Introduction to Writing a Research Proposal

WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

A research proposal is a <u>study plan</u> that is to be followed in the course of a research effort. In formal terms the proposal is a series of statements which are designed to carry forward an action for the purpose of testing a specific set of hypothesis.

WHY WRITE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

There are many reasons for writing a research proposal. Perhaps most important is that a research proposal is a necessary document to convince funding sources that a project is worthy of their attention and their money! However, a written proposal also forces a researcher to organize his efforts with regard to the <u>time</u> and <u>resources</u> necessary to complete a research project.

<u>STEP ONE : IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM</u>

The first and usually the hardest step in writing a research proposal is getting the inspiration. Every proposal begins or at least should begin with an idea.

Begin by writing down your thoughts about an idea. Talk to as many people as you can who are knowledgeable in the area of your idea - but don't limit yourself to experts. Discuss your idea with anyone who is willing to listen!

In the development of your idea it goes without saying that you must read a great deal. Other researchers have developed material in your idea and can contribute to yours.

It is important not to hurry the development of your idea. Be sure to allow for a substantial lapse of time from its origination to the time when you start to write your proposal.

Translating that idea into an organized goal-oriented project requires a thorough analysis of the project. That process should include the following steps:

1. Statement of the problem or problems.
2. Consideration of ways to resolve them.
3. Designing a project to resolve the problem/problems.

4. Determining the necessary personnel, resources, and funds
      to carry out the project.
   5. Identifying potential sources of funding.
   6. Evaluating the project's credibility, relevance and need.

Many projects inevitably fade away during this analysis stage. They may be faulted, technically flawed or lacking in general merit, timeliness or credibility.

STEP TWO : FINDING A FUNDING SOURCE

The task of determining where to send a proposal is a major research challenge. It is extremely important to make preliminary contact with your potential source of funding to determine whether or not they are willing to even consider your application. A common mistake is to prepare a proposal without shaping it to the special needs and requirements of a particular funding target.

Once you have identified a potential funding agency find out exactly what application procedures are to be followed. Applications for grants usually require completion of an application form that covers both program and budget information.

STEP THREE : WRITING THE PROPOSAL

The secret to writing a high quality research proposal is good organization. In fact many would argue that proposal writing is ninety-nine percent preparation.

In the actual preparation for the writing task it is important that you allow yourself fairly large blocks of uninterrupted time (2-4 hours). You should have all your materials at hand, especially your notes, references, articles and writing materials. Once all the arrangements are made, the final step in getting ready is the setting of target dates for finishing various phases of the proposal writing task.

A. Research Proposal Outline

The beginning proposal writer is frequently frustrated by not knowing where to begin the writing task. One answer to this difficulty is to prepare a research proposal outline. An outline is as an aid to guiding your efforts towards a document that will eventually be used to organize and carry out your research. It can be used to identify and examine subheading topics. Once familiar with the structure and subheading topics the writer can then turn to the notes taken in the first efforts to formulate the research idea.

The following is a suggested research proposal outline guide:

RESEARCH PROPOSAL OUTLINE

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

I. INTRODUCTION

General description of the area of concern
Problem to be studied
Purpose of the proposed research project
Major research question
Minor research questions
Major hypotheses
Minor hypotheses
Significance of the problem and the justification for
     investigating it
Feasibility of doing the proposed research

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Background
Theory relevant to the major research question
Current literature

III METHODOLOGY

Major or general hypothesis
Research design
Schematic drawing of research design
Location or setting in which study takes place
Calendar-table of events in carrying out study
Sampling design and procedures
Data collection instruments
Pre-testing of data collection instruments
Definition of terms and concepts
Data processing procedures
Special techniques
Footnotes and appendix attachments
Bibliography

REMEMBER: Try not to use the research proposal outline in a
     rigid fashion. The outline is only an aid to guiding
     your efforts towards a document that will eventually be
     used to organize and carry out your research.

These subheading topics do not represent the final work in proposal writing. It is recommended that the writer add their own subheading topics as they seem appropriate to his or her project.

B. Guidelines for the Research Proposal

Proposal writing is an art that practice and experience will make better. REMEMBER: When writing a proposal, always follow exactly the guidelines which the agency or foundation publishes. In addition to preparing the proposal, there is always the deadline which must be met for the submission of the proposal.

Most proposals required the following elements:

A. Cover Letter
B. Title Page
C. Table of Contents
D. Proposal Summary or Abstract
E. Statement of Research Problem or Program
F. Objectives of the Research Project
G. Description of the Project
H. Timetable of the Project
I. Key Project Participants
J. Project Budget
K. Bibliography and References.

A. Cover Letter

The cover letter should introduce you, start establishing your credentials for the project, highlight special features of the proposal and add any useful details not included in the proposal.

B. Title Page

Items normally included on the title page are:
1. Type of Document: (A Proposal)
2. Title: should express the major or general hypothesis of your study.
3. Submitted by (Name and Location)
4. Date
5. Submitted to (Name and Location)

C. Table of Contents

It is important to lay the table of contents out in a formal manner since it is often used as an index by the reader to quickly search out a particular section of the document. Remember to include page numbers!

D. Proposal Summary or Abstract (approximately 300 words)

The proposal summary is likely to be one of the last elements of the proposal that you write. It should include a clear statement of your project program, the research objectives, and outline the anticipated results and objectives.

E. Statement of Research Problem or Program

The problem statement should first and foremost be expressed as a problem. First, it is necessary to explain why a problem is a problem. Second, point out the relationship between the problem and given theory. It is important to show the generality of the problem. Third, it is difficult to say how long or short the problem statement should be, but don't carry on beyond one or two pages.

F. Objectives of the Research Project

When the project is finished, what will the results be?. You should list these results as the primary and secondary objectives of your project. Primary objectives are major goals, secondary objectives are specific components of a primary objective. All of the objectives should have concrete attainable results that can be measured and readily identified.

G. Description of the Project

The description of the project should be considered the central element of the proposal. It explains in detail exactly how you will achieve the primary and secondary objectives. The description includes your work plan, methods and procedures, the rationale for the approaches taken, and projections of the accomplishments to be achieved.

A frequent criticism of project descriptions in proposals is that they fail to be explicit, that they do not spell out precisely what methods will be used, what steps will be taken, and what schedule will be met in reaching the objectives. When you think the description is really finished, read it through impartially. Keep at it until will satisfy the meanest critic!

H. Timetable of the Project

The timetable should show when each task will start and when it will end. It is an extension of the objectives and the work plan. This element is vital if you are not an experienced researcher.

I. Key Project Participants

The identities, education, experience and qualifications of

the personnel involved in carrying out the project are always essential ingredients of a proposal. Proposal instructions commonly require those submitting proposal to includes resumes.

Many formats exist for the preparation of resumes or vitae to include in or a accompany a proposal. The simpler the format the better but remember - resumes submitted with the proposal should be carefully edited to include only the experience and publications relevant to the project.

J. Project Budget

What will the project cost? What equipment is available, what will have to be purchased? What are the logistical costs of supplies and field trips?

K. Bibliography and References

If this information is available and useful, include it to show the thoroughness of your research and your grasp of the background necessary to complete the project.

STEP FOUR : FINAL TASKS AFTER THE FIRST DRAFT OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL IS FINISHED

When the first completed draft of the proposal is ready for editing, have someone critique your work, Take all the criticism that you can get and make the best possible use of it.

When the proposal is finished and presumably ready to submit, go through it item by item. Make certain that the text is clean, clear and sharp. Appearances won't improve the contents of your proposal, but neat appearance will enhance the impression of care, seriousness and professionalism.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Behling, J..; 1979; Guidelines for Preparing the Research Proposal, University of America Press, Washington D.C.82 pp.

Holtz, H.; 1986; The Consultant's Guide to Proposal Writing. John Wiley & Sons, New York. 294 pp.

Lauffer, A.; 1977; Grantmanship, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills.120 pp.

Lefferts, R.; 1978; Getting a Grant. How to Write Successful Grant Proposals. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey. 160 pp.