivity and partiality. And remember, subjectivity is not and should never be synonymous with lack of rigour. Being clear about your frameworks is part of that rigour.

You should therefore use your proposal to clarify what theoretical resources you will be drawing on and why. There should, therefore, be clear linkages between this discussion and your discussion of the literature. In particular, you need to explain the relevance and usefulness of your theoretical framework to your proposed project. You need to give particular consideration, at this point, to the issues that

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loom large within your chosen theoretical framework and how they will affect the research process.

Methodology and methods: your investigative and analytical techniques

Definitions of methodology differ confusingly and vary greatly between disciplines. However, a reasonable definition is that it is the package of epistemology, ontology and method that shapes and informs your research project. People in different disciplines have different methodological approaches:

Methods are the ways in which you go about collecting, locating or creating the material you are going to analyse and the associated practical techniques. For example:

- A cultural theorist might use auto/biography, stories and myths, novels, poetry and plays, visual images, films and television programmes, newspapers and so on.
- People in the creative arts often produce a work of art, a play or an exhibition and write an exegesis of it.
- An art historian might use both cultural artefacts and archival material about the people who created and consumed them.
- An economist might garner government statistical data and use this to construct a model to generate research results.
- A sociologist might go out and interview people, participate in some aspect of their lives or distribute survey questionnaires.

It's difficult to find a collective name for all the different kinds of material mentioned here. In the social sciences, it tends to be called 'data' and, for convenience, we will use this term. But remember that we are using the term inclusively.

Finally, there are research traditions that don't rely on data, even as broadly defined. These are the types of research – such as pure mathematics, logic and some branches of philosophy and theology – which are purely conceptual and directed at the resolution of abstract problems.

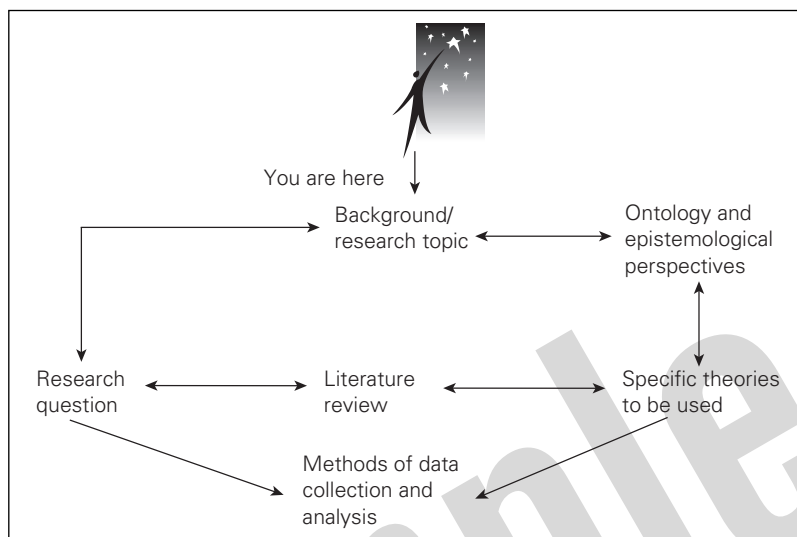


FIGURE 3 Processes and linkages in research proposals

We've already explained that the proposal mirrors the research process itself and therefore, like research, your proposal must represent a coherent and integrated process. The questions you are seeking to address, together with your epistemological perspectives, will inform the methods you choose. The methods you decide to use should enable you collect and analyse the data that you need in order to answer your questions using your chosen epistemological perspectives. Figure 3 gives a visual image of the kinds of processes and linkages discussed so far that should be explicit in your proposal.

To summarise, this section of a research proposal should consist of a detailed description and justification of how you will actually go about collecting and analysing your data. That is, what data will you collect, how will you collect it and how will it be analysed? You need to justify why these are the best methods for your question(s).

Use your imagination in solving the problem of how to collect the data that you need. People often resort to what seems like the simplest, easiest and even the most 'objective' method of data collection. This is not necessarily the best method for answering the questions you are trying to ask. Methods such as questionnaires, for example, may evoke feelings of fatigue and *ennui* among the target recipients, especially if those recipients have no empathy with, or particular interest in, what you are researching. On the other hand, where people feel strongly

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about an issue a questionnaire may be a very good source of data. At Rebecca's university, for example, a long and detailed questionnaire survey to all staff about the research culture in the institution produced a very healthy and very rapid response rate. Rebecca attributes this to the fact that staff were either antithetical to research or deeply committed to it. Either way, everyone was very keen to have their say.

Helen and James demonstrated admirable ingenuity and imagination in designing their data collection methods.

Helen, a marketing academic, was researching people's food shopping and consumption habits. She needed to know what they bought and how they used it. Rather than simply send out a questionnaire or carry out an interview based on memory, she asked her respondents to write a list of the foodstuffs in their fridges and cupboards. She used the list as the basis of a guided discussion with the respondents.

James was doing research in cultural studies/sociology on how children form their identities, including how they see 'home' and the part it plays in who they think they are. As a starting point, he gave the children a disposable camera and asked them to take photographs of 'home' (that is, whatever 'home' meant to them). When he had developed the photographs (including several of front doors and pets) he used them to discuss with the children why those particular images meant 'home' to them.

Practical matters such as whether or not you will get physical access to the data you need or whether you have the practical skills you need to access it are real considerations in research design. Will you have enough time to collect the data required? Will your data collection requirements stretch the goodwill of those on whom you depend for access?

In 1945 the border between Germany and Poland was redrawn and some formerly German territory became part of Poland. As a result, many of the regional government records relating to the formerly German territories passed into Polish archives and were often catalogued in Polish. Cathy

- ▶ was a fluent German-speaker but her Polish was non-existent. Access to these crucial records was therefore dependent not only on obtaining funding for research trips to Poland, but also on learning enough Polish to interrogate the catalogues and negotiate with Polish archivists.

In this section, it is absolutely essential to describe not only how you will collect your data but also how you will analyse it. Data analysis is often scantily done or left out completely. This seriously weakens many proposals.

Data analysis needs two things: first, an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view and make sense of the material collected; second, appropriate tools and techniques to organise, categorise, sift and manage it. You will need to refer back to your theoretical framework and your research questions to be absolutely sure that you explain how you will use and address them in your analysis of your data.

Explain what skills you will need and whether you have them or how you will acquire them. Think about the particular software or other tools available (see later in this book), and how you will acquire the skills to use them. It's a good idea to visualise yourself sitting down with your carefully collected data and asking 'What do I do now? How do I make sense of all of this?'

Ethical considerations: will your research do harm?

Later in this book we will give detailed consideration to ethical practice in research. For the proposal, you will need to ensure that your reader is confident that you have thought carefully about the ethical dimensions of your proposed research and, where appropriate, that you intend to comply with all relevant ethical guidelines and procedures. Sometimes research may have no obvious ethical issues attached to it. However, we think that research completely devoid of any ethical considerations or consequences whatsoever is a virtual impossibility.

Time scales: establishing phases and deadlines

It is important to map out a reasonable schedule of your work so that you can monitor your progress and manage your project effectively. If your project is externally funded, bear in mind that your funders may also ask for a time schedule and even ask you to report against it. Start

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with your intended finishing date and do not underestimate the amount of time that it takes to polish your draft writing into a finished product.

In Table 3, we show the timeline of a real project involving a number of researchers. On this project the researchers had to juggle a number of conflicting time constraints. These included the time scale that the organisation under investigation imposed, the need to use research assistants and also the proposers' own busy schedules. Note that many of the activities are concurrent.

Making an impact: getting it out and about

You need to make a clear statement in your proposal about how you intend your work to have an impact. We deal with this issue in much more detail in *Building Networks*. Making an impact may involve three different sorts of dissemination of your research output.

To other academics

A key indicator of the worth of much research is whether it is publishable in refereed academic journals, as an academic book or as a chapter in an academic book. You may like to give some consideration at this stage to what sorts of things may be publishable and where you would like them to appear.

Also think about which conferences you may wish to give papers at. This may involve conferences that will give you high academic visibility, which can help with your career prospects, but just as important is to find smaller conferences where you can have a good and detailed discussion about your work and get constructive feedback that will help you improve your papers and other writing. If you are seeking funding for your project, you may be able to ask for money to go to these conferences as part of the research funds.

This kind of dissemination is especially important if you wish to pursue a career as an academic in a university.

To relevant non-academic users and beneficiaries of your research

These may include people who were involved in the research process as gatekeepers and/or respondents, possibly the people who funded your

TABLE 3 Women's participation in research activities

Date	Task	Responsibilities
2002 May	Advertise researcher posts internally Submission of proposal and consent procedures to university ethics committee	PMG
25 June	Interviews for researcher posts	
1 September	Project starts	RA
September–December	Initial literature review (reading of the literature continues throughout the project)	RA
September–December	Analysis of secondary data on women in science	RA
September–October	Design of research instruments	RA, PMG
October	Advisory group meeting to advise on research design and access	
End October	Submission of survey questionnaire and interview schedule to ethics committee	RA, PMG
November	Distribution of survey questionnaire	RA
December–Early January 2003	Survey data entry	Casual employee(s)
December–January 2003	Interview recruitment	RA
January	Survey data analysis	RA, PMG
February–June	Interviews	RA
May–July	Interview data analysis	RA, PMG
July–September	Preparation of report	RA, PMG
September	Draft report to advisory group	PMG
October	Dissemination of report Seminar to present findings	RA, PMG
2003–4	Conference attendance Preparation/submission of papers for publication	RA, PMG

PMG Project Management Group. RA Research Associate.

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research and, indeed, anyone else or any other groups who might find your work of use or interest.

The form of such dissemination may include a workshop for policy users, articles in appropriate professional journals or newspapers, a popular book, magazine articles or public lectures. For instance, if you were conducting research into children and young people, you might want to hold a special conference for such groups of people and include it in the costings and dissemination strategy.

Through the popular media

This means of dissemination can reach wider audiences and, if well done, can be effective and very beneficial to your personal research profile and that of your university. However, media exposure is fraught with dangers and we would strongly advise you to seek professional help, support and training in how to deal with journalists. Your institution's press office should be able to help in this regard. A good way of attracting media attention is by producing good press releases. Again, your institution's press office, if there is one, should be able to guide you in this. If you anticipate that your research will attract media interest, make sure that there are plans for dealing with it in your proposal, especially if that interest is likely to be hostile.

And finally ...

When you have done all this and have a complete draft research proposal, get other people, your peers as well as those more experienced than you, to read it and comment. This will help you to revise the proposal before you proceed further. That way, you will ensure that you start off on a firm footing.