

Writing Research Proposals

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What is a Research Proposal?

A research proposal is the written plan for the research project. Proposals are written to enable a researcher to design and organise his/her project. For the researcher themselves, they are essential for ensuring that careful consideration is given to why the research is needed, and to what methods will best suit the purpose of the study. Proposals are also developed so that the study can be reviewed:

- by an ethics committee for approval
- by a funding body who may need to assess whether the study is worthy of financial support.

A research proposal typically includes the following:

- Background and rationale for the study
- Review of relevant literature
- Aims, objectives and expected outcomes for the study
- Methods
- Proposed budget

Where do I start to develop a research proposal?

The starting point for developing a research proposal is to identify your research problem or question. Ideas for research can come from many sources, including issues arising from your day to day practice, or questions arising from the nursing literature. Once you have some idea of what you wish to research, it is important that you start by undertaking a literature search, and reading some of the work that has been written in the area you have selected. It is also helpful at this stage to talk with others to help refine your research problem, and to identify resources which may help you in addressing this question. You should also give careful consideration at this stage as to the feasibility of your research idea. It may be better to start by breaking down your research question into a series of questions, or identifying the various components or stages which may be inherent in answering your research question.

A helpful tip in starting to develop your proposal - allow yourself plenty of time.

What should I include in a research proposal?

The overall structure of a research proposal is fairly standard. However, different groups (e.g. funding bodies, ethics committees etc) may have particular requirements, so it is essential that you read carefully any specific instructions provided by the target group for the proposal.

The typical elements of a research proposal include:

Statement of the problem and Objectives of the Study:

This section answers the question *What do you want to achieve?*

The purpose of any research study is to address a research problem or question. This section should therefore include a concise statement about the desired outcomes that will be achieved in conducting the research. While the section may begin with a general statement of purpose, it is also important to include specific aims or objectives. Ideally, these should be clear and specific, achievable, and merit study.

Significance/Relevance of the problem:

This is a brief section which should answer the question: *Why is this research needed?*

This section should describe the importance of the research to patients, the nursing profession, to health care and/or society. It should be well argued and convincing, and should clearly show the importance of this study to patient care.

Background to the study:

This section continues to answer the question: *Why is this research needed?*

It usually builds on the previous section to include a more detailed review of other research in the subject area. It should clearly show how the research builds on what has already been done or why further research is needed in a similar area, and should strengthen the argument as to why the research is important. The length and depth of the review will depend upon the purpose of the proposal.

Methods:

This section should answer the question: *What is to be done, on who, how and where?*

The methods you chose should be relevant to the question you are trying to answer, and should be feasible (given time, resource and ethical considerations). It should generally include statements about:

- study design
- setting and sample
- data collection procedures
- data analysis procedures

It is important that the methods are rigorous enough so that they achieve the aims of the study. If you are not an experienced researcher, it is advisable at this stage to refer to texts on research methods or to consult others to help you to design your research methods. It is also helpful in this section to provide a timeline for each stage of the research with target dates.

At this point, you should also consider any ethical considerations that may be associated with your research, and demonstrate that you have given adequate consideration to these.

Budget

This section should answer the question: *What are the costs associated with this study?*

A budget for research can include costs of salary for research personnel, equipment (e.g. tape recorders), or maintenance costs (e.g. stationery, travel, mail, telephone costs etc). It is important in this section to ensure that the budget is sufficient to achieve the objectives of the study, is justifiable, and demonstrates accountability.

Some helpful hints - if your study requires resources beyond what is being offered by a particular funding body, you may wish to revise your proposal so that it addresses only a selected component of your proposed study. Alternatively, you may wish to include detail about how the remaining resources for the successful completion of the project will be obtained.

Some General Points about Style

When others read your proposal, they should agree that it is:

- clear
- coherent
- convincing
- concise
- complete

What criteria are used to review my proposal?

A reviewer will generally ask the following questions:

- Is the research well planned?
- Is the research important?
- Is the applicant aware of other research in the area?
- Does the applicant have the ability to complete the project?
- Is the support requested appropriate for the project?

Some Further Tips for Writing Proposals (Adapted from the Oncology Nursing Society “Grant Writing Tips”):

- It is wise to consider working as part of a team. Find others who are experts in your content area, or who have the research skills necessary for successful completion of the project.
- If you are an experienced researcher, consider consulting others on areas which are beyond your expertise
- Use others to help you critique your proposal. Proposals can be strengthened by incorporating suggestions in the final draft. A useful strategy is to have others critique your proposal in its early, formative stages before you become too invested in a specific approach.
- Use the grant application and instructions as your road map. Read and follow them carefully - in the beginning, in the middle, and at the very end - to be sure that you have followed the rules and have not forgotten anything that pertains to your study
- A full scale study is often proposed when a pilot study would be far more appropriate
- Be sure to make a compelling case regarding why the study is significant to cancer nursing even if the relevance may seem obvious to you
- Make your presentation pleasant to look at and to read. Use a clean style font no less than 12 point. Use subheadings, and other creative approaches to present your work, but ensure that you follow the guidelines required by the funding body
- Write clearly in an organised fashion using active voice and non-sexist language. Typographical errors and misspellings reflect poorly on your attention to detail
- Only request allowable budget expenses. Justify your budget carefully. The reviewer should be able to comprehend why the expenditure is needed and how you reached each calculation

- Read and critically evaluate your own work. Ultimately, your proposal must show that your research is significant, do-able with the resources, budget and time frame allowed, as well as scientifically sound.
- Check the integrity of your proposal for your own purposes. Are the various components consistent and appropriate? Are there any holes or gaps in the project which may result in a fatal design flaw? Have you adequately developed a thread to connect each specific aim to the other sections of your proposal? Have you lost anything or have you added something this is unrelated to your aims?

Some Final Thoughts for Success

- Consider the advantages of collaboration - it can enhance the skills available to conduct the study, can improve the quality and outcomes of the study, and can make the research much more fun
- Ask others to review your proposal - the critical eye of colleagues and friends can ensure that the project is clear, coherent, complete and convincing
- Recognise the importance of good communication with key players - the successful conduct on your research will depend on the co-operation of many; identify who the key players are and talk with them at the outset
- Remind yourself why you want to do this - the reason we do this is to find out more about how we can care for people with cancer; research can also be professionally rewarding

Good luck!