

Structural Outline of a Research Proposal

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A research proposal, whether prepared for a Thesis or as a research grant application, or as a Scholarly Project in one's ongoing work, is an explication of each aspect of the proposed study. Its first section, known as the conceptual phase of research, conveys the topic and phenomenon (research problem) that will be studied, expresses the investigator's conceptual framework for understanding the research problem and that will guide the proposed study and states the purpose(s) that are to be fulfilled at the close of the study. Its second section, known as methods or procedure and as plan for the empirical phase, contains the plan for conducting the proposed study.

Thus, a completed research proposal is the thought and action plan that the investigator puts forth and that enables others to judge the appropriateness of the investigator proceeding with the study. Only after the proposal and the methods to protect human subjects are approved (never before), may the data production proceed.

The following overview of content of a research proposal was developed to provide guidelines for the new investigator. As with any guidelines, those provided below are intended to be used with reasoned thought. The specific content of each section will be influenced by the topic being studied; by the knowledge the investigator has derived from previous research, other writings, and personal background; and by the investigator's own creativity.

A completed research proposal, in general, answers questions of: On what knowledge base is the study built? What is the relevance of the proposed study to nursing's knowledge base? Specifically, what does the investigator intend to accomplish through the study? How will the investigator proceed to produce data pertinent to the study's purposes? What is the plan for deriving meanings from the data to fulfill the study's purpose(s)?

- I. **CONCEPTUAL PHASE:** The three parts of this component of a research Proposal are discussed below.
 - A. **Problem (also known as Objective).** Expresses the overall objective or long-term goal of the proposed research. It introduces the topic and specifies the issue or concern which provoked the study and, thus, on which further knowledge is needed. The problem usually is preceded by a brief general introduction that serves to establish the topic and to place the research problem in a context of meaning. The research problem is the reference (anchor) point for the conceptual framework. Within the context of the introduction and the expression of the research problem, the significance of the study is conveyed.
 - B. **Conceptual framework.** The conceptual framework is the investigator's organization of knowledge that gives substantive meaning to the research problem and that will be used to direct the study. It is based upon a critical and thoughtful study of the literature that has bearing on the research problem. It is not a review of literature per se. Rather, from study of the literature bearing on the research problem, the investigator first gleans what the state of knowledge is about that problem, including what concepts have been used for its examination and how the problem has been studied by others. That state of knowledge may point in the direction of need for new or further description of one or more concepts pertinent to understanding the problem, for search for relationships or differences between two or more concepts, or for manipulation so to discover if causal relations may exist between concepts. Thus, the conceptual framework is the investigator's synthesis of selected literature that has been reviewed and that is judged by the investigator to be pertinent to this study. It is the investigator's image of the current state of knowledge about the problem, the current state of the art for studying that problem, and it contains the reasoning (rationale) underlying the purpose(s) and empirical methods.
 - C. **Purpose(s) (also known as Specific Aim - some research text refer to this as Problem).** The purpose is the criterion for completion of the study. It is what the investigator purposes to do or to accomplish by the end of the study (e.g. to describe, to determine if differences or relationships exist..., to test the hypothesis that...). The form of the purpose (declarative statement, question, or research hypothesis) must be congruent with the underlying conceptualization of the research problem as presented in the conceptual framework.
- II. **METHODOLOGY (PLAN FOR EMPIRICAL PHASE):** This component of a research proposal contains information about how the investigator plans to produce data pertinent to each variable expressed in the purpose(s) and to analyze those data. The topics that need to be addressed are detailed below. Their sequence and content will vary by topic,

by state of knowledge about that topic of study and the investigator's judgment.

- A. **Data Producing Instruments.** Develop a description of the empirical indicators that will be used to reflect each variable expressed in the specific aim(s). Convey the potential of those indicators to achieve the purpose intended for them, e.g., what estimates of validity and reliability have been found through past usage of the indicator? What is the relation of the indicator to the conceptual meaning of the variable it is to represent? If constructed for this study, what pilot work has been done with the instrument(s) to determine its appropriateness for use? If a mechanical instrument is used, how will calibration be used to insure accurate recordings?
- B. **Design.** Describe the type of design to be used and the rationale for its selection. Presentation of design should convey its congruence with the conceptualization of the problem being studied, the specific aim(s) or purpose(s) to be accomplished and the sampling plan.
- C. **Sample.** Develop the means to be used for selection of the cases pertinent to the study, e.g., the subjects (human or animal), specimens, groups, or other units being studied. Discuss the sampling design to be used. State the proposed sample size and give rationale for that number. Express the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of cases in the sample.

Methods of Procedure. How will data production proceed? Include (to the extent it is pertinent) such topics as methods for gaining entry to a setting, what subjects will be told, what subjects will be asked to do, and how subject attrition (if study is longitudinal) will be handled. The procedure section can be thought of as walking through the various steps in their proposed sequence.

- III. **Protection of Human Subjects.** Identify all potential risks, substantial stress, and invasion of privacy to potential subjects. Identify the relation between those risks and the benefits to be gained by the study. Identify all procedures for reduction of risks and protection of rights of human subjects to privacy and informed consent. (In addition to this section within the proposal, a separate application for review of protection of human subjects is prepared by the investigator {University of Washington Form #13-11.}. This application is to be submitted to the student's supervisory committee for review and action with the completed research proposal. Subsequent to approval of the proposal and the human subjects application by the supervisory committee, the Human Subjects Application-U.W. #13-11 is submitted to the Department's Human Subjects Review Committee. This Committee reviews the application and recommends action on it to the Department Chair.

Methods of Analysis. Discuss and illustrate how data will be analyzed in relation to the specific aim(s). If statistical procedures (descriptive and/or inferential) will be used, identify the expected measures and the reason(s) for their choice in relation to the type of data anticipated and the specific aim(s) to be served. If a qualitative type of analysis is proposed, describe how it will be carried out.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

- A. **Bibliography**
- B. **Appendices.** These include materials which lend further clarity to the proposal, e.g., copy of a proposed interview schedule, consent form.
- C. **Time Frame.*** Develop a time plan for data production, analysis and preparation of the final report. Show month by month time required to accomplish each component of the study.
- D. **Budget.*** Show costs for equipment, supplies, computer time, travel and other categories of expense necessary for the conduct of the proposed study.

*Note: Items C and D above may or may not be included formally within the proposal. Regardless, anticipation of these points is helpful toward developing a plan that is feasible to accomplish.