

How to Write a Good Research Proposal

(A Practical Guide to Beginner Researchers)

This note intends to help beginner researchers, especially from SIRDs and ETCs, when they submit research proposals to NIRDPR, Hyderabad. This aims at being a practical help. I hope this can serve as a point of reference to get clarity on what and what should go into a research proposal so that your proposal is acceptable to a reviewer. The procedures regarding budgeting and the rounds of proposal defense you should be aware of are not covered here. For that, you'd better refer to the Office Order in this regard. This short-note is intended to be a practical guide on how to write a good research proposal - technically.

How to use this guide: When you craft (draft!) your research proposal keep this guide as a reference point, and constantly come back to this paper to verify if what you write is in conformity with what is suggested in this guide. This will help you with the structure and what should go below each heading and sub-heading. Proper structuring and providing all necessary details are essential in a research proposal. But, you should know that a good writing is, in fact, a craft work.

Title: Go for clear, concise, unambiguous title. Your title should indicate specific content and context of the problem you wish to explore as clearly as possible.

Background

- Introduce the theme (not more than 500 words, or maximum one page)
- Literature Review (go for a minimum of 4 – 5 studies – as recent as possible). The purpose of reviewing the existing literature on your research topic is to get acquainted with what earlier researchers have done about your topic; what questions they have attempted answering; what research methods they have adopted; what their studies reveal; what questions they seem to have not attempted unraveling etc. This gives (a) research gap, (b) research questions, and (c) hypotheses etc. This is an important step in research. This is not a general search, but a focused one, with purposes mentioned above. Please bear this in mind.

- Research Questions: What other researchers have not attempted answering, which your study shall unravel. This, in principle, should flow from the literature review. Research questions indicate the research gap, which your study shall close by adding new knowledge. List out 3 – 4 research questions you want to answer through your research.

Need of the Study

- Why answering these questions are important. In other words, what is the importance of this study? How this study shall add to the existing knowledge in the sector, or settle / clarify some of the unresolved issues bothering a given sector of development. Reviewer of your proposal must feel: *‘Yes, research into this area is absolutely necessary’*.

Objectives

What you hope to achieve through this research. You can have one overarching objective, and 2 or 3 specific objectives. Objectives generally are ‘to’ statements: for example, to develop....to find out....to identify.....to explore....to measure.....to describe....to compare...to determine.... etc. Once you complete writing objectives of your study, please check (i) if it is in line with your research questions, and (ii) the title of your research.

Hypothesis

A hypothesis is an assumption about relations between variables. It’s a tentative explanation of the research problem or a guess about the research outcome. If your study would follow quantitative research methods or mixed methods research procedure, it is good to have a set of hypotheses. Hypotheses bring focus to a research problem, but are not essential for a study. Qualitative research studies need not have any hypotheses. Please bear in mind that there must be a basis to bring hypotheses into a study. Hypotheses cannot come floating in thin air. Hypotheses emerge during the course of your literature review, or from actual development practice. A hypothesis contains variables that are measurable, and specifies how they are related. A statement that lacks variables or that does not explain how the variables are related to each other is no hypothesis in scientific sense. It is good to go ahead with (a few focused) research questions only, if testing of hypotheses is going to be problematic.

Research Design

This is basically a blueprint for your study. It explains (and justifies) **how** you shall find answers to your research questions. In other words, what is your research plan to move from questions to answers? What methodology, methods and tools you shall use to answer your research questions. This is required because the strength of *what* you find largely rests on *how* it was found. If your research procedure is wrong, your findings are not going to be valid. Your findings become questionable.

At this section, you specify (i) concepts and variables in the selected problem; (ii) Operationalising concepts which help in measuring variables; and the (iii) choice of method of data collection. Therefore, this step requires a lot of thinking as to what data you need; what are the sources of your data; how you shall collect the data; what tools you shall use for collecting data; what can be your sample size; what is going to be the proportion of quantitative and qualitative data etc. There is enormous variety of study designs and you need to be familiar with some of the most common ones both in quantitative and qualitative approaches. Please read ‘Research Design’ chapter online (You can get help from: methods.sagepub.com). This section in your research proposal should contain the following sub-headings.

- ***Research Approach:*** There are many approaches to studying a research problem. They include: exploratory, explanatory, diagnostic, random trial control etc. You need to recognize which approach would be most appropriate for the problem in hand. This is about *connecting research questions to data*. You must also decide if this is going to be quantitative or qualitative or mixed methods study.
- ***Sources of Data:*** Who are your respondents, and how will you find them – personally or through e-mail / on-line survey? What sampling procedure you shall follow? What primary data are required? Explain the sample size, and how do you determine your sample size? What is your justification for determining this sample size? What secondary data are required? What are the sources of your secondary data?
- ***Study Area:*** How many states or districts / blocks / Gram Panchayats you plan to cover in your study? What is your justification for selecting these districts / Gram Panchayats? Justify how scientific / unbiased is your selection of the study area / sample units. Here you need to bear in mind if you would be able to cover all the samples within the duration you are given to complete this study.

- Sampling Procedure: This is a tricky area. Bear in mind that your sample selection should be representative of the population you wish to talk about in your study. This is about generalizability. A reviewer should get an impression that you have been unbiased. The easiest way to determine your sample size is to use one of the on-line sample size calculators. See for instance, www.surveysystem.com
- Methods & Tools for Data Collection: Survey method, experimental method, field study method, case study method, document analysis method. What tool you shall use for data collection – Questionnaire? Interview Schedule? Observation-check list and so on.
- Data Analysis procedure: How do you plan to summarise and present your data – whether you will be doing statistical analysis like in a quantitative study or thematic analysis like in a qualitative study? How do you plan to test your hypotheses, if you have stated some hypotheses?
- Scope and Limitations of this study: Scope or delimitation refers to the boundaries of your study. In other words, how your study was deliberately narrowed down by conscious exclusions and inclusions in order to (i) achieve focus, and (ii) avoid wavering. ‘Limitations’ is about the elements or certain components of the theme of your research you ought to have covered in your study, but did not do so. Without being apologetic or defensive you must state the limitations clearly. You can also put across how do you ensure credibility of the results despite limitations? This can also be stated.

Outcome Expected

What do you expect to be the outcome of your study? You can come out with a research report; you can come out with a handbook or manual based on the insights you gained in the study; you can prepare a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for a Gram Panchayat to take up drinking water delivery system or waste management system, for instance. You can conduct a dissemination seminar inviting all the officials concerned in order to disseminate the results of your study. This will also serve as another way of validating the findings of your study.

Research Team

Sl.No	Name & Designation of the Research Team Members	Educational Qualification	Institutional Affiliation
1.			
2.			

Detailed Time

Research Activity	Start date & month	End date & month
Review of Literature		
Construction of data collection tools		
Data Collection		
Data Entry		
Data Analysis		
Writing up		
Finalise the Study & submit		

Financial Budget

Please Refer to Office Order in this regard.

Further Reading

If you wish to read just one book (cover to cover) on Research Methods, I shall suggest:

Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners – by Ranjit Kumar (Sage Publications, New Delhi). Available on Amazon.in (also in NIRDPR Library)

If you want books at slightly next level, you can read:

Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches - by Keith F Punch (Sage Publications, New Delhi)
Available on Amazon.in

The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project – by Zina O’Leary (Sage Publications, New Delhi)
Available on Amazon.in